

The Book Thief

Presentation by Peter Anderson (the book, the author, the film from Wikipedia)

THE BOOK

The Book Thief is a novel by Australian author [Markus Zusak](#).^[1] Narrated by [Death](#), the book is set in [Nazi Germany](#), a place and time when the narrator notes he (Death) was extremely busy. It describes a young girl's relationship with her foster parents, the other residents of their neighbourhood, and a young Jewish man who hides in her home during the escalation of [World War II](#). First published in 2005, the book has won numerous awards and was listed on [The New York Times Best Seller list](#) for over 230 weeks.^[2]

Liesel Meminger is a nine-year-old girl living in Nazi Germany in 1939. Her mother is taken away and forced to give up her two children, Liesel and her brother, Werner Meminger. As they are on the train to Molching, Liesel's brother dies, and the narrator, Death, sees her for the first time. They dig Werner's grave by the train track. At Werner's funeral, Liesel steals a book called *The Grave Digger's Handbook* dropped by a young grave digger's apprentice. Liesel is fascinated by the book, even though she can't read or write. She brings it to her new home.

Liesel arrives at her foster house in a distraught state. She forms a bond with her new foster parents, Hans, and Rosa Hubermann. Hans is a painter and accordion player, and Rosa does washing for a few local customers. Hans teaches Liesel to read and write. Liesel makes friends with many people, including Rudy Steiner. Rudy and Liesel have many adventures together, most of which involve theft. Rudy keeps asking Liesel for a kiss, but she keeps refusing.

Max Vandenburg is a Jew who is being hidden by a friend. Max has been given Hans' second-hand copy of *Mein Kampf* with a key hidden inside it. Max then travels to Molching. He opens the door to Liesel's house on Himmel Street and meets Hans in the kitchen. He collapses on the doorstep. Hans takes Max in, because during World War I, Max's father, Erik, saved Hans's life. For years, Mama, Papa, and Liesel hide Max in their basement. Slowly, they become friends. When Max became ill, Liesel read to him, and talked to him to help him get well. Max also writes a story for Liesel in a homemade book named *The Standover Man*.

One by one, Rosa's washing customers have fired her. When the last one, the mayor and his wife Ilsa, fires Rosa as well, Liesel is angry. In retaliation, Liesel and Rudy decide to steal books from the mayor's house. The mayor and his wife have a large library and, in the past, Ilsa has allowed Liesel to read books in the library during her visits to the house. She stopped in fear the Nazis would catch her with many forbidden books.

Early in 1942, Max becomes ill and collapses. Liesel reads to Max as he gradually recovers.

The Nazis come to Molching to inspect the houses to see if any could be used as air-raid shelters. Liesel feigns a football injury so she can warn Mama and Papa that the Nazis are coming. The family has only a moment to tell Max to hide. He is not found, and their basement is judged to be too shallow for a shelter.

Liesel helps Papa paint when the order comes to blacken windows for the nighttime air raids. Together they mix black paint, and paint people's window blinds to keep out the light. When they take a break for lunch, Hans plays his accordion. During this time, Rudy has become a good athlete, winning three gold medals at a Hitler Youth Event.

Once more, Liesel steals a book from the mayor's house. Shortly after, Rudy takes her to look at the window of the mayor's house. They see that a book leans against it, and Liesel cannot resist taking it. As she and Rudy ride their bikes away, Liesel looks back and sees that Ilsa is watching in the window. She waves, and Liesel waves back. Liesel finds a note from Ilsa inside of the dictionary. It says that she knows about the thievery and that it is okay for Liesel to take the books, but that she should come to the front door next time.

When the first air-raid sirens go off, late at night, the family goes down the street to the Fiedlers' house. Max, left behind, sneaks to the window and sees the stars, for the first time in years. Liesel reads to the people in the shelter.

A convoy of Jews is forced to walk through Molching, and Liesel sees the parade of sick, starving wretches on their way to Dachau, concentration camp. An old man stumbles in the street, and Hans gives him a piece of bread. They are both beaten, and Hans is called a Jew-lover. Immediately, Hans fears they will come to search his home now. That night, Max leaves. Though Hans is positive the Gestapo will come for him, they do not. Max has left for no reason.

An examination took place at school, and Rudy was selected, for his intelligence and his athletic ability, to be part of the new “master race” of Aryans. However his parents refuse to send him away.

In retaliation for his episode with the Jew, Hans is accepted into the Nazi Party, and drafted into the army. Likewise, Rudy’s father, who refused to send his son to the Aryan program, suffers the same fate. Hans has the dreaded job of Special Air Raid Unit. They remain above ground during an air raid to clean up and collect the dead bodies.

