

Cate Morton

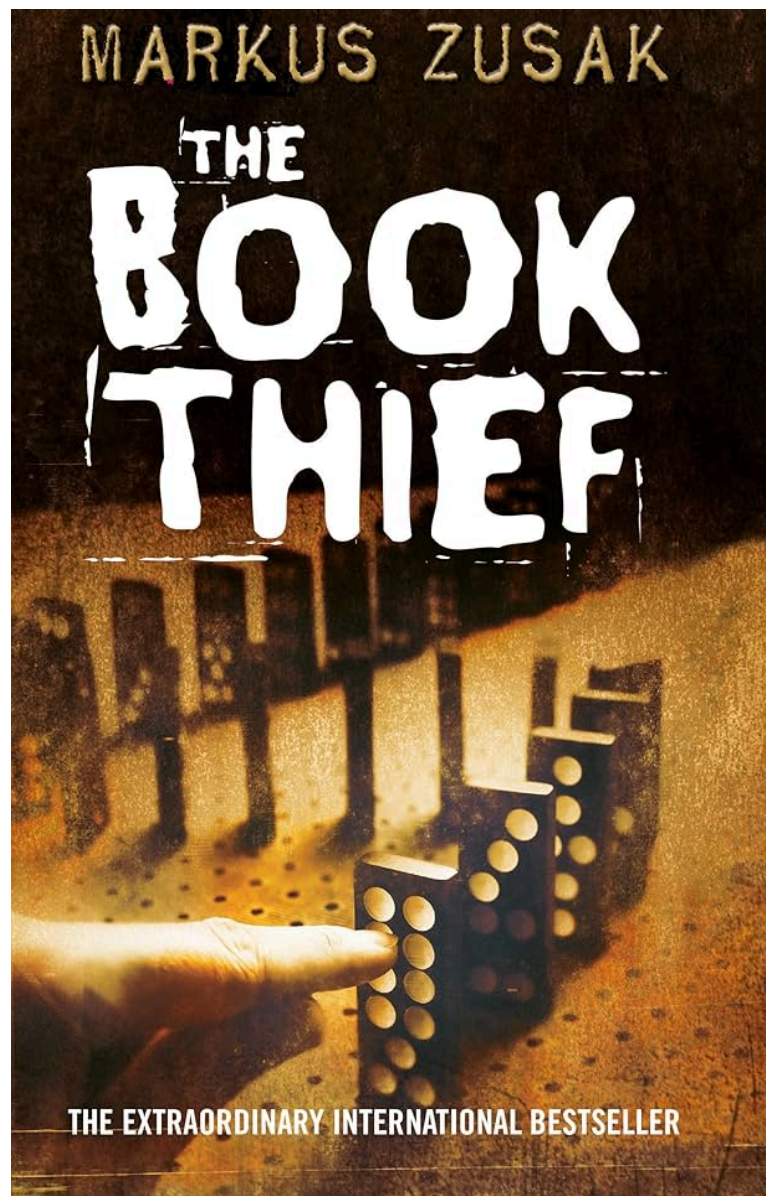
Engl 112B

Dr. Warner

30 September 2024

The Book Thief

Markus Zusak





Picture: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/59222/markus-zusak/>

Website: Author does not have his own active website. **Information:** <https://www.chipublic.org/markus-zusak-biography/>

About the Author: Markus Zusak is an Australian author who studied

English and history at the University of New South Wales, graduating with an education diploma and Bachelor of Arts. Zusak is the youngest of four siblings and his parents are German and Australian immigrants. Neither of his parents really spoke or understood English and made it a priority that their children master the language. Before he published his first book in 1999, he was a high school English teacher. He has written six novels, and *The Book Thief* is translated into over forty languages. *The Book Thief* has received many awards, including young adult awards such as “Best Book” by *the School Library Journal*. He states in an interview he wrote the book not to target a specific audience, but hoping it would be someone’s favorite book.

Summary: *The Book Thief* follows Liesel Meminger as she moves into her foster family’s home in Molching during the holocaust and finds the significance of words. Her foster father, Hans Hubermann, teaches her to read and write, helping her cope with the harsh realities of war. Her and her friend, Rudy, enjoy stealing in their past time, and she often hangs out with Max, a

Jewish stow, in her basement. The story is told from the perspective of Death as Death begins to judge humans and the state of the world increasingly as the story continues. Liesel faces death and loss throughout the story as most of the people closest to her leave or die because of the war. This story follows her growing up and maturing with the war, emphasizing the fragility of life and the impact words have on everyone.

