

The Book Thief

by Markus Zusak

About the Book

It's just a small story really, about among other things: a girl, some words, an accordionist, some fanatical Germans, a Jewish fist-fighter, and quite a lot of thievery. . .

Set during World War II in Germany, Markus Zusak's groundbreaking new novel is the story of Liesel Meminger, a foster girl living outside of Munich. Liesel scratches out a meager existence for herself by stealing when she encounters something she can't resist—books. With the help of her accordion-playing foster father, she learns to read and shares her stolen books with her neighbors during bombing raids as well as with the Jewish man hidden in her basement before he is marched to Dachau.

This is an unforgettable story about the ability of books to feed the soul.

Praise for the Book

"*The Book Thief* will be appreciated for Mr. Zusak's audacity, also on display in his earlier *I Am the Messenger*. It will be widely read and admired because it tells a story in which books become treasures. And because there's no arguing with a sentiment like that."

- *New York Times*

"Elegant, philosophical and moving...Beautiful and important."

- *Kirkus Reviews*, Starred

"*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."

- *USA Today*

"Exquisitely written and memorably populated, Zusak's poignant tribute to words, survival, and their curiously inevitable entwinement is a tour de force to be not just read but inhabited."

- *The Horn Book Magazine*, Starred

Courtesy of Random House, Inc.

About the Author

Title: Markus Zusak

Australian Novelist (1975 -)

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2007. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Biography

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2008 Gale, Cengage Learning

Updated:09/13/2007

Personal Information:

Born 1975, in Sydney, Australia; son of a house painter and a maid; married. Addresses:
Home: Sydney, Australia.

Career:

Writer and novelist. Worked as a janitor and a high school English teacher.

Awards:

Older Readers Honor Book of the Year, Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA), 2001, for *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* and 2006, for *I Am the Messenger*; Older Readers Honor Book of the Year, CBCA, and Young Adult Book of the Year, Queensland Premier's Literary Awards, both 2002, for *When Dogs Cry*; Older Readers Book of the Year, CBCA, and Ethel Turner Prize, New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards, both 2003, for *The Messenger*; Printz Honor Book, 2006, for *I Am the Messenger*.

Works:

Writings:

Young Adult Novels

- *The Underdog*, Omnibus Books (Norwood, South Australia, Australia), 1999.
- *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, Omnibus Books (Norwood, South Australia, Australia), 2000, Arthur A. Levine (New York, NY), 2001.
- *When Dogs Cry*, Pan Macmillan Australia (Sydney, New South Wales, Australia), 2001, published as *Getting the Girl*, Arthur A. Levine (New York, NY), 2003.
- *The Messenger*, Pan Macmillan Australia (Sydney, New South Wales, Australia), 2002, published as *I Am the Messenger*, Knopf (New York, NY), 2005.

- *The Book Thief*, Knopf (New York, NY), 2006.

“Sidelights”

Since the publication of his first novel in 1999, Markus Zusak has rapidly become one of the more prominent young authors in Australia. In his books, Zusak, the son of working-class immigrants to Australia, tells the stories of other disadvantaged young men struggling against bleak circumstances and their own internal demons to improve themselves and their lives. "Stories have always told me where I was from," Zusak told interviewer Tammy L. Currier, on the *TeenReads* Web site. "[My parents'] hardships and struggle to live decent lives are probably the basis of everything I approach. Also, when I see my friends, we laugh and carry on, and it's our stories that give us that laughter. I guess without stories we'd be empty."

Zusak's award-winning novels about the Wolfe brothers, *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* and *When Dogs Cry* (published in the United States as *Getting the Girl*) have received a good deal of critical attention, both in his native Australia and in America. The books are written "in earthy, working-class dialect," a critic noted in a *Publishers Weekly* review of *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, and are told from the point of view of Ruben Wolfe's younger brother, Cameron. The Wolfe brothers are teenagers in a blue-collar household that has fallen on hard times since their father was injured and lost his job as a plumber. Their mother works scrubbing floors, but it is not enough to make ends meet. So when, near the beginning of *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, the boys are approached by a man who runs illegal boxing matches, they accept the chance to bring in extra money by fighting. Ruben, long a participant in after-school fistfights, has no problems adapting to boxing; billed as "Fighting Ruben Wolfe," he wins most of his matches, bringing home fifty dollars in prize money after each one. Cameron, who is the more reserved of the two, has trouble and gets the ring name "The Underdog," but he stays in the ring and fights through his fear with such "heart" that the spectators often throw him tips in acknowledgment of his tenacity. "The fast-paced narrative captures the physical rigors of the boxing ring as well as the emotional turmoil and the ultimate unity of the troubled Wolfe family," commented Peter D. Sieruta in a *Horn Book* review of *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*. Although the two brothers eventually are forced to face each other in the ring, they remain close; each chapter of the book concludes with a conversation between the two.

