



Book Club Set

The Book Thief

By Markus Zusak

About the Author



Markus Zusak was born in 1975 in Sydney, Australia, the youngest of four children of immigrant German and Austrian parents. Neither parent could read or write English when they first arrived in Australia, but they wanted their children to master the language and strongly encouraged them to read and communicate in English from an early age. Zusak began writing fiction at age 16 and pursued a degree in teaching. Before becoming a professional author, Zusak worked briefly as a house painter, a janitor and a high school English teacher.

In 1999, Zusak's first novel, *The Underdog*, was published after many initial rejections. It is the first book in a trilogy narrated by Cameron, the youngest child in the working-class Wolfe family. Cameron is the underdog of the title, and the narrative follows his struggle to define himself within his family and society. Cameron and his brother and best friend Ruben were loosely based on Zusak and his own brother. The sequel, *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, tells of the brothers' participation in an illegal boxing ring as a means of supporting their family. The final book in the trilogy, *When Dogs Cry* (published as *Getting the Girl in the United States*) examines the complications of loss, death and falling in love.

Zusak's second and third novels received numerous awards and honors, including the American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults for *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* and the Queensland Premier's Literary Award for Young Adult Fiction for *When Dogs Cry*. Zusak followed the Wolfe brothers trilogy with *The Messenger* (published as *I Am the Messenger in the United States*) in 2002. It is the story of down-and-out teenage cab driver Ed, who receives cryptic messages via playing cards that direct him to help strangers in need. In the process of deciphering the clues and completing the tasks, he ultimately discovers his own purpose in life. Lauded in Zusak's native Australia and abroad, the book received the Michael L. Printz Honor and the Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award (Australia) and was named a Bulletin Blue Ribbon Book and a Publishers Weekly Best Book of the Year.

The Book Thief followed in 2006 and was met with even more critical and popular success. A sympathetically drawn Death narrates the story of orphan Liesel Meminger, who finds friendship and a new family in a small town in Germany during World War II. She also discovers the power of words and books as Hitler's Nazi agenda threatens to destroy everything she has come to love. Zusak chose the subject matter in part to share the stories his parents told him about growing up in Austria and Germany during the war. The Book Thief was published as a novel for adults in Australia and as a young adult novel in the United States, but Zusak doesn't draw such distinctions. "What I wanted to do... was write someone's favorite book," rather than write for a specific audience, Zusak revealed in an interview. Author John Green reviewed the book in the New York Times, hailing it as "[b]rilliant" and "achingly sad," and said of the heroine, "[t]he hope we see in Liesel is unassailable, the kind you can hang on to in the midst of poverty and war and violence."

Zusak received many awards for The Book Thief, including the Michael L. Printz Honor and the Kathleen Mitchell Award (Australia). It was named a Best Book by the School Library Journal and the Young Adult Library Services Association, and was the Editors' Choice in the Kirkus Review and Booklist. Zusak lives in Sydney, Australia and continues to write fiction.

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About the Book



It is 1939. Nazi Germany. The country is holding its breath. Death has never been busier, and will be busier still.

By her brother's graveside, Liesel's life is changed when she picks up a single object, partially hidden in the snow. It is The Gravedigger's Handbook, left behind there by accident, and it is her first act of book thievery. So begins a love affair with books and words, as Liesel, with the help of her accordion-playing foster father, learns to read. Soon she is stealing books from Nazi book-burnings, the mayor's wife's library, wherever there are books to be found.

But these are dangerous times. When Liesel's foster family hides a Jew in their basement, Liesel's world is both opened up, and closed down.

In superbly crafted writing that burns with intensity, award-winning author Markus Zusak has given us one of the most enduring stories of our time.

