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# Battle Royale



## Synopsis

Battle Royale, a high-octane thriller about senseless youth violence, is one of Japan's best-selling - and most controversial - novels. As part of a ruthless program by the totalitarian government, ninth-grade students are taken to a small isolated island with a map, food, and various weapons. Forced to wear special collars that explode when they break a rule, they must fight each other for three days until only one "winner" remains. The elimination contest becomes the ultimate in must-see reality television. A Japanese pulp classic available in English for the first time, Battle Royale is a potent allegory of what it means to be young and survive in today's dog-eat-dog world. The first novel by small-town journalist Koushun Takami, it went on to become an even more notorious film by 70-year-old gangster director Kinji Fukusaku.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In his violent, controversial first novel, Koushun Takami takes us to the Republic of Greater East Asia, a contemporary, fictional, essentially fascist empire that includes Japan and China, but not Korea. Among the stranger forms of abuse under this oppressive regime is the Program, a compulsory game that pits a group of teenagers against one another until there is only one survivor. Ostensibly begun as a sort of tactical experiment, every year the Program destroys 50 junior high school classes of 15-year-olds for no clear purpose. This is the story of one of those classes. 42 students, 21 male, 21 female, are given weapons and confined to an island. There, they must kill each other until there is one winner, or all perish should they refuse. "Battle Royale" is often

compared to William Golding's 1954 novel "Lord of the Flies". The two books are superficially very similar: They both concern a group of youths on an island fighting for their lives. They are both allegories, but of different things. "Lord of the Flies" illustrates the baser instincts that are normally hidden beneath a thin veneer of civilization. It is to some degree a mockery of British society as the author saw it at the time. "Battle Royale" is explicitly anti-fascist, but since it is doesn't have an audience living under fascism, that's not meaningful in itself. The book's fascism seems to be an allegory for the more rigid aspects of Japanese culture and its educational system. It's possible to interpret the book as anti-capitalist, but I've no idea if that was intended. I do think it implicitly criticizes expectations that modern families often have for their children, and I suspect that bourgeois American youth will empathize more with this facet of the book than with those themes which apply more specifically to Japan. I understand why young people like "Battle Royale". But it wasn't exclusively young people who made the book a bestseller in Japan. It's an entertaining novel with an interesting premise for older folks too. Truthfully, its themes are not as well-executed as "Lord of the Flies", but "Battle Royale"'s characters, interpersonal relationships, and motivations are more intricately drawn. And this is what makes it a page-turner. The bloodbath isn't so shocking as the idea that gruesome violence is inevitable. We get to know these characters. We witness well-intentioned people do horrible things. After a while the reader comes to see the hopelessness of the situation and realizes that people really would murder their classmates, even if they had not set out to do so. When I started reading "Battle Royale", I doubted my ability to keep track of 42 plus characters, all with unfamiliar Japanese names. But I didn't have any trouble at all remembering who was who. Author Koushun Takami deserves a lot of credit for focusing our attention on unique attributes of each character and organizing the book to overcome confusion. The number of students left remaining is announced at the end of each chapter. This helps the reader keep track of what's going on and emphasizes the narrative's -and the Program's- matter-of-fact tone. The only glaring fault that I can find with Takami's writing is the dialogue. The students' dialogue seems awkward and remedial. As I know nothing about the Japanese language, I can't tell if this is bad writing or a problem with the translation. Apart from that, the text is fluid and easy to read. Don't be put off by the book's length. It's a real page-turner. I never at any point tired of reading. I was always anxious to find out who would live or die in the next chapter. Creepy but true. Maintaining the readers' curiosity for over 600 pages is an admirable accomplishment. "Battle Royale" is an impressive first novel. It's enjoyable for young and aging alike. 4 1/2 stars.

This revised English translation of Koushun Takami's spectacular debut novel could not come at a

better time. It has been out of print from VIZ for a few years now, but their new Haikasoru imprint is ideal for bringing it back. This "notorious, high-octane thriller," presents a gripping story that will stay with you for the rest of your life. It is a simple story. A group of 42 high-school students are taken to an evacuated island, given weapons and a time limit, and forced to kill each other until only one of them is left standing.

First off, why is this a must-buy? 1. The translation has been improved. The first edition was rife with typographical errors, and more than once a character would be addressed with another's name. I asked the Haikasoru editor personally, and he said the book received a line-by-line edit, so this improved, tidied translation is something to be excited about. 2. A 22-page afterword by author Koushun Takami! This will be "his longest published work since the novel itself," according to the Haikasoru website. His own opinion on the cult status of his own creation is something no fan should miss. 3. A new forward to the novel by Max Allan Collins. The prolific *Road to Perdition* writer knows a thing or two about good fiction, and there can never be too many essays about good novels by good novelists. 4. Last but not least, an interview with the director of the first *Battle Royale* film, Kinji Fukasaku. Unfortunately, Fukasaku died in 2003, so this will be an old interview, published in English for the first time. It will be interesting to know the opinions of this master director, who so perfectly adapted a film for a much younger generation than his own. It is often said that the best fiction does not provide answers, but rather asks questions. That is **PRECISELY** what this book does. When one reads it, one inevitably asks, "What would I do in this situation?" The simple moral dilemma presented in this book will lead not just to introspection, but to some fun, speculative conversations with friends and family. I first read the book six years ago. After all this time, it still gets brought up in conversation, and it is a testament to the strength of the story that I am still so excited today for this new edition. The book doesn't just excel as a conversation-starter, however. Attached to the simple conflict of the story is a very, very gripping narrative with living, breathing characters. While the psychological examination of a few characters drives the story along the most of the way, the reader is given glimpses into the minds of all 42 students. Far from being confusing, this actually draws the reader further into the story.

New words by the author himself, an interview with the director of the film, and a forward by a modern master of fiction are three reasons that could, individually, motivate one to pick up this second edition of *Battle Royale*. What makes this purchase a necessity for the fan or new reader, however, is all of this packaged with a revised translation. Once again, if you are a fan of the book, the manga, or the films, this book will prove a good excuse to reacquaint yourself with the franchise. Personally, I maintain that the novel itself is the best way to experience the story. I believe the author feels that the manga is the best way. Undoubtedly, some would side with the films. Regardless, none of them

are anything less than entertaining. If you are a fan of Battle Royale, pick this up, it will be worth it. If you aren't a fan yet, this is, in my opinion, the best place to start.

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