



THE BOOK THIEF

By Markus Zusak

Author Information

Markus Zusak, age 32, currently lives in Sydney, Australia. In his free time, he enjoys surfing and playing soccer.

When Marcus was growing up, he wanted to be a house painter like his father. He soon realized he had a talent for knocking things over, painting himself into corners and figured out painting bored him. When he was a teenager, he read a few novels that really brought him into their worlds. He decided he wanted to become a writer. He wrote his first book at age 16, but it took many years before he could get a publisher interested. He was glad he had so many rejections and failures. They made him realize that what he was writing just wasn't good enough – so he had to improve what he was doing.

When it comes to writing, Mr. Zusak has two routines. He said the first one is the non-lazy routine. He begins working at 7am and aims to finish by 11:30am. That usually sees him though until 12 or 12:30 (with a bit of time-wasting in between). Then he takes a long break and writes for a few more hours in the afternoon. The lazy routine usually starts at 10am and he usually writes longer in the afternoon. The only time these routines change is when he is starting a new book or ending one. He then chooses to work more at night.

Mr. Zusak grew up hearing stories about Nazi Germany, about the bombing of Munich and the Jews being marched through his mother's small German town. He always knew it was a story he wanted to tell.

He is an award-winning author of five books for young adults: *The Underdog*, *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, *Getting the Girl*, *I am the Messenger*, and *The Book Thief*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the effect of having Death serve as the narrator?
2. What is the significance of colors in the book?
3. Rosa is described as "her face was decorated with constant fury." (p. 33)
4. What made Rosa so angry?
5. How was Hans "worth a lot." ? (p. 34)
6. How would the story have been different if Liesel didn't keep having nightmares about her brother?
7. Why was Rosa a good woman for a crisis?
8. Who is your favorite character? Why?
9. In the book there are many, many instances of courage. If you can, choose which act (and by whom) best illustrates courage?
10. In the novel, words have the power to both destroy and save lives. Discuss.
11. How did the key come to be in Max's copy of MEIN KAMPF?
12. Do Max and Liesel end up together?

Caution! It is likely that the following reading guide will reveal, or at least allude to, key plot details. Therefore, if you haven't yet read this book, but are planning on doing so, you may wish to proceed with caution to avoid spoiling your later enjoyment.

About this Book

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. She arrives with few possessions, but among them 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 full-fledged book thief. She rescues books from Nazi book-burnings and steals from the library of the mayor. Liesel is illiterate when she steals her first book, but Hans Hubermann uses her prized 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.

Discussion Questions

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.

4. 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.
5. 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?
6. 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.

Markus Zusak

Bio

Markus Zusak received the Children's Book Council of Australia's Book of the Year Award for I AM THE MESSENGER. He lives in Sydney, where he writes, occasionally works a real job, and plays on a soccer team that never wins.



INTERVIEW

April 13, 2006

[Markus Zusak](#) is the award-winning author of four young adult novels: THE UNDERDOG, FIGHTING RUBEN WOLFE, GETTING THE GIRL and I AM THE MESSENGER. In this interview with Teenreads.com contributing writer Brian Farrey, Zusak discusses the appeal of reading and writing, and describes his experience in Germany while researching his latest novel, [THE BOOK THIEF](#). He also addresses the similar threads that run through his work and even shares a poignant childhood memory.

Teenreads.com: One of your greatest successes in THE BOOK THIEF was making Death a character with depth whose musings wax philosophical at nearly every turn. How much Markus Zusak is there in Death, and vice versa?

Markus Zusak: I guess there's a little bit of death in me, but it's probably true for everyone. I think I just applied the thought of how scared I am of death and reversed it. I thought, 'What if he or she or it is haunted by everything he sees humans do?' In that way, he's also like all of us, because we all have the same reactions to each other's behavior. Also, I had more empathy for Death when he was vulnerable like that.

TRC: In "The Word Shaker," the book-within-a-book in THE BOOK THIEF, Max weaves a parable for Liesel about the power of words to at once destroy and create. In the world today, who do you think is winning --- the people who use words to destroy or the word shakers?

MZ: What a question! Probably like always, it's pretty even, and the word shakers most likely feel lonelier because the destroyers are louder. Maybe the point is also that this is internal as well as external. We all have stories about ourselves that shame us, but also ones that give us the feeling that we're okay after all.

TRC: You traveled to Germany to do research for THE BOOK THIEF. What was that experience like? What did you take away that you didn't know before you started?

