

The Book Thief

By Markus Zusak

Book Talk by Nichelle Kamrar

About Markus Zusak:

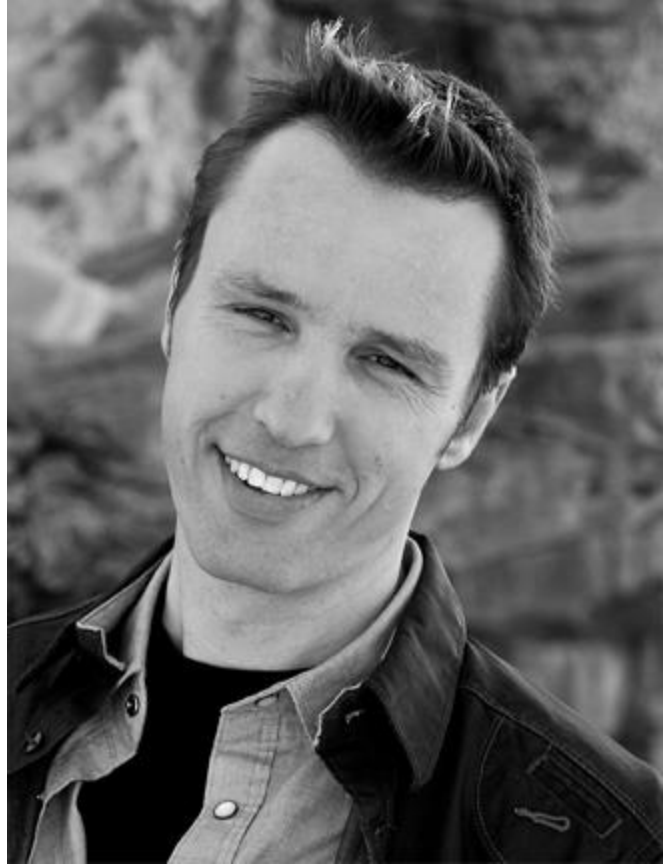
Markus Zusak was born in Australia to Elisabeth and Helmut Zusak, who grew up in Germany and Austria during WWII. *The Book Thief* was inspired by the stories they would tell of their childhoods, and two incidents in particular: the bombing of Munich, and the whipping of a Jewish prisoner and the teenage boy who dared to offer him a bit of bread.

Markus Zusak has social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr.

Tumblr, rather than Zusak's website, is the most updated resource on Zusak's writing process and personal life.

Tumblr: <http://zusakbooks.tumblr.com/>

Official Website: <http://www.randomhouse.com/features/markuszusak/>



Summary of *The Book Thief*:

In *The Book Thief*, Death presents its interpretation of WWII from Germany's point of view—but not any *singular* Germany. *The Book Thief* centers on Liesel Meminger, a young girl sent to live at Himmel Strasse (which means “Heaven Street” in German) with foster parents Hans and Rosa Hubermann. Liesel arrives at Himmel Street clutching *The Grave Digger's Handbook*, stolen from her brother's burial site despite her inability to read. As time passes, Hitler becomes more powerful, and through her literacy, so does Liesel. Through her thievery and her relationships with the Himmel Strasse community, Liesel learns about the immense power of words, which can spread hurt and hatred, but can also provide healing and hope.

Three Key Quotes:

1. After Alex Steiner tracks down his son Rudy and tries to explain to Rudy why he cannot go around impersonating Jesse Owens, Death gives an outline of Alex Steiner's thought process. “The Contradictory Politics of Alex Steiner” demonstrate that some Germans did

think about their choices during this era, and did not necessarily agree with the tenets of The Third Reich.

“Point One: He was a member of the Nazi Party, but he did not hate the Jews, or anyone else for that matter....Point Five: Somewhere, far down, 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” (49-50).

2. Most characters in the book face questions and feelings of courage, cowardice, shame, and guilt. Although each character has different sources of these questions and feelings, Max Vandenburg’s struggle with these ideas is the most revisited. This particular passage summarizes the commonality between each character’s experience with guilty consciences.