There is another raid, and Liesel reads to the neighbourhood to comfort them. When they get home, Rosa gives Liesel Max’s sketch book, *The Word Shaker*. He talks about Hitler, and how he came to power, and talks about the power of words and symbols.

On duty, Hans breaks his leg and is told he won’t be returning to the unit. Transferred to a desk job, he returns to his family.

When the next group of Jews is driven through the street in Molching, Liesel sees Max among them. She insists on walking with him, until they both are brutally beaten. Max tells her they caught him several months ago, on the way to Stuttgart. When she recovers, Liesel tells Rudy about Max. She shows him the sketch that Max drew of Rudy, with his gold medals around his neck.

Liesel goes once more to the Mayor’s house. She climbs through the window and then sits on the floor in the library. Suddenly filled with anger at the things she has seen in life, she tears a book to shreds. She leaves a note for Ilsa, saying she won’t be back, and leaves. A few days later, Ilsa brings a little black book with lined pages to Liesel, suggesting she write her own story. Liesel begins her story, “The Book Thief.”

A few days later, she is once again in the basement editing her story, when Himmel Street is bombed. The entire street is decimated, and she is the only survivor. Rosa, Hans, and Rudy are all dead. Her book is swept up and thrown in a garbage truck, but is picked up by Death. Liesel goes to live with the Mayor and Ilsa. In 1945, Max returns.

The epilogue reveals that Liesel later moves to Australia and has children and grandchildren. When she meets death herself, he gives her back the notebook she dropped as a girl.

THE AUTHOR

Markus Frank Zusak (born 23 June 1975) is an [Australian](#) writer. He is best known for [The Book Thief](#) and [The Messenger](#) (US title, *I Am the Messenger*), two novels for young adults which have been international [bestsellers](#). He won the annual [Margaret Edwards Award](#) in 2014 for his contribution to young-adult literature published in the US.^[1]

Zusak was born in Sydney, Australia. His mother Lisa is originally from Germany and his father Helmut is from Austria. They emigrated to Australia in the late 1950s.^{[2][3]} Markus is the youngest of four children and has two sisters and one brother. He attended Engadine High School and briefly returned there to teach English while writing. He studied English and History at the [University of New South Wales](#), and graduated with a [Bachelor of Arts](#) and a [Diploma of Education](#).

Zusak is the author of five books. His first three books, *The Underdog*, *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* and *When Dogs Cry*, released between 1999 and 2001, were all published internationally and garnered a number of awards. *The Underdog*, his first book, took seven years to publish. *The Messenger*, published in 2002, won the 2003 CBC Book

of the Year Award (Older Readers) and the 2003 NSW Premier's Literary Award (Ethel Turner Prize) in Australia and was a runner-up for the [Printz Award](#) in America.

The Book Thief was published in 2005 and has been translated into more than 30 languages. Beside winning awards in Australia and overseas, *The Book Thief* has held the number one position at Amazon.com and on the *New York Times* bestseller list, as well as in Brazil, Ireland and Taiwan. It has been among the top five best sellers in the UK, Spain, Israel and South Korea, and is still set to be released in many other territories.

Zusak's next novel is reported to be [Bridge of Clay](#).

The Book Thief was [adapted](#) as a [film of the same name](#) in 2013.

THE FILM

The Book Thief is a 2013 American-German war [drama film](#) directed by [Brian Percival](#) and starring [Geoffrey Rush](#), [Emily Watson](#), and [Sophie Nélisse](#). Based on the [novel of the same name](#) by [Markus Zusak](#) and adapted by [Michael Petroni](#), the film is about a young girl living with her adoptive German family during the Nazi era. Taught to read by her kind-hearted foster father, the girl begins "borrowing" books and sharing them with the Jewish refugee being sheltered by her foster parents in their home. The film features a musical score by Oscar-winning composer [John Williams](#).

The Book Thief premiered at the [Mill Valley Film Festival](#) on October 3, 2013, and was released for general distribution in the United States on November 8, 2013. The film received mixed reviews upon its theatrical release with some reviewers praising its "fresher perspective on the war" and its focus on the "consistent thread of humanity" in the story,^[5] while other critics faulting the film's "wishful narrative".^[6] With a budget of \$19 million,^[3] the film was successful at the box office, earning over \$76 million.^[4]

The Book Thief received [Academy Award](#), [Golden Globe](#) and [BAFTA](#) nominations for its score. For her performance in the film, Sophie Nélisse won the [Hollywood Film Festival](#) Spotlight Award, the [Satellite](#) Newcomer Award, and the [Phoenix Film Critics Society Award](#) for Best Performance by a Youth in a Lead or Supporting Role – Female. The film was released on [Blu-ray](#) and [DVD](#) on March 11, 2014.^[7]

