

The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes

The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes is a 2023 American dystopian action film directed by Francis Lawrence from a screenplay by Michael Lesslie and Michael Arndt. Based on the 2020 novel The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes by Suzanne Collins, it serves as a prequel to The Hunger Games (2012), and is the fifth installment in The Hunger Games film series. The film stars Tom Blyth, Rachel Zegler, Peter Dinklage, Jason Schwartzman, Hunter Schafer, Josh Andrés Rivera, and Viola Davis. Set 64 years before the events of the first film, its plot follows the events that lead a young Coriolanus Snow on the path to becoming the tyrannical leader of Panem, including his relationship with the Hunger Games District 12 tribute Lucy Gray Baird during the 10th Hunger Games.

The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes premiered in Berlin on November 5, 2023, and was released theatrically in the United States on November 17, 2023, by Lionsgate Films. The film received mixed reviews from critics and was a financial success, grossing \$337.4 million worldwide against a production budget of \$100 million. After the film's release, The Hunger Games film series became the 20th-highest-grossing film franchise of all time, having grossed \$3.3 billion worldwide.

Plot

In dystopian, war-ravaged Panem, Snow family patriarch, General Crassus Snow, dies in the First Rebellion between the Capitol and thirteen Districts. Years later, Crassus' son, Coriolanus, is one of twenty-four Academy students selected to mentor a 10th Annual Hunger Games tribute. Coriolanus hopes for the Plinth Prize scholarship to restore his family's prosperity. Games creator and Academy dean, Casca Highbottom, advises the mentors to focus on entertainment rather than tributes winning. Coriolanus' wealthy friend and fellow mentor, Sejanus Plinth, resents the Games' cruelty.

The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes



Theatrical release poster

Directed by	Francis Lawrence
Screenplay by	Michael Lesslie Michael Arndt
Based on	The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes by Suzanne Collins
Produced by	Nina Jacobson Brad Simpson Francis Lawrence
Starring	Tom Blyth Rachel Zegler Peter Dinklage Hunter Schafer Josh Andrés Rivera

Coriolanus is assigned District 12's female tribute, Lucy Gray Baird. During the reaping ceremony, she engages Capitol viewers by slipping a snake down the dress of Mayor Lipp's daughter, Mayfair, then defiantly singing. Coriolanus earns Lucy Gray's trust accompanying her to the Capitol Zoo, where tributes are publicly caged. Another mentor, Arachne Crane, taunts her tribute, who kills her. Coriolanus promotes Lucy Gray to Capitol citizens, to Highbottom's displeasure, as he paired Coriolanus with a District 12 tribute to fail.

Coriolanus proposes a sponsorship scheme to Head Gamemaker Dr. Volumnia Gaul: to increase ratings, Capitol viewers can monetarily support tributes. Coriolanus' academic partner, Clemensia Dovecote, claims credit for the proposal. Gaul places the proposal paper into a tank of genetically-modified snakes that attack only unfamiliar scents. When Clemensia is forced to retrieve it, the snakes severely bite her, confirming Coriolanus' sole authorship.

While touring the arena, rebel bombs explode, killing several tributes and mentors. After Lucy Gray saves Coriolanus from debris, he gives her rat poison as a weapon and says she can hide in a bombed hole in the arena floor. In the initial bloodbath, Lucy Gray enters the hole with fellow District 12 tribute, Jessup. Sejanus sneaks into the arena and mourns his fallen tribute and former friend, Marcus. Gaul persuades Coriolanus to retrieve Sejanus. A tribute attacks them, forcing Coriolanus to kill him.

The president's son, Felix Ravinstill, dies from injuries sustained in the bombing. As revenge, Gaul releases the snakes into the arena, killing every remaining tribute but Lucy Gray; earlier, Coriolanus secretly put a handkerchief bearing her scent into the tank. Caving to public pressure, Gaul declares Lucy Gray the victor. Later, Highbottom confronts Coriolanus with the handkerchief and the rat poison, sentencing him to twenty years' Peacekeeper service. Coriolanus bribes an officer to transfer him to District 12, and Sejanus volunteers to join him.

