



Producer Nina Jacobson on location for *The Hunger Games*.

Let the Games Begin

How Producer Nina Jacobson Launched the Movies' Next Blockbuster Franchise

by Rae Contreras

When speaking about *The Hunger Games*' protagonist Katniss Everdeen, producer Nina Jacobson observes that she "is a girl who reluctantly has to change the world," adding, "as a filmmaker... I want to help change the world." While one could easily focus on how much revenue the forthcoming franchise might be poised to make, when talking with Jacobson about what went into producing the film (based on the best-selling novel by Suzanne Collins), it's clear she sees the project as about more than just putting up big box-office numbers. (Of course the film's record-setting \$155 million opening weekend remains a cause for celebration.)

Photos by Murray Close

"One of the most challenging aspects of producing can be finding material you feel passionate about," says Jacobson. "You have to set out to fall in love with projects. There are so many challenges, you *have* to be in love with it." The book, in which teenagers are forced by the government to compete in a deadly tournament, has captured not only Jacobson's heart, but has resonated with millions of fans. And its film adaptation has already broken records. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, it enjoyed the biggest first-day pre-sales on Fandango.com, beating out *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse*. With that many people anticipating your work, one might need the kind of iron will that Katniss Everdeen possesses.

Fortunately, Jacobson has it. The pressures of making tent-pole films are not unfamiliar to her. Her 20-year career includes senior positions at Disney, DreamWorks and Universal. At Disney, she oversaw franchises *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Princess Diaries*. But her taste is eclectic, as evidenced by the range of films she spearheaded, including *The Sixth Sense*, *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *Freaky Friday*. Before Disney, Jacobson was a senior film executive at DreamWorks SKG, where she oversaw *What Lies Beneath* and originated the idea for the studio's first animated feature, *Antz*. She made the shift to producer when she founded her own production company, Color Force, where she again balances franchises and smaller films. The company is producing the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series, with the first two films each grossing more than \$70 million. She went on to produce *One Day*, based on the book by David Nicholls.

The transition from executive to producer was a little terrifying for Jacobson. She remembers, "I went from a buyer and being able to say 'yes' to projects, to generating content and making the calls rather than getting them." Luckily, most of the relationships she had formed over her executive tenures had stuck. It also helps that Jacobson chooses material that's hard to say no to.

"When I first read the book, I couldn't put it down," she says of *The Hunger Games*, the first volume in its wildly popular trilogy. "I was completely captivated by Suzanne's voice. I was struck by the intensity of the story and the character, and the fact that she is genuinely flawed, but also somebody whose instinct for survival and desire to protect her sister ultimately drives her to become a revolutionary over the course of the series. That's not something she's born to be, but something that circumstance has thrust upon her." The story of teenagers fighting to the death in a dystopian future is decidedly more intense than the usual teen-lit offerings. And while there is a romantic element to the story, Jacobson indicates that it's not fundamentally about romance, but in fact, more subversive. And for Jacobson, this is the appeal. "It's a book about war, and it's uncompromising in the way it talks about the world we live in and our cultural values," she remarks. The author herself was a huge inspiration in dealing with such a heavy subject. Collins learned about the effects of war when her father spoke of his service in Vietnam. His stories stuck with her and she was compelled to share that perspective with others. Jacobson shares that Collins "thought it was very important to show how these characters are shaken from war."



Producer and PGA member Nina Jacobson.

Jennifer Lawrence (center) on the set of *The Hunger Games*.



Working with Collins also helped Jacobson and her team walk the line in satisfying die-hard fans while making the film available to a wider audience. Collins even played a role in deciding which aspects of the book were absolutely essential and which were more flexible or expendable. For example, "It was important to [Suzanne] that the characters play the age they are in the books," she says. "We've tried to follow the example of the book, and stay true to the characters and relationships that drive the story. As much as it has a 'big idea,' it's a real character-driven movie. Being fans ourselves, we were committed to casting actors that represented what we'd like to see in the movie, so we never tried to pander in any way."

And strong actors were needed in order to pull off the complex characters and storyline. The filmmakers felt Oscar-nominated actress Jennifer Lawrence was the perfect fit to play the brave-but-flawed Katniss. Jacobson recalls, "When she came in for her audition, she made the casting director who was reading with her cry. She had us in tears. What else can you really ask out of an audition? That doesn't happen very often and it was really moving. She's a very powerful actress and that came through. She completely stole the part in the audition."

