

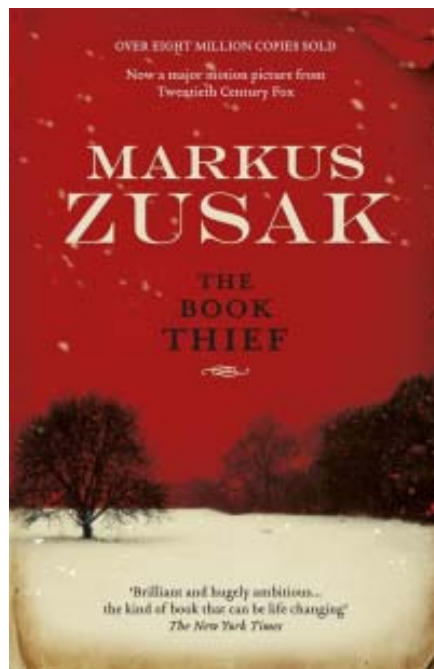
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AUSTRALIA

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Markus Zusak



THE BOOK THIEF

Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'Trust me, though, the words were on their way, and when they arrived, Liesel would hold them in her hands like the clouds, and she would wring them out, like the rain.' (p 85)

This is a novel about the power of words which act as a conduit for the writer's imagination and as a haven for the reader in the exploration of our deepest emotions and fears. It's a burning testament to how words can overcome adversity, but also to how they have in extreme circumstances been used to create fanatic hatred. It's about the tragedy of what happens to the human soul when the power to express or write words is taken away from it. It's about the redemptive and the destructive power of knowledge and of love. It's about the themes of death, hope, guilt, survival and redemption. It's about the fact that each and every one of us is haunted by our capacity for evil and our desire to do good. It shows that whilst words are an inspiring force in translating feelings, and in expressing the inexpressible, they can also destroy the very things we hold most dear - that they are ultimately one of the most powerful forces by which humanity transcends the physical, and attempts to describe the spiritual power of the imagination and the force of emotional connection which we have with each other. They help us to survive and to endure the loss of those who don't.

In 1939 in Nazi Germany, Liesel Meminger and her younger brother Werner are being taken by train by their mother to live with a foster family, Rosa and Hans Hubermann, who live at 33 Himmel Street, Molching, outside Munich, when Werner dies. 'Death', the narrator of this novel, notices Liesel for the first time, and will encounter her again some years later when she and her best friend Rudy discover the grounded enemy aircraft (pp 520-1), and later still when a bomb falls on Himmel Street (p 563). Liesel's love affair with books begins with *The Gravedigger's Handbook* which she finds by her brother's grave, and continues with fourteen books in total (pp 30-1). Liesel is taken in by the irascible Rosa and by the kindly Hans, who though he is never noticed by anyone, becomes Liesel's beloved papa, whose innocuousness she is instantly aware is not a true portrait of who he is. *'The frustration of that appearance, as you can imagine, was its complete misleadance, let's say. There was most certainly value in him, and it did not go unnoticed by Liesel Meminger.'* (p 34) ... *The girl knew from the outset that he'd always appear mid-scream, and that he would not leave.'* (p 38) Their children Hans and Trudy are grown up and live elsewhere, and it is their absence in this house which Liesel fills, as Hans and Rosa fill the absence in her heart.

This novel is premised on the philosophy that words and books have power. Hans teaches Liesel to read, by sharing the book she had found, and it is this which opens doors for Liesel and helps her to cope with the terrible world in which she finds herself. Hans gives her two books for Christmas, *The Dog Named Faust* and *The Lighthouse*. And after she rescues *The Shoulder Shrug* from the book-burning, an act which was observed by the Mayor's wife, Ilsa, the latter shows her into her private library of books (p 146) where Liesel is almost religious in her worship of their display, and also comes to worship the words within them during her subsequent visits. Liesel discovers how words had also rescued Hans, *'but I would soon learn that words and writing actually saved his life once. Or at least, words and a man who taught him the accordion...'* (p 67) Later still she learns that Erik Vandenburg had taught him to play in the WWI trenches which is ironically what brings him danger during WWII. For Hans's promise to Mrs Vandenburg to help the family of his dead comrade is finally 'called up' when her son Max is sent to hide with them. Liesel's fury when the Mayor's wife ends her employment of Rosa as ironing lady is wounding (p 283) and ultimately self-destructive, for she deprives herself of her beloved books. She steals *The Whistler* from the Mayor's house in retaliation for the sleight, and goes on to steal more, before Ilsa begins to leave books for her to 'take'. Amongst them is a

dictionary, and in Part Seven the novel is punctuated with definitions of words indicating the tantalizing and slippery nature of meaning. For words can injure as well as heal; can obfuscate as much as reveal truth.

