

The Book Thief

By Markus Zusak

Book Talk

By Laura Stefanko

ENGL 112B

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

Markus Zusak is an Australian writer and the son of German and Austrian parents. Zusak graduated with a Bachelors in Education and, for brief time, worked as a high school English teacher. In 2006 Zusak's novel *The Book Thief* was published, gaining major print success. In Australia, *The Book Thief* was published as an adult novel, but in the United States, as a young adult novel. Instead of categorizing his book, however, Zusak says, "What I wanted to do... was write someone's favorite book". Zusak says his inspiration for writing *The Book Thief* was the stories his parents would tell him of growing up during World War II. Since its publication, *The Book Thief* has won countless awards, including the Michael L. Printz Honor and the Kathleen Mitchell Award. In 2013, Zusak's novel was adapted into a film.

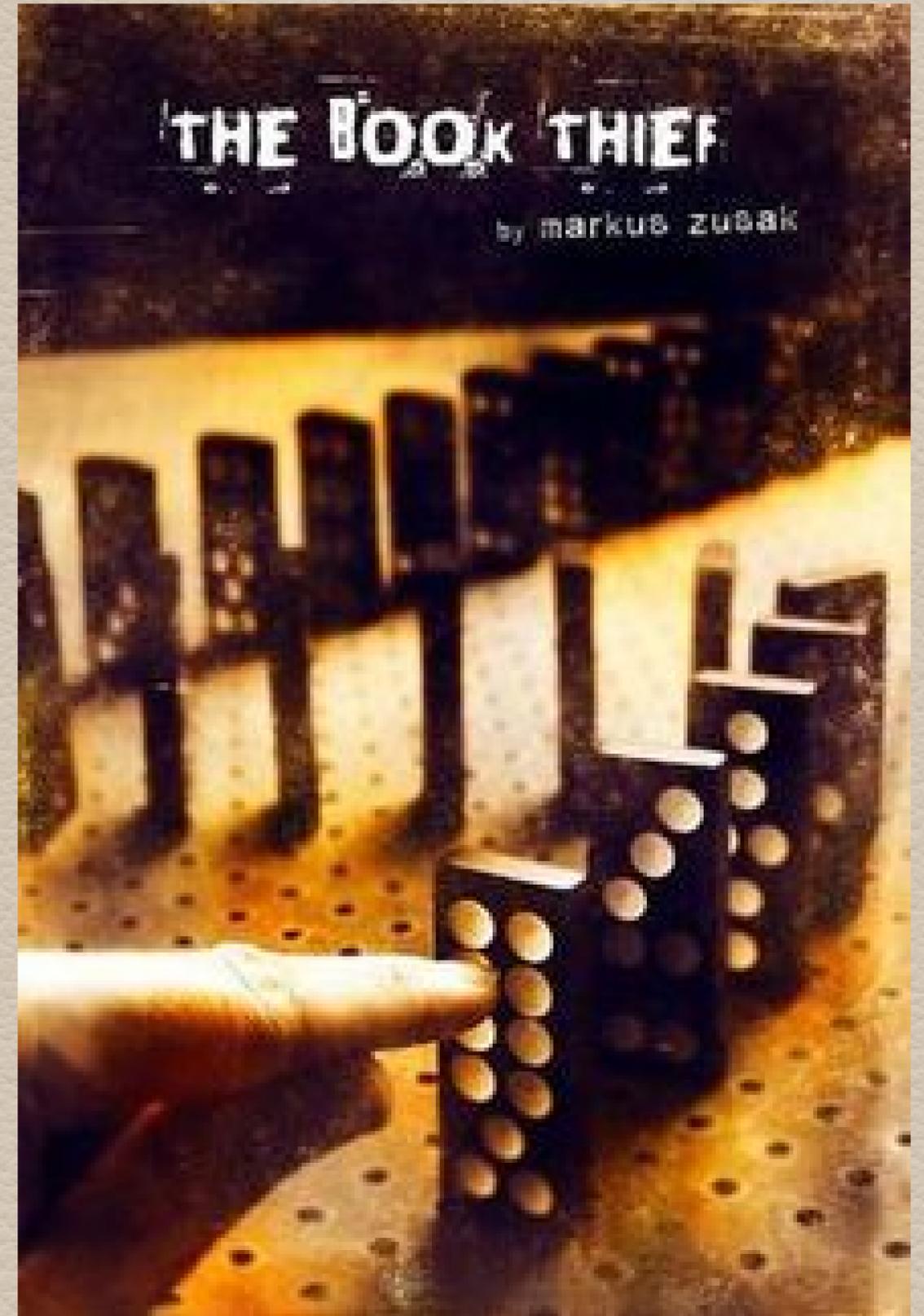
Information in this biography is taken from:
<https://www.chipublib.org/markus-zusak-biography/>

To learn more about the author visit the website above.

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Summary

The Book Thief, narrated affectionately by Death, follows the story of young Liesel Meminger as she grows up before and during World War II. At first illiterate, her foster father Hans Hubberman teaches her to read and write, and the impact of his lessons follow her throughout the course of the novel as she steals book after book, finding comfort in words. Her growth as a character is marked by her experiences with death, loss, and—within that suffering—several moments of child-like happiness. As Zusak himself writes, "This is a story of courage, friendship, love, survival, death, and grief. This is Liesel's life on Himmel Street..." (2).