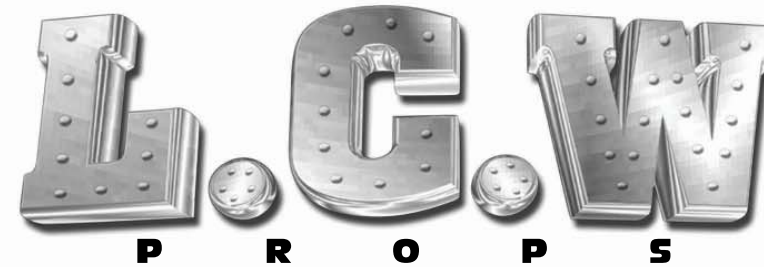
Another essential part of bringing the story to life would be selecting a director with a strong and coherent vision; she found this in director Gary Ross. As she says of Ross, "The big attraction toward Gary was knowing that he has a great ability to tell story through character and that he does it elegantly." Ross is a four-time Oscar nominee whose credits include *Seabiscuit* and *Pleasantville*. "We were looking for a director who we — both myself and the people at Lionsgate — felt would get the characters right and capture the emotional backbone of the story, someone who would make sure that we were always rooted in real emotions and that we always felt the authenticity of the experience through these characters."

In addition to the characters, there was also the world of *The Hunger Games* to bring to life. And with a high-concept story set in a dystopian future, the visual style of film would

have to represent a fully-imagined world. Jacobson and Ross want the audience to sense that the story is in the future, but still feel that they're not so far from the here-and-now. To that end, Ross often utilized a hand-held camera to create a sense of urgency and realism. Jacobson explains, "We didn't want it to feel like a world you can't see us becoming. It was always very important to Gary that it all should feel real and plausible."

The team referenced American history to help stay grounded. To depict the poverty-stricken District 12, Katniss' native region, they utilized Appalachian and coal-mining imagery, and a wardrobe inspired by The Great Depression. "We wanted to reference that time of our history to enhance the theme of class division," she notes. "You can see our District 12 is reminiscent of Dorothea Lange's photos. It feels distinctly American." At the same time, the production design emphasizes gray color tones to suggest the fascistic undercurrents in the oppressive world of *The Hunger Games*.

At the other end of the spectrum is The Capitol, the wealthy metropolis that holds complete power over the rest of the nation and where Katniss and the other "tributes" are transported to slaughter one another for its residents' entertainment. "The Capitol is a world of color," notes Jacobson. "And although it's obviously futuristic, there's nothing in The Capitol that's so futuristic that you can't imagine that we can't get there. Gary was able to find a tonal bandwidth that always felt credible, and that's so rooted in character and authentic emotion. The production design, wardrobe and hair ... it's extreme to some extent, but we held back on the extremity so that you'd never feel as if you were on a different planet." After all, as Jacobson reminds us, "Panem is North America — it is us — and we wanted to make sure that connection was felt."



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Jacobson (center) on the set of *The Hunger Games* with daughter Josie Bleakley.


On the set, Jon Kilik was brought on as a line producer to help make sure the production went smoothly. "It's essential to have the right partner, and we made a good team," she says; with her executive background, Jacobson managed the big picture while Kilik focused on the "devil in the details." While the movie was a big production, they set out to make it efficiently, using more of a guerilla style to suggest a less slick, less "Hollywood" feel. But to do that, "You need to manage resources really well," Jacobson observes. "And Jon really helped with bringing all the elements together." As a result, they were able to effectively dance between the

director and studio in order to settle on a creative direction that wouldn't break the bank.

So with an acclaimed team, many of them Academy Award nominees, and a passionate commitment to the material, it's clear that to Jacobson, making *The Hunger Games* isn't only about box-office receipts but about telling a story that will make viewers think. "The audience needs to not feel that they are off the hook," Jacobson insists. "The power of these books is their observation that we have the capacity for this kind of brutality. It might feel extreme, but we have to feel relevant."

It's equally interesting to consider why a story in which teenagers deal so directly with violence and oppression has as big a contemporary following as the more lighthearted *Harry Potter* series or the pulpy *Twilight* franchise. The trilogy's success says something about what kind of substance young audiences are craving. "I'm very interested to know what smarter people than me would say about why this book is so popular at this moment in history," Jacobson ponders. "Because I think it says a lot about the 99% and the 1%, and to the degree to which showmanship and entertainment are able to cloak and distract us from real societal ills that have an enormous impact on all of us, but especially on our young people."

Jacobson and company obviously have put a lot of care into trying to bring the book to life as authentically as they can. In terms of trying to satisfy the book's following, she admits, "You can't please everyone. Not all the details of the book will make it into the movie." However, she does hint that some elements of the book that didn't make it into the first film may find their way into the next two.

But Jacobson believes that fans ultimately will be pleased, if only because the filmmakers' decisions we made from a fan's perspective. "We respect the fans because we are fans ourselves. We have tried to tell our story to the best that we can. For me, it's not about comparing it to anything else... The book distinguishes itself as far as material, so the book has done that work for us." All that's left is the job that Jacobson loves: "Making the best possible movie we can." 

After all, as Jacobson reminds us, "Panem is North America — it is us — and we wanted to make sure that connection was felt."



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