An introduction to the Great Stories Club series, written by Maria Sachiko Cecire, Director of Experimental Humanities and Assistant Professor of Literature, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

As long as there have been new communications technologies, people have worried about how media can control our thinking and even alter the nature of how we experience being human. Today some researchers and journalists warn that our Internet culture may be making us less thoughtful, lonelier people, even as governments push for greater technological literacy and universal connectivity. But as early as Plato’s *Phaedrus* (c. 370 BC) we see an argument against the dangers of writing, because of the way that it can encourage forgetfulness and replace true understanding with stored words. How do media shape individuals and influence whole societies? The three books in this series focus on the stories of young people who learn to see the structures of power that underlie the mass entertainment and information industries in their worlds, and who use this knowledge to resist unjust and oppressive systems. At the same time, the books raise essential questions about where our thoughts, ideas, and very sense of self come from. How much are our identities molded by outside interests? How can we become aware of our media environment when we are immersed in it? How can we use media to improve our circumstances and those of others?

Mass media is a relatively new mode of communication, beginning with Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century. Mass media has been associated with social change from its earliest days: cheap pamphlets by Protestant reformers undermined the power of the Catholic Church and helped the Reformation sweep through Europe. The press’s unprecedented power multiplied as literacy rose and nineteenth-century industrialization made mechanized printing and wide distribution possible. In the first half of the twentieth century Walter Benjamin argued that the ability to reproduce art cheaply and sell it as a commodity had done away with the old ritual uses of art and launched a new age of mass art. This creates a culture of widespread participation (since everyone can encounter the same works) but also comes with the potential for mass distraction, giving immense political power to whoever controls its message (“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 1936).

In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan became famous for the idea that “the medium is the message”: that media not only convey ideas, but that simply adopting new media technologies fundamentally shifts how humans perceive the world. For example, he saw electronic media like radio and television as shrinking the world down into an interconnected “global village,” in which people everywhere can be aware of one another. He also thought that media serve as “extensions of ourselves”: that as we rely on them they become part of us in ways that inevitably affect how we perceive reality. There is no conclusive answer in the debate about whether media shapes us or we shape it; the answer probably lies somewhere in between. But as the books in

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1 See, for instance, the studies in Nicholas Carr’s *The Shallows* (2010) and Sherry Turkle’s *Alone Together* (2011).
this series show, the form of media (live television in *The Hunger Games*, the data feed in *FEED*) is often as significant as the content that flows through it.

Current thinkers like Henry Jenkins argue that mobile Internet technologies have ushered in an age of participatory culture in which most people are potential media producers and consumers, with immense reserves of information at their fingertips (*Convergence Culture*, 2006). But when individual “knowledge” includes not only the contents of our brains but also the contents of the Internet that we always carry with us, are we almost cyborgs already? Have we become, as scholars such as N. Katherine Hayles have suggested, “posthuman,” thinking “in partnership with intelligent machines” (*How We Became Posthuman*, 2008)? The fact that many people sleep next to their smartphones and can’t imagine going a day without them shows how much the Internet has become an “extension of ourselves,” and how close reality has come to what was once science fiction.

If the media technologies we use have become essential to who we are, shouldn’t we care passionately about who controls their production, management, and content? Two of the books in this series, *FEED* and *The Hunger Games*, use dystopian fantasy settings to help us think through this question and look at our own media use with fresh eyes. The third book offers an example of how mass media contributed to an important human rights movement in the not-so-distant past. Each novel is a powerful work in its own right, but taken together they illuminate how media awareness can change lives and help us challenge injustice.

**Book 1 (Awakening): FEED by M.T. Anderson**

**Description:** “In this chilling novel, Anderson imagines a society dominated by the feed: a next-generation Internet/television hybrid that is directly hardwired into the brain. Teen narrator Titus never questions his world, in which parents select their babies' attributes in the conceptionarium, corporations dominate the information stream, and kids learn to employ the feed more efficiently in School. But everything changes when he and his pals travel to the moon for spring break. There Titus meets homeschooled Violet, who thinks for herself, searches out news and asserts that "Everything we've grown up with the stories on the feed, the games, all of that it's all streamlining our personalities so we're easier to sell to." Without exposition, Anderson deftly combines elements of today's teen scene, including parties and shopping malls, with imaginative and disturbing fantasy twists. "Chats" flow privately from mind to mind; Titus flies an "upcar"; people go "mal" (short for "malfunctioning") in contraband sites that intoxicate by scrambling the feed; and, after Titus and his friends develop lesions, banner ads and sit-coms dub the lesions the newest hot trend, causing one friend to commission a fake one and another to outdo her by getting cuts all over her body. Excerpts from the feed at the close of each chapter demonstrate the blinding barrage of entertainment and temptations for conspicuous consumption. Titus proves a believably flawed hero, and ultimately the novel's greatest strength lies in his denial of and uncomfortable awakening to the truth. This satire offers a thought-provoking and scathing indictment that may prod readers to examine the more sinister possibilities of corporate- and media-dominated culture.” *Publishers Weekly* review, 2002
Relation to theme: *FEED* focuses on the process of “waking up” to how media shapes our lives and thinking. In the novel, most people in America grow up with corporate-owned data feeds directly embedded into their brains. These feeds barrage them with ads, entertainment, and news tailored to their consumer profiles, and allow instant access to information and online chats. At the start of the novel, the protagonist Titus is a full participant in the accompanying culture of consumerism that his friends, family, and even “School™” accept and promote. But after he meets the smart, inquisitive Violet on a trip to the Moon, Titus begins to notice how the feed controls him and his friends, and starts to question the dangerous and unequal norms of his world. Anderson’s novel raises key questions about what it means to be a human being in the Internet age: How can we be more than machines programmed by others? What responsibilities do we have to those who powerful interests might exploit or leave behind? *FEED* shows how difficult this kind of awakening can be, but also how it can open the door to a richer, more meaningful life.