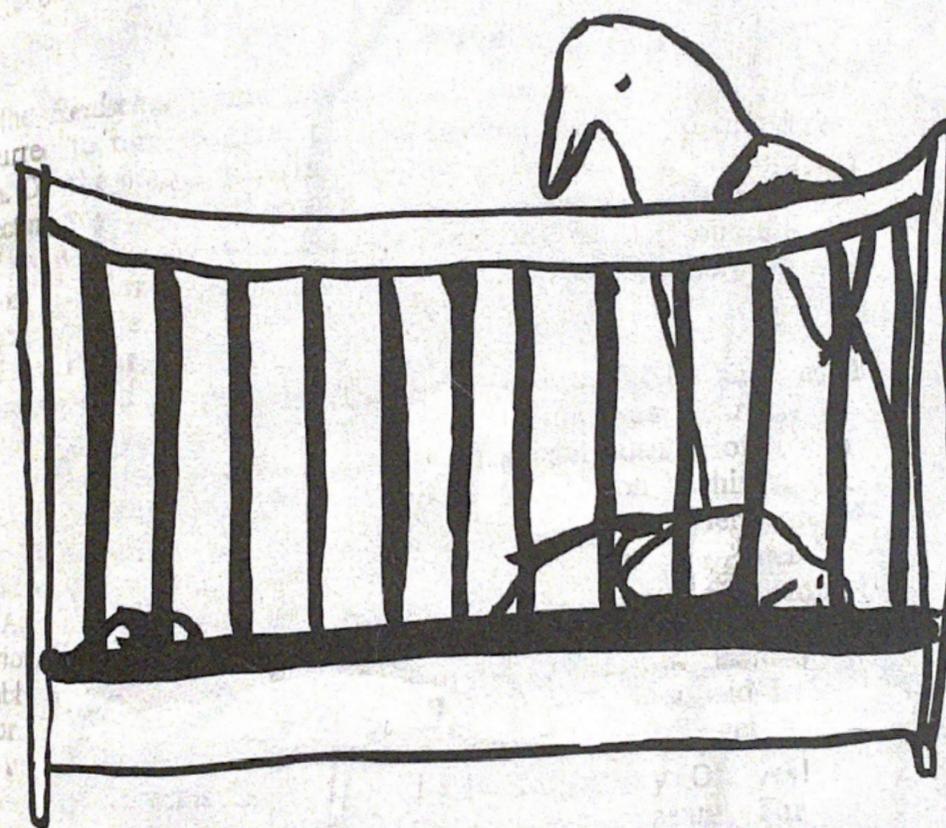


All my life,
I've been scared

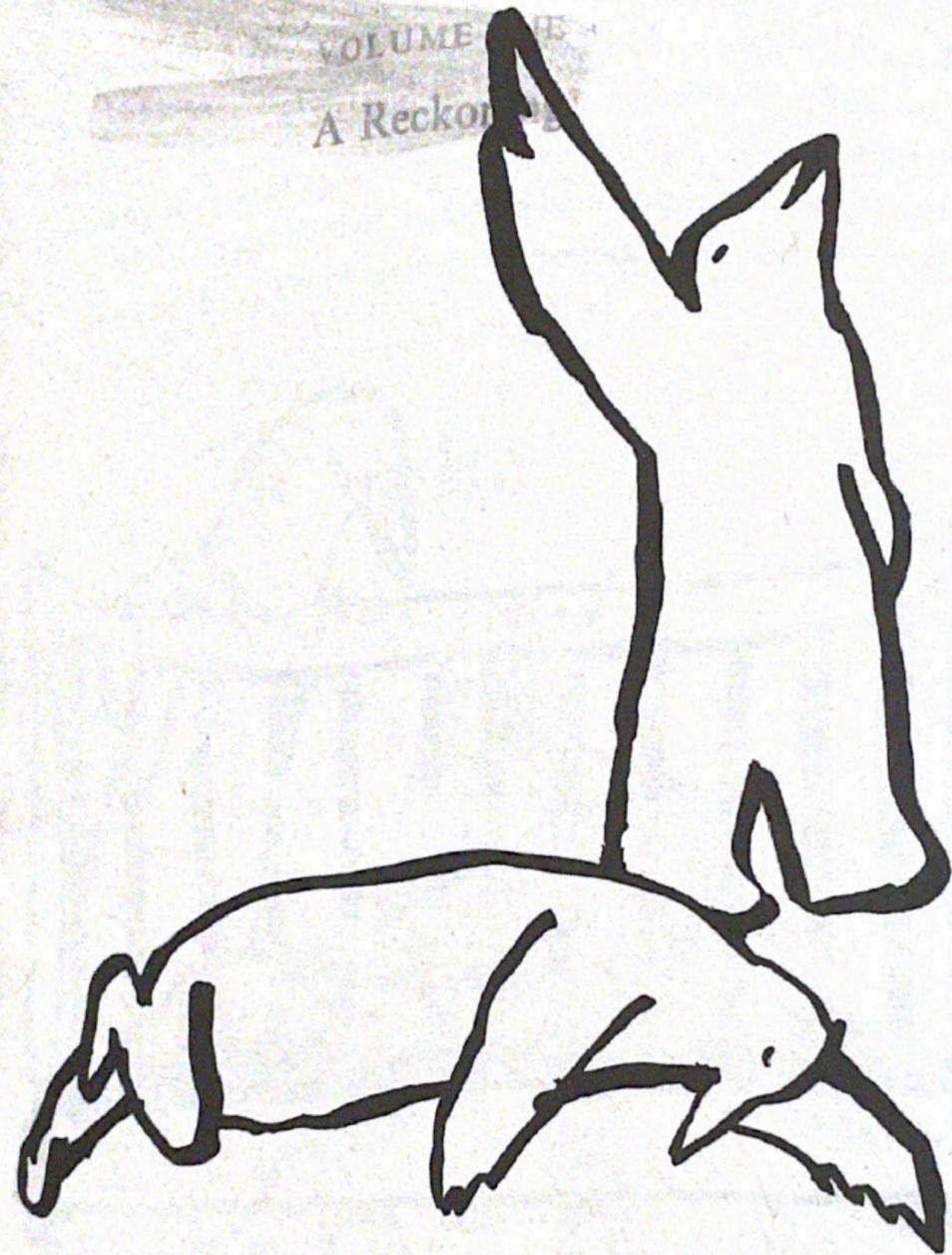


of men standing over me

I suppose my first standover
man was my father,



but he vanished
before I could remember him.



VOLUME 1
A Reckon

For some reason, when I was a boy, I liked to fight. A