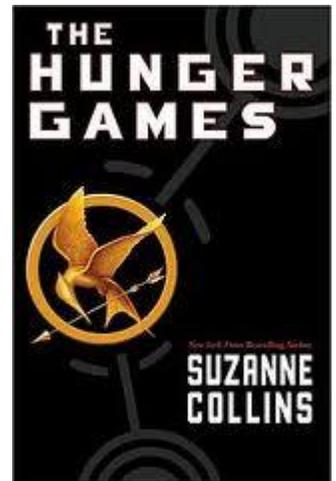


## Summer Reading

I love to read and always have, usually spending several hours a day wrapped up with a book, a stack of newspapers or in recent years my Kindle or iPad. While I remain a fan of good fiction, my current reading tastes have turned more toward non-fiction. Part of the change reflects the fact that the fiction market has become saturated with mass-produced schlock à la James Patterson, for example, who manages to turn out a new novel every six weeks or so. But it's summer, time for light reading. Dropping for a few days my "serious" stuff, I have just finished a couple of currently popular books. They were interesting.

One of the reasons I've switched my reading from fiction to non-fiction is an annoying habit I've acquired since I've taken up writing myself. As an author primarily of fiction, I have developed the terribly distracting tendency to deconstruct other works of fiction as I read them. Rather than simply sitting back and enjoying the story, I am constantly putting myself in the author's place. Why did he or she do this instead of that? Where is the story line going?

My brother, the attorney, suggested I read *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. The book is the first of a trilogy aimed at "young adults" (read "teenagers") and was recently made into a movie. It's a dystopian novel (think *Brave New World* and *1984*), set in a post-apocalyptic North America, now known as the county of Panem. It's a great beach book! The author's style and craft make for good reading and I'd recommend it.

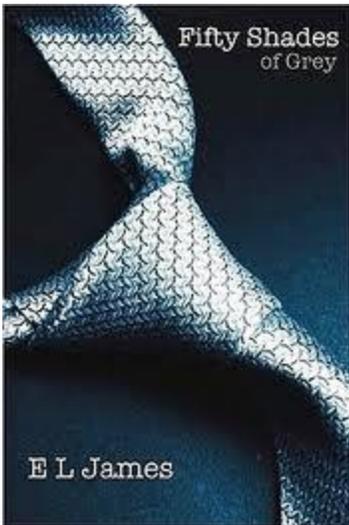


With that said, it happened again with *The Hunger Games*. Collins is a good writer, no doubt, but three chapters into the book I realized she'd recycled the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur as the backbone of her plot line. In her strange world of the future, conquered lands are expected to send tributes in the form of youth chosen by lottery to compete to the death in a series of so called "Hunger Games." Not too different from King Minos' demand that the conquered city of Athens send some of her youth, again chosen by lottery, to face the dreaded Minotaur in the Labyrinth. The more I read, the more I realized that she'd cobbled together several thousand years worth of various themes drawn from classical literature, theology, philosophy and history. Here a recycling of the Roman gladiatorial games. There a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, a story by the way that Shakespeare himself purloined from earlier literature. I loved it.

The idea of recycled plots is not bad—in fact it is the rule rather than the exception in most works of fiction. Much has been written about it, but perhaps most famously by Georges Polti in his late 19<sup>th</sup>

century work, *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*. Polti makes the very believable case that most of human conflict—that’s the heart of fiction after all—can be reduced to a series of “situations.” The time, the place and the characters may change, but the basic story line remains the same. You mix and match them in the arc of your plot, *et voilà*, you have a tale worth (re)telling. If you want to know more, here’s a link to Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Thirty-Six\\_Dramatic\\_Situations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Thirty-Six_Dramatic_Situations)

The other book I managed to wade through was *Fifty Shades of Grey*, by British author E. L. James. It, too, is the first of a trilogy, and the reviews often describe it as “an erotic novel.” Most of the folks I know that have read it describe it as “mommy porn.” It is bad, monumentally bad. So bad that you want to wash your hands after you read it. And I am not talking about the plot with its generous helpings of kinky sex. The *Wall Street Journal* succinctly describes it as centering on “a CEO who enlists a young virgin to be his submissive sex partner.” The heavy-handed sex part I can take, although similar activity seems to have brought down a number of highly-placed executives in recent years. It’s the writing. It has to be some of the worst I’ve read in years. As of last week it had sold more than twenty million copies.



Which brings me to the point I want to make about much popular fiction: You don’t necessarily have to know how to write to be a successful fiction author. Having played this game now for about a decade, I have come to the full and disappointing realization that for essentially every “blockbuster” novel, the only single correlate with commercial success is the size of the marketing budget. Scary! And perhaps another reason why works by Patterson sell so well: He’s the former head of a New York advertising agency.

But *Fifty Shades of Grey*, no matter how badly written it is, shares something with *The Hunger Games*. It is build around a recycled plot. Again, according to a write up in the *Wall Street Journal*, Ms. James originally wrote the Grey trilogy as a work of fan fiction based on the *Twilight* series. Christian Grey, the billionaire businessman was formerly Edward the vampire, and Anastasia, his sex slave, was Bella, the human girl with sweet-smelling blood. In wading through the dreadful prose, the heavy hand of an editor was evident at every turn, but at least they made some money. I predict it won’t last once the novelty wears off. Remember James Frey?