Zusak explained to Currier that the relationship between Ruben and Cameron is "my brother and me all over--not giving each other an inch at home, but willing to die for each other in the world." Zusak and his older brother even used to box each other in their backyard, "and being younger and smaller than my brother, he really used to beat the crap out of me," he continued.

In *When Dogs Cry*, the sequel to *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, "Zusak explores the deep if inexpressible desire to create, as well as the intersection between family loyalty and romantic affection," explained a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor in a review of the U.S.

edition, titled *Getting the Girl*. The Wolfe brothers have given up boxing, and Cameron has turned to writing as a means to express himself and to try to figure out who he is. At the moment, he seems to be a loner and a loser, as he wanders the streets by himself and pines outside the house of a girl who cannot stand him. Life starts looking up when Octavia, a sweet girl recently dumped by Ruben, turns her affection to Cameron, but Ruben objects to their blossoming romance. "The interaction of the characters is the real strength of this novel," Janet Hilbun commented in *School Library Journal*.

Zusak is also the author of *The Messenger* (published in the U.S. as *I Am the Messenger*), a novel about an aimless twenty-year-old cab driver named Ed. Ed is a laid-back nobody, living alone in a shabby little house with his big-hearted but smelly dog, until he helps to foil a botched bank robbery and he is hailed in the local paper as a hero. Shortly thereafter, someone begins sending him playing cards with addresses and cryptic messages written on them. Each address, Ed discovers, directs him to someone who needs help. The card he receives, the ace of diamonds, leads him to an abused wife, a lonely old woman whose husband was killed in the war years earlier, and a struggling athlete who suffers from a lack of self-confidence. The ace of clubs leads him to a priest whose church is threatened by low attendance, a teenaged mother struggling to raise three children, and a pair of brothers whose relationship involves constantly beating and threatening each other. When the ace of spades arrives, one of the three missions leads Ed to information about his mother. The ace of hearts directs him to help out a trio of his friends. Finally, he receives a final card: a joker, upon which is written Ed's own address, directing him to the person who perhaps needs the most help of all. By assisting these people, and in the process helping himself, Ed begins to find a purpose and meaning in life. "This book tells the story of a young man transcending his belief in himself, valuing what he has achieved, and gaining a new outlook on his life. It captures the reader from the first pages, and its incredible ending will astound you," commented *Bookloons* Web site reviewer J.A. Kaszuba Locke. Ed "transforms from a self-absorbed (although funny and likeable) lout into a genuine hero, reaching out in a beguiling, unsentimental way to the others he's directed to find on the cards he receives," noted *TeenReads* reviewer Terry Miller Shannon. Matt Berman, writing on the *Common Sense Media* Web site, mused that *I Am the Messenger* displays "glimpses of brilliance." Zusak "is a keen observer of the bonds that both connect and stifle relationships," Denise Civelli wrote in the *Melbourne Herald Sun*, and he is also "gifted in unveiling enchantment in the simple dealings of everyday life."

Survival in the grim world of Nazi Germany forms the background of *The Book Thief*. Narrated by Death himself, a wry, sometimes sardonic, even bitterly humorous character, the book follows the life of protagonist Liesel Meminger, who finds strength, wisdom, and determination in the pages of fourteen different books she steals throughout her difficult years. At the book's opening, in 1939, nine-year-old Liesel and her six-year-old brother are sent to live with foster parents Hans, a painter and accordion player, and Rosa Huberman in Molching, near Munich. Tragedy strikes during the arduous trip; her brother dies and is buried alongside the train tracks. There, Liesel spies the first book she will ever steal: a gravedigger's manual, dropped by one of the workers who prepared her brother's humble grave. Though she cannot read the book, it provides inexplicable

