

POST READING

8. 'I wanted to tell the book thief many things, about beauty and brutality. But what could I tell her about those things that she didn't already know . . . ?'

Books, words, stories – these play a significant role in *The Book Thief*. Re-read 'The Word Shaker'. Discuss how your understanding of this story within a story has changed now that you have finished reading the novel.

Reflect on *The Book Thief* as a whole (that 'critical distance' again). There is a dichotomy in this novel; words can be celebratory and used as a force for good, but they can also be used destructively and as a force for evil. In what ways are words used both positively and negatively in the story?

9. 'The consequence of this is that I'm always finding humans at their best and worst. I see their ugly and their beauty, and I wonder how the same thing can be both . . . ?'

This is a story that transcends the Second World War. It isn't just about how awful the Nazis were, or how much they persecuted the Jews. What do you think this book is about? And how does having Death as a narrator add to the 'bigger picture'?

10. 'For me, the sky was the colour of Jews . . . ?'

Revisit the KWLH grid that you began prior to reading the novel. Through discussion, complete the third and fourth columns.

How has this book developed your understanding of man's inhumanity to man?



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The Book Thief

MARKUS ZUSAK

PUPIL'S NOTES

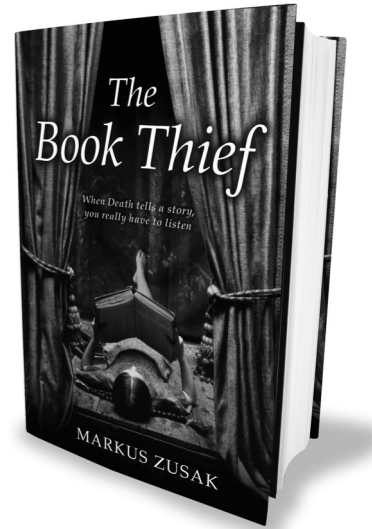
INTRODUCTION TO THE RESOURCE

Yes, *The Book Thief* has well over 500 pages, but don't let this put you off! Once you have started the novel, you won't be able to put it down and it is a pacy read. The author uses all kinds of trickery to help the reader, some of which you'll explore using these resources. You'll get through it no time at all – and you'll be glad you did. This is an exceptional novel and you'll want to read it more than once.

In an interview about writing (www.teenreads.com/authors/au-zusak-markus.asp) Zusak describes three elements which are needed to grab the reader's attention:

'The first thing is the gems . . . the second would be story. While it's nice to have the gems, if the story doesn't captivate me, it makes finding the great images that little bit harder. Lastly, I think voice . . . If you can hear the characters or the narrator talking, they can almost tell you anything and you will go with them.'

This resource will use these three elements to underpin the way you explore this book.



PRE READING ACTIVITIES

1. 'For me, the sky was the colour of Jews . . . ?'

To be able to understand fully – and, it might be said, really enjoy – a novel, you need to know about its context. *The Book Thief* is set in 1939, at the beginning of the Second World War. Where might you find out information about this period in our history?

In groups, combine your efforts and share information as you copy and complete the first two columns in the grid (a KWLH grid) below. The third and fourth columns will be revisited when you have finished reading the book.

| What do we know about the Second World War? | What do we want to know? | What have we learned? | How have we learned it? |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| | | | |

You will have discovered from your combined knowledge that the Second World War is a huge topic. Have a close look at the book jacket. How might this help you to focus on which areas will be the most relevant to help you understand the novel better?

2. 'Shaped like a long, broken arm, the road contained several houses with lacerated windows and bruised walls. The Star of David was painted on their doors. Those houses were almost like lepers . . .'

Research *Kristallnacht*. Bullet-point some key facts about it and add these to your grid.

3. 'It's just a small story really . . .'

Let's look at the sense of story now. Still in your groups, read the short story 'The Word Shaker', set within the main story in *A Hidden Sketch Book* in part eight. Don't worry that you haven't read the rest of the novel yet. Look up the definition of parable. 'The Word Shaker', written by Max, one of the characters, is certainly a parable because it has an 'unspoken meaning'. Discuss what you think this hidden meaning is. Is there more than one meaning?

