

Markus Zusak talks about the writing of *The Book Thief*

When I was growing up in suburban Sydney, I was told stories of cities on fire and Jews being marched to concentration camps. Both my parents grew up in Europe during World War II, and although they were extremely young at the time, in hindsight, they were able to understand many things. Two stories my mother told me about growing up in Munich always stuck with me. One was about a burning sky when the city was bombed. The other was about a boy being whipped on the street for giving a starving Jewish man a piece of bread. The man sank to his knees and thanked the boy, but the bread was stripped away and both the taker of the bread and the giver were punished.

This showed me that there was another side to Nazi Germany, and it was a side I wanted to write about. At first I thought of a biography, but as a writer of fiction, I knew it wouldn't take long for the itch to imagine to climb out of me and into the story. Another problem was that Nazi Germany, Hitler and all associated topics had been written about before, so how could I make my own story original?

My first thought was to make it a personal story, about a girl. Then came an idea that I'd had floating in my head for a couple of years about a stealer of books. Soon I realised that words were a good metaphor for Nazi Germany. It was words (and Hitler's ability to use them) that contained the power to murder and ostracise. What I set out to create was a character to juxtapose the way Hitler used words. She would be a stealer of books and a prolific reader. She, too, would occasionally use words to hurt, but she would understand their power to heal and give life through stories. Immediately, I had dark and light. I had the contradictory element of humanity's good and evil, but it still wasn't enough.

For more than a year, I tried everything to make the book work, but somehow it never did. I tried first person, third person, second person, shifting points of view, present and past tense, and none of it gave me what I wanted.

Then I stumbled upon the idea of Death narrating the story, and it all made sense. Who is constantly hanging around in times of war? Who would have the opportunity to pick up a story penned by a girl in a bombed German city? Death was the right answer, although there were still a few decisions to be made.

When I first brought Death into the story, he was sinister. He enjoyed his work a little too much. For months I wrote in this way and again I was falling short in some aspect I couldn't understand. When I took a break from the book, I was sitting down on the back step and it hit me that Death should actually be *afraid...of us*. The irony of this was exciting, and it made perfect sense. Death is on hand to see the greatest crimes and miseries of human life, and I thought, *What if he tells this story as a way of proving to himself that humans are actually worthwhile?*

At that point, I started writing and I didn't stop. In the end, *The Book Thief* took me three years to write. If nothing else, I know it's a far different book from anything I've done before, which is what made it so challenging. I was also finally satisfied that there was a good sense of imagination in it. In three years, I must have failed over a thousand times, but each failure brought me closer to what I needed to write, and for that, I'm grateful.

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Notes for the reader of *The Book Thief*
from the author Markus Zusak

*First the colours.
Then the humans.
That's usually how I see things.
Or at least, how I try.
**Here is a small fact:
You are going to die.***

The Book Thief is narrated by Death, who finds the story as he walks through Munich's mountain range of rubble after it is bombed in 1943. The sky is burning. The roads are like oil-stained pages. The book thief – a girl – is on her knees. She's howling.

On many counts, the idea of Death narrating a story set in war-time Germany is quite fitting, although not in the expected way. The cliché states that war and death are best friends, working hand in hand, but we soon learn that this is not quite the case. On the contrary, Death sees war as the boss who asks the impossible, making him work to the brink of exhaustion. Then, rather than congratulating him on a job well done, the boss asks for more, only quicker.

In such times, Death is actually *afraid* of humans. He sees what they do to each other and he needs distraction and solace. He needs colours. He needs proof that humans are worth their existence. *The Book Thief* is one such slice of proof.

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

The book thief is Liesel Meminger, a foster child growing up in Munich. She steals her first book, *The Gravedigger's Handbook*, at the grave site of her brother, and when she is taught to read predominantly by her foster father, a love affair with books and words begins. As Hitler uses words to assert power and wreak havoc, Liesel uses words to bring herself back to life.

But these are dangerous times. When Liesel's foster family takes in Max Vandenburg – a young Jewish man – and hide him in the cold concrete of their basement, her world is both opened up and closed down. Again, it's the sharing of words and stories that bond Liesel and Max.

Still, the war steps closer. Jews and other *criminals* are marched through the streets of Munich towards Dachau 'to concentrate' – and all it will take is one mistake for the family's secret to be exposed.

When Max is forced to flee and Liesel's foster father is sent to the war, the book thief needs to wait. She goes on stealing books with her best friend (the irrepressible Rudy Steiner) and reading to the frightened neighbours in the bomb shelter, until the time comes to know for certain. Can the words and stories truly give these people what they need to survive?



Illustrator: Trudy White

The Jews came down the street like a catalogue of colours. A German girl somehow did the unthinkable and made her way through to walk with them. When the soldiers pulled her away and threw her to the ground, she stood up and continued. She walked on, armed only with the words. Eventually, Liesel stopped and began to speak, and Max Vandenburg turned around...

On one hand, *The Book Thief* is about what Death describes as 'the ugliness and beauty' of humans, but at its most basic level, this book is the story of a girl. It just happens to be a story about friendship and love surviving amongst the bombs, the bullets and the words of war.