“Thank you. For Max Vandenburg, those were the two most pitiful words he could possibly say, only rivaled by I’m sorry....He wanted to walk out—Lord, how he wanted to (or at least he wanted to want to)—but he knew he wouldn’t. It was much the same as the way he left his family in Stuttgart, under a veil of fabricated loyalty. To live. Living was living. The price was guilt and shame” (208).

3. Liesel Meminger has a complicated relationship with words, beginning with her initial illiteracy. After Liesel begins to understand words themselves, she understands the many ways words can be used. In *The Book Thief*, Liesel constantly fluctuates between appreciating how words can be used to express comfort, love, and individuality and hating how words can be used to express prejudice and incite destruction. This passage juxtaposes Liesel’s clashing feelings about words.

“You bastards, she thought. You lovely bastards. Don’t make me happy....She said it audibly now, to the orange-lit room. ‘What good are the words?’” (521).

Adolescents in the Search for Meaning Categorization:

Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* is a work of historical fiction. The action of the story takes place in Nazi Germany between 1939 and 1943, but the book is narrated by Death, whose commentary gives the story a retrospective and omniscient frame. While WWII rages without, Liesel Meminger and her neighbors face wars within themselves about such ideas as fear, courage, mortality, shame, guilt, morality, suffering, and friendship. *The Book Thief* falls under several categories outlined in *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story* due to the multitude of complex themes it encompasses. The categories most suitable are those of chapters five through seven: “Books about Facing Death and Loss”, “Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions”, and “Books about Courage and Survival”.

Why should teens read this book?:

While we know from accounts such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Schindler's List* that some non-Jewish Germans must not have been brainwashed Nazis, in many books and films, that is the only portrayal allocated to all German characters. *The Book Thief*, however, includes characters who both oppose and support the Nazi status quo, and explores the effects of the war and Hitler's ideology on the average citizen of Himmel Strasse: young children like Liesel and Rudy Steiner, guilt-wracked veterans like Hans and Michael Holtzapfel, worried women like Rosa and Barbara Steiner, broken women like Frau Holtzapfel and Ilsa Hermann, Hitler supporters like Frau Diller and the Hubermanns' son, and Hitler targets like Max Vandenburg.

In retrospect, it is easy to assign "good guys" and "bad guys" to a conflict. However, the very occurrences of WWII and the Holocaust prove the danger and tragedy that results from stereotyping and dehumanizing others, rather than trying to understand them or imagine them complexly. *The Book Thief* is one of the strongest reinforcements on the importance of seeing and understanding people multidimensionally.

Analysis of Text Complexity

Lexile Measure: 730L, ? grade reading level

Dale-Chall score: 6.3, 7th/8th grade reading level

Based on its Dale-Chall score, I could recommend *The Book Thief* for young adults between the ages of 13 and 17. *The Book Thief* contains a few uncommon words, such as "capitulated" or "septic", but the majority of the vocabulary is everyday for children by this age. When German words or organization abbreviations are used, they are quickly followed by English translations. Zusak's characters, especially Max, Liesel, and Death, describe events with simple, clear, powerful metaphors. In *The Book Thief*, Zusak presents multiple perspectives from people of different backgrounds and ideologies, and shows how each of his characters face problems relating to several key, recurring themes. The reinforcement of these themes makes them clear, and the questions they raise are presented such that readers can follow their development. However, while I think most middle-school children could read and understand the book, its sheer volume (550 pages) might be too much to assign for a middle-school class. Additionally, it may be noteworthy that Zusak intended the book for adults, and *The Book Thief* contains much swearing and graphic violence, which may be too much for middle schoolers if *The Book Thief* is their first introduction to Holocaust literature.

Other Works by Markus Zusak:

The Underdog (1999)

Fighting Ruben Wolfe (2000)

When Dogs Cry OR *Getting the Girl* (U.S.) (2001)

The Messenger OR *I Am the Messenger* (U.S.) (2002)