The Book Thief traces the gradual encroachment of Nazism on the everyday life of the Hubermanns and other ordinary families like them. It shows the insidious nature of such control over personal freedom. It reveals how hatred of others including the Jews and the communists (Kommunisten) imbued the rhetoric of Hitler's speeches in order to incite violence, destruction and cruelty. Hans's dislike for the movement is cloaked in the necessary public subservience to its dictates. On the Führer's birthday, they, like all their neighbours, hang a flag in their window. Liesel is required to join the Hitler Youth movement which becomes familiar to her as she is expected to don the brown uniform and practice her 'Heil Hitler' (p 41). But when Hans Jnr arrives for Christmas we observe how extreme fanaticism can subsume a personality, with his furious denouncement of his father for not being a committed Nazi. He sees Hans Snr as '*part of an old, decrepit Germany - one that allowed everyone else to take it for the proverbial ride while its own people suffered*' (p 112) and accuses him of being a bystander who '*does nothing as a whole nation cleans out the garbage and makes itself great.*' (pp 113-4) The chilling words used here reduce the Holocaust to a clinical, domestic solution for problems such as unemployment and poverty. Liesel is not concerned until she hears the word Kommunisten spoken with such bile on the Führer's birthday (p 120) and realises that the manifesto is directed at her own family. She begins to fear that her letters to her mother may never be answered since she is in obvious danger. When Hans confirms her fear, she expresses her hatred for the Führer but is admonished by Hans (pp 124-5). His fear for their safety has led him to take the safest path; to privately hate and publicly adhere to Nazism's tenets, and later in the novel the Hubermanns' predicament is spelled out (p 215). Later still Max fantasises about boxing with the Führer only to have his victory destroyed by Hitler's mental manipulation of the crowd who are spectators to the imaginary conflict (p 275). This scene is a metaphor for how Hitler convinced an entire nation to willingly allow or turn a blind eye to human suffering on such a vast scale. It also describes how those who tried to resist, like Hans, and Rudy's father, Alex Steiner, were recruited and made to serve as soldiers for a cause they didn't believe in. '*When they come and ask you for one of your children, ... you're supposed to say yes.*' (p 446)

Anti-Semitism and Jewish resistance to persecution is one of the strands in this story. '*There was, of course, the matter of forty million people I picked up by the time the whole thing was finished, but that's getting all metaphoric.*' (p 121) Liesel lives near Schiller Street - the road of yellow stars - and observes the destruction of Jewish homes and their disappearance from the neighborhood. The irony of the situation is pointed out forcibly: Rudy's 'father's business wasn't doing so well of late (the threat of Jewish competition was taken away, but so were the Jewish customers.)' (p 161) The essence of Jewish humour is to laugh at adversity in a black form of hilarity. A far greater irony is present when Max Vandenburg is given a false identity and a copy of *Mein Kampf* in which to hide his papers and to hide behind when traveling by rail to his new hideout. 'Of all the things to save him.' (p 173) Later Max systematically removes each page and paints over it in order to write his own story on the pages beginning with the tale he gives Liesel for her birthday. As they and their neighbours watch successive groups of Jews being herded through the streets on their way to Dachau, we observe the penalty paid by those who, like Hans, attempt to offer to them the smallest act of kindness (pp 418- 423). Their fear for the repercussions which might be brought to bear on their own families provides a chilling impetus to remain silent in the face of the inhumanity of anti-semitism. The real meaning of hatred is brought home to Liesel and Ludwig Schmeikl at the rally when they realise that their petty disputes in the schoolyard were a pallid reflection of the hatred evinced by the burning, and their shock amid the chaos forces both to apologise for their fight (p 122).

