

The Book Thief
Markus Zusak
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Historical Fiction
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The Book Thief: A Picturesque, Vibrant Holocaust Story

By Evan W.

Can the power of words captivate the attention of a young girl, even during one of the most grotesque historical events? *The Book Thief* tells of the internal development of Liesel Meminger, and how she discovers the calming power of literature after losing everyone close to her. By personifying death as the omniscient narrator, Markus Zusak makes use of vivid imagery to bring the emotions of Liesel to life, while also conveying a message of Holocaust horrors. This contradiction makes *The Book Thief* all that more fascinating: creating a powerful text rather than a typical childhood Bildungsroman. Despite the occasional ambiguity of certain sections, the imagery and vibrant emotions give this novel enough of a spark to make it an enticing read.

Liesel, the protagonist fighting through life-changing events, gradually discovers the power of words to alleviate her stresses. Soon after moving in with her foster family, she is forced to take on multiple responsibilities, including making new friends while keeping an enormous secret from them. To hide a Jew in one's house was the most courageous thing one could do in Nazi Germany, and Liesel soon discovers this when Max Vandenburg, the son of Papa's old friend, comes to live with them. From this moment on, Liesel enters a new lifestyle, one filled with paranoia every second of every day. Throughout this time, Liesel is also attending school, collecting books, and stealing food to survive, all of which make this novel chaotic as well as intriguing throughout.

In terms of *The Book Thief's* strengths, imagery is definitely the most superior, as it transforms multiple depressing scenes into lively events. Liesel is often forced to result to her imagination for pleasure, creating joyous visions to protect her from debilitating challenges. Gruesome images of wartime Germany led Liesel to daydream about the weather, stating, "The sky is blue today, and there is a big long cloud, and it's stretched out, like a rope... and the sun is like a beautiful yellow hole." Visions like these help extend the novel's overall flow by giving descriptive accounts of Liesel's various thoughts, supplying this novel with a slight sensation of joy despite the gloomy historical context.

Another motif that appeared repeatedly was the use of vivid colors in sections with depressing themes. By using colors to enhance the setting, Zusak shines an optimistic light on

many otherwise bleak parts of the novel. Bright colors, like yellow and red, serve as paradoxes to the overbearing motif of death, as they were present while deaths were simultaneously occurring. Not only are these interesting additions, they also portray Death, the narrator, as an extremely relatable figure as he contains the human-like quality of feeling sympathetic towards mortalities. Zusak sympathetically writes, “Even death has a heart”, explaining that deaths themselves do not always carry the negative connotations people associate them having. The contradiction between the stereotype of death and Zusak’s portrayal of it made for a thought-provoking read, as the question arises of what meanings death truly contains in the course of a lifetime.

Despite the spectacular imagery, *The Book Thief* can be fairly confusing at times due to unclear transitions. The story starts out as a series of flashbacks and present events, which occasionally make it hard to tell exactly what is occurring. On multiple occasions, there are jumps from narrations to actual scenes; making it necessary to reread various sections in order to fully comprehend the plot. These mixed up time frames, along with a deliberate plot spoiler, make reading certain sections awkward and somewhat tedious. “I’m going to tell you what happens... you’ll eventually figure out”, was said by Death in one of his many monologues, as he ends up giving away crucial information and spoils the novel while doing so. This blatant plot spoil is extremely anticlimactic, as there are numerous moments present which foreshadow the future without revealing it entirely. Regardless, this novel is a must read, as these attributes give a different perspective on Holocaust life which many other Holocaust novels do not contain.

The Book Thief is Zusak’s most famous work, as it raised his stature among readers and reviewers worldwide. It has won numerous awards since its publication, such as the Printz Honor and the NSW Premier Literature Award. Zusak has written a few other novels such as *I am the Messenger*, *The Underdog* and *When Dogs Cry*, which have also gained global recognition.

Anyone who loves reading novels with incredible imagery, historical insights, and slight plot twists should definitely read *The Book Thief*. This story is one I truly admire, as the vivid metaphors and various unique aspects make it worth the read. Personally, I would give it three and a half stars out of five, as it contains wonderful plot elements as well as somewhat confusing scenes at times.