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Discussion Questions



1. What was the author's purpose behind choosing Death as a narrator? Is this a trustworthy narrator? How does Death see things that a human narrator might not?
2. In the opening of the book when Liesel steals her first book, *The Gravedigger's Handbook*, this event can be thought of as the first of many turning points for her. What are some of the others? Talk about each major character and what their turning points are, as well as turning points for the community as a whole.
3. Knowing that Liesel is called a "thief," how does the book complicate our ideas of justice and judgment? Which characters do you view as just/unjust or brave/cowardly, and why? Which events or details most color your perceptions of these characters?
4. What choices do characters make about groups they will belong to? What groups do they belong to without choice? What are the consequences?
5. Discuss Liesel's friendship with Rudy. Does she love him in the way he loves her, or is it a child's love? Do you think he reminds her of her brother?
6. Zusak's books often portray characters with a tendency to fight—including Max and Liesel. Is a child who fights more forgivable than an adult who fights? Why?
7. From Hans to Liesel to the mayor's wife, discuss how some of the characters in *The Book Thief* deal with their past. Discuss themes of memory and punishment.
8. Is Hans Hubermann a courageous man? How does he show courage, or lack of courage?
9. Name some acts of resistance in the book, from large to small. What does the author intend with his inclusion of these acts?
10. Who has power in this book? How does Liesel gain power, and how does Max? Toward the end of the novel Liesel remarks to herself that words give power. How so?
11. Discuss the meaning of Max painting over *Mein Kampf*. What is he able to express by doing this and by drawing over it, that he cannot convey in person?

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Author Interview



This novel is so finely plotted and the characters so fully formed, that people love to hear about the genesis for this story. Can you tell us a bit about when the concept for a novel about WWII, narrated by Death and about a girl book thief, came to you? Which idea came first and how did you build upon it?

Like most ideas, I stumbled across bits and pieces over time and started using them for no apparent reason. Once, when my computer was broken, I was writing the book I was working on at the time on foolscap paper. In the middle of it, I wrote a page about a girl stealing a book in modern-day Sydney. I didn't do anything with it at the time, but a few years later, when I started thinking seriously of writing about my parents and their childhoods in Germany and Austria during World War II, I thought, "Maybe I should put that book thief in." I guess that's how things start. You put two unrelated things together and at some point, you understand: they're actually not unrelated at all, they're perfect for each other.

The next realization was also a bit of a fluke. I was working with some kids at a high school and got them to write about color. I did the exercise with them and realized I had written about red, white and blue—but more importantly, about three different deaths, from Death's point of view. Again, I thought, "How about just throwing that into that book set in Nazi Germany as well?" I didn't wonder if it made sense at first, I just wrote, and very slowly, the ideas formed a little more clearly. As an example, it wasn't until many months working on the book that I saw that the colors in the prologue should actually be red, white and black, in the colors of the Nazi flag...

At the end of the day, there's a whole range of answers to this question. You could say the concept of the book was always there. It was waiting while I was growing up in Sydney, listening to my parents' stories in the kitchen with my brother and two sisters. In so many ways, that's where the book truly began.

The power of words and language is so wonderfully emphasized in this novel. Liesel writes, “I’ve hated the words and I’ve loved them;” and the narrator points out that “without words the Fuhrer was nothing.” Is this a theme that you felt you could explore more in telling this story than in anything else you have worked on?

It felt like it by the time I’d finished, but I never set out to do that. Like most writers, I start to understand what a book is about as I’m writing it, and sometimes even afterwards. In *The Book Thief* I started to make those connections as I considered using *Mein Kampf* in the story and having characters paint over it and write their own story over the top. From another point of view, it wasn’t until the book was published when I saw that it was also about people doing beautiful things in even the ugliest times. I guess you do know it as you’re writing, but not in such a definable way. The more time you spend with it, the clearer (and sometimes murkier) it all becomes.

Liesel is such a strong, unique and interesting girl. I love that you write the women so well and am interested to hear why you chose a young girl to be the “book thief.” What was your inspiration for her character?

The first thing I should say is that I still cheated. I still didn’t write from Liesel’s point of view...but it was actually a natural thing to have a female lead character. The luckiest part about my childhood was to have two parents with amazing stories who both happened to be great storytellers on top of it. With no disrespect to my dad, it was my mum’s world at the outskirts of Munich that had the greatest influence on me. That’s why I chose Liesel. Of course, the instant I fictionalized something, it wasn’t her anymore. Liesel ceased being my mother on page eight or nine and became herself, even when I borrowed from my mother’s life story.

I think it’s very easy in human nature to paint the “bad guys” with strong black paint, and not entertain questions about how we would act in a situation where

bad, confusing, questionable things are happening. I really appreciate the gray in your book, and those characters that are wrestling with how to proceed as a German in Nazi Germany, without the benefit of hindsight. Rudy's father, for instance, doesn't want to rock the boat, even though he feels uncomfortable with some of what is happening, and this is because he has to look out for his family. As a parent, I really relate to this. Could you talk about the questions you intended to raise about the decisions we make in these gray areas? When is a moral situation untenable? When and how do you decide to risk your life or put your loved ones in jeopardy? Do you duck and cover and try to survive? Or do you take a stand? These are hard questions that you've bravely laid out.