Quote #1: “Summer came for the book thief, everything was going nicely. For me, the sky was the color of Jews... There were broken bodies and dead, sweet hearts. Still, it was better than the gas... I took them all away, and if ever there was a time I needed distraction, this was it. They were French, they were Jews, and they were you” (349-350)

- This quote is spoken by Death. It is significant because *Death* is tired of doing his job and *Death* feels these people should not die. Liesel’s enjoyable summer is contrasted to Death’s reality, portraying Liesel’s innocence and obliviousness. Death sees things in color and mentions souls he captures rise. The sky being the color of Jews is indicative of how many Jews are dying and how depressing the atmosphere is. The sky is infinite, and Death does not see an end to the amount of Jews he has taken or will take. Death gives remorse and possibly some regret to the dead bodies he’s collected and needs a distraction to help him continue on, even if it is reluctantly. He is tired of taking everyone’s life and ties it back to “you,” indicating it could be anyone. This “you” shows the universal fear everyone should have, and has, during this time period when death is inevitable.

Quote #2: “Liesel– I almost scribbled this story out. I thought you might be too old for such a tale, but maybe no one is. I thought of you and your books and words, and this strange story

came into my head. I hope you can find some good in it... They thought they could hear voices and words behind them, on the word shaker's tree" (444-450).

- Liesel is given a book Max made while he was in her basement that her foster mom presents to her at Christmas. This story tells his perspective of the holocaust and rebellion. Books are banned during this time, and Max gifting Liesel a book shows his defiance and his immorality as he will now forever live as long as his pages do. He claims Hitler hypnotizes his army with cunning words, and they go into a conveyor belt and come out unified physically and emotionally. He describes Liesel as a "word shaker" in this story who climbs a tree Hitler wants to be cut down, the only sign of life. This story is an emphasis on the importance of words, not just for Liesel but also Hitler. Max claims everyone became brainwashed at the power and precision of Hitler's words, and perhaps Liesel is a "word shaker" since she can look past his fake words and see reality. Words are what bond Max and Liesel, and acknowledging this friendship is important to Liesel and demonstrates why she values words and language so much.

Quote #3: "His face fell on her. It reached down as she tripped, and the Jew, the nasty Jew, helped her up. It took all of his strength... When she ignored him completely, the soldier used his arm to separate the stickiness of the people. He shoved them aside and made his way through... The soldier took her. His hands manhandled her clothes... Together, they watched the humans disappear. They watched them dissolve, like moving tablets in the humid air" (510-515).

- This quote, specifically this part, shows the difference of what the imprisoned Jews use their strength for opposed to the soldiers. Liesel is initially overjoyed to reunite with Max, and they share a heartfelt moment that is contrasted to the violence and pain that is inflicted after. The Jews, who hardly have energy to help themselves, help Liesel stand up

and cause no violence. The soldier, who is well fed and taken care of, uses his energy to submit to pain and later whips her, Max, and Rudy. Words are contrasted to violence as she turns to words and storytelling to help her cope with the violence that is ensuing. This scene is a symbol of the power of faith, friendship, and words whilst being juxtaposed to violence and innocence.

Classroom Use: I would introduce this book as a larger unit, since it is a larger book and some background context is required. I would give a summary on the holocaust prior to starting the book and do my best to preface some of the issues presented in the text (such as death, violence, parental relations) to have group discussions on possible ways to cope with these hardships. An activity that could be impactful and helpful to the comprehension of both the story and the gruesomeness of the war would be a timeline of the people coming in and out of Liesel's life. I would have a timeline of the war's events and a timeline of people in Liesel's life as a class activity to better everyone's understanding of the war and how it impacts Liesel's life. This could also be a moment to reflect on how she copes with these losses and how they impact her character. Another activity could be a visual activity of using the description of the basement to draw an interpretation of what it would look like. An essay or writing reflection concept is considering how the story being written from death's perspective impacts the story itself, and deep diving into death's intervening comments in the story.

Other Similar Texts to Pair With: This text offers a younger perspective of the war so if time allowed I would pair the book to Bette Greene's *Summer of My German Soldier* as both texts are about a younger girl navigating emotions tied with the war and growing up; such as relationships to parents and where they fit in the world. Another book, or film, I would present would be *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* to show a young male's perspective of the war. I would also like to

play *The Pianist* movie to offer a visual perspective of the war, and offer an older, male perspective on the war who actively hides from the Nazis. I would not necessarily have the class read and watch the entire texts but I would have them read or watch pieces to make sure the students understand there are different perspectives on the war.

Why you should give this book to teens: This book should be given to teens for *many* reasons, one being awareness. This book is an opportunity to educate people about the holocaust if they haven't been already, and it being written from a teens perspective could help a teen empathize with the events seeing how Liesel comprehends them. Liesel navigates how to cope with death and loss many times throughout the book, introducing a teen some potential ways to cope (such as with words) or introducing the concept of mourning altogether. Seeing how Liesel constantly thinks of her brother throughout the novel despite his passing at the beginning of the book shows how grief takes time and there is no correct pattern to mourning. It is also important to be aware of the holocaust and how terrible its events were. This book, although still violent, doesn't focus on the violence itself and could be an easier holocaust read for queasy teens who don't cope with gruesome details well. This book navigates complicated friendships and adult relationships as well as learning about oneself as a teen and could help a teenager in not only educating them but helping them feel less alone.