PLOT

In April 1938, a voice representing [Death](#) ([Roger Allam](#)) tells about how the young Liesel Meminger ([Sophie Nélisse](#)) has piqued his interest. Liesel is traveling on a train with her mother ([Heike Makatsch](#)) and younger brother when her brother dies. At his burial she picks up a book that has been dropped by his graveside (a gravedigger's manual). Liesel is then delivered to foster parents Hans ([Geoffrey Rush](#)) and Rosa ([Emily Watson](#)) Hubermann because her mother, a Communist, is fleeing Germany. When she arrives, Liesel makes an impression on a neighboring boy, Rudy Steiner ([Nico Liersch](#)).

Rudy accompanies her on her first day of school. When the teacher asks Liesel to write her name on the chalkboard, she is only able to write two "X"s, showing that she doesn't know how to read. Later that day, she is taunted by her schoolmates who chant "*dummkopf*" ("fool" in German) at her. One of the boys, Franz Deutscher, challenges her to read just one word to which Liesel responds by beating him up. She impresses Rudy, and they become fast friends. When Hans, her foster father, realizes that Liesel cannot read, he begins to teach her, using the book that she took from the graveside. Liesel becomes obsessed with reading anything she can get her hands on.

Liesel and Rudy become members of the [Hitler Youth movement](#). While at a Nazi book burning ceremony, Liesel and Rudy are bullied into throwing books onto the bonfire by Franz, but Liesel is upset to see the books being burned. When the bonfire ends, and everyone but she has left, she grabs a book that has not been burned. She is seen by Ilsa Hermann ([Barbara Auer](#)), the mayor's ([Rainer Bock](#)) wife. Hans discovers that she has taken the book and tells her she must keep it a secret from everyone. One day, Rosa asks Liesel to take the laundry to the mayor's house. Liesel realizes that the woman who saw her taking the book is the mayor's wife, and she is scared she will be found out. Instead, Ilsa takes her into their library and tells Liesel she can come by anytime and read as much as she'd like. Liesel also finds out about Johann here, who was the son of Ilsa and is now missing. Ilsa feels the

loss of her son profoundly and has kept his library intact to commemorate him. One day Liesel is found reading by the mayor who not only puts a stop to her visits but dismisses Rosa as their laundress. Liesel continues to "borrow" books from the mayor's library by climbing through a window.

There is a night of violence against the Jews (known historically as [Kristallnacht](#)). Max Vandenburg ([Ben Schnetzer](#)) and his mother, who are Jewish, are told by a friend that one of them (but only one) can escape, and Max's mother forces him to go. Max goes to the Hubermanns' house where Rosa and Hans give him shelter. Max is the son of the man who saved Hans's life in [World War I](#). Max is initially allowed to stay in Liesel's room while recovering from his trip, and they begin to become friends over their mutual hatred of Hitler since Liesel blames Hitler for taking her mother away. [World War II](#) begins, initially making most of the children in Liesel's neighborhood very happy. Max is later moved to the basement so that he can move around more, but it is colder in the basement, and Max becomes dangerously ill. Liesel helps Max recover by reading to him with every spare moment.

One day while "borrowing" a book from the mayor's home, Liesel is followed by Rudy. He discovers the secret of the books and also the secret of Max, whose name he reads on a journal Max gave to Liesel for Christmas. Rudy guesses that her family is hiding someone, and he swears to never tell anyone. Franz overhears Rudy's last words of keeping it a secret. Franz violently pushes Rudy to reveal the secret, but Rudy throws the journal into the river to keep it away from Franz. However, after Franz has gone, Rudy plunges into the icy river to rescue the journal, and Liesel realizes that she can truly trust him. Soon a local party member comes by to check the Hubermanns' basement, and they have to hide Max. However, they are told that their basement was being checked as a potential bomb shelter and realize they weren't suspected of harboring a fugitive.

While working one day, Hans sees a neighbor and friend named Lehman being taken away by the police because he is a Jew. Lehman tries to tell the police that he is a German that his son is in the war fighting for Germany, but is dragged off nonetheless; Hans tries to intervene, telling the officer that Lehman is a good man, but Hans's name is taken by the soldiers and Hans is thrown to the ground. Hans realizes what a mistake he has made since this has made his family visible. He tells the family, and Max realizes he must leave in order to protect them. Hans then receives a telegram that he has been [conscripted](#) into the army and must leave immediately.