lot of the time, I lost. Another boy, sometimes with blood falling from his nose, would be standing over me.

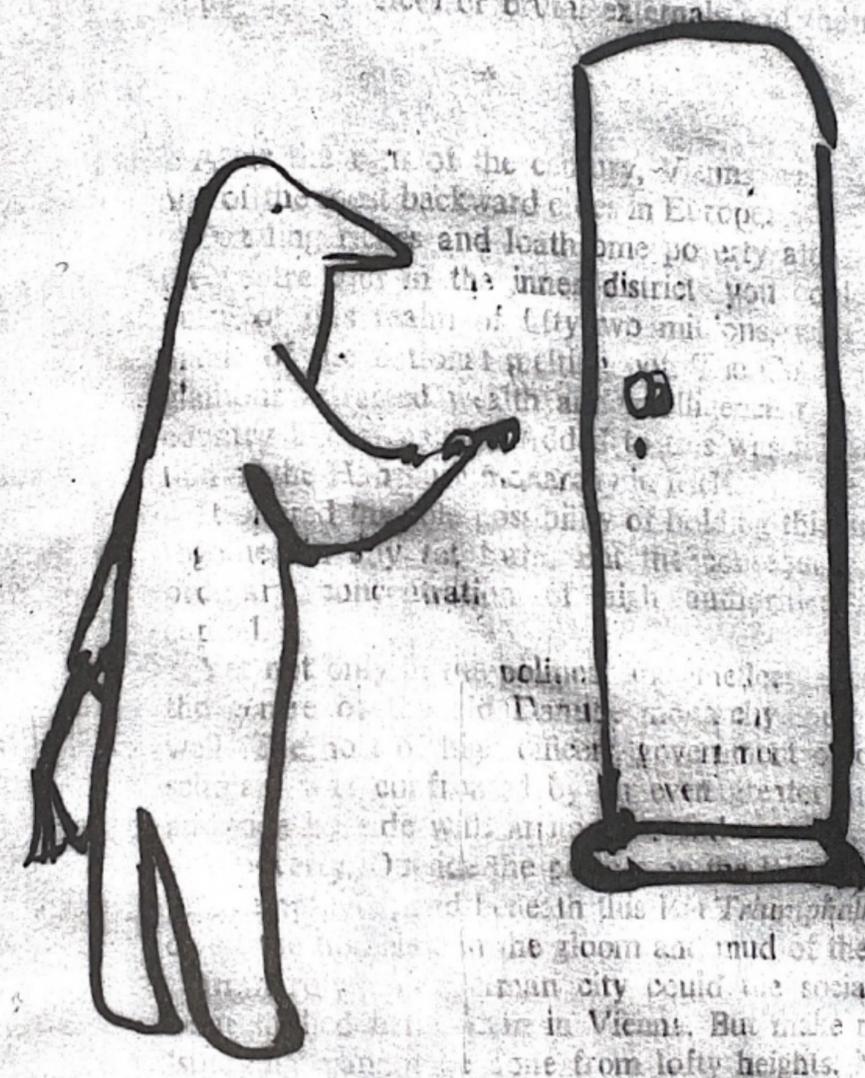
Many years later, I needed to hide. I tried not to sleep because I was afraid of who might be there when I woke up.



But I was lucky. It was always my friend.

