

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Book Thief
by Marcus Zusak

BOOK GROUP

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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Markus Zusak was born in Sydney, Australia, in 1975. He is the son of Austrian and German parents who grew up in Europe during World War II and later immigrated to Australia. Zusak wrote his first book when he was about 16 years old, though apparently it was not very good. Zusak calls it “an absolute shocker;” it was never published.

His first published novel was *The Underdog*, published in the United States in 2002. The story centers on the complex relationship between two brothers, Ruben and Cameron Wolfe. Zusak eventually wrote a trilogy about the Wolfe brothers. *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* (2001), the second novel, was a YALSA Best Book of 2002. The trilogy was completed with *Getting the Girl*, published in 2003. In 2005, Zusak’s highly lauded novel *I am the Messenger* was published in the United States. It tells the unique story of a young man who learns to risk himself in order to help others. It won the Children’s Book Council of Australia Book of the Year award, and was a Michael L. Printz Honor Book in 2006.

In 2006, *The Book Thief* was published. Zusak had heard stories from his parents about life in Europe during World War II and was interested in writing about people in Nazi Germany who were opposed to Nazi rule. When he was a child, his mother described to him the bombing of Munich and her experience witnessing Jewish prisoners being marched through her town on their way to Dachau. Both of these events appear in *The Book Thief*. It has received great critical acclaim and serves as an important addition to literature written about Nazi Germany.

Zusak currently lives in Sydney with his wife where he devotes most of his time to writing.

BOOK SUMMARY

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The narrator Death explains that each time he carries away a soul, he sees a particular color, depending on what the sky looks like at the time. He reveals that he is haunted by humans because he so often witnesses humans’ worst actions. Then he recounts his three brief encounters with a young girl, Liesel Meminger. In order to find some good in the humans who can be so destructive, Death remembers the stories of particular people who show that human existence is worthwhile. Liesel is one of those people, and Death tells her story in the pages that follow.

It is 1939, and Liesel is traveling with her mother and younger brother when her younger brother dies. At his burial, Liesel steals her first book, one about grave digging that she finds on the ground. Her mother and Liesel then continue to their final destination: a foster home for Liesel since her mother cannot afford to care for her. Liesel is taken to Himmel Street in a town called Molching, outside of Munich. There she meets her foster parents, Rosa and Hans Hubermann.

Liesel is haunted every night by a nightmare of her brother’s death, so Hans stays in her room and plays the accordion for her. This act of kindness helps Liesel feel safe, and she develops a strong bond with Hans. Liesel asks Hans to teach her to read. Using the grave digging book, paint, and the blank walls of their basement, the two spend day and night reading together. Liesel also befriends a young man in her class named Rudy. Some of their escapades include stealing food from farmers and, later, books from the Mayor’s wife. Liesel develops a strong bond with Rudy, too.

Liesel writes letters to her mother via the foster agency, but when no reply comes, Liesel realizes that her parents were arrested by the Nazis and likely killed. Liesel feels angry with Hitler for the loss of her parents. At a book burning for Hitler's birthday in 1940, Liesel steals her second book from the smoldering fire. Ilsa Hermann, the mayor's wife and one of the people for whom Rosa washes clothes, sees her act of thievery. Later, Ilsa shares with Liesel the wonders of her library and the two form an unusual friendship.

One night, a young Jewish man arrives at the Hubermann house. Because Max's father had saved Hans's life during World War I, without any hesitation and at great risk to themselves Rosa and Hans create a space for Max in their basement. They swear Liesel to secrecy about their forbidden guest. Liesel and Max gradually form a deep friendship. Despite the immense secret about Max, her life is relatively happy until Ilsa Hermann tells Liesel that Rosa's laundry services are no longer required. Liesel takes this rejection extremely hard because of their friendship. Soon after, Liesel begins stealing books from Ilsa. Liesel truly becomes her namesake, "the book thief."

Lisa brings news of the outside world to Max in the basement, and keeps him company when he falls ill late in 1941. It seems all is right with her world when he recovers. In the summer of 1942, Liesel receives a dictionary and a note from Ilsa, where she expresses her hope that someday Liesel will visit the library through the door rather than the window. Liesel feels guilty about the way she has treated Ilsa, but does not respond to her.

Himmel Street experiences air-raid warnings beginning in September of 1942. During the air raids, Liesel reads to the neighbors in the shelter. Liesel sees Jewish prisoners marched through Molching on a long walk to Dachau. Ever-generous Hans gives a sickly old prisoner a piece of bread, and both he and the old man are whipped by a guard. Hans is terrified that his kindness will bring the Nazis to search his home, so Max decides to leave. The Hubermann house becomes shrouded in fear of punishment as well as sadness and concern about Max's departure. The German army comes to recruit Rudy, but his father, Alex, refuses to let him go with them. The army instead forces Alex to join up. Hans is also forced into the German army. Neither of the men is sent to fight, luckily. Rudy and Liesel strike back at the Nazis by leaving bread in the road for the Jewish prisoners forced to march through the town.

Rosa gives Liesel a book that Max made for her. In it is the beautiful parable he had created called "The Word Shaker." It tells the story of a girl who battles the evil word trees planted by Hitler. Liesel finally decides to thank Ilsa for her generosity over the years by returning a plate that Ilsa had given her with food on it. Soon after, in April of 1943, Hans returns home injured, but having escaped Death yet again in war.

Jews are again marched through Molching, and Liesel sees Max among them. Upset by this encounter, Liesel goes to Ilsa's library and tears up one of her books. Afterwards, she writes Ilsa a letter to apologize and thank her for the books Ilsa has shared with her. Ilsa brings Liesel a gift — a black book with lined paper. Himmel Street is bombed and everyone — Rosa, Hans, Rudy, everyone — is killed except for Liesel because she was writing in her black book in the basement at the time of the bombing. She is rescued by the army and Death sees her grieving when he comes to whisk everyone's souls away. He takes the book she was writing, called *The Book Thief*.

The novel ends with Death telling Liesel that he is "haunted by humans."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. What is the effect of having death serve as the narrator?
2. What is the significance of words?
3. Why is Hans Hubermann “worth a lot” (p.34)?
4. Can you relate to the actions Hans chooses? What motivates him?
5. What is the role of colors?
6. What are examples of sacrifice?
7. What is the significance of stealing?
8. What is the role of Liesel’s brother?

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