

THE
BOOK
THIEF

The Extraordinary International Bestseller

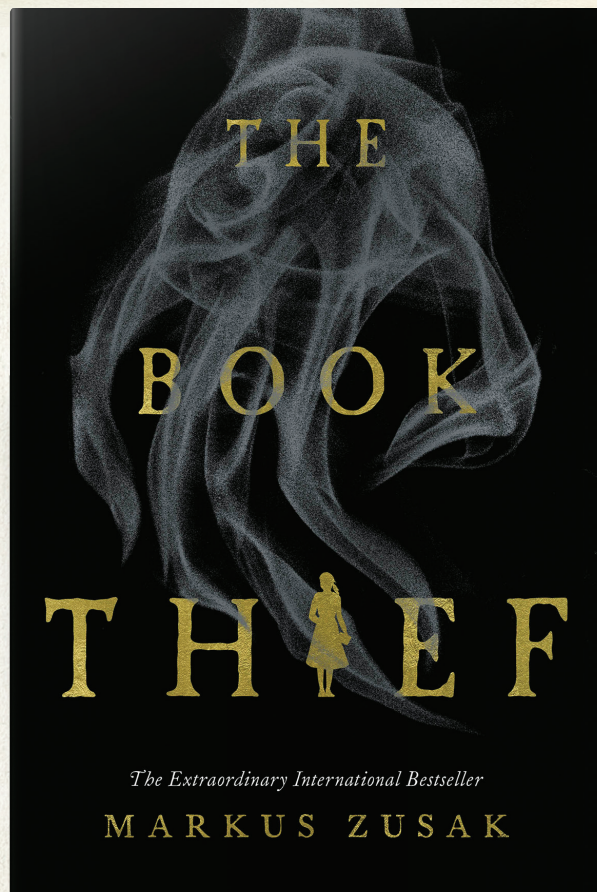
MARKUS ZUSAK

EDUCATORS' GUIDE

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Liesel Meminger is only nine years old when she is taken to live with the Hubermanns, a foster family, on Himmel Street in Molching, Germany, in the late 1930s. She arrives with few possessions, but among them is *The Grave Diggers Handbook*, a book that she stole from her brother's burial place. During the three years that Liesel is with the Hubermanns, Hitler becomes more powerful, life on Himmel Street becomes more fearful, and Liesel becomes a full-fledged book thief. She rescues books from Nazi book burnings and steals from the library of the mayor. Liesel is illiterate when she steals her first book, but Hans Hubermann uses her prized books to teach her to read. This is a story of abandonment, courage, friendship, love, survival, death, and grief. This is Liesel's life on Himmel Street, told from Death's point of view.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



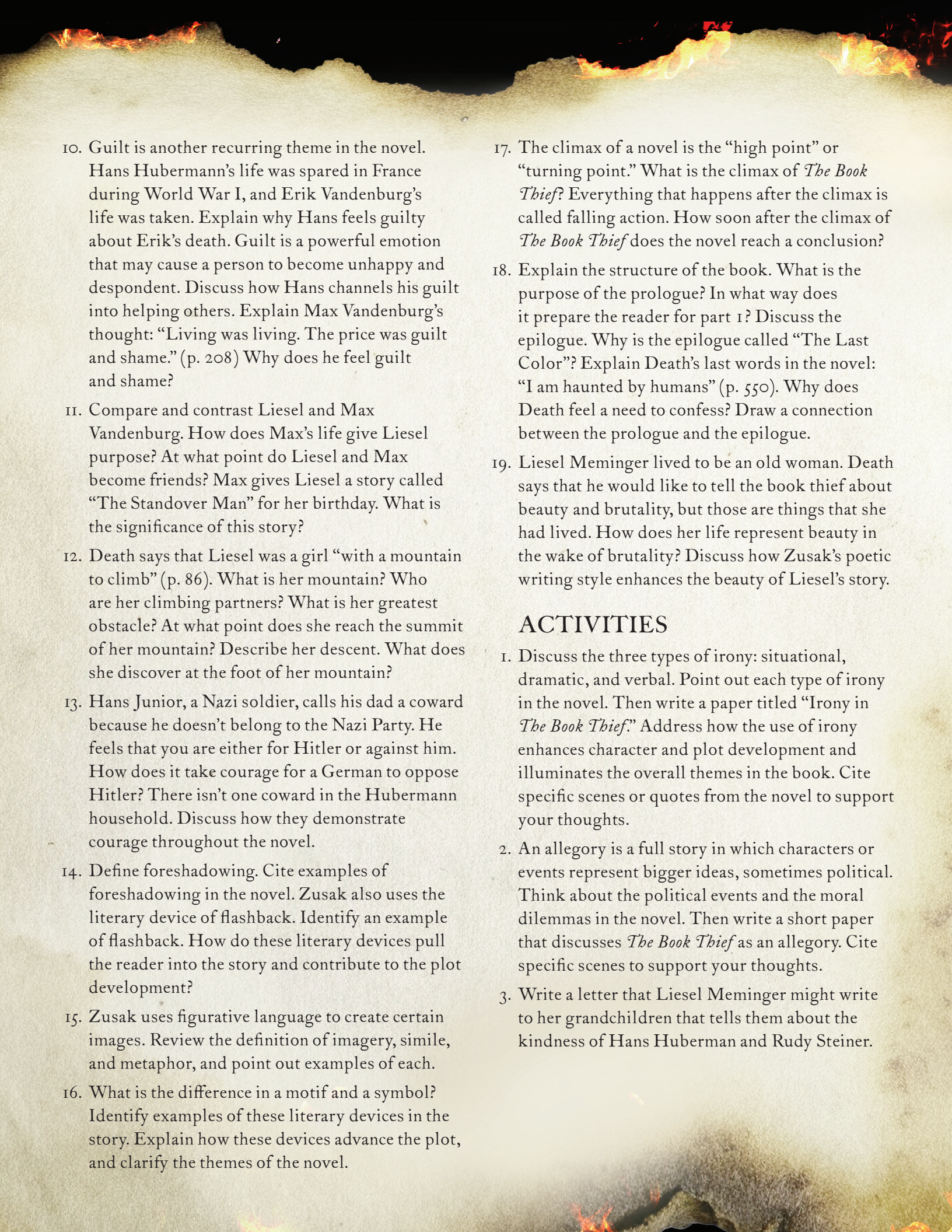
MARKUS ZUSAK, one of today's most innovative and poetic novelists, was born in 1975 in Sydney, Australia. With the publication of *The Book Thief* (2006), he was dubbed a "literary phenomenon" by Australian and US critics. In 2006, *The Book Thief* won the National Jewish Book Award, and in 2007, the novel was named a Michael L. Printz Honor book. To date, the novel has been published in more than forty languages. He has written a number of novels: *The Underdog* (1999), *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* (2000), *Getting the Girl* (2004), *I Am the Messenger* (2006), *Bridge of Clay* (2018), and *Three Wild Dogs (and the Truth): A Memoir* (2025). *The Book Thief* was made into a major motion picture in 2013, and *I Am the Messenger*, also a Michael L. Printz Honor book, was made into a television series in 2023. He lives in Sydney, Australia. For more information about Zusak, visit his [website](#).