How does it help your understanding of the context of *The Book Thief*?

Can this parable be applied to any other context other than the Second World War? For example, can you think of any other recent wars or persecutions of a group of people?

Expand your vocabulary! Look up the words diaspora and pogrom. You may need to do this on the web. How might these apply to the context of *The Book Thief*?

Update your grid.

DURING READING

4. 'If you feel like it, come with me. I will tell you a story. I'll show you something.'

Let's move on to the voice in the story. You should have read the section *Death and Chocolate* in the Prologue with your teacher and explored the narrative voice and how this differs from the authorial voice. In addition, you will have discussed what you learn about the narrator and how he earns our sympathy.

Jump ahead to part six and read the opening chapter: *Death's Diary*. What is the role of the narrator here? What do we learn about the impact of war on humanity? Pick out some of Zusak's 'gems' that really describe the horror of what Death experiences.

At the very end of *The Book Thief* Death says, 'I am haunted by humans.' This theme resonates throughout the story. What message does the author want to convey to us and how does he use Death's voice to do this?

5. 'The pale, empty-stomached girl was standing, frost-stricken . . .'

There are other voices in the story. Read to the end of the Prologue and highlight the times that the book thief is mentioned by Death. Draw up a list of facts about her and a list of opinions. What do we learn about this character? What does Death make us feel for her?

Now read the chapter *Growing Up a Saumensch*. In this chapter Death highlights some facts about Rosa and Hans Hubermann. Rewrite your list of facts about Liesel in a similar style.

6. 'Rudy had already made up his mind about Liesel Meminger . . .'

Liesel's voice is strong, but much that we learn about her is through her relationships with other characters in the story – Rudy, Max, Ilsa Hermann, the Hubermanns. Begin to assemble a mind-map which reflects the relationships between Liesel and the other characters. Put Liesel in the middle of the map and draw links between the characters. On the links write down keywords that describe the nature of the relationship. Add some quotations or examples of actions that highlight your ideas. Keep adding to this mind-map as you progress through the story.

You can revisit this mind-map when you have finished reading the novel to see if your thoughts have changed or developed.

7. 'At the end of it, the sun is like a yellow hole . . .'

In his interview, Zusak says that he:

'loves the idea that there can be one gem on every page of a book. It can be an image, an idea or a piece of dialogue. If there is one gem on every page of a hundred-page book, that's a hundred good reasons to read it.'

His narrative style is very evocative, yet the language he uses is straightforward. There are very few Latinate words and the vocabulary is not difficult. So how does he create such a powerful style?

Work in pairs. Work on the same chapter (you can choose) but work on it independently for now. Find the 'gems' to which Zusak refers. You can choose more than one per page.

Fill in the grid and then compare your findings with your partner.

| Gem | What is the impact? (What does it do to me, the reader?) | How does it have impact? (How does it work?) |
|-----|--|--|
| | | |

Now join with another pair of students who have worked on a different chapter. Again, compare your findings. Is there a pattern emerging in relation to how these 'gems' work? For example, does Zusak use personification, sentence variety, descriptions of colour or some other technique more than others? Or does he use a variety of effects to keep his reader engaged?

Join with another group of four and produce a group display of 'gems'. With luck these gems will now come from four different chapters. Stand back and read them with 'critical distance' (when you look at the novel as a whole). Can you tell which section of the book they come from? What do they tell us about the tone and mood? Are there any patterns to be found here? For example, does the author use more of one type of gem for creating a sombre mood?

Another facet of Zusak's style is his use of 'punchlines'. For example, at the end of part nine, Death states:

'Yes, it was a great night to be Liesel Meminger, and the calm, the warm and the soft would remain for approximately three more months.

But her story lasts for six.'

Find two or three other examples of such 'punchlines'. What is the effect of these on the reader? Which reading strategies do they make us use? How do they make us look forward and backwards?