comfort to her and helps her maintain a link to her fading past. Soon, her early trauma brings on nightmares and sleepless nights, during which her foster father teaches her to read. Another time she steals a volume from a pile of books being burned by Nazi soldiers. On another occasion, she is invited into the large library of the town mayor's wife, where she is secretly helped to steal other books. Slowly, through her access to these written works and her own developing intelligence, she begins to become aware of the atrocities going on around her. The family's proximity to Dachau lets her often see wretched columns of Jews being marched off to death. There, she sees a frail old man collapse in the street and a young boy bring him a scrap of bread; she also sees the savage beating that both of them receive at the hands of Nazi soldiers. Soon, Liesel connects the Nazis to her own identity as a German, causing great personal turmoil. She begins to realize the significance of the man whom her father helps hide: Max Vandenburg, a Jewish refugee. As Death tells of the travails and small victories of his grim mission, Liesel matures and begins to realize the power of knowledge, and how it can contribute to freedom even in the atmosphere of the deepest oppression.

"This is a beautifully balanced piece of storytelling with glimpses of what is yet to come: sometimes misleading, sometimes all too true," commented Philip Ardagh in the *Manchester Guardian*. "Zusak is no apologist, but able to give a remarkable insight into the human psyche." Zusak "succeeds in finding diamonds among the ashes, balancing despair with hope and endurance," commented London *Independent* critic Christina Hardyment. "Unsettling, thought-provoking, life-affirming, triumphant and tragic, this is a novel of breathtaking scope, masterfully told," Ardagh concluded. "To be sure, *The Book Thief* attempts and achieves great final moments of tear-jerking sentiment. And Liesel is a fine heroine, a memorably strong and dauntless girl," commented Janet Maslin in the *New York Times*. The book, Maslin remarked, "will be widely read and admired because it tells a story in which books become treasures. And because there's no arguing with a sentiment like that."

Further Readings About the Author:

Periodicals

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- *Age* (Australia), September 10, 2005, Peter Pierce, review of *The Book Thief*.
- *Booklist*, February 15, 2001, Bill Ott, review of *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, p. 1129; May 15, 2003, Gillian Engberg, review of *Getting the Girl*, p. 1656; January 1, 2007, Michael Cart, "'Tis the Season," review of *The Book Thief*, p. 74.
- *Daily Telegraph* (Surry Hills, New South Wales, Australia), August 23, 2003, Ray Chesterton, interview with Zusak, p. 30.
- *Guardian* (Manchester, England), January 6, 2007, Philip Ardagh, "It's a Steal," review of *The Book Thief*.

- *Herald Sun* (Melbourne, Victoria, Australia), October 12, 2002, Denise Civelli, review of *The Messenger*, p. W30.
- *Horn Book*, March, 2001, Peter D. Sieruta, review of *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, p. 217; May-June, 2003, Peter D. Sieruta, review of *Getting the Girl*, p. 360.
- *Independent* (London, England), January 24, 2007, Christina Hardymont, "The Importance of Words in a Situation So Dire, It almost Beggars Description," review of *The Book Thief*.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, March 1, 2003, review of *Getting the Girl*, p. 402; December 1, 2006, Jerome Kramer, review of *The Book Thief*, p. 16.
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- *Sunday Tasmanian* (Hobart, Tasmania, Australia), December 15, 2002, Richard Sprent, review of *The Messenger*, p. T18.
- *Time*, March 13, 2006, Lev Grossman, "Five Great New Books: Dragons! Lip Gloss! Death! There's Life in Teen Books after Harry Potter," review of *The Book Thief*, p. 63.