How it fits best in Chapters 4-8 in *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning*:

Chapter 4: Books about Real-Life Experiences:

- Teens navigating relationships
 - Liesel has to say goodbye to her mother and move in with a new family. She navigates her relationships with her foster parents differently, but finds a way to bond with her foster father and make time to understand her mother. This could

help teens accept different relationships with their parents and help them better understand their parents are people also navigating emotions and life the same way they are.

- Liesel's relationship with Rudy throughout the story matures into something more than a friendship. He constantly makes passes at her, which she declines, until she realizes her feelings for him as more than a friend. This could help teens who are struggling to come to terms with their friend feel better about their feelings and help them feel normal.
- Teens navigating morals and their conscious
 - Rudy and Liesel begin to steal food and Liesel also steals books throughout the text. Liesel develops her morals around books, figuring it is better they get read than sitting there collecting dust or burning. At first she feels guilty stealing, but as she steals more her morals align more with stealing and she gains pleasure from it. These stealing moments give Liesel youth and a sense of immaturity since she is a child and longs to have fun. Even though she is surrounded by death, Liesel still finds ways to cope and get pleasure, reminding the young adult to live their life as best they can and it is okay to make mistakes.
 - Liesel feels really bad when she yells at Ilsa Hermann. She regrets her decision when she thinks about it after, displaying how her standards and conscience are developing. This shows a young teen it is okay to make mistakes and to learn from them.
- Secrets and accountability

- Liesel is trusted by her father with their secret about their Jewish stowaway, Max. Hans warns her intensely what will happen if she tells *anyone* their secret, as they would all be in danger. Secrets can be hard to keep, especially at a young age, but it is important for teens to know not everything should be shared and it is important to have boundaries.

Chapter 5: Books about Facing Death and Loss: Liesel faces death and loss with every major person presented in this story. She is separated from her mother, her brother dies, her foster parents die, her best friend dies, and her basement pal is not to be seen again, unaware of his fate. The book is written from the perspective of Death, giving insight into every characters' fate, but seeing Liesel cope with these deaths and the state of the world is powerful. She learns to cope with loss and death, and understands words and escaping in books as a healing way for her to survive.

Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions: This book discusses the holocaust, which is a result of religious discrimination. It explores Liesel and other characters' thoughts and feelings toward the death and violence that ensues on Jewish people and makes them decide if they rebel or not. The Hubermann's decide to rebel against the discrimination when they house Max. They could have died from this decision but decided this morally aligns with their beliefs more than judging other people for theirs.

Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival: Liesel maintains composure throughout the text despite all the negativity and violence that surrounds her. She learns to cope with words and books, escaping and learning as much as she can. She displays courage when she disobeys the rules, such as when she steals, hosting Max, and running to him in the street.

Quantitative:

- Lexile: approximately 730L, indicating it's suitable for middle school readers.
- AR: 5.0, point value of 17
- Readability: 7-8 graders, ages 13-14
- Dale-Chall: 7-8 grade
- Flesch-Kincaid: 5.5-6.5, appropriate for readers in grades 5-7
- I would recommend this book to 7-8 grade students.

Qualitative:

- Structure
 - The text is narrated by death, adding depth and irony to the characters and events.
 - The text is ten sections with chapters within. Each section and chapter has its own title to indicate unity between them. Zusak chooses for the chapters to be shorter to keep the reader engaged.
 - The text is a nonlinear timeline as it jumps back and forth between characters and timelines to provide more context.
 - Zusak includes visual aids, such as drawings and bolded words, to highlight important moments on the page.
- Language Conventions and Clarity
 - Word choice is simple.
 - Zusak uses some words in German and provides their definitions. These words are italicized.
 - Some words are paired with a definition, bolded on the page to provide further clarity to the intensity of the words.

- Imagery, metaphors, repetition, word play, and foreshadowing are the primary literary devices used in this text.
- Knowledge Demands
 - It is important the reader has knowledge of the holocaust and WWII to fully understand the events in the text.
 - Not required for comprehension but for further analytical clarity some background on the literary references enhances the experience of the text.
 - Emotional maturity is important since heavy themes such as death and loss are present throughout the entire novel.
 - Knowing to recognize symbolism in the narrator and in books is an important preface to understand the text and part of its complexity.
- Levels of Meaning
 - Literally: This text follows Liesel Meminger as she navigates war, friendship, and loss.
 - Emotionally: This text reflects how war impacts Liesel's childhood and how she is forced to learn to cope with death in order to stay sane and survive.
 - Symbolically: Liesel's love and admiration for words and books serves as a means of her survival and independence, giving a sense of hope, resistance, and emphasizing the impact of storytelling.