

A DANGEROUS UTOPIA

by Lois Lowry

The esteemed author of *The Giver*, *Gathering Blue*, and *Messenger*

In my early years as a writer for young people, I occasionally received letters from people who wondered why I had used a “bad word” in a book. I always wrote back, explaining that an author tries to reflect reality, and so book characters have to speak the way real people would speak; it didn’t mean, I always explained, that the reader should speak that way, or that the author does.

When I wrote *The Giver*, it contained no so-called “bad words.” It was set, after all, in a mythical, futuristic, and Utopian society. Not only was there no poverty, divorce, racism, sexism, pollution, or violence in the world of *The Giver*; there was also careful attention paid to language: to its fluency, precision, and power.

The reaction to the book was startling. It was startling in the number of letters and responses I received almost immediately, but it was even more startling in the degree of differences in the responses.

A Trappist monk wrote from his monastery that he and his brothers were reading the book as a Christian

metaphor and finding it profoundly significant as a message of redemption.

At about the same time, a parent in California demanded that it be taken off the library shelves of her child’s school because of its immorality.

A private school in Michigan made it required reading not only for all the upper-school students, but for their parents.

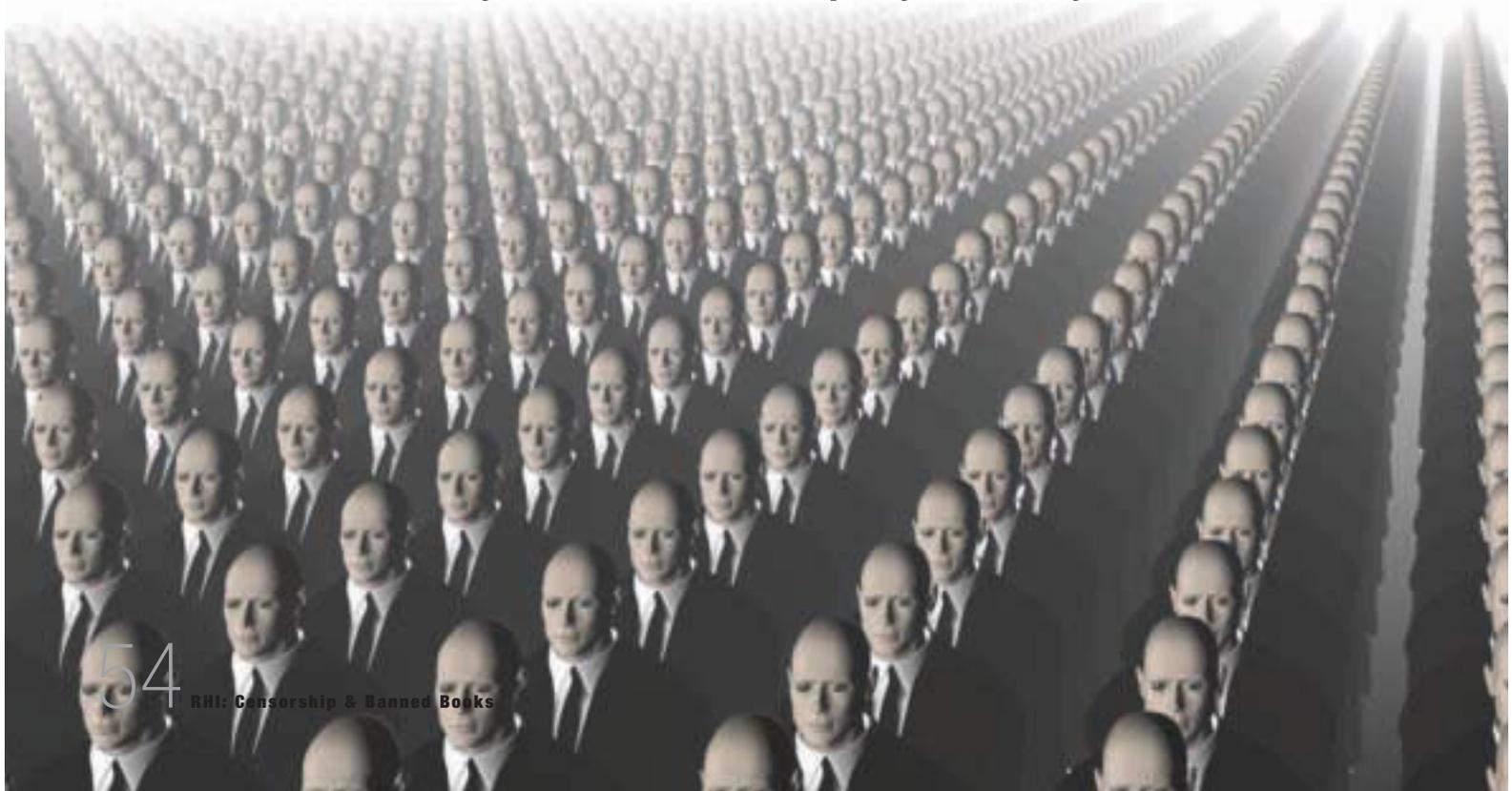
At the same time, a teacher wrote to me that the Newbery committee should be chastised for their awarding the 1994 medal to a sensationalistic piece of trash.

The children of Belgium and France chose the book, in translation, as their favorite of the year.

A parent wrote to me that I should be ashamed for exposing children to “messy data.”

What’s wrong with this picture? I found myself thinking.

I went back and re-read the book myself. I tried to figure out whether these disparate people were, in fact, all responding to the same thing: whether there was actu-



ally a theme in the book that people found either uplifting or terrifying, or maybe both. And I discovered that it was the concept of choice. *The Giver* is about a world where those decisions are made for them. It seems very safe and comfortable, and I bet a lot of parents—later to object and censor—liked the book until they were two-thirds of the way through it.

Then it got scary. It got scary—and they decided to take it away from their own kids—because it turned out that it wasn't safe and comfy to live in a world where adhering to rigid rules is the norm. It turned out, in the book, that such a world is very, very dangerous, and that people have to learn to make their own choices.

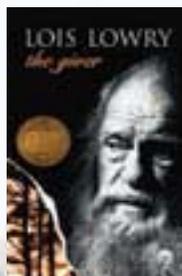
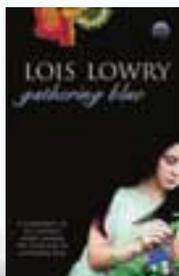
I sympathize with the fear that makes some parents

not want that to be true. But I believe without a single shadow of a doubt that it is necessary for young people to learn to make choices. Learning to make right choices is the only way they will survive in an increasingly frightening world. Pretending that there are no choices to be made—reading only books, for example, which are cheery and safe and nice—is a prescription for disaster for the young.

Submitting to censorship is to enter the seductive world of *The Giver*: the world where there are no bad words and no bad deeds. But it is also the world where choice has been taken away and reality distorted. And that is the most dangerous world of all. ■

About the Writer

LOIS LOWRY is a multi-award-winning author who has written many books. She is the author of the popular Anastasia Krupnik books and was the recipient of the Newbery Medal for both Number the Stars and The Giver. She is also the recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award which honors an author for his or her lifetime contribution to young adult literature.



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