In District 12, Coriolanus and Sejanus visit a bar where Lucy Gray performs with the Covey, a formerly nomadic band; Coriolanus and Lucy reunite. Shortly after, Coriolanus is to transfer for officer training in District 2. Meanwhile, Sejanus becomes involved with the rebels. Coriolanus confronts Sejanus and records his admission using a jabberjay, sending it to Gaul. Coriolanus later finds Sejanus meeting with rebels Spruce, Lucy Gray's ex-boyfriend Billy Taupe, and Mayfair, Billy's new girlfriend. In the ensuing confrontation, Coriolanus fatally shoots Mayfair and Spruce kills Billy. Spruce hides the guns, but he and Sejanus are hanged for treason.

Lucy Gray and Coriolanus flee north. Lucy Gray knows he killed two people, but he accidentally reveals a third (Sejanus), raising her suspicions. At a small cabin, Coriolanus finds the hidden weapons tying him to Mayfair's murder. Lucy Gray, distrusting Coriolanus because he knows she could incriminate him, disappears into the woods. Coriolanus, pursuing her, is bitten and disoriented by a snake she laid as a trap. He blindly shoots his rifle after jabberjays mimic her voice, but her fate is left unknown.

	<u>Jason Schwartzman</u> <u>Viola Davis</u>
Cinematography	<u>Jo Willems</u>
Edited by	<u>Mark Yoshikawa</u>
Music by	<u>James Newton Howard</u>
Production companies	<u>Color Force</u> <u>Good Universe</u> <u>Lionsgate Films</u>
Distributed by	<u>Lionsgate Films</u>
Release dates	November 5, 2023 (Berlin) November 17, 2023 (United States)
Running time	157 minutes ^[1]
Country	United States
Language	English
Budget	\$100 million ^[2]
Box office	\$337.4 million ^{[3][4]}

Coriolanus dumps the guns into the lake near the cabin. With no remaining witnesses, he returns to District 12. Rather than District 2, Coriolanus is sent to the Capitol, where Gaul reveals she procured him a pardon and scholarship to the Capitol University. Sejanus' parents, unaware Coriolanus caused their son's death, make him their heir. Highbottom tells Coriolanus he never intended the Games to become a reality; he drunkenly conceived the idea, but his friend, Crassus Snow, submitted it as their joint academic project. Highbottom abhorred the violence it caused and never forgave Crassus, turning to morphling and mistreating Coriolanus because he hated his father, blaming him for ensuring the Games' continued cruelty. Coriolanus slips poison into Highbottom's morphling vial, killing him and beginning his rise to power.

Cast

- Tom Blyth as Coriolanus "Coryo" Snow: A mentor for the upcoming 10th Hunger Games and future President of Panem
 - Dexter Sol Ansell as young Coriolanus
- Rachel Zegler as Lucy Gray Baird: The female tribute from District 12 who forms a connection with Coriolanus, and a member of the Covey, a travelling musician group
- Josh Andrés Rivera as Sejanus Plinth: A classmate and friend of Snow, and the mentor to a tribute from District 2, his former home
- Viola Davis as Dr. Volumnia Gaul: The head gamemaker of the 10th Hunger Games and the person who implemented them
- Peter Dinklage as Casca Highbottom: Dean of the academy and intellectual author of the Hunger Games
- Jason Schwartzman as Lucretius "Lucky" Flickerman: The first television host for the 10th Hunger Games
- Hunter Schafer as Tigris Snow: Coriolanus's older cousin and confidante. She would go on to become a stylist in the Games and an ally to Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 2*.
 - Rosa Gotzler as young Tigris
- Fionnula Flanagan as Grandma'am: Coriolanus and Tigris's grandmother
- Burn Gorman as Commander Hoff: The leader of the Peacekeepers in District 12