Later on, however, the human pendulum swings back. *'How quickly the pity would leave her, and how quickly it would spill over into something else completely.'* (p 160)

Guilt is the terrible burden felt by survivors who not only lament the loss of their loved ones, but also the danger they inflict on others. *'To live. Living was living. The price was guilt, and shame.'* (p 227) When Max is taken by Walter Kugler into hiding he has to abandon his family, and *'the relief struggled inside him like an obscenity. It was something he didn't want to feel but, none the less, he felt it with such gusto it made him want to throw up.'* (p 208) When he makes his way out of hiding to seek refuge in the Hubermanns' home, *'He reminded himself that this was no time for hope ... How could he show up and ask people to risk their lives for him? How could he be so selfish?'* (p 183) These lines describe the terrible dilemma of the persecuted, whose only hope generally lies in risking the lives of others, and whose pain lies in their memory of those they've loved who've not survived. Michael Holtzapfel is one of the many tragic exponents of such 'survival guilt' and his actions are evidence of the enormous pressure such people place on themselves emotionally. *'They're the ones I can't stand to look at, although on many occasions, I still fail. I deliberately seek out the colours to keep my mind off them, but now and then, I witness the ones who are left behind, crumbling amongst the jigsaw puzzle of realization, despair and surprise. They have punctured hearts. They have beaten lungs.'* (p 5)

This is also a beautifully crafted tale about the growth of love in a family. Hans and Rosa find a second family in Liesel, as she does in them. Despite Rosa's rough exterior she is in her heart a kind and decent person who feels the need to protect Liesel and then Max. She is deeply aware of how hard it is for a child to endure the secrets and the fears of their existence. *'Everything was good. But it was awful too.'* (p 221) And she has no hesitation in taking in Max who is in a similar situation to Liesel (p 223) and becomes part of their 'family' too. This microcosm of a larger group or community perhaps explains how some of the victims of the Holocaust managed to resist death. Liesel's small gifts to Max not only cheer his waking hours but symbolize the fact that familial love and hope can imbue the simplest of objects with the desire to love and survive.

Such gift giving is another theme symbolic of the gift of love. Liesel hordes 'treasures' for Max when he is asleep for days; he makes books for her; Liesel reads stories to Mrs Holtzapfel; and she gives Rudy a 'gift' of a suit on Christmas 1942; Liesel continues to read to Mrs Holtzapfel after the death of her son, Robert, and also comforts her surviving son Michael: *'It feels good to be good for something in the aftermath of the snows of Stalingrad.'*(p 501) The Mayoress gives gifts of books to her which finally culminate in Liesel's act of reparation (p 503-4), and Liesel's nightmares about her brother's death leave her finally after she has reconciled herself with her benefactor. The gift of life is to be treasured and even more than that, the twin gifts of hope and of love. For they offer solace to those who survive suffering and loss and often appear in their most powerful form as words.

How does a writer describe the unthinkable? How does he deal with loss, betrayal, unconscionable cruelty, unbearable sadness and incredible resilience? Zusak does it by using the cool, world-weary voice of Death, the one who can look down on all this and describe it, although even he cannot see it impartially, and it's little wonder that Death is somewhat facetious about a 'God' who can countenance all this destruction.

'For me, the sky was the colour of Jews. When their bodies had finished scouring for gaps in the door, their souls rose up. Their fingernails had scratched at the wood and in some cases were nailed into it by the sheer force of desperation, and their spirits came towards me, into my arms. We climbed out of those shower facilities, onto the roof and up, into eternity's certain breadth. They just kept feeding me. Minute after minute. Shower after shower.' (p 372)

The power of this description of such atrocity is grounded in a poetic expression of human suffering. It's a prayer for the dead; a dirge for the living who allowed it; a lament for their common humanity. Later Death describes the terrible events in the snows of Stalingrad when Robert Holtzapfel died (pp 499-501) and the novel concludes with Death's resonant observations on humanity. If humans have been responsible for the most brutal of events, they have also survived them and this dual capacity provides a source of wonder to every writer, everywhere. The movement of history is like a tide which scoops up people, some early and some later in life, and washes them away leaving the survivors to tell their stories, and to regret their loss. We are all survivors in one way or another. But we will all die, of course, as well.

WRITING STYLE

1. The genius of this book is to use the **Omniscient narration** of the voice of Death which allows 'him' to describe any event or person he chooses to, even after they've ceased to play a role in the narrative of Liesel's love affair with books. Within this **metafictional** style of narration ('*A story. Story after story. Story within story.*' (p 74)), he uses particular techniques:

1. a) The narrator employs a combination of third and second person to make his connection with the reader even more intimate. E.g. '*I could introduce myself properly, but it's not really necessary. You will know me well enough...*' (p 4)

1. b) This novel is interspersed with vignettes or stories told by Death describing the fates of various people after they walk out of Liesel's life. E.g. Arthur Berg (p 180). Death's role as director of each individual's fate is clear, e.g. '*Soon I will clap them together. Just give me a few pages.*' (p 182)

1. c) The narrator has the ability to tease, or in some cases prepare the reader with 'advance notice' of events which haven't yet happened in the narrative (e.g. Rudy's death predicted p 262), and is thus able to subvert and play with the traditional sequential narrative:

*'Five hundred souls.
I carried them in my fingers, like suitcases. Or I'd throw them over my shoulder.
It was only the children I carried in my arms.'* (p 359)

This technique allows a reflective engagement with the reader:

'Of course, I'm being rude. I'm spoiling the ending, not only of the entire book, but of this particular piece of it. I have given you two events in advance, because I don't have much interest in building mystery. Mystery bores me. It chores me.' (p 263)

Discuss narration in this work.

2. All writers are 'book thieves' for they discover secretive tactics for undermining the reader's capacity to interpret a narrative, and steal into their hearts with their expression and style. Zusak's way with words is singularly inventive, since he uses figures of speech in a totally original, cryptic and poetic manner. E.g. '*When the train pulled into the Bahnhof in Munich, the passengers slid out as if from a torn package.*' (p 25) Rosa '*looked like a small wardrobe with a coat thrown over it.*' (p 28) '*Burning words were torn from their sentences.*' (p 121) '*Birds above did laps.*' (p 121) '*Rudy ... barely able to contain a grin. It ran across his face like a skid.*' (p 175) '*The town hall stood like a giant, ham-fisted youth, too big for his age.*' (p 183) '*There were no people on the street anymore. They were rumours carrying bags.*' (p 410) '*They were going to Dachau, to concentrate.*' (p 415) '*Faces like ghost towns.*' (p 443) Did you notice a particularly evocative piece of writing like these?

3. **Setting** is particularly resonantly evoked by often ascribing 'emotions' to a place. E.g. '*The house was pale, almost sickly-looking, with an iron gate and a brown spit-stained door.*' (p 184) What impression does this give the reader of the atmosphere on Himmel Street? Read the description of Molching and Liesel's arrival on Himmel Street (pp 26-27). What techniques does the writer use to create a picture of this place?

4. The **humour** in this novel has an **edge of darkness** (understandably since it is narrated by Death!), and despite the fact that it is largely seen through German eyes, it is also coloured by the distinctive tone of **Jewish humour**. '*How do you tell if something's alive? You check for breathing.*' (p 39) When Rosa is at her bleakest clutching the accordion after

Hans has left, Liesel hears her snoring: *'Who needs bellows, she thought, when you've got a pair of lungs like that?' (p 458) 'It kills me sometimes, how people die.'* (p 494) Did you find this novel amusing? Discuss sequences where you appreciated the black humour at work.

5. Several **graphic and suggestive pieces** are included (pp 244 -256, pp 301-2, and pp 474-480) which are 'stories' written and illustrated by Max. What did you make of these pieces? Compare them to the style of work found in Antoine de Saint Exupéry's *The Little Prince*.

6. This text is redolent with **symbolism and metaphor**. For example, the books Liesel steals have titles which relate to the themes. Several passages suggest that words are a metaphor for action, for history, and for human endeavour. E.g. *'Those who remained were firing into the blank pages in front of them. Three languages interwove. The Russian, the bullets, the German.'* (p 499) Discuss predominant symbols and metaphors.