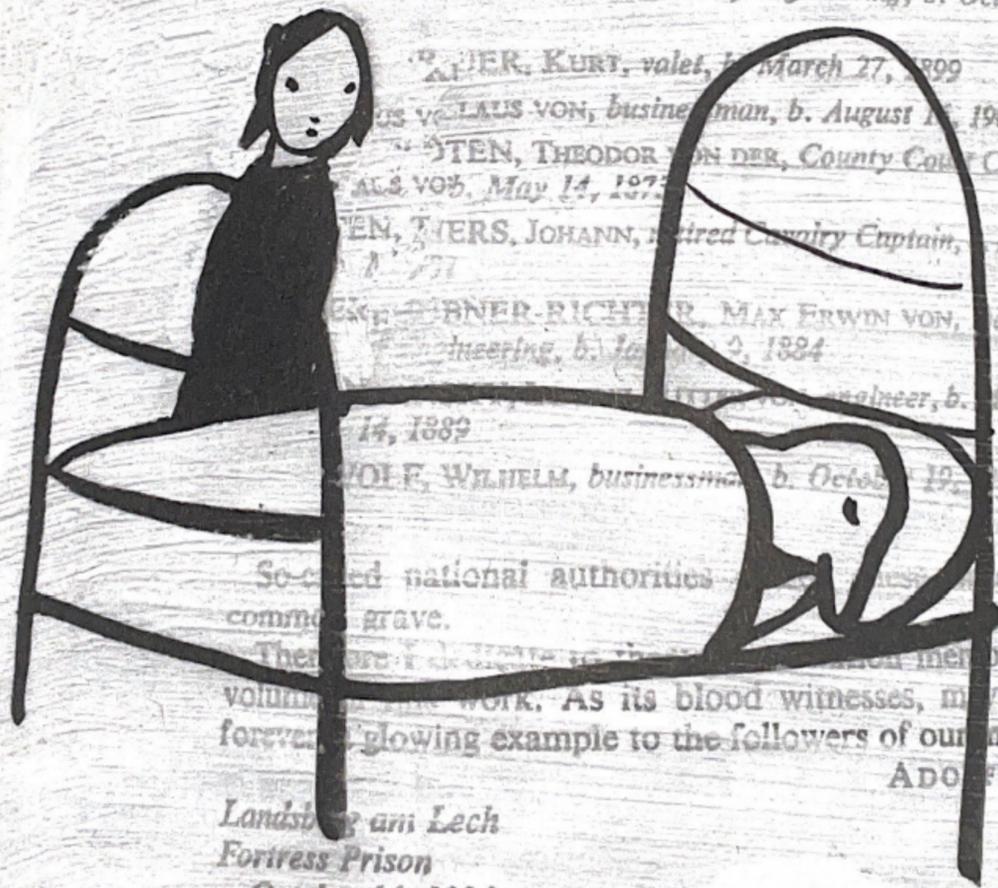


When I was hiding, I dreamed of a certain man. The hardest was when I traveled to find him.



Out of sheer luck and many footsteps, I made it.

I slept there for a long time.
Three days, they told me...
and what did I find when
I woke up? Not a man, but
someone else, standing over me.



Landstamm am Lech
Fortress Prison
October 16, 1924

As time passed by,
the girl and I realized
we had things in common.

TRAIN
DREAMS
FISTS



States which do not serve this purpose are misbegotten, untenable, and in fact. The fact of their existence changes things, but the necessity of a gangster bandits can justify robbery. National Socialists are champions of a new philosophy of life. We must never base ourselves on so-called 'accepted facts' and false ones at that. If we did, we would not be the creators of a new great idea, but the copies of the present-day world. We must distinguish between the best vessels and the state, the vessel and the race as its content. This vessel has meaning only if it can preserve and protect the content; otherwise it is useless.



From this, we National Socialists derive a standard for the evaluation of a state. This value will be relative from the point of view of the individual nation, but absolute from that of the humanity as such. This means, in other words: The quality of a state cannot be evaluated according to its cultural level or the power of this state in the frame of the world, but solely and exclusively by the degree of this state's institutions for the realization of the racial ideal. I look like something else.

revolution by the value and nature of the commodities which it has given. Now I live in a basement. Bad dreams still live in my sleep.

One night, after my usual nightmare, a shadow stood above me. She said, "Tell me what you dream of." So I did.



