

"VARIANT" (Book Review)

Written by Clay McLeod Chapman
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A void has been left in the bloodthirsty hearts of many a young adult reader now that THE HUNGER GAMES has come and gone. Who will be our rebound read?

It seems inevitable that whenever one literary phenomenon closes up shop, a throng of knock-offs invade the bookshelves in hopes of claiming that former cash cow's throne at the top of the bestseller list. Given the stupefying success of Suzanne Collins' trilogy of RUNNING MAN-esque cutthroat competitive kids, complete with drab despotic Orwellian overtones, it shouldn't come as such a surprise that sci-fi teen-on-teen violence is all the Y/A rage these days.

You can toss Robison Wells' VARIANT (HarperTeen) into the mix now, a no-frills blend of BATTLE ROYALE and THE STEPFORD WIVES by way of the Stanford Prison Experiment. Though it isn't the heir apparent to Collins' most dangerous game, VARIANT is a quick read that stands alongside the alarming number of books—not to mention bestsellers—that focus on students obliterating other students in an unchecked post-Columbine quasi-future. *Kids these days...*

Benson Fisher is the recent recipient of a scholarship to attend Maxfield Academy. Something of a revolving door orphan, Benson has passed from one foster home to the next and never quite found his footing. He has taken it upon himself to find a semi-permanent home that will see him through the home-stretch of his remaining days as a juvenile, now only a mere six months away from turning eighteen and legally claiming his independent status. But it doesn't take long before Benson realizes that Maxfield Academy isn't all that it is cracked up to be.

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Welcome to Thunderdome, SAVED BY THE BELL-style.

One student enters, no students leave.

Turns out there are no teachers at Maxfield. Students rule this school. Divvied up into separate gangs based on self-imposed social hierarchies, the onus is put on the student body to compete for head-of-the-class status. How, exactly? Where HARRY POTTER had his Quidditch, VARIANT apparently has paintball, which can't help but feel like a toothless step back in our reading culture's collective bloodlust. As much as I'm sure getting splattered by a 6 mm water soluble paint-pellet would sting to the high heavens, it doesn't seem to carry the template of threat that THE HUNGER GAMES has already laid down for all other books to haplessly follow. The envelope has been pushed, for better or for worse—and within our craven Y/A climate, stepping away from the edge unfortunately doesn't do Wells any favors.

Which is not to say that there isn't a body count amongst this student body. There is. The book's touted big twist pops up midway through the novel, which feels less like a rug-pulling reveal than a new wrinkle within the narrative. No spoilers here. We'll keep Wells' secret safe. That said, folks familiar with CLASS OF 1999, the direct-to-video sequel to the CLASS OF 1984, will find a certain kinship with this book, echoing the film's cheeky tagline: "*Where to graduate... is to survive.*"

Who knows? As it stands, VARIANT has already been publicized as the first book in a trilogy. Once readers reach its subsequent sequels, those paint pellets may just end up being replaced with something a little more lethal—and original.

