

The Book Thief by Marcus Zusak

About the Book

It's just a small story really, about among other things: a girl, some words, an accordionist, some fanatical Germans, a Jewish fist-fighter, and quite a lot of thievery.

Set during World War II in Germany, Markus Zusak's groundbreaking new novel is the story of Liesel Meminger, a foster girl living outside of Munich. Liesel scratches out a meager existence for herself by stealing when she encounters something she can't resist—books. With the help of her accordion-playing foster father, she learns to read and shares her stolen books with her neighbors during bombing raids as well as with the Jewish man hidden in her basement before he is marched to Dachau. (*From the publisher.*)

About the Author

Australian author Markus Zusak grew up hearing stories about Nazi Germany, about the bombing of Munich and about Jews being marched through his mother's small, German town. He always knew it was a story he wanted to tell.

We have these images of the straight-marching lines of boys and the 'Heil Hitlers' and this idea that

everyone in Germany was in it together. But there still were rebellious children and people who didn't follow the rules and people who hid Jews and other people in their houses. So there's another side to Nazi Germany," said Zusak in an interview with The Sydney Morning Herald.

At the age of 30, Zusak has already asserted himself as one of today's most innovative and poetic novelists. With the publication of *The Book Thief*, he is now being dubbed a "literary phenomenon" by Australian and U.S. critics. Zusak is the award-winning author of four previous books for young adults: *The Underdog*, *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, *Getting the Girl*, and *I Am the Messenger*, recipient of a 2006 Printz Honor for excellence in young adult literature. He lives in Sydney. (*From the publisher.*)

Book Reviews

With Death as narrator, Markus Zusak's haunting novel follows Liesel Meminger, *The Book Thief*, through the fear-filled years of Nazi Germany. The story opens as the ten-year-old girl takes her first book shortly after her younger brother's death. Both children were en route to the foster home of Hans and Rosa Hubermann in a Munich suburb. Despite Rosa's sharp tongue and Hans's lack of work, their home is a loving refuge for the

**nightmare-ridden girl. It also becomes a hideout for Max, a young Jewish man whose father saved Hans's life. Liesel finds solace with her neighbor Rudy and her creative partnership with Max. Accompanied by Rudy, the girl copes by stealing food from farmers and books from the mayor's wife. There are also good moments as she learns to read and plays soccer, but Hans's ill-advised act of kindness to a Jewish prisoner forces Max to leave their safe house. The failing war effort and bombing by the Allies lead to more sacrifices, a local suicide and, eventually, to great losses. Reading books and writing down her experiences save Liesel, but this novel clearly depicts the devastating effects of war. Narrator Allan Corduner defines each character with perfect timing. He's deliberate as the voice of Death, softly strong as Liesel, and impatient, but not unkind, as Rosa. With richly evocative imagery and compelling characters, Zusak explores behind-the-lines life in World War II Germany, showing the day-to-day heroism of ordinary people. Relevant for class discussions on wars both past and present. (*For grades 9-up.*)
*Barbara Wysocki - Library Journal***

When Death tells a story, you pay attention. Liesel Meminger is a young girl growing up outside of Munich in Nazi Germany, and Death tells her story

as "an attempt-a flying jump of an attempt-to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it." When her foster father helps her learn to read and she discovers the power of words, Liesel begins stealing books from Nazi book burnings and the mayor's wife's library. As she becomes a better reader, she becomes a writer, writing a book about her life in such a miserable time. Liesel's experiences move Death to say, "I am haunted by humans." How could the human race be "so ugly and so glorious" at the same time? This big, expansive novel is a leisurely working out of fate, of seemingly chance encounters and events that ultimately touch, like dominoes as they collide. The writing is elegant, philosophical and moving. Even at its length, it's a work to read slowly and savor. Beautiful and important. (*For ages 12-up.*)
Kirkus Reviews

Some will argue that a book so difficult and sad may not be appropriate for teenage readers. *The Book Thief* was published for adults in Zusak's native Australia, and I strongly suspect it was written for adults. Adults will probably like it (this one did), but it's a great young-adult novel. Many teenagers will find the story too slow to get going, which is a fair criticism. But it's the kind of book that can be life-changing, because without ever denying the essential amorality and randomness of

the natural order, *The Book Thief* offers us a believable, hard-won hope. That hope is embodied in Liesel, who grows into a good and generous person despite the suffering all around her, and finally becomes a human even Death can love. The hope we see in Liesel is unassailable, the kind you can hang on to in the midst of poverty and war and violence. Young readers need such alternatives to ideological rigidity, and such explorations of how stories matter. And so, come to think of it, do adults.

John Green - New York Times Book Review

While it is set in Germany during World War II and is not immune to bloodshed, most of this story is figurative: it unfolds as symbolic or metaphorical abstraction. The dominoes lined up on its cover are compared to falling bodies. The book thief of the title is a schoolgirl named Liesel Meminger, and the meaning of her stealing is not left unexplained. She has been robbed of a brother, who dies at the start of the book. Her mother disappears, and then Liesel is left in foster care. A great deal has been taken away from her. She steals books to settle the score.... *The Book Thief* will be appreciated for Mr. Zusak's audacity, also on display in his earlier "I Am the Messenger." It will be widely read and admired because it tells a story in which books

become treasures. And because there's no arguing with a sentiment like that.