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

- Read about the Holocaust on the following [website](#). Make a list of ten important facts, and write a sentence that explains each fact. Then hold a group discussion about what everyone should know about the Holocaust.

DISCUSSION

1. Setting is when and where a novel takes place. How does Zusak reveal the setting? Explain how he uses personification to describe Himmel Street. Compare and contrast Himmel Street and Molching, Germany, at the beginning and end of the novel.
2. Discuss the symbolism of Death as the omniscient narrator of the novel. What are Death's feelings for each victim? Describe Death's attempt to resist Liesel. Death states, "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." (p. 491) What is ugly and beautiful about Liesel, Rosa and Hans Hubermann, Max Vandenburg, Rudy Steiner, and Mrs. Hermann?
3. Liesel believes that Hans Hubermann's eyes show kindness, and from the beginning she feels closer to him than to Rosa. Explain why Rosa insists that Liesel address them as "Mama" and "Papa." How does Hans gain Liesel's love and trust? Debate whether Liesel is a substitute for Hans's children, who have strayed from the family. Why is it so difficult for Rosa to demonstrate the same warmth toward Liesel? Discuss how Liesel's relationship with Rosa changes by the end of the novel.
4. *The Grave Digger's Handbook* is the first book Liesel steals. Why did she take the book? What is significant about the titles of the books she steals? Explain why she hides *The Grave Digger's Handbook* under her mattress. Discuss Hans Hubermann's reaction when he discovers the book. Later, Hans writes a story for Liesel titled "The Word Shaker." What is the importance of this story?
5. What does the act of book thievery teach Liesel about life and death? Discuss Rudy Steiner's reaction when he discovers that Liesel is a book thief. How does stealing books from the mayor's house lead to a friendship with the mayor's wife? Explain how Liesel's own attempt to write a book saves her life.
6. Describe Liesel's friendship with Rudy. How does their friendship change and grow throughout the novel? Death says that Rudy doesn't offer his friendship "for free" (p. 51). What does Rudy want from Liesel? Discuss Death's statement "The only thing worse than a boy who hates you [is] a boy who loves you." (p. 52) Why is it difficult for Liesel to love Rudy? Discuss why Liesel tells Mr. Steiner that she kissed Rudy's dead body.
7. Explain how Liesel compensates for her inability to read? How does she have a sharp insight into people and the world in which she lives? Discuss her first impression of Max Vandenburg. What does she see in Hans that others cannot see?
8. The power of words is the central theme in the book. Trace the development of this theme throughout the novel. Which characters in the novel help Liesel understand this power? At what point in the novel does Liesel understand that words have unlimited power?
9. Discuss the theme of abandonment. Liesel feels abandoned by her mother and by the death of her brother. How does she equate love with abandonment? At what point does she understand why she was abandoned by her mother? Who else abandons Liesel? Debate whether she was abandoned by circumstance or by the heart. Discuss whether Rosa and Hans feel abandoned by their children.

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10. Guilt is another recurring theme in the novel. Hans Hubermann's life was spared in France during World War I, and Erik Vandenburg's life was taken. Explain why Hans feels guilty about Erik's death. Guilt is a powerful emotion that may cause a person to become unhappy and despondent. Discuss how Hans channels his guilt into helping others. Explain Max Vandenburg's thought: "Living was living. The price was guilt and shame." (p. 208) Why does he feel guilt and shame?
 11. Compare and contrast Liesel and Max Vandenburg. How does Max's life give Liesel purpose? At what point do Liesel and Max become friends? Max gives Liesel a story called "The Standover Man" for her birthday. What is the significance of this story?
 12. Death says that Liesel was a girl "with a mountain to climb" (p. 86). What is her mountain? Who are her climbing partners? What is her greatest obstacle? At what point does she reach the summit of her mountain? Describe her descent. What does she discover at the foot of her mountain?
 13. Hans Junior, a Nazi soldier, calls his dad a coward because he doesn't belong to the Nazