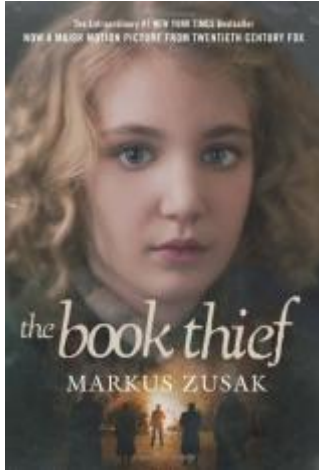


The Book Thief

by Markus 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.

This is an unforgettable story about the ability of books to feed the soul.

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Discussion Guide

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? Debate 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? Debate 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.

Author Bio

Markus Zusak was born in 1975 and is the author of five books, including the international bestseller, *THE BOOK THIEF*, which is translated into more than 40 languages. First released in 2005, *THE BOOK THIEF* has spent a total of 375 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and still remains there eight years after it first came out.

THE MESSENGER (or *I AM THE MESSENGER*), published in 2002, won the 2003 Australian Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award (Older Readers) and the 2003 NSW Premier's Literary Award (Ethel Turner Prize), as well as receiving a Printz Honour in America. It also won numerous national readers choice awards across Europe, including the highly regarded *Deutscher Jugendliteratur* prize in Germany.

It is *THE BOOK THIEF*, however, that has established Markus Zusak as one of the most successful authors to come out of Australia. To date, *The Book Thief* has held the number one position at Amazon.com, Amazon.co.uk, the *New York Times* bestseller list, as well as in countries across South America, Europe and Asia. It has also been in the top five bestsellers in the UK and several other territories. It has amassed many and varied awards, ranging from literary prizes to readers choice awards to prizes voted on by booksellers. It was the only book to feature on both the USA and UK World Book Night Lists in 2012, and has now been adapted into a major motion picture.

Markus Zusak grew up in Sydney, Australia, and still lives there with his wife and two children.

Critical Praise

"Brilliant and hugely ambitious... It's the kind of book that can be life changing."

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