

The Book Thief



Author Background

Marcus Zusak

- **Born** 23 June 1975 in Sydney, Australia
- **Lives** in Sydney, Australia

The youngest of four children, Marcus Zusak was born in Sydney in 1975. Zusak's parents emigrated to Australia from Europe in the late 1950s. His mother Lisa is from Germany and his father Helmut is from Austria. Zusak attended Engadine High School and studied English and History at the University of New South Wales, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts and a Diploma of Education.

Zusak's first three books, *The Underdog*, *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* and *When Dogs Cry* (also known as *Getting the Girl*), were published between 1999 and 2001. All three novels were published internationally and garnered a number of awards and honours in both Australia and the USA. Published in 2002, *The Messenger* (or *I am the Messenger*) 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.

Published in 2005, *The Book Thief* established Markus Zusak as one of Australia's most successful authors. Zusak has stated that *The Book Thief* was inspired by stories his parents told him about their respective childhoods in war-time Munich and Vienna. In particular, Zusak was affected by his mother's experiences of the bombing of Munich and of seeing Jewish people being marched to the Dachau concentration camp. Zusak has recalled a story his mother told:

One day, there was a terrible noise coming from the main street of town, and when she ran to see it, she saw that Jewish people and other so-called criminals were being marched to Dachau. At the back of the line, there was an old man, totally emaciated, who couldn't keep up. When a teenage boy saw this, he ran inside and brought the man a piece of bread. The man fell to his knees and kissed the boy's ankles and thanked him... Soon, a soldier noticed and walked over. He tore the bread from the man's hands and whipped him for taking it. Then he chased the boy and whipped him for giving him the bread. In that one moment, there was great kindness and great cruelty, and I saw it as the perfect story of how humans are.

Source: Publisher website (Random House), *Goodreads*, *Reading Group Guides* and *Wikipedia*.

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Book Summary

Liesel Meminger is only nine years old when she is taken to live with the Hubermanns, a foster family, on Himmel Street in Molching, Germany, in the late 1930s. Among the few possessions Liesel arrives with is *The Grave Digger's Handbook*, a book that she stole from her brother's burial place. During the years that Liesel lives with the Hubermanns, Hitler becomes more powerful, life on Himmel Street becomes more fearful, and Liesel becomes a fully-fledged book thief. Liesel rescues books from Nazi book-burnings and steals from the Mayor's library. The book thief is illiterate when she steals her first book, but Hans Hubermann uses Liesel's treasured books to teach her to read. This is a story of courage, friendship, love, survival, death, and grief. This is Liesel's life on Himmel Street, told from Death's point of view.

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 amassed many and varied awards, ranging from literary prizes to readers' choice awards and booksellers' prizes. Originally published for adults in Australia, it was released for young adults in the United States. It has been adapted into a major motion picture filmed in Berlin.

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Discussion Questions

1. One reviewer has described Liesel as “A plucky heroine who sometimes steals and lies”. * What do you think motivates Liesel? Are her actions justified?
2. *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 Liesel steals?
3. What does the act of book thievery teach Liesel about life and death?
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? Why is it so difficult for Rosa to demonstrate the same warmth toward Liesel?
5. 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 Rosa and Hans Hubermann, Max Vandenburg, Rudy Steiner, and Mrs. Hermann?
6. 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 Liesel’s life represent beauty in the wake of brutality? Discuss how Zusak’s poetic writing style enhances the beauty of Liesel’s story.
7. *The Book Thief* was published for young adults in the United States, where it won the 2006 National Jewish Book Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature. In Australia, the book was published for adults (although Zusak’s previous novels had been published in the young adult genre). Would you recommend *The Book Thief* to a younger audience, an adult audience, or both?
8. *Just for fun:* Have you seen the film version of *The Book Thief*? Zusak has said:
*“I see the book and film as two completely different things. Like brothers, they might look the same at times, and sound it. They might even have the same blood in their veins. But they go their own ways.”***

How do you think the film compares with the book? What did you think of the casting and the script?

