

## Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes book review by Sarina

"The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes" is set in Panem, 64 years before the events of "The Hunger Games" trilogy, and focuses on the early life of Coriolanus Snow, the future tyrannical President of Panem. Personally, the story was much more dramatic than the famous trilogy, but that made it fun to read. The story begins ten years after the war between the Capitol and the Districts, with 18-year-old Coriolanus Snow preparing for the 10th annual Hunger Games. Once part of a wealthy and influential family, the Snows have fallen on hard times following the war. Coriolanus lives with his cousin Tigris and his grandmother in a once-grand apartment, struggling to maintain appearances while secretly facing poverty.

Determined to restore his family's fortunes, Coriolanus sees an opportunity in the Hunger Games. This year, for the first time, Academy students will mentor tributes. Coriolanus hopes to win the top prize by successfully guiding his assigned tribute to victory, which would secure funds for his university education. However, Coriolanus's plans are challenged when he's assigned Lucy Gray Baird, the female tribute from impoverished District 12. Initially disappointed, his perspective changes during the reaping ceremony when Lucy Gray demonstrates her charisma by putting a snake down the mayor's daughter's dress and captivating the audience with a song. As Coriolanus begins to work with Lucy Gray, he finds himself increasingly drawn to her. They develop a strategy together, and the two of them begin to fall in love.

The 10th Hunger Games are notably different from the Hunger Games we know. The tributes are kept in poor conditions, barely fed, and housed in a zoo. The arena is a stadium, and there are no elaborate costumes or chariot rides. Coriolanus and other mentors, including his classmate Sejanus Plinth, start bringing food to the starving tributes. Dr. Volumnia Gaul, the Head Gamemaker, takes an interest in Coriolanus's ideas for improving the Games' entertainment value. Dean Casca Highbottom, the creator of the Hunger Games, seems to have a grudge against Coriolanus for unknown reasons.

Tragedy strikes when bombs explode during a tour of the arena, killing several tributes and mentors. Lucy Gray saves Coriolanus's life during this incident and in the aftermath, Lucy Gray captivates the Capitol audience with her singing during the televised interviews.

As the Games begin, Coriolanus works tirelessly to secure sponsors and aid for Lucy Gray. She proves to be resourceful and cunning, using her wit and charm to survive. Coriolanus becomes increasingly invested in her success, both for his ambitions and his growing feelings for her.

The Games are brutal and chaotic, with tributes dying from various causes including each other, arena hazards, and even snakes introduced by Dr. Gaul. Lucy Gray's singing becomes a powerful tool, allowing her to manipulate other tributes and win support from the Capitol audience. After Lucy Gray emerges as the victor, Coriolanus's future seems bright. However, his actions during the Games, including breaking rules to help Lucy Gray, catch up with him. As punishment, he's sent to District 12 as a Peacekeeper.

In District 12, Coriolanus reunites with Lucy Gray, who has returned home. They rekindle their relationship, and Coriolanus becomes involved with her group of musicians, the Covey. However, he also begins to see the harsh realities of life in the districts and the simmering discontent with Capitol rule.

Coriolanus's time in District 12 is marked by moral conflicts. He befriends Sejanus, who has also been sent to the district and has rebel sympathies. Coriolanus finds himself torn between his growing affection for Lucy Gray and the district way of life and his ambition and loyalty to the Capitol. The situation comes to a head when Sejanus becomes involved with rebel forces. Coriolanus, fearing for his own future, records Sejanus's confession of aiding rebels and attempting to free a prisoner. This leads to Sejanus's arrest and execution.

Implicated in other crimes and fearing discovery, Coriolanus and Lucy Gray plan to escape together. However, at the crucial moment, Coriolanus chooses ambition over love. He destroys evidence linking him to the crimes and allows Lucy Gray to flee alone, presumably escaping Panem.

Coriolanus returns to the Capitol, where he learns that Dr. Gaul has been manipulating events to test and shape him. She offers him a position as her protégé, which he gratefully accepts. (This is what leads Coriolanus' to become the notorious President Snow.)

The epilogue shows Coriolanus, now known simply as "Snow," firmly established in the Capitol's power structure. He's wealthy again, working on making the Hunger Games even more horrific, and embraced by the elite. However, if you read the trilogy, you know what his outcome is. :) I rate this book an 8/10!