

Teacher Guide

Grades 9–12

The Book Thief

Markus Zusak

NOVEL UNITS[®]



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THE BOOK THIEF

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Teacher Guide

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Note

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Please note: Parts of this novel deal with sensitive, mature issues. Please assess the appropriateness of this book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading and discussing it with them.

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Skills and Strategies

Critical Thinking

Analysis, compare/contrast,
research, evaluation,
interpretation, inference

Comprehension

Cause/effect, predicting,
plot development

Vocabulary

Target words, definitions,
application

Listening/Speaking

Discussion, oral presentation,
interview, video presentation

Writing

Essay, prose, letter, poetry,
script, eulogy, newspaper article

Literary Elements

Point of view, characterization,
setting, theme, simile, metaphor,
metonymy, personification,
irony, foreshadowing, humor,
imagery, tone

Across the Curriculum

Art—collage, drawing, caricature,
bookmaking; Music—soundtrack;
History—Adolf Hitler, World War II

Death and Chocolate–The Kiss (A Childhood Decision Maker)

The story begins with an introduction by the narrator, Death. He relates that he will be telling the story of one great human survivor whom he refers to as “the book thief.” When the reader meets this person, Liesel, she is traveling with her mother and younger brother on a train. During the trip, her brother dies and they bury him near the tracks. Her mother takes Liesel to Molching where she is left with foster parents, the Hubermanns—loud and menacing Rosa and her gentle husband, Hans. Various citizens of Molching are introduced, including the resident Nazi, Frau Diller, and the spirited young Rudy, who will become Liesel’s best friend.

Vocabulary
affable
septic
innocuous
echelons
pragmatic
casual
supercariously
incense
auspicious
raucous
lecherous
misogynist
audacious
nefarious

Discussion Questions

1. When Death says he needs distraction from “the leftover humans,” to whom is he referring? How is he preparing the reader for the novel’s subject? (*Leftover humans are survivors, those who have looked at death but kept living. From this, the reader surmises his focus in the novel. Liesel, “the book thief,” will be such a survivor. Clearly, with Death narrating the story and the setting being Nazi Germany, survivors must have a prominent role in the story. The reader is prepared for a story of suffering and survival.*)
2. Regarding the guards, Death says, “When it came down to it, one of them called the other. The other did what he was told. The question is, what if the other is a lot more than one?” (p. 23). Explain what you think he means by this statement and how it relates to the larger context of Nazi Germany. (*Answers will vary. Death speaks of two people, one who gives orders and one who follows orders. The implication is that if the second follow orders blindly without question, tragedy can ensue. Death’s “other” refers to the Nazi soldiers, who followed Hitler’s orders without question, even allowing themselves to believe in Hitler’s “land of the Jews [i.e., after the war many justified their actions by saying they were just following orders]. When these kinds of people are great in number, the person giving the orders can accomplish whatever she can imagine—whether it’s good or evil.*)
3. Discuss Death’s narrative voice. Is there anything surprising about the way the author characterizes Death? What do you observe about the way Death presents Liesel’s story? (*Death is portrayed with a fair amount of humor and personality. This is a departure from the usual black-cloaked, grimacing, vile character customary in literature. He has a sardonic tone with which he mocks humans, but he confesses to needing the distraction of colors to keep himself from being drawn in by human experience. He is sympathetic to humans’ plights and finds himself amazed at humans’ tenacity and will to live. Death often expresses guilt and sorrow at having to take a human life. He also proves to have a poetic soul, using rich imagery and a preponderance of figurative language in his descriptions. Death also has a number of authorial storytelling techniques. One is to highlight his favorite observations in bolded statements that stand out from the main story. He also employs foreshadowing quite frequently, announcing bits and pieces of information that will not come to light until later, which incites the reader’s curiosity and compels him/her to continue reading.*)
4. In some ways, Rosa appears to be an unpleasant and difficult person. Discuss examples of Rosa’s softer side. (*Answers will vary. Examples: Death tells us Rosa loved Liesel. She hugs Liesel when she takes a bath, and it is Rosa who tells Liesel to call her and Hans “Mama” and “Papa.” The reader also may wonder why the gentle Hans is attracted to Rosa; perhaps there is more to her than she initially demonstrates.*)

- An instant bond forms between Liesel and Hans Hubermann. What seems to draw them together? What might they appreciate about one another? (*Death describes Hans as an “un-special” person, someone who seems invisible to those around him. Liesel, however, instantly responds to his kindness and gentleness. When she arrives and is frightened, he takes her mind off her fear by teaching her to roll cigarettes. When she is suffering from nightmares, he sits by her bedside, and in the morning he shares his music with her. She, on the other hand, probably brings him welcome relief from Rosa’s harsh and carping presence. Liesel has never had a father to speak of, and Hans’ children are grown. They each benefit from the loving and gentle presence of the other.*)
- Discuss how the setting contributes to the plot. What dimension does it add as the story unfolds? (*The Nazi presence is like a brewing storm. Already, the reader can imagine it is the cause behind Liesel’s separation from her mother. Death makes several allusions to the fact that he will be getting very busy. There is a subtle mention of the Jewish section, Molching and the Stars of David on the door but no elaboration, thus far. Frau Diller’s fervent Nazism seems no more than an amusing character trait, a custom everyone is sure to “Heil Hitler” to get service. The chosen setting is a historical one, which means that readers inevitably know more about what will ensue than the characters do [dramatic irony]. This leaves readers expecting dramatic events to befall the characters, creating a heavy sense of foreboding.*)
- What are your initial impressions of Rudy? (*Answers will vary. Rudy immediately comes across as a spirited kid with a bit of a “who may care” attitude. He has a reputation as being slightly crazy, but this does not keep him from ruling the soccer field. He is happy enough to follow his mother’s orders to befriend the new girl and then to seek ways to get a kiss from her. There is the mysterious mention of the Jesse Owens incident as well as the trouble Rudy seeks in Pfiffik’s. He seems to be a kid who will follow adventure instead of sitting idly by.*)

Supplementary Activities

- As you read the novel, keep a list of examples of similes, metaphors, and personification. Examples: **Similes**—“the passengers slid out of me from a torn package” (p. 25); “There is murky snow spread out like carpet” (p. 27). **Metaphors**—poverty: an unpopular relative (p. 25); “...Rosa Hubermann had a face coated with constant fury” (p. 23), “[E]ns’ eyes] were made of kindness, and silver” (p. 34). **Personification**—“...the glowing light arm-wrestled the sky” (p. 11); “The brass knocker eyed her from the door” (p. 25).
- On their way to school, Liesel and Rudy see a “road of yellow stars” (p. 51). Research the ways in which Jews were identified and forced to line up to their deportation, and write an essay on your findings.
- Complete the Characterization chart on page 32 of this guide for one of the following: Liesel, Hans Hubermann, Rosa Hubermann.

