

Literacy And Power Of Words In Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*

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ABSTRACT

The work selected for the study, *The Book Thief* (2005) by Markus Zusak, belongs to the category of indirect Holocaust literature. *The Book Thief* is a moving story written by Markus Zusak from the German perspective of everyday civilian hardships and survival under the Third Reich. It celebrates the power of words and love in the face of unutterable suffering. This is the tale of the book thief, as narrated by death. It's just a small story about, amongst other things: a girl, an accordionist, some fanatical Germans, a Jewish fist fighter, and quite a lot of thievery. The most important theme in "*The Book Thief*" is the idea that words can give people a sense of security, power and expression. The first theme is the power of words accomplished by the book thief Liesel.

KEY WORDS: Holocaust, Literacy, Power of words, Markus Zusak, Liesel

Holocaust literature gained prominence due to the diaries and journals that survived Holocaust. Writers, who were victims or those who were witness to the mass destruction like Elie Wiesel, Anne Frank, Icek Keperburg, Yad Vashem, Moshe Flinker, Primo Levi etc., wrote what they saw or suffered and this mode of writing flourished in the years following the war. The works by those who had experiences with Holocaust came to be called 'direct' or 'first

generation' Holocaust Literature .These include diaries, journals, essays, memoirs, novels, poems etc .The other division 'indirect' Holocaust Literature comprises the writings by those who do not have any direct experience but drew knowledge from other sources like memories shared by victims themselves or inspirations from the direct works or their own experience of close living with the survivors. The work selected for the study, *The Book Thief* (2005) by Markus Zusak, belongs to the category of indirect Holocaust literature.

The Book Thief is a moving story written by Markus Zusak from the German perspective of everyday civilian hardships and survival under the Third Reich. It celebrates the power of words and love in the face of unutterable suffering. This is the tale of the book thief, as narrated by death. It's just a small story about, amongst other things: a girl, an accordionist, some fanatical Germans, a Jewish fist fighter, and quite a lot of thievery. Published in 2005, this work is a strong account of the shattering tragedies that hit the lives of Jewish men, women and children. Australian-born Markus Zusak grew up sitting at the kitchen table, glued to his chair, listening to his mother's tales of her childhood in Nazi Germany. Such tales would later serve as a springboard for his unusual novel about the power of words to both destroy and comfort. This novel has a bizarre narrator: Death. Drawn into a tense and dangerous historical era, readers discover how Liesel Meminger, the protagonist first learn to read and is transformed into the "book thief", stealing books before they can be burnt by the Nazis or confiscated from personal libraries. When her family decides to hide a Jew in the basement, Liesel holds out hope to him in the form of her two most precious commodities: words and stories.

Markus Frank Zusak, born on 23 June 1975 is best known for *The Book Thief* and *The Messenger*, two novels for young adults which have been international best sellers. He won the annual Margaret A. Edwards Award in 2014 for his contributions to young adult literature. This

novel has also been included in the category of historical fiction. Zusak was born in Sydney and his mother Lisa is originally from Germany and his father Helmut is from Austria. 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 Under Dog*, his first book, took seven years to publish. *The Messenger*, published in 2002, won the CBC Book of the Year Award and the 2003 NSW Premier's Literary Award in Australia and was a runner – up for the Printz Award in America. *The Book Thief* was published in 2005 and has since been translated into more than 30 languages. This elegant classic novel was also adapted into a film of the same name in 2013, directed by Brian Percival and starring Geoffrey Rush, Emily Watson and Sophie Nelisse.

The effect of literacy on relationship to place is significant for characters such as Liesel and Max who have to relocate and are suppressed because they are not able to freely stand on their own until they know have a safe place, they are at a loss of connection to a sanctuary or a safe environment. Literacy does not have much influence for those who already have an established community because they already are in a place where they can be free to be themselves. A notable example is Hans. He is directly under the influence of literacy as he teaches Liesel how to write and read; however, we see no impact on his perspective of place due to his ability and write. When Hans teaches Liesel in the basement, the basement is just a place underground where he stores paint, with no significant meaning. Even when the basement becomes a hiding place for Max, Hans's perspective on the basement maybe changes because of the implications of hiding a Jew, rather than because of literacy. Hans is in a position in which he already has an established community and a place in the community. He has a home, family, and

is known in the town. Hans does not need literacy in order to define who he is and where he is in relation to place.

The most important theme in “*The Book Thief*” is the idea that words can give people a sense of security, power and expression. The first theme is the power of words accomplished by the book thief Liesel. At the beginning of the novel, Liesel is homeless, innocent and most importantly, illiterate. After stealing her first book at her brother’s funeral (the book being *A Gravediggers Handbook*) she develops a longing to learn how to read. Her new foster father Hans Hubermann begins to read this book to Liesel to provide her with an escape from her recurring nightmares of her brother’s death. In the end of the novel, the power of the words saves Liesel’s life, for, if she had not been in her basement reading over the book Max wrote for her, she would have never survived the bombing of Himmel Street. This proves to be an exaggerated example that the power of words can in fact change the life. Throughout the novel, Liesel’s ability to read excels with home school spelling bees in the basement where the Hubermanns will soon house a Jew. Not only does Liesel’s new found understanding of reading help her to understand the society around her, but helps her form a life changing bond with Max Vadenburg- the Jew in the basement with daily weather reports and long nights of reading to each other.

The second theme that connects Hitler and propaganda in the novel with the power of words also explains to how Hitler was able to influence such a vast number of people into belief that the Jewish were the source of all evil in their society. This connects to the overall theme of the novel because it shows how words can be used to change an entire nation’s perspective on a single race or event etc. he was able to do so not only with the writing of “*Mein Kampf*” but with various propaganda including Hitler youth- causing the youth of Nazi- Germany to hate the

Jewish race and to burn Jewish novels. The propaganda was aimed at belittling the opposing victims and taking away whatever pride or possession they had.

The third theme is freedom of speech and expression, the final theme to the novel is how the power of words can express someone's inner thoughts. They need not to be spoken, for most of the characters in the novel express themselves through written works such as journals, biographies, etc. This is finally shown through Liesel's bibliography- dictating her life from the moment her journey began. This included the imagery of her brother's death, the Hubermanns, Rudy Steiner and many other childhood companions who she thought were a great influence on her life.

Through this study I have tried to attempt a critical reading of *The Book Thief* and the abiding prayer 'Never Again'. By spreading these testimonials it is possible to ensure that the importance of the Holocaust is not forgotten, no matter how many years pass, as memories are passed on to the next generation. We are lucky to have this opportunity to safeguard the memory of the Holocaust, promote tolerance and protect the multi-cultural society in which we live. Literacy and power of words during the holocaust and the effect of that in contemporary society has been clearly analyzed in this dissertation through Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*. It would be apt to end with the statement of a holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel: "I believe firmly and profoundly that anyone who listens to a witness becomes a witness and those who hear us, those who read us, those who learn something from us, they will continue to bear witness for us. And till now they are doing it with us. At a certain point in time, they will do it for all of us".

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