On the way home from school one day, Liesel believes she has seen Max in a line of Jews marching through town on their way to a death camp, and she begins screaming his name, running through the line. She is thrown to the sidewalk twice by a German soldier and finally relents when Rosa picks her up and takes her home. Within a few days, Hans returns from the front because he was injured by a bomb that hit his unit's truck.

The family is reunited only for a short time. One night the city is bombed by accident, and the air raid sirens fail to go off. Hans, Rosa, and Rudy's family (except for his father who has also been conscripted into the army) are killed in the blast. Liesel was spared from the bombing because she fell asleep in the basement while writing in the journal given to her by Max. Rudy is brought out of his house by neighbors, and he is barely alive. He begins to tell Liesel that he loves her, but he dies before he can finish the sentence. Liesel begs him to "wake up," telling him that she will give him the kiss that he has been asking for; although he has already died, she nevertheless does actually kiss him. During this scene, Death is heard speaking again about how he received the souls of the dead. Liesel passes out, and one of the soldiers carries her to a stretcher. When she wakes up, she sees a book among the rubble and picks it up. She then sees the mayor and Ilsa drive up. With Ilsa being the only friend she has left, Liesel runs up to her and hugs her.

Two years later, after Germany has fallen to the [Allies](#), Liesel is in the tailor shop owned by Rudy's father, and she sees Max enter. Overjoyed by his survival and return, she runs to hug him. The final scene is Death speaking again about Liesel's life and her death at the age of 90, mentioning her husband, children, and grandchildren, as we look over her modern day Manhattan Upper East Side apartment with pictures of her past and a portrait of her, upon which the camera lingers. The narrator does not state whom she married but implies that she became a writer. Death says that he has seen many good and bad things over the years, but Liesel is one of the few who ever made him wonder "what it [i]s to live." Death concludes that the only truth he knows is true is that he is "haunted by humans".

CRITICAL RESPONSE

[The Christian Science Monitor](#) reported that reviews were "middling".^[13] The movie currently holds a score of 7.6 on IMDb. Review aggregation website [Rotten Tomatoes](#) gives the film a score of 46%, based on 134 reviews, with an average score of 5.6/10. The site's consensus states, "A bit too safe in its handling of its Nazi Germany setting, *The Book Thief* counters its constraints with a respectful tone and strong performances."^[14] On [Metacritic](#), which assigns a normalized rating out of 100 based on reviews from critics, the film has a score of 53 (indicating "mixed or average reviews") based on 31 reviews.^[15]

In her review for the *New Empress Magazine*, Mairéad Roche praised the film for providing a "fresher perspective on the war" through the experiences of ordinary Germans who lived through the Nazi era.^[6] In addition to the "Oscar-baiting beautiful" cinematography and John Williams's film score that contribute to the film's emotional appeal, Roche singled out the performance of young Sophie Nélisse as Liesel that "matches the well-measured and seemingly effortless efforts of both Rush and Watson".^[6] Roche concluded, *The Book Thief* weaves a consistent thread of humanity through its narrative via the commonality of Death, storytelling and the concept of free will. The disturbing sight of children in Hitler Youth uniforms and Allied blanket bombing, when shown through the innocence of a child, humanises the German generation just living their lives without the hindsight of history. A blurring of vision due to tears is to be expected, but that effect is delivered with respect and dignity to the audience.^[6]

In his review following the [Mill Valley Film Festival](#), Dennis Harvey at [Variety](#) magazine wrote, "Rush generously provides the movie's primary warmth and humour; Watson is pitch-perfect as a seemingly humourless scold with a well-buried soft side."^[16] Harvey also praised the film's cinematography and film score, noting that "impeccable design contributions are highlighted by Florian Ballhaus'[s] somber but handsome widescreen lensing and an excellent score by John Williams that reps his first feature work for a director other than Steven Spielberg in years."^[16]

In her review for "MSN UK", Emma Roberts gave the film 5 out of 5 stars, stating: 'With incredible acting, a gripping story and fantastic direction, "The Book Thief" is a heart-warming yet chilling tale, which will nestle in your mind long after the credits finish rolling.'

Stephanie Merry of [The Washington Post](#) was less impressed with the film, giving it two and half out of four stars. Merry felt that the film "has its moments of brilliance, thanks in large part to an adept cast" but that the film ultimately shows the difficulties of bringing a successful novel to the screen.^[16] In his review for the [Los Angeles Times](#), Robert Abele was also unimpressed, describing the film as "just another tasteful, staid Hollywoodization of terribleness, in which a catastrophic time acts as a convenient backdrop for a wishful narrative rather than the springboard for an honest one".^[6]