

LET THE HUNGER GAMES BEGIN!

Suzanne Collins' gripping young-adult trilogy is a crossover smash—and Hollywood is about to launch the first movie. An exclusive interview with director Gary Ross.

It was director **Gary Ross'** 15-year-old twins who turned him on to *The Hunger Games*, the first installment of **Suzanne Collins'** terrifically urgent futuristic trilogy. **“I started reading it at 9 o'clock one night and finished reading it at 2 in the morning,”** says Ross (*Pleasantville*, *Seabiscuit*). Like the rest of the bestselling young-adult series' ardent fans, he fell hard for heroine Katniss Everdeen, a 16-year-old girl who must survive the whims of a cruel government that sends children to fight to the death on reality TV. Ross and Lionsgate aim to start production on the first film in the late spring. Collins, who wrote the early drafts of the script, is resting easy about the choice of director. **“I feel confident that Katniss is in excellent hands,”** she told EW. **“His previous work illustrates his passion and talent for good storytelling, and I look forward to seeing his vision for *The Hunger Games* come to life.”** In this exclusive interview—which contains a few spoilers, so don't say we didn't warn you—Ross describes just what that vision entails.

EW: What do you think makes you the right director for the gig?

Gary Ross: I just loved the story so much. There is a defiant, antiauthoritarian quality to it. I guess if you look at some of my stuff, *Pleasantville* probably in particular, there's a streak that runs through all that. And I'm so touched by the humanity of Katniss. As much as the firestorm or the final action sequences are incredibly riveting and enormous, it's the relationships in the book that are the most moving to me.

EW: Are you already hearing from kids who are afraid you're going to screw up their favorite book?

Ross: [Laughs] I just received 150 letters from the Frenship Middle School near Lubbock, Texas. The reading-program teacher got them to all write me letters. So many of them wrote, “Listen, I know this is an action movie and I can't wait to see the action but please don't lose the heart of the story.” The death of Rue is mentioned by every kid who reads the book. It's funny because I realize the letters are from Lubbock, Texas, which is where Buddy Holly was from. So in a way it's the birthplace of American teenage rebellion. Isn't that cool?

EW: Did they give you useful advice?

Ross: A lot of them talked about “Don't mess with the colors.” I think they didn't want me to pump it full of contrast or desaturate the movie or make it gratuitously edgy in a visual way. I think kids are hipper to clichés than we are sometimes.

EW: Those Lubbock kids, to say nothing of your own son and daughter, must have strong ideas about casting.

Ross: Can I just take this opportunity to tell you who I'm going to cast or...

EW: You may!

Ross: No, I'm just kidding. I'm just at the beginning of the process right now. I've talked to Suzanne so extensively and I feel like I understand the character really, really well. I've read in the press that there are front-runners, but that's not the case.

EW: Do you want to cast an unknown?

Ross: I honestly don't know. We'll cast the right person for the part. Lionsgate has been great in that they don't feel that this needs a movie star in Katniss' role. The greatest thing about the franchise and the books being the star is that we can cast whoever we want.

EW: Your budget is reportedly \$60 million. Are you going to have enough for the otherworldly scope of this project? [Lionsgate denies the figure, saying the budget has yet to be locked in.]

Ross: I'm not allowed to confirm the budget number, but I will say it's enough money to make the movie well and not disappoint a single fan. It's a lot less money than a lot of other franchises or tentpoles of the same stature. But I don't mind budget constraints. Sometimes they can produce creative solutions that are often better than what you would've had if you hadn't had to think it through so rigorously.

EW: How much CGI will be involved? I imagine you'll need some for the Muttations, the book's genetically altered creatures?

Ross: It's funny because the Lubbock kids—back to Lubbock, I'm dying to go to this school!—also expressed how important it was for me to adequately render the Muttations. And yes, we will.

Obviously they're one of the larger technical challenges, but they will be animated CG characters.

EW: What scene do you most look forward to shooting?

Ross: I can't wait to shoot the firestorm from a filmmaking perspective. I can't wait to do the relationship with Rue— both developing the relationship between Katniss and Rue and also the poignancy of Rue's funeral. How Katniss decorates her body with flowers? I mean, it's just so beautiful.

EW: Some fans think the book's violence demands an R rating.

Ross: It's not going to be an R-rated movie because I want the 12- and 13- and 14-year-old fans to be able to go see it. This book means too much to too many teenagers for it not to be PG-13. It's their story and they deserve to be able to access it completely. And I don't think it needs to be more extreme than that.

EW: Do you find the violence in the book extreme?

Ross: No, I don't. I wouldn't rate the book R. I think Suzanne has a lot of restraint. It isn't that she has written an overly graphic book. Even in things like the Tracker Jacker sequence, while horrific, it's the ideas that Suzanne has created that are so terrifying.

EW: Do you think the demand for an R rating partly comes from grown-ups trying to justify falling for something marketed to young adults?

Ross: Maybe that's true. And yet some of the greatest literature is YA. If you look at the S.E. Hinton stuff that Coppola did [*The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish*, both in 1983]—that's just so classically wonderful. In between [my screenplays for] *Dave* and *Pleasantville*, I was the Los Angeles library commissioner, and we greatly expanded teen services in that time. And that's when I first fell in love with YA literature. It's as urgent as being a teenager is. And Suzanne has created something that's just so unbelievably universal that it doesn't really know an age.