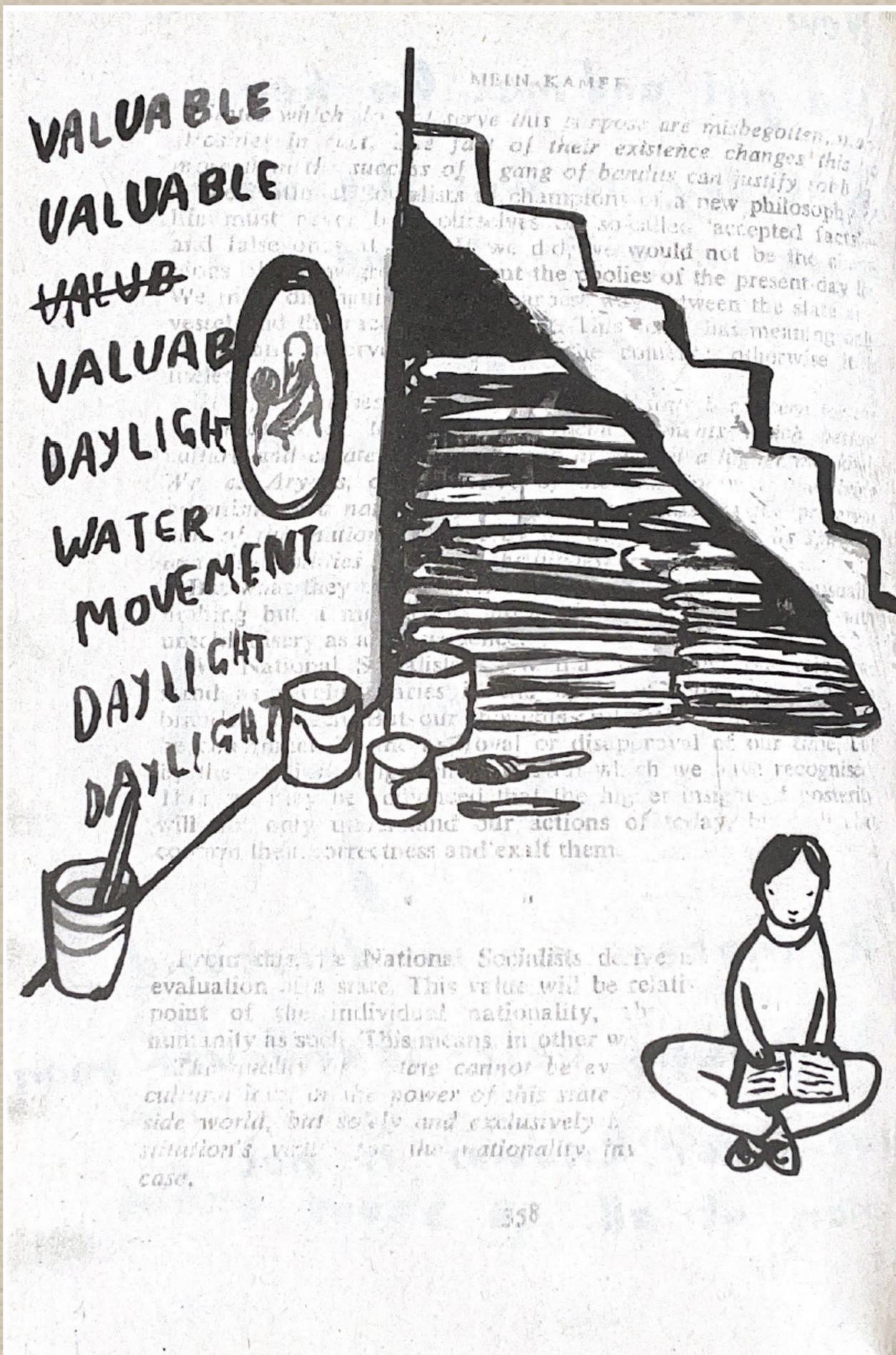


In return, she explained what her own dreams were made of.

Now I think we are friends, this girl and me. On her birthday, it was she who gave a gift - to me.



It makes me understand that the best standover man I've ever known is not a man at all...



- "All my life I've been scared of men standing over me... I've ever known is not a man at all..." (*The Standover Man*, 224-236).

Max Vandenburg's late birthday gift to Liesel is a book that he wrote himself, painted over the whited out pages of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. This particular quote—or rather—picture book, highlights important aspects of the novel such as the mutual suffering Max and Liesel share and the relationship they form through it. When Max and Liesel have nothing else, they rely on the power of words and literature to bolster each other up. The comfort of Max's company plays a vital role in Liesel's maturing as well. Once dependent on her papa to comfort her after nightmares, Liesel grows to comfort herself. In turn, Liesel's company and affection gives Max the strength he needs to endure his hiding. She assuages the fears he has had of "standover men," and proves to be a positive light that shines through Max's suffering.

- "A book floated down the Amper River. A boy jumped in, caught up to it, and held it in his right hand... It's the machinations that wheel us there that aggravate, perplex, interest, and astound me" (241-243).

As with the rest of the novel, Death narrates this short section and foreshadows the death of Liesel's close friend Rudy Steiner. This passage develops Death not only as a narrator, but as a character throughout the novel as well. It attempts, perhaps not successfully (that is up to the reader), to humanize death by showing that although it takes away life, it does not revel in that job. The device of foreshadowing is explained at the beginning of the next chapter. It is obvious that in a book like this death is inevitable, but the passage highlights that even if one knows how a story will end, the emotions you experience are what make a story. There is also an example of Zusak's rich use of imagery and figurative language in this passage. He describes the air as, "lovely, gorgeous, nauseating cold," and the "concrete ache" of the water. There is a juxtaposition between the positive connotation of words like "lovely" and "gorgeous" when they're positioned next to the word "nauseating" that makes the whole scene feel uneasy. There are equally brilliant uses of figurative language like this is extended throughout the entire novel that create a sense of unity amongst the text, even as the story evolves. This passage points specifically to only one of those uses.