Janet Maslin - New York Times

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the symbolism of Death as the omniscient narrator of the novel. What are Death's feelings for each victim? Describe Death's attempt to resist Liesel. Death states, "I'm always finding humans at their best and worst. I see their ugly and their beauty, and I wonder how the same thing can be both." (p. 491) What is ugly and beautiful about Liesel, Rosa and Hans Hubermann, Max Vandenburg, Rudy Steiner, and Mrs. Hermann? Why is Death haunted by humans?

2. What is ironic about Liesel's obsession with stealing books? Discuss other uses of irony in the novel.

3. *The Grave Digger's Handbook* is the first book Liesel steals. Why did she take the book? What is significant about the titles of the books she steals? Discuss why she hides *The Grave Digger's Handbook* under her mattress. Describe Hans Hubermann's reaction when he discovers the book. What does the act of book thievery teach Liesel about life and death? Explain Rudy's reaction when he discovers that Liesel is a book thief. How does stealing books from the mayor's house lead to a

friendship with the mayor's wife? Explain how Liesel's own attempt to write a book saves her life.

4. Liesel believes that Hans Hubermann's eyes show kindness, and from the beginning she feels closer to him than to Rosa Hubermann. How does Hans gain Liesel's love and trust? Decide whether Liesel is a substitute for Hans's children, who have strayed from the family. Why is it so difficult for Rosa to demonstrate the same warmth toward Liesel? Discuss how Liesel's relationship with Rosa changes by the end of the novel.

5. Abandonment is a central theme in the novel. The reader knows that Liesel feels abandoned by her mother and by the death of her brother. How does she equate love with abandonment? At what point does she understand why she was abandoned by her mother? Who else abandons Liesel in the novel? Decide whether she was abandoned by circumstance or by the heart.

6. Guilt is another recurring theme in the novel. Hans Hubermann's life was spared in France during World War I, and Erik Vandenburg's life was taken. Explain why Hans feels guilty about Erik's death. Guilt is a powerful emotion that may cause a person to become unhappy and despondent. Discuss how Hans channels his guilt into helping others. Explain Max Vandenburg's thought, "Living was living. The price was guilt and shame." (p. 208) Why does he feel guilt and shame?

7. Compare and contrast the lives of Liesel and Max Vandenburg. How does Max's life give Liesel purpose? At what point do Liesel and Max become friends? Max gives Liesel a story called "The Standover Man" for her birthday. What is the significance of this story?

8. Death says that Liesel was a girl "with a mountain to climb." (p. 86) What is her mountain? Who are her climbing partners? What is her greatest obstacle? At what point does she reach the summit of her mountain? Describe her descent. What does she discover at the foot of her mountain?

9. Hans Junior, a Nazi soldier, calls his dad a coward because he doesn't belong to the Nazi Party. He feels that you are either for Hitler or against him. How does it take courage to oppose Hitler? There isn't one coward in the Hubermann household. Discuss how they demonstrate courage throughout the novel.

10. Describe Liesel's friendship with Rudy. How does their friendship change and grow throughout the novel? Death says that Rudy doesn't offer his friendship "for free." (p. 51) What does Rudy want from Liesel? Discuss Death's statement, "The only thing worse than a boy who hates you [is] a boy who loves you." (p. 52) Why is it difficult for Liesel to love Rudy? Discuss why Liesel tells Mr. Steiner that she kissed Rudy's dead body.

11. How does Zusak use the literary device of foreshadowing to pull the reader into the story?

12. Liesel Meminger lived to be an old woman. Death says that he would like to tell the book thief about beauty and brutality, but those are things that she had lived. How does her life represent beauty in the wake of brutality? Discuss how Zusak's poetic writing style enhances the beauty of Liesel's story.

(Questions issued by publisher.)

Read-alikes (from Google Sites)

Ashes by Kathryn Lasky

Gabriella Schramm's world is changing during Hitler's rise to power, so she turns to books for comfort, but soon her books come under attack. This book gives the reader a fascinating glimpse of an ordinary person's life in Nazi Germany.

The Diary of a Young Girl by Anne Frank

This classic nonfiction book is the journal kept by Anne Frank during her family's years in hiding during World War II. Life in the cramped attic is difficult, but Anne's spirit shines through and her journals have made sure that her experiences will never be forgotten.

Auschwitz by Pascal Croci

This graphic novel tells the story of a fictional couple who loses their daughter in a concentration

camp. Based on interviews with survivors of the Holocaust, the illustrations are dark and powerful.

**Tamar: a Novel of Espionage, Passion and Betrayal
by Mal Peet**

When Tamar's grandfather dies he inherits a box full of clues and codes. The contents of this box illustrate the life of a resistance fighter in Holland during the Nazi occupation, and his exploration of the contents of the box threaten to change Tamar's life forever.

Copper Sun by Sharon Draper

Young Amiri is taken from her African village, shackled and shipped overseas to be a slave on a plantation, but when a chance to escape occurs, she takes it and tries to find sanctuary. Amari's story is intense, richly detailed and character driven.

People of the Book by Geraldine Brooks

Hanna Heath is charged with the restoration of a priceless religious Jewish book. What she finds during her restoration brings about moving stories of the book's past and the people who had worked to save it from a variety of dangerous circumstances.

Night by Elie Wiesel

The true story of Wiesel's survival of Auschwitz and

Buchenwald. This is a dark, powerful book about inhumanity and survival.