

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak

Book Summary:

Narrated by Death, *The Book Thief* is the story of Liesel Meminger, a nine-year-old German girl who is given up by her mother to live with Hans and Rosa Hubermann in the small town of Molching in 1939, shortly before World War II. On their way to Molching, Liesel's younger brother Werner dies, and she is traumatized, experiencing nightmares about him for a few years. Hans is a gentle man who brings her comfort and helps her learn to read, starting with a book Liesel took from the cemetery where her brother was buried. Liesel befriends a neighborhood boy, Rudy Steiner, who falls in love with her. At a book burning, Liesel realizes that her father was persecuted for being a Communist, and that her mother was likely killed by the Nazis for the same crime. She is seen stealing a book from the burning by the mayor's wife Ilsa Hermann, who later invites Liesel to read in her library.

Keeping a promise he made to the man who saved his life, Hans agrees to hide a Jew named Max Vandenberg in his basement. Liesel and Max become close friends, and Max writes Liesel two stories about their friendship, both of which are reproduced in the novel. When Hans publicly gives bread to an old Jew being sent to a concentration camp, Max must leave, and Hans is drafted into the military at a time when air raids over major German cities were escalating in terms of frequency and fatality. Liesel next sees Max being marched towards the concentration camp at Dachau. Liesel loses hope and begins to disdain the written word, having learned that Hitler's propaganda is to blame for the war and the Holocaust and the death of her biological family, but Ilsa encourages her to write. Liesel writes the story of her life in the Hubermann's basement, where she miraculously survives an air raid that kills Hans, Rosa, Rudy, and everyone else on her block. Liesel survives the war, as does Max. She goes on to live a long life and dies at an old age.

Book summary came from this website:

<http://www.gradesaver.com/the-book-thief/study-guide/short-summary/>

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think of Death as the narrator? How does this impact the style of the novel?
2. Abandonment and guilt are two of the book's central themes. Can you discuss examples of how these themes play out?
3. Compare and contrast the two stories Max writes for Liesel, "The Standover Man" and "The Word Shaker." What is the meaning of both stories? Why does Max only want Liesel to have the "The Word Shaker" "when she's ready?"
4. How does this book show the power of words?
5. The Grave Digger's Handbook is the first book Liesel steals. What is significant about the titles of the books she steals? (Other titles include The Whistler, The Shoulder Shrug, The Dream Carrier, The Complete Duden Dictionary and Thesaurus, and The Last Human Stranger.)
6. 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.
7. Why does Death tell Liesel that it is "haunted" by humans?
8. How does the idea of book thievery shape the novel? How is this ironic?
9. Consider Zusak's use of foreshadowing. By revealing how characters die early on, or the outcomes to certain events, does Zusak make the novel less suspenseful or more?

Other questions to think about:

10. Why do you think the author has dominoes on the cover of this book?
11. Why do you think colors are emphasized in this book?
12. What is the effect of the use of German in the book? Do the German words and passages make things confusing? Do they make the story feel more authentic? Why or why not?
13. When Liesel reads aloud to the others in the bomb shelter for the first time, a voice inside her says, "This is your accordion." What does that mean?
14. Do any of the characters fight internal wars? If so, which ones, and what are they battling?
15. Liesel and the mayor's wife also have a complicated relationship. Eventually, the mayor's wife leaves her a plate of cookies, and Liesel later returns the plate to the doorstep. Afterwards, "her brother never climbed into her sleep again." Why?
16. Liesel has complex relationships with her foster parents, Hans and Rosa. In what ways do they show how they feel about her and about each other?
17. Why does Liesel refuse to bathe after losing her brother and mother, and then again after losing everybody on Himmel Street?
18. Why does Rudy seem to love Liesel immediately after they meet, and why does Liesel not recognize that she loves him until years after?

A quote from the author Markus Zusak about how he was inspired to write *The Book Thief*:

"Two stories my mother told me affected me a lot. The first was about Munich being bombed, and how the sky was on fire, how everything was red. The second was about something else she saw...

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 were being marched to Dachau, the concentration camp. 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 the first place. In one moment, there was great kindness and great cruelty, and I saw it as the perfect story of how humans are."

Sources used:

<http://www.shmoop.com/book-thief/>

<http://www.gradesaver.com/the-book-thief/>

(<http://www.randomhouse.com/features/markuszusak/author.html>)

<http://www.galesburglibrary.org/BookClub/BookThief.pdf>

Discussion Questions for *The Book Thief* by Mark Zusak (Some questions taken or adapted from randomhouse.com)

Random House Discussion questions found in the back of the book