THE AUTHOR

Markus Zusak was born in 1975 and is the author of five books, including *The Messenger* and the international bestseller *The Book Thief*, which is translated into more than forty languages. His children's books include the award-winning trilogy *The Underdog*, *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* and *When Dogs Cry*. He lives in Sydney with his wife and two children.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *'The impoverished always try to keep moving, as if relocating might help. They ignore the reality that a new version of the same problem will be waiting at the end of the trip - the relative you cringe to kiss.'* (p 25) Discuss.
2. Rosa Hubermann seems unlovable (p 35) and yet she has a lot of love to give, and *'was a good woman for a crisis.'* (p 230) Are seemingly angry people simply protecting themselves from the hurt which inevitably lies in human relationships? Discuss.
3. *'Is there cowardice in the acknowledgement of fear? Is there cowardice in being glad that you lived?'* (p 115) Death writes: *'I've seen so many young men over the years who think they're running at other young men. They are not. They're running at me.'* (p 189) Those who survive war may be those who, like Hans, do not invite Death's attention. The description of his service in WWI (p 188) suggests that Hans had a gift for remaining incognito, but ideas of cowardice and bravery are very ambiguous. Is it a 'gift' to escape the attention of death? Are young men who risk their lives in battle, or in boxing rings, or at the wheels of cars, brave or foolish? Zusak's children's books have also masterfully explored notions of masculinity and courage in obliquely poetic and sparsely written narratives. Is 'being a man' a metaphor for courage, or of foolhardiness? Discuss.
4. How ordinary people tolerated the excesses of Nazism is illustrated by the points made by Alex Steiner (pp 61-2). Such movements prey on insecurities, on fear of unemployment and loss of livelihood, of poverty, and of not being able to support one's family. *'there was an itch in his heart, but he made it a point not to scratch it. He was afraid of what might come leaking out.'* (p 62) Later the narrator explains that *'it would all have come to nothing had the Germans not loved one particular activity - to burn.'* (p 90) Compare this to global and Australian toleration of atrocities today.
5. *'I guess humans like to watch a little destruction. Sandcastles, houses of cards, that's where they begin. Their great skill is their capacity to escalate.'* (p 118) The novel describes Rudy Steiner: *'In years to come he would be a giver of bread, not a stealer - proof again of the contradictory human being. So much good, so much evil. Just add water.'* (p 178) Is the capacity for violence a nasty streak in all of us?
6. Music, in the form of Liesel's papa's accordion, is like words, symbolic here of spiritual strength. Reading this book might remind you of how other popular cultural forms such as film are often resonant with similar ideas. E.g. The movie 'The Sound of Music' is now almost a cliché but watching it invariably reminds you of the power of music to transcend undercurrents of fear and to symbolise hope and unity. Discuss.
7. Surviving life is a mixture of the prosaic and the sublime. The spirit sustains us, but the body must be given due credit as well. For example, even when discussing the unthinkable - the death of Max whom they've each come to love - the Hubermanns must also worry about the reality of that death - the smell of a corpse and the difficulty of hiding it, and when they eat, they realize guiltily that his illness has given them more sustenance. (p 352) Zusak's picture of survival is visceral and real, rather than being romanticized, as it often is in 'Hollywood' interpretations. Discuss the manner in which the reality of war and its 'mundanity' is presented in *The Book Thief*.
8. 'I'm sorry' are words which punctuate some of the key events in this novel, such as the rally (p 122), or when Ilsa tells Liesel about her son Johann being killed in WWI (pp 158-9). These words have particular resonance in Australian society for the government's refusal to share the mutual guilt of the past. Discuss.

9. The Jewish Holocaust is an event which has been the subject of countless fictional and non-fictional works. You may wish to read others and discuss and compare them to this novel. E.g. D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* is another monumental work, as is Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's List* or William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*. *The Diary of Anne Frank* is a non-fiction work which has also achieved widespread recognition.

10. This novel is obviously based (in part) on the experiences of Markus Zusak's own family and on his research, since he lists some of his sources in *Acknowledgments* at the end of the book. One of them is the Sydney Jewish Museum available at <http://www.sydneyjewishmuseum.com.au/> [Accessed 2 October 2005] Information included on its website includes the fact that 70 of their 90 volunteer guides are Holocaust survivors whose stories are told in the Museum. Do some research of your own and discuss it in relation to the contents of this novel.