- "The bombs came down, and soon, the clouds would bake and the cold raindrops would turn to ash...An unhappy-looking accordion, peering through its eaten case" (498).

Again, Death foreshadows the tragedy that is to come in Liesel's life. Descriptive language is used when recounting the events of that night, from the clouds baking, to the cold raindrops turning to ash, to the hot snowflakes showering to the ground (498). In this passage foreshadowing builds on the already mounting tension, telling the reader exactly what is going to happen and how, creating an ominous sense of foreboding that at once beckons the reader to continue, yet with an uneasy dread of what is soon to come. Death also highlights the fact that Liesel is the only one to survive the bombing, literally saved from his clutches by the power of words. Earlier in *The Book Thief* the many ways in which words figuratively save Liesel and others is of note. The power of words save Liesel by giving her a voice, they then save Liesel and Max as they seek refuge from their nightmares, and again they save Liesel's frightened neighbors as they take cover from the bombs, comforted by her reading. This time, words literally save Liesel as she withdraws to the basement to write, while others sleep peacefully, unaware of the falling bombs.

Quantitative

- Dale-Chall Readability Score

Raw score 2.7004

Adjusted Score: $(3.6365 + 2.7004)$

Final Score: 6.3

Grade level: 7-8

- Lexile Text Complexity

730L

Grade level: 4-5

- ATOS

ATOS Book Level: 5.1

Interest Level: Upper Grades (UG 9-12)

AR Points: 18.0

Qualitative

- **Structure:** Structurally, *The Book Thief* proves to be a more complex text. The chronology switches from the past, present, and future several times, and although it is narrated in the first person by Death, the "I" pronoun is hardly used. The narrator is omniscient, allowing for the thoughts and emotions of each character to be explored deeply, but this can also be confusing for younger readers.

- **Language Conventionalty/Clarity:** This novel contains detailed, figurative language that can be complex, but ultimately much more descriptive than plain language. Some words may need to be searched up in the case that they are unfamiliar or archaic.

- **Knowledge Demands:** This text requires the reader to have at least some knowledge of WWII and the Holocaust. They need not be historians, but a general understanding is required to understand the setting and conflict.

- **Levels of Meaning:** This text needs to be considered both literally and figuratively. Imagery, metaphor, and other figurative language is employed through out the novel and reader's will need to use their knowledge and imagination to interpret the passages.



Overall, I think the qualitative analysis of the text complexity is a much more accurate way of gauging reading level. As with many other YA novels, it is not the language of the text that makes *The Book Thief* complex, rather it is the subject matter and themes that are brought up. I believe that the Lexile score of 730L, or 4th to 5th grade, is too low for students to meaningfully read this novel. This novel is much better suited for students at least middle school aged, if not 9th or 10th grade.

- At the end of the novel Zusak provides discussion questions based on the text. Have students interact with these in a Socratic seminar or other similar open-discussion settings. Some notable questions:
 - Discuss the symbolism of Death as an 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" (491). What is ugly and beautiful about Liesel, Rosa and Hans Hubberman, Max Vandenburg, Rudy Steiner, and Mrs. Hermann? Why is Death haunted by humans?
 - Guilt is another recurring theme in the novel. Hans Hubberman'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" (208). Why does he feel guilt and shame?
- *The Book Thief* was adapted into a film in 2013. Show this film in class and have students analyze how the film version takes on things like Death as a narrator, the depiction of Nazis, and chronological changes. What does the movie do well? How does it compare to the book? Have students write about what they would include if they were tasked with adapting the book into a movie.

Teaching *The Book Thief*

- John Donne's sonnet "[Death: be not proud](#)" pairs nicely as an accompanying text to *The Book Thief*. Have students discuss in a group the differences and similarities between how death is described in the poem versus Death in the novel. What is similar? What is different? Extend this discussion further and have students write an essay comparing the two texts. Ask students to consider how elements like tone, metaphor, simile, and imagery contribute to the overall unity of the text.
- Have students look back at Max Vandenburg's *The Standover Man* and the way in which he describes his life story to Liesel. Ask students, "If you were to write a short story to give to Liesel, what would you write?" Emphasize Liesel's appreciation of literature and her current situation before students give their answers. Have students write and illustrate this story, and then have them discuss which book they would paint over and why. Another option would be to have students rewrite the text in *The Standover Man* but keep with the original illustrations. How does their text change or keep with the original?
- If teaching a World Literature class or covering a history unit, consider using *The Book Thief* as a fictional accompanying text about World War II and the Holocaust. Compare *The Book Thief* to non-fiction texts about the time period. How does *The Book Thief* successfully (or unsuccessfully) depict the death and suffering of the time? What is the value in reading fictional accounts of a real world event?