**Book 2 (Resistance): The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins**

**Description:** “This is a grand-opening salvo in a new series by the author of the Underland Chronicles. Sixteen-year-old Katniss poaches food for her widowed mother and little sister from the forest outside the legal perimeter of District 12, the poorest of the dozen districts constituting Panem, the North American dystopic state that has replaced the U.S. in the not-too-distant future. Her hunting and tracking skills serve her well when she is then cast into the nation's annual Hunger Games, a fight to the death where contestants must battle harsh terrain, artificially concocted weather conditions, and two teenaged contestants from each of Panem's districts. District 12's second tribute is Peeta, the baker's son, who has been in love with Katniss since he was five. Each new plot twist ratchets up the tension, moving the story forward and keeping the reader on edge. Although Katniss may be skilled with a bow and arrow and adept at analyzing her opponents' next moves, she has much to learn about personal sentiments, especially her own. Populated by three-dimensional characters, this is a superb tale of physical adventure, political suspense, and romance.” —Francisca Goldsmith, *Booklist* review, September 1, 2008 (Starred Review)

**Relation to theme:** In *The Hunger Games*, the protagonist Katniss is well aware of the relationship between media and power in her country, but resistance seems impossible. Every year the Capitol forces teenage “tributes” from each of the twelve districts in Panem to fight to the death in an extended televised entertainment extravaganza. Part beauty pageant, part survival show, part gladiatorial match, the Games are a gruesome take on reality TV that Capitol residents adore and the state requires district residents to watch as a punishment for past revolt. This modern version of the Roman Empire’s “bread and circuses” reminds the oppressed districts of their powerlessness while keeping wealthy Capitol viewers too entertained to think about the injustices in their country (much like Titus’s initial numbness in *FEED*). When Katniss is thrust into the Games with her schoolmate Peeta, she learns that knowing how to manipulate the audience’s emotions is as important to staying alive as being able to handle a weapon. Katniss and Peeta’s performances shift the will of the audience in their favor, undermining the state’s authority and turning the Capitol’s media weapon into their own tool. *The Hunger Games* is a stark reminder that those with economic, technological, political, and military power get to write the dominant cultural narratives. It suggests how even those utterly without power...
might be able to use the system to their advantage, to voice dissent and even create change. But, the novel asks, at what personal cost?

Book 3 (Revolution): MARCH by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell

Description: Congressman Lewis, with Michael D’Orso’s assistance, told his story most impressively in Walking with the Wind (1998). Fortunately, it’s such a good story - a sharecropper’s son rises to eminence by prosecuting the cause of his people - that it bears retelling, especially in this graphic novel by Lewis, his aide Aydin, and Powell, one of the finest American comics artists going. After a kicker set on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on March 7, 1965 (the civil rights movement's Bloody Sunday), the story makes January 20, 2009 (President Obama’s inauguration) a base of operations as it samples Lewis' past via his reminiscences for two schoolboys and their mother, who've shown up early at his office on that milestone day for African Americans. This first of three volumes of Lewis' story brings him from boyhood on the farm, where he doted over the chickens and dreamed of being a preacher, through high school to college, when he met nonviolent activists who showed him a means of undermining segregation to begin with, at the department-store lunch counters of Nashville. Powell is at his dazzling best throughout, changing angle-of-regard from panel to panel while lighting each with appropriate drama. The kineticism of his art rivals that of the most exuberant DC and Marvel adventure comics and in black-and-white only, yet! Books Two and Three may not surpass Book One, but what a grand work they'll complete.—Ray Olson, Booklist review, June 01, 2013 (Starred Review)

Relation to theme: The final book, MARCH, is a graphic novel that tells the true story of how young black activists used mainstream media to help bring about an end to segregation during the Civil Rights era. While FEED and The Hunger Games are dystopian fantasy novels, MARCH is a reminder of how often reality can already look like a horrific dystopia that must be survived and revolutionized. MARCH shows how the mass media of the time helped expose the young Lewis to the mission of racial equality in spite of his rural Alabama upbringing. Newspapers, magazines, radio and television broadcasts, and a comic book about the nonviolent ideals of Martin Luther King, Jr. all helped to bring Lewis from a chicken farmer to a leader in the movement for desegregation. He and his fellow activists face humiliation and brutality during sit-ins and marches, but media reports of their courage and self-control win them the support of people around the country and put pressure on politicians to change racist laws. MARCH is an inspiring example of how self-aware young people can make the most out of even a media system that does not favor them. And as a beautifully illustrated graphic novel, it calls attention to the unique power that different media forms continue to offer us today.