Online

- *AllReaders.com*, <http://www.allreaders.com/> (May 16, 2007), Ann Gaines, review of *I Am the Messenger*.
- *BookLoons*, <http://www.bookloons.com/> (May 16, 2007), J.A. Kaszuba Locke, review of *I Am the Messenger*; J.A. Kaszuba Locke, review of *The Book Thief*.
- *BookPage*, <http://www.bookpage.com/> (May 16, 2007), Linda M. Castellitto, "Markus Zusak's Compelling Appointment with Death," review of *The Book Thief*.
- *Common Sense Media*, <http://www.commonensemedia.org/> (May 16, 2007), Matt Berman, review of *I Am the Messenger*.
- *Contemporary Literature About.com*, <http://contemporarylit.about.com/> (May 16, 2007), John M. Formy-Duval, review of *The Book Thief*.
- *Pan Macmillan Australia Web Site*, <http://www.panmacmillan.com.au/> (May 16, 2007), "An Interview with Markus Zusak."
- *Random House Web site*, <http://www.randomhouse.com/> (May 16, 2007), biography of Markus Zusak.
- *Scholastic Australia Web Site*, <http://www.scholastic.com.au/> (May 16, 2007), "Profiles: Markus Zusak."
- *TeenReads*, <http://www.teenreads.com/> (May 16, 2007), Tammy L. Currier, interview with Markus Zusak; Terry Miller Shannon, review of *I Am the Messenger*.*

Source Citation: "Markus Zusak." Contemporary Authors Online. Detroit: Gale, 2007. Literature Resource Center. Gale. KENT DISTRICT LIBRARY. 2 Dec. 2008
<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=LitRC&u=lom_kentdl>.

Gale Document Number: GALE|H1000154965

Author Interview

A Conversation With Markus Zusak

Q: What inspired you to write about a hungry, illiterate girl who has such a desire to read that she steals books?

A: I think it's just working on a book over and over again. I heard stories of cities on fire, teenagers who were whipped for giving starving Jewish people bread on their way to concentration camps, and people huddled in bomb shelters. . . . But I also had a story about a book thief set in my hometown of Sydney. I just brought the two ideas together and realized the importance of words in Nazi Germany. I thought of Hitler destroying people with words, and now I had a girl who was stealing them back, as she read books with the young Jewish man in her basement and calmed people down in the bomb shelters. She writes her own story—and it's a beautiful story—through the ugliness of the world that surrounds her.

Q: How did you decide to make Death the narrator of the book?

A: With great difficulty! I thought, "Here's a book set during war. Everyone says war and death are best friends." Death is ever-present during war, so here was the perfect choice to narrate *The Book Thief*. At first, though, Death was too mean. He was supercilious, and enjoying his work too much. He'd say extremely creepy things and delight in all the souls he was picking up . . . and the book wasn't working. So I went to a first-person narration, a simple third-person narration . . . and six months later I came back to Death—but this time, Death was to be exhausted from his eternal existence and his job. He was to be afraid of humans—because, after all, he was there to see the obliteration we've perpetrated on each other throughout the ages—and he would now be telling this story to prove to himself that humans are actually worth it.

Q: Liesel has an uncanny understanding of people and an ability to befriend those who most need companionship. Who do you think is Liesel's most unforgettable friend?

A: For me it's Rudy, but a lot of people will tell me it's Hans Hubermann, Max, the mayor's wife, or even Rosa Hubermann. Rudy is just my favorite character. From the moment he painted himself black and became Jesse Owens, he was my favorite. Liesel kissing his dusty, bomb-hit lips was probably the most devastating part of the book for me to write. . . . I was a mess. On the other hand, I'm also drawn to all of the relationships Liesel forms, even her reading with Frau Holtzapfel, and the return of her son. Even Ludwig Schmeikl—the boy she beats up on the playground and reconciles

with at the book burning . . . I think the relationship with Rosa is the most unexpected, though. The moment when she sees Rosa with the accordion strapped to her (when Hans is sent to the war) is when she realizes exactly how much love her foster mother is capable of.

Q: Your use of figurative language seems natural and effortless. Is this something that you have to work to develop, or is it innately a part of your writing style?

A: I like the idea that every page in every book can have a gem on it. It's probably what I love most about writing—that words can be used in a way that's like a child playing in a sandpit, rearranging things, swapping them around. They're the best moments in a day of writing—when an image appears that you didn't know would be there when you started work in the morning. At other stages, it takes time. It took three years to write this book, and some images remained from start to finish, but others were considered and reconsidered dozens of times, if not more. Often, to keep the workday flowing, I'll continue writing the story and then come back later to develop an image that hasn't worked from the outset. I might even take it out completely.

Courtesy of Random House, Inc.

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.
5. 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.
6. 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?
7. 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.

Courtesy of HarperCollins