**Books of the Times | 'The Book Thief'**

**Stealing to Settle a Score With Life**

**By** [**JANET MASLIN**](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/janet_maslin/index.html?inline=nyt-per)

Published: March 27, 2006 NEW YORK TIMES

Markus Zusak has not really written "Harry Potter and the Holocaust." It just feels that way. "The Book Thief" is perched on the cusp between grown-up and young-adult fiction, and it is loaded with librarian appeal. It deplores human misery. It celebrates the power of language. It may encourage adolescents to read. It has an element of the fanciful. And it's a book that bestows a self-congratulatory glow upon anyone willing to grapple with it.

[Skip to next paragraph](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/27/books/27masl.html?_r=0#secondParagraph)"The Book Thief" resembles other, better novels that have been widely popular. Its roundabout approach to the Holocaust suggests "Everything Is Illuminated" Lite. Its embattled, feisty young heroine has a Potterish appeal as she makes her way through a mystifying adult world. There is a Vonnegut whimsy to the mordant turns of fate here. And Mr. Zusak's narrator offers constant manipulative asides, as in the clever Lemony Snicket books, although in this case wit is not much of an option. The narrator is Death.

How can a tale told by Death be mistaken for young-adult storytelling? Easily: because this book's narrator is sorry for what he has to do. "To me, war is like the new boss who expects the impossible," he confides, on one of many occasions when he campaigns to win readers' approval. "You see?" he says, about the demise of one of the book's best-liked characters. "Even death has a heart."

The youthful sensibility of "The Book Thief" also contributes to a wider innocence. While it is set in Germany during World War II and is not immune to bloodshed, most of this story is figurative: it unfolds as symbolic or metaphorical abstraction. The dominoes lined up on its cover are compared to falling bodies. The book thief of the title is a schoolgirl named Liesel Meminger, and the meaning of her stealing is not left unexplained. She has been robbed of a brother, who dies at the start of the book. Her mother disappears, and then Liesel is left in foster care. A great deal has been taken away from her. She steals books to settle the score.

The first book taken by Liesel offers a sampling of Mr. Zusak's real but easily oversold charm. It is called "The Grave Digger's Handbook," and is subtitled "A Twelve-Step Guide to Grave-Digging Success." Liesel finds it at the cemetery where her brother is buried. And it becomes her link to the past, even after she is put in the care of Rosa and Hans Hubermann, whose household is colorful to the point of dangerous whimsy. Hans finds life-affirming ways to play the accordion, for example.

Liesel lives in a town called Molching, which is close enough to Munich for its residents to see Jews being sent to the Dachau concentration camp nearby. Since Liesel is Lutheran, she is not in any danger of sharing this fate, although the effects of the war on Germans are strongly felt. But Liesel finds herself forced into a [Hitler](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/h/adolf_hitler/index.html?inline=nyt-per) Youth uniform. And perversely, the Führer's "Mein Kampf" becomes one of the books that are important in her life.

Mr. Zusak does his imaginative best to make sure that no Nazi touchstone like "Mein Kampf" is treated in a predictable way. Hitler's book first helps to save a young Jewish man named Max Vandenburg, who is hidden by the Hubermanns. Then, with its pages turned blank by white paint, it is transformed into an entirely different book altogether. And it helps to forge an everlasting connection between Liesel and Max.

"The Book Thief" is a long, winding tale, punctuated by Death's commentary. ("By the way — I like this human idea of the grim reaper. I like the scythe. It amuses me.") Most of it is confined to Molching and has a coyly claustrophobic outlook. As Liesel and her best friend, Rudy Steiner, trade dubious endearments (most of which translate as "You filthy pig!"), they also commit small, meaningful acts of defiance against the Nazi regime. Even transgressions as tiny as the stealing of apples are woven and rewoven into the story.

"So much good, so much evil," Death says of human nature. "Just add water." Beyond its many variations on that idea, "The Book Thief" adds up to a string of anecdotes that are tinged with quiet horror. At its most effective, the book's tone can be terrifyingly matter of fact. "For the book thief, everything was going nicely," Death observes, as the extermination camps flourish in the summer of 1942. "For me, the sky was the color of Jews."

It's possible to be overwhelmed and impressed by such moments in Mr. Zusak's novel. It's also possible to wish there were more of them, that their impact were sharper, and that the book were less fussy, more certain of its own strength.

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. But for every startlingly rebellious episode — Rudy's Führer-baiting impersonation of the black American athlete Jesse Owens, the building of an indoor snowman for a Jew in hiding, the creation of books and drawings that frame Liesel and Max's experiences as life-affirming fairy tales — there are moments that are slack.

"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.