Additional mentors

- Ashley Liao as Clemensia Dovecote: A classmate and friend of Snow, and a mentor to a tribute from District 11^[6]
- Max Raphael as Festus Creed: A classmate of Snow, and mentor to a tribute from District 4^[7]
- Zoe Renee as Lysistrata Vickers: A classmate of Snow, and mentor of the other District 12 tribute, Jessup^[7]
- Aamer Husain as Felix Ravinstill: A classmate of Snow, son of the President of Panem, and mentor to a tribute from District 11^[6]
- Lilly Cooper as Arachne Crane: A classmate of Snow, and a mentor to a tribute from District 10^[8]
- Ayomide Adegun as Pup Harrington: A classmate of Snow, and a mentor to a tribute from District 7
- Amélie Hoeferle as Vipsania Sickle: A classmate of Snow, and a mentor to a tribute from District 7

Additional tributes

- Nick Benson as Jessup: The male tribute from District 12 alongside Lucy Gray^[8]
- Mackenzie Lansing as Coral: The female tribute from District 4 and leader of "the Pack"^[6]
- Cooper Dillon as Mizzen: The male tribute from District 4^[9]
- Hiroki Berrecloth as Treech: The male tribute from District 7
- Kjell Brutscheidt as Tanner: The male tribute from District 10^[9]
- Dimitri Abold as Reaper: The male tribute from District 11
- Irene Boehm as Lamina: The female tribute from District 7
- Sofia Sanchez as Wovey: The young female tribute from District 8^[7]
- Knox Gibson as Bobbin: The male tribute from District 8
- Luna Steeples as Dill: The female tribute from District 11
- Luna Kuse as Brandy: The female tribute from District 10
- Jerome Lance as Marcus: The male tribute from District 2

Dakota Shapiro plays Billy Taupe, Lucy Gray's former love interest and a former member of the Covey.^[9] Isobel Jesper Jones plays Mayfair Lipp, the daughter of District 12's mayor, a rival of Lucy Gray, and Billy Taupe's new girlfriend.^[10] George Somner plays Spruce, a rebel citizen from District 12.^[9] Other members of Lucy Gray's travelling musician group, the Covey, include Vaughan Reilly as Maude Ivory,^[9] Honor Gillies as Barb Azure,^[10] Eike Onyambu as Tam Amber,^[10] and Konstantin Taffet as Clerk Carmine.^[10] Additionally, Michael Greco and Daniela Grubert appear as Strabo Plinth and Mrs. Plinth, Sejanus' parents,^[10] while Carl Spencer and Scott Folan appear as Smiley and Beanpole, two peacekeepers sent by the Capitol to District 12.^[10]

Production

Development

In August 2017 Lionsgate CEO Jon Feltheimer expressed interest in more stories in *The Hunger Games* film series, but only with the approval of the author or the series, Suzanne Collins.^[11]

In June 2019, Joe Drake, chairman of the Lionsgate Motion Picture Group, announced that the company was working with author Suzanne Collins with regards to an adaptation of the novel *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*.^[12] By April 2020, Collins and Lionsgate confirmed that plans were underway for the film's development. Francis Lawrence was later confirmed to direct, after doing so for the prior three films in the series since *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*. The screenplay was written by Collins, Michael Arndt and Michael Lesslie, with Nina Jacobson and Brad Simpson as producers along with Lawrence.^{[13][14]} Concerned over the book's length, Lawrence briefly considered to split the film in two parts like he did with *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 1* and *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 2*, but abandoned the idea to do so, due to his regrets over that decision.



Promotional poster in John Halle's Hall, a medieval hall house now the foyer of the Odeon Cinema, Salisbury, UK, April 15, 2023.