MZ: It was great. I humiliated myself sometimes when I spoke German (I'm pretty rough with it), but that's all part of the experience. It was great to simply walk around the streets where the book was set --- to see the river where I'd imagined Rudy jumping in to rescue Liesel's book. Research-wise, I found some things that were impossible to find in Australia, like certain records and annoying, hard-to-get trivial information. A good example was discovering the seasonal habits of apple trees, just in case someone out there would pick me up on a mistake. On a strange note, I did something a little sentimental, or superstitious...I carved Rudy and Liesel's names into a tree with a coin. It was at the river, and my fingers were really sore by the end of it. I wonder if the names are still there.

TRC: A common thread in all your books is respect and the characters who seek it. Ruben and Cameron. Ed Kennedy. Liesel and Max. All have varying degrees of success. Do you believe that the need for respect is a trait inherent in humans, and, if so, how have you seen that trait bring out the best and worst in your life?

MZ: I've never thought of the similarities between the books in that way, but I think I equate that idea with hunger. The Wolfe brothers are hungry to survive and prove themselves to the world and each other. Ed delivers people from one spiritual place and sense of self to another. And Liesel and Max show love and respect by sharing stories. As for myself, I only know that writing has given me that sense of self worth. Without writing and stories, I know I'd be miserable. I'm just lucky I decided early on what I wanted to do. Also --- and to finally answer the question now --- I think that a sense of respect is definitely inherent in humans. I guess we all want that kind of affirmation, from other people and from ourselves.

TRC: In a recent interview you said, "It's the little stories that define us, our existence." What's the littlest story you can tell about Markus Zusak that helps define you and your existence?

MZ: God --- these questions are incredible (in a good way)!

One of my best memories of growing up is catching my first proper wave, surfing across it, with my brother cheering from the shore. My brother and I hated each other and loved each other, but that small memory shows me that we were really best friends.

TRC: How do the responses to your books from readers differ in Australia from the responses in the US? How are they similar?

MZ: I've actually noticed no differences at all. I just seem to get more responses from America, since it's a much bigger country.

TRC: Talk about your discipline as a writer. What routines/habits do you have for where you write, when you write, and how you write?

MZ: I try to write in the mornings, from about 7 till 11:30, then have a long break, then maybe do another few hours later in the afternoon. That changes towards the end of a book, when the hours become a lot longer. There's also a lazier routine, usually in summer, when I'm more likely to start work around 10 and move everything back. That's usually just because I picked up surfing again and go early in the mornings.

TRC: You've described THE BOOK THIEF as a challenge to write, taking nearly three years to complete. What sorts of writing challenges do you embrace? What challenges, if any, do you shy away from?

MZ: I'm basically a non-confrontational person. I shy away from blowing my horn at someone in the car (I think I've done it three times). I also agree with people rather than argue --- I can't help it. As for writing challenges, I don't know. I guess I shy away from writing certain genres. Fantasy. Crime, and so on. The challenge I take on is no different from any writer --- the doubt. Struggling to believe that the book is working is the greatest problem, but if it wasn't there, finishing a book wouldn't be the achievement that it is.

TRC: When you sit down to write, how much do you know about the story and the characters before you start, and how much of it comes from the process of experimentation while writing?

MZ: I generally have the start and the end first. Then I have other kinds of check points I want to go through. It's a bit like running a race, but once you've gone through each stage, you find that things will move around. You'll need to do certain parts up to a hundred times before you can move on. You might even find the end a little to the left or right than you originally planned. A good example of that is *THE BOOK THIEF*. Originally, Liesel was going to be arrested for book thievery, but when I made it to the end, it simply wasn't right.

TRC: *THE BOOK THIEF* is, among other things, a love letter to books, writing, and the power of words. What excites you when you write?

MZ: I love the idea that there can be one gem on every page of a book. It can be an image, an idea or a piece of dialogue --- anything. If there's one gem on every page of a hundred-page book, that's a hundred good reasons to read it.

TRC: What three elements does a book need in order to grab your attention as a reader? What are you reading these days that's making you take notice?

MZ: The first thing is the gems I just mentioned, the second would be story. While it's nice to have the gems, if the story doesn't captivate me, it makes finding the great images that little bit harder. Lastly, I think voice. Someone once told me that voice is everything, and they were probably right. If you can hear the characters or the narrator talking, they can almost tell you anything and you will go with them. I am currently reading the Australian classic, *CLOUDSTREET*, by Tim Winton. It is all of the things I've just mentioned.

TRC: Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to us! Final question: Can you tell us anything about what's up next for you?

MZ: I'm starting work on a new book now. I'm not sure how long it will take, but it's called *BRIDGE OF CLAY*. I'm afraid of it at the moment, but that's probably a good thing.