10 | Why teens should read *The Book Thief*

- I agree with the USA Today review of *The Book Thief* that asserts "[*The Book Thief*] deserves a place on the same shelf with *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank...Poised to become a classic". The characters in this novel are so impeccably crafted, and combined with the narration style a reader can form a powerful emotional connection with every aspect of the story. Not only is the story set in an important moment of history that every student has the duty of remembering, the book's emphasis on the power of words sends an important message about the impact reading and writing have to transcend time, person, and place. There are universal themes of courage, friendship, love, and death that have the ability to resonate with any person that reads the novel. The book also poses several important questions to the reader, encouraging them to think critically about it. In the middle of the novel Death asks, "Did [the German people] deserve any better, these people?...The Germans in basements were pitiful, surely, but at least they had a chance...For those people, life was still achievable" (375-376). This novel advances young readers and contains all Exeter Study Qualities and nearly all Honor List Book Characteristics.

- **Chapter 4: Books about Real-Life Experiences**

The Book Thief is a historical fiction set during the very real life event of World War II. Liesel navigates this time while also navigating her own adolescence. The book follows the tragic story of a young girl that learns first-hand the horrors of the Nazi regime. She directly watches the persecution of Jews as her family hides one in their basement. Discrimination based on race, religion, and sexuality was a reality of the past and continues to be one of the present.

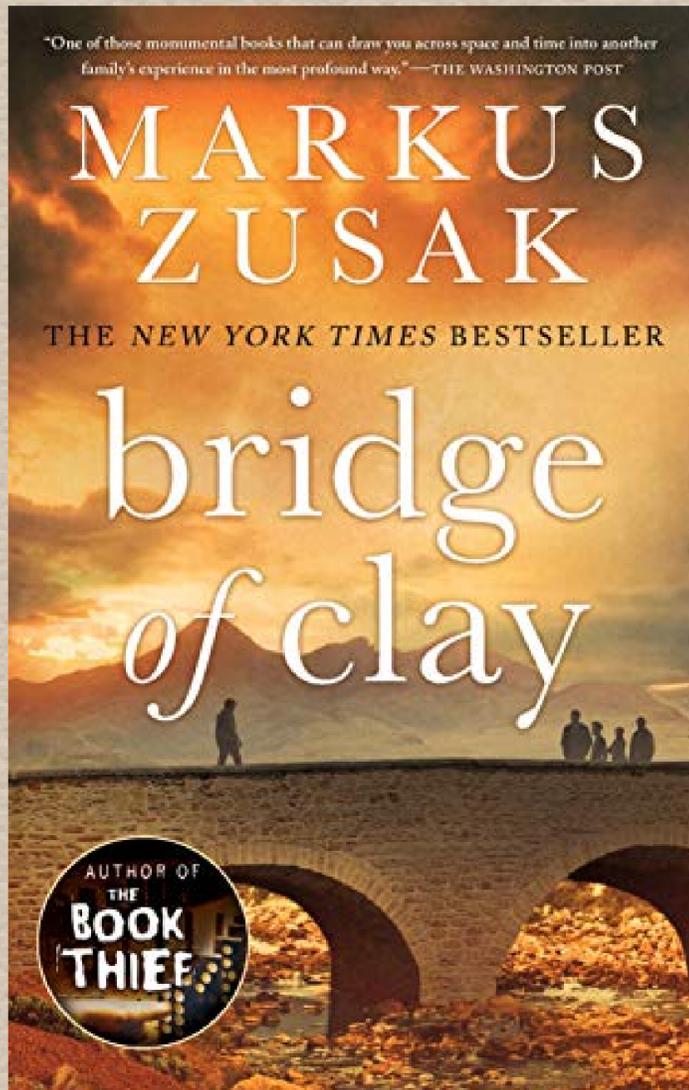
- **Chapter 5: Books about Facing Death and Loss**

Death is present in every aspect of this story. When we meet Liesel she has just witnessed her younger brother die, and then she leaves her biological mother forever. By the end of the novel, all but one of the important characters in Liesel's life have been killed. This book may help students who have similarly experienced loss in their life, putting the emotions of something so tragic into words. It may introduce students to an outlet for their healing, like Liesel's.