Jacobson felt that the finished film had a "daunting" length but feels that it "really goes by so fast".^[15] Collins, in addition, would serve as an executive producer on the film.^[14]

Casting

In May 2022, Tom Blyth was cast as the young President Snow,^[16] with Rachel Zegler as his protégée, tribute Lucy Gray Baird.^[17] Zegler was originally offered the role in January, but initially turned it down before later changing her mind.^[18] In June 2022, Josh Andrés Rivera (who previously starred in 2021's *West Side Story* alongside Zegler), Hunter Schafer and Jason Schwartzman were cast.^{[19][20][21]} Peter Dinklage was cast in the following month.^[22] Throughout June and July 2022, the cast was rounded out with actors portraying the film's multiple tributes and mentors.^{[6][8][7][9]} On August 15, 2022, it was reported that Viola Davis was cast as Volumnia Gaul, the head gamemaker of the 10th annual Hunger Games.^[23] On September 16, 2022, more cast members were revealed, including Burn Gorman and Fionnula Flanagan.^[10]

Filming

Filming began in Wrocław, Poland, on July 11, 2022, and ended in Berlin, Germany, on November 5, 2022.^{[14][24]} Filming locations included the Monument to the Battle of the Nations in Leipzig,^[25] the Strausberger Platz and the Olympic Stadium in Berlin and the Centennial Hall in Wrocław.^[26] Some scenes in the film were also shot in the "Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord" in Duisburg in North Rhine-Westphalia,^[27] and areas around Wałbrzych (Poland), including Boguszów-Gorce; a fragment of the trail leading to Chełmiec Mountain, and the lake in Grzędy.^[28]

Music

The soundtrack for *The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes* contains the film's version of songs such as "The Hanging Tree", "Pure as the Driven Snow", which were live performed by Zegler, and produced by Dave Cobb, which heavily drew from Appalachian-country folk music.^[29] The official soundtrack *The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes (Music From & Inspired By)* was released on November 17, by Geffen Records featuring tracks performed by Zegler, as well as songs performed by established Americana and folk artists, and was led by two singles: "The Hanging Tree (Lucy Gray's version)" was released on October 20, 2023,^[30] and "Can't Catch Me Now", performed by Olivia Rodrigo, was released on November 3.^[31]

In July 2022, composer James Newton Howard confirmed that he would return to score the film.^[32] Howard's score was released on November 17, 2023, by Sony Classical Records.^[33]

Marketing

On October 30, 2023, the film was given an interim agreement so that actors could promote it during the 2023 SAG-AFTRA strike, since Lionsgate is not part of the AMPTP.^[34]

Release

The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes had its European premiere in Berlin, Germany on November 5, 2023,^[5] its world premiere at the BFI IMAX in London on November 9, 2023,^[35] and was released on November 16, in Europe^[36] and November 17, 2023, by Lionsgate Films.^[37]

Home media

The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes was released on digital and VOD on December 19, 2023.^[38] The film was released on 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray, Blu-ray and DVD on February 13, 2024, by Lionsgate Home Entertainment.^[39]

Reception

Box office

The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes grossed \$166.4 million in the United States and Canada, and \$171 million in other territories, for a worldwide total of \$337.4 million.^[3]

In the United States and Canada, *The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes* was released alongside *Next Goal Wins*, *Trolls Band Together*, and *Thanksgiving*, and was projected to gross around \$50 million from 3,776 theaters in its opening weekend, with some industry estimates going as low as \$45 million or as high as \$60 million.^{[40][41]} The film made \$19.1 million on its first day, \$5.75 million from Thursday night previews. It went on to debut to \$44 million, topping the box office but marking the lowest start of the franchise.^[2] The film made \$29 million in its second weekend (a drop of 35%, the smallest of both the franchise and of any blockbuster in 2023), remaining in first.^{[42][43]} The film finished in second place each of subsequent three weeks, with grosses of \$14.5 million (finishing behind newcomer *Renaissance: A Film by Beyoncé*),^[44] \$9.4 million (behind newcomer *The Boy and the Heron*),^[45] and \$5.8 million (behind newcomer *Wonka*).^[46] In its sixth weekend the film made \$3.5 million, and a total of \$5.4 million over the four-day Christmas frame, finishing in seventh.^[47]

Critical response

On the review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes, 64% of 237 critics' reviews are positive, with an average rating of 6.4/10. The website's consensus reads: "An outstanding cast and exciting story help make *The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes* a worthy return to Panem in spite of a rushed and somewhat frustrating ending."^[48] Metacritic, which uses a weighted average, assigned the film a score of 54 out of 100, based on 52 critics, indicating "mixed or average" reviews.^[49] Audiences polled by CinemaScore gave the film an average grade of "B+" on an A+ to F scale, the lowest of the franchise, while those polled by PostTrak gave it an 87% overall positive score, with 70% saying they would definitely recommend the film.^[2]

Zoe Guy of *Vulture* reported that "some critics view the 158-minute spectacle as an overwrought snoozefest, while others argue that *Ballad* is the most satisfying entry in the entire franchise".^[50] *NME*'s Alex Berry meanwhile characterised the initial critical response as "largely negative", noting that "the film has been criticised as lacking in the excitement and drama promised by the trailer, and not living up to the expectation following the first films".^[51]

Writing for *IndieWire*, David Ehrlich named the film both the best young adult dystopian film and "by far" the strongest installment in *The Hunger Games* film series, describing it as "the rare prequel that manages to stand on its own two feet and *still* feel taller than the other stories it's ultimately meant to support".^[52] *RogerEbert.com*'s Christy Lemire complimented the "subtlety of this supervillain origin story" and described Blyth's performance as Coriolanus Snow as "a star-making performance".^[53] Brian Truitt of *USA Today* praised it as "an enticing blend of dystopian action epic and musical drama that surpasses the previous films".^[54] In a negative review for *The Guardian*, Peter Bradshaw wrote that "the interest, dramatic momentum and energy" of the franchise "have frankly expired", concluding that "this movie finally ties itself into various knots to prefigure the later world of Katniss, but the time to end the Games came long ago".^[55] Clarisse Loughrey of *The Independent* criticized the film for "[squandering] the anger of novelist Suzanne Collins's source material" and "[diluting] its biggest villain", further deriding Snow's characterization as a "yassification of a future monster".^[56]

Accolades

Award	Date of ceremony	Category	Recipients	Result	Ref.
<u>Alliance of Women Film Journalists</u>	January 4, 2024	EDA Special Mention Awards	<i>The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes</i>	Nominated	^[57]
<u>Artios Awards</u>	March 7, 2024	The Zeitgeist Award	Debra Zane, Dylan Jury and Simone Bär (Location Casting)	Nominated	^[58]
<u>Costume Designers Guild Awards</u>	February 21, 2024	Excellence in Sci-Fi/Fantasy Film	Trish Summerville	Nominated	^[59]
		Excellence in Costume Illustration	Oksana Nedavniaya	Nominated	
<u>Hollywood Music in Media Awards</u>	November 15, 2023	Original Score – Sci-Fi/Fantasy Film	James Newton Howard	Nominated	^[60]
		Original Song – Sci-Fi/Fantasy Film	"Can't Catch Me Now" - Olivia Rodrigo and Dan Nigro	Won	
<u>North Carolina Film Critics Association</u>	January 3, 2024	Best Original Song		Nominated	^[61]
		Ken Hanke Memorial Tar Heel Award	Hunter Schafer	Nominated	
<u>People's Choice Awards</u>	February 18, 2024	Action Movie of the Year	<i>The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes</i>	Won	^[62]
		Female Movie Star of the Year	Viola Davis	Nominated	
			Rachel Zegler	Nominated	
		Action Movie Star of the Year	Viola Davis	Nominated	
			Rachel Zegler	Won	
<u>Set Decorators Society of America Awards</u>	February 13, 2024	Best Achievement in Décor/Design of a Science Fiction or Fantasy Feature Film	Sabine Schaaf and Uli Hanisch	Nominated	^[63]
<u>Society of Composers &</u>	February 13, 2024	Outstanding Original Song for a Dramatic or Documentary	"Can't Catch Me Now" - Olivia Rodrigo and	Won	^[64]

Lyricists Awards	Visual Media Production	Dan Nigro		
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See also

- "Lucy Gray" 1799 poem by William Wordsworth, after which Lucy Gray Baird is named.

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