* Marianne Brace, Independent (UK)

** Interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4/1/14

Source: Most questions from the publisher (Random House)

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Reviews

When Death tells a story, you pay attention. Liesel Meminger is a young girl growing up outside of Munich in Nazi Germany, and Death tells her story as “an attempt—a flying jump of an attempt—to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it.” Liesel’s experiences move Death to say, “I am haunted by humans.” How could the human race be “so ugly and so glorious” at the same time? This big, expansive novel is a leisurely working out of fate, of seemingly chance encounters and events that ultimately touch, like dominoes as they collide. The writing is elegant, philosophical and moving. Even at its length, it’s a work to read slowly and savor [sic]. Beautiful and important.

Kirkus Reviews

Some will argue that a book so difficult and sad may not be appropriate for teenage readers. *The Book Thief* was published for adults in Zusak's native Australia, and I strongly suspect it was written for adults. Adults will probably like it (this one did), but it's a great young-adult novel. Many teenagers will find the story too slow to get going, which is a fair criticism. But it's the kind of book that can be life-changing, because without ever denying the essential amorality and randomness of the natural order, *The Book Thief* offers us a believable, hard-won hope. That hope is embodied in Liesel, who grows into a good and generous person despite the suffering all around her, and finally becomes a human even Death can love. The hope we see in Liesel is unassailable, the kind you can hang on to in the midst of poverty and war and violence. Young readers need such alternatives to ideological rigidity, and such explorations of how stories matter. And so, come to think of it, do adults.

John Green, *The New York Times*

Zusak, an Australian author, has said that writing the book was inspired by two real-life events related to him by his German parents.... It is, however, the way in which Zusak combines such terrible events with such believable characters and the minutiae of everyday life in Nazi Germany that makes this book so special.

A number one *New York Times* bestseller, *The Book Thief* has been marketed as an older children's book in some countries and as an adult novel in others. It could and - dare I say? - should certainly be read by both. Unsettling, thought-provoking, life-affirming, triumphant and tragic, this is a novel of breathtaking scope, masterfully told. It is an important piece of work, but also a wonderful page-turner. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

Philip Ardagh, *Guardian*

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Reviews (continued)

This "small story," as Death calls it, threads together gem-like scenes of the fates of families in this tight community, and is punctuated by Max's affecting, primitive artwork rendered on painted-over pages from *Mein Kampf*. Death also directly addresses readers in frequent asides; Zusak's playfulness with language leavens the horror and makes the theme even more resonant — words can save your life. ... It's a measure of how successfully Zusak has humanized these characters that even though we know they are doomed, it's no less devastating when Death finally reaches them.

Publishers Weekly

In Hitler's Germany, Liesel comes to understand the power of words. Being able to read them empowers her, but it empowers others, too. *"Without words, the Führer was nothing. There would be no limping prisoners, no need for consolation or wordly [sic] tricks to make us feel better. What good were the words?"*

The Book Thief is full of visually strong moments: a snowball fight in the basement, the young Jew's fantasy boxing match with Hitler; the literal whitewashing of a "bad" book (*Mein Kampf*) into a good one (painting over the pages to write a new story for Liesel). But it could be much tighter. While some images are spot on (the dying Max: "The colder he became, the more he melted"), some struggle too hard to be profound and end up meaningless ("a septic truth bleeds towards clarity").

This is a moving work which will make many eyes brim. Zusak shows us how small defiance and unexpectedly courageous acts remind us of our humanity. It isn't only Death who is touched. Liesel steals our hearts too.

Marianne Brace, *Independent (UK)*

The Australian Zusak, 30, is the acclaimed author of four young-adult books, yet *The Book Thief*, his fifth, was released Down Under as an adult novel in 2005, presumably because of its dark subject matter. Zusak's U.S. publisher chose to release it as a young-adult book, believing young readers can and will attempt a 550-page novel that realistically portrays the Holocaust. One only hopes adults also will discover *The Book Thief*.

The Book Thief is unsettling and unsentimental, yet ultimately poetic. Its grimness and tragedy run through the reader's mind like a black-and-white movie, bereft of the colors of life. Zusak may not have lived under Nazi domination, but *The Book Thief* deserves a place on the same shelf with *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel's *Night*. It seems poised to become a classic.

Carol Memmott, *USA Today*