I wish I knew. There's a point sometimes when you have to say, "I don't know"—and I guess that's exactly the point with this answer. None of us knows what we'd have done. Statistics tell us that a huge majority of us would have been a part of it. Sometimes, too, I wonder how history will judge us. For me, the job is to write the story. I loved Alex Steiner. I even loved Frau Diller, who was fully involved in the Nazi regime. I guess you become two different things: the writer and the person. I make writing decisions when I'm at the desk, and my job isn't to condemn Frau Diller and congratulate Hans Hubermann or Alex Steiner. It's my job to put them next to each other and see what happens next.

Still, I'm avoiding the question, though, aren't I?! To be honest, I didn't set out to raise questions, or answer them. I set out to deliver the characters in a way that they would feel like friends of ours. I set out to have a character like Rudy pretend to be Jesse Owens and have a reader not only believe it, but cheer him on. The questions come afterwards.

The Book Thief depicts a period in world history that has often been examined in art, theater and literature, but you bring forth such an often overlooked perspective. Perhaps this is too personal a question, but can you talk about how your family, whose stories helped inspire the novel, received the book?

The first thing I'll say is that I owe my parents everything. They gave me the world of this book like a language I didn't know I had. Sure, there's a ratio of probably 90 percent fiction in the finished work, but it's the world and backdrop of the story that they brought to life. It was like waking up one day and being able to speak Russian or Spanish when previously you couldn't. I started writing and it was like scratching something open, reaching in and pulling a whole world out—but again, that doesn't answer the question. To tell you the truth, I could go on all day about my parents' reactions. There are too many stories that hopefully I'll tell when I come up to Chicago (I can't wait, by the way).

The one thing I've got room for here is to say that I think they're mostly just proud. They met in Australia and couldn't speak English, and now, the stories they brought with them are the foundation not only for *The Book Thief*, but most likely my career as a writer. They taught me a love of story, whether they know it or not. In that sense, it's really great when they talk about the book as if it's theirs—because it is.

I would love to hear about the choice of Death as a narrator. It's such a bold and interesting choice, adds such a lively and dark flavor, and really pays off. But I wondered if you had any trepidation about the tonal balancing act you were performing while writing it? Were you nervous at all about the humor?

It was a bit of a nightmare, really. For quite a while, I moved away from Death narrating, but I was constantly called back. It just made sense to me. People often say that war and death are best friends, so who better to be hanging around Nazi Germany to tell this story? What really clinched it after all the mistakes, all the doubts and other possibilities, was when I realized that Death should have just that slightest edge of vulnerability. It was when I understood that he was actually tired, and afraid, and haunted by all the cleaning up, especially during wartime. I saw that he should be telling this story to prove to himself that humans can be worthwhile, and beautiful, even in the ugliest times.

Do you picture Death in your head? What does he look like? We talked about this quite a bit in developing the adaptation for the stage and would obviously love to know what you see?

You can't believe how excited I am to see the Steppenwolf production. To be honest, when I think of Death, I hear the voice, and then I see the sky, the earth, the trees and all of us. It's why I wanted Death to talk about those things in terms of "who," like "the sky who was wide and blue and magnificent." I wanted Death to talk about all of those things as if they were colleagues—all part of the same thing. Maybe I see Death as the part of us that knows all the time that we're going to die, reminding us to live properly. Then again, sometimes I do like to see the old Grim Reaper, just for a bit of a laugh...

Why do you think the book has struck such a chord with readers of so many ages?

I never think of this book's audience in terms of age. I honestly thought it wouldn't have any audience at all, and that's how it became the book it did. I thought, "No one's going to read this, I might as well do exactly what I want." I think that's how I ended up keeping Death on the books, and every other oddity, from incorrect grammar to the small announcements appearing throughout the text. I stopped worrying about the audience and that has to happen with every book, I think. There's a moment where you realize you've cared for the audience all this way, and you get a bit fed up, and finally say: "All right, I've helped you out this far, but now you have to come with me". Ironically enough, I think that's when your true audience starts to love a book the most—when you trust them enough to come with you anyway.

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Share your thoughts with other readers!



DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: