



"Sometimes things happen to people and they're not equipped to deal with them." A reasonable enough remark perhaps, but not particularly clever. Surprising then that this rather banal piece of prose from the 2008 novel *The Hunger Games* has been revealed by bookseller Amazon as the most commonly highlighted passage on the Kindle; some eighteen-thousand or so eager readers saw fit to draw attention to it on the bestselling e-reader.

Recently released as a film adaptation, *The Hunger Games* depicts a post-apocalyptic world in which the residents of a city's poor neighbourhoods are forced to compete against one another for survival in fight-to-the-death games. The books have been a publishing phenomenon which continues to gather pace and enthusiastic cinema-goers scrambled to watch protagonist Katniss Everdeen's exploits on screen.

As far as allegories go, there's a lot of meat on the bone. Author Suzanne Collins says that reality TV and the Gulf War were on her mind as she conceived the idea of a starving city's population being reduced to gladiatorial marionettes for the amusement of a sadistic, authoritarian government. Given the social and economic upheaval all over the world in recent years, Collins was shrewd to anticipate the appetite for the story.

Whatever the inspiration, it's not hard to understand the appeal: tales of people overcoming adversity have always been popular and in this case it's the famished citizens of the fictional nation of Panem who vie for readers' and viewers' sympathies. Of course for the fasting Muslim during Ramadan, it's the hunger that attracts most curiosity. Among non-Muslims in particular, there's often a fascination with the idea of going without food and drink (among other things) for the whole day.

"How do you cope?", "Don't you feel hungry?", and the perennial favourite: "Can't you nibble on a little something if you get ravenous?" While it may get a little tiresome day after day and year after year, it's good policy for us to deal patiently with these encounters; after all, there's much to be learned about our religion from a conversation with a fasting Muslim. And in reality, it's not surprising that the practice raises eyebrows in this part of the world.

To a generation that has grown up in an era of plenty, it's often considered eccentric to willingly deny oneself life's ample pleasures. And in a post-Christian landscape, notions of self-control and asceticism have given way to the most lurid and debauched expressions of self-indulgence (often in city-centres on a Friday or Saturday night). All the more reason then to take the time to explain the motivation and meaning behind one of the most important parts of our religion.

Ramadan is another occasion when Muslims have a valuable opportunity to express something of the magnificence of Islam to friends, colleagues and neighbours, to provide counter-weight to the frequently distorted perspective supplied by the mass media. And as more and more people start to flounder from the terrible existential emptiness of modern secular culture, the time is right to serve a dish that will satisfy their hunger.