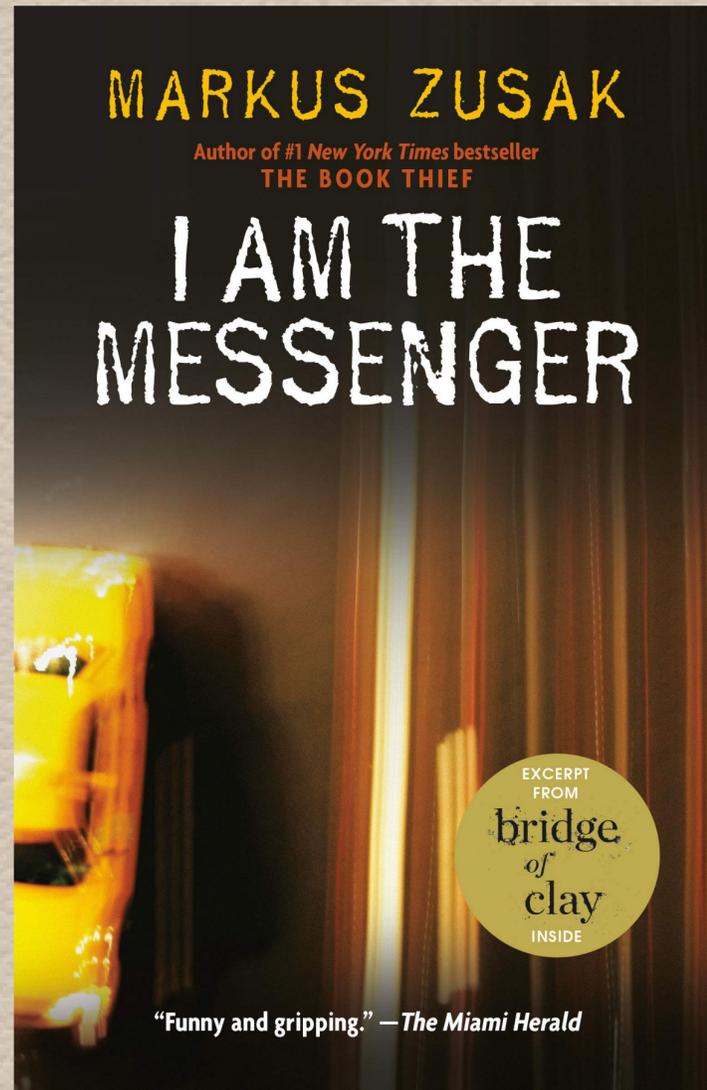
- **Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival**

Liesel is not the only courageous character in *The Book Thief*, but she is one of the few that survived. Each character shows their own moments of courage at several points in the novel. Whether that be standing up to authority, those who aim to persecute you, or those who aim to persecute others. This novel can teach teens the importance of standing up for what they believe in. Students must learn about the past horrors of the world in order to stand up to future horrors when they inevitably present themselves.

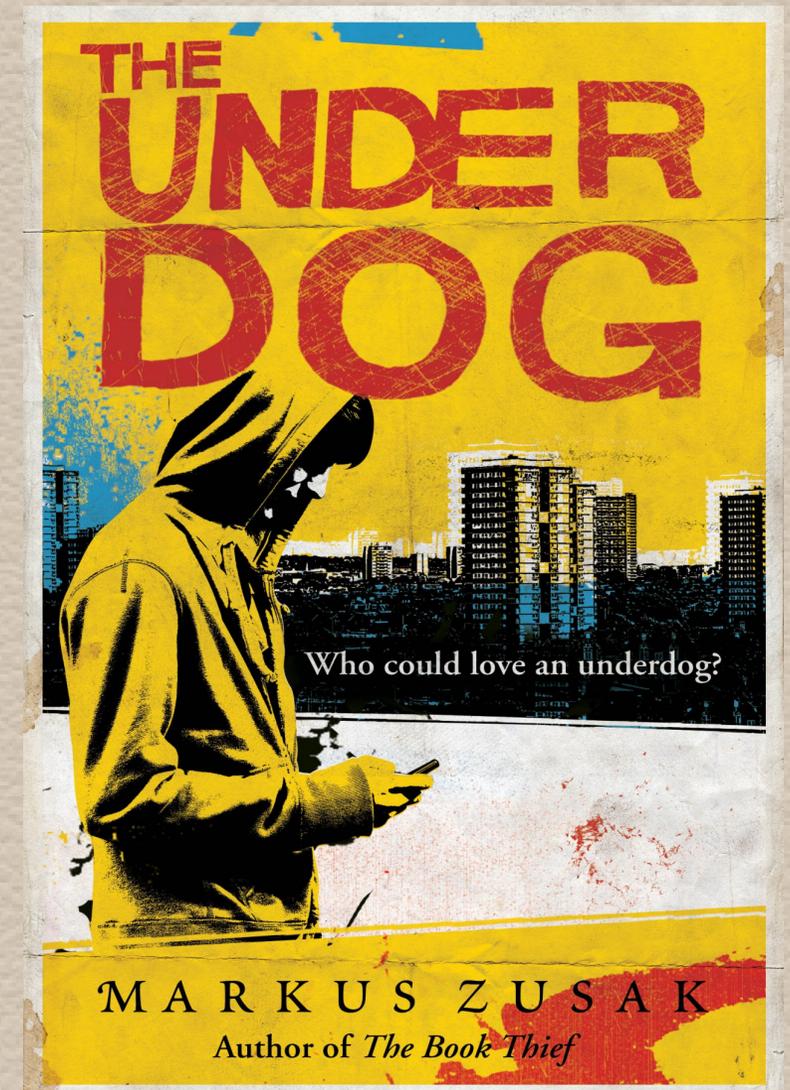
12 Other Books by Markus Zusak



Bridge of Clay is Zusak's most recent novel. Published in 2018, *Bridge of Clay* follows a group of brothers as they learn to live in the adult world.



I Am The Messenger, published in 2002, follows the life of Ed Kennedy and the events that follow him after he inadvertently stops a bank robbery.



The Underdog was Zusak's first novel, published in 1999. The story chronicles 15-year-old Cameron Wolfe and his older brother as they navigate their lives.