11. One of the unsettling aspects of the post-Holocaust era has been the establishment not only of museums and memorials but of a tourist industry which invites what sometimes becomes an almost voyeuristic observation. Even when visiting the website for the Sydney Jewish Museum, for example, one is startled by the tone of the entry:
Buy your Rosh Hashanah Gifts & Cards at the Sydney Jewish Museum Gift Shop
For all your special gifts for barmitzvah, batmitzvah, weddings, engagements, birthdays or the welcome the arrival of a baby to the family.
Kosher Café serving light lunches, snacks, coffee and drinks.
How can we hope to appreciate such human suffering from the position of a relatively affluent and consumerist society?

12. The cover is a significant part of any published work, since it has to provide a metaphorical and artistic visual summary of the work's themes, and to market the book by appealing to a wide range of readers. Examine the artwork including image, design, typography, and blurb, and discuss their relationship to the themes of the work, and their appeal. Titles of books are significant too, for they also have to poetically evoke the work's ideas. What other titles might this have had? Most of the titles of the books which Liesel reads could also have been the title of this work. E.g. *The Gravedigger's Handbook*. Put together they might provide a word game in themselves. E.g. *The Word Shaker*, *The Shoulder Shrug*. Are they possibly 'plays on words' with other associations? What possible meanings might you make of the words *The Book Thief*? Discuss.

13. Guilt is one of the key themes in this novel; the terrible burden that people who survive feel when they know others have not been so fortunate. The children of survivors also feel this pain. E.g. Lily Brett's novels such as *You Gotta Have Balls* are all imbued with the neurotic shadow cast by parents on their children, for they too are survivors. Discuss.

14. Punishment for a moral transgression must always be made personal for people to really fear it. Hans warns Liesel not to reveal that they are harboring a Jew, by threatening to take those things which are most precious to her. (pp 219-221) This is a metaphor for the need to always 'feel' the consequences of a crime ... to 'feel' other people's pain. Is our affluent society insensitive to other cultures and their pain?

15. 'What great malice there could be in allowing something to live.' (p 270) Is the fear of death the worst thing we can endure?

16. '*It was a nation of farmed thoughts...our Führer also planted seeds to create symbols.*'

(p 475) Max's story suggests that Hitler's power lay in the words he planted. Compare this to the rhetoric used by governments today. Are we equally manipulated by 'the powers that be'? Discuss.

17. 'Chance' in life is an aspect of this work which was also reflected in Zusak's *The Messenger*. '*The human heart is a line, whereas my own is a circle, and I have the endless ability to be in the right place at the right time.*' (p 522) When Death writes: '*One wildcard was yet to be played*' (p 201) he is suggesting that life is made up of random and yet significant connections which often return to haunt us and alter the course of a seemingly pre-determined destiny. The chapter headed '*The Gamblers (A Seven-sided Dice)*' (p 263 -287) describes how a series of seven random events create both pressure and vitality in Liesel's life. When Hans gives up his seat to Reinhold Zucker it saves his life and leads to his discharge to home duties (pp 506-7). When Alex Steiner goes to war in refusing to allow his son Rudy to attend a special school for elite students, he unwittingly contributes to another catastrophic loss. Is chance more to be feared than the certainties in our lives?

18. The central question asked here (which has been asked in countless other great works of literature) is how human beings have been capable of such brutality and also have transcended suffering with acts of extraordinary love and courage. Some would credit God (or other religious figures) with this dual power, but this novel places responsibility firmly with men and women, and marvels at their goodness, their frailty, and their potential for evil. Death writes that '*I am haunted by humans*'. (p 584) We are all haunted by this duality, and our imaginations and emotional connections with each other are our only saviour. Discuss.

19. *The Book Thief* has now been made into a major motion picture by Twentieth Century Fox. How does seeing the film, either before or after reading the book, impact on the reading experience?

THE BOOK THIEF

Markus Zusak

Picador Australia

Paperback - ISBN: 9781743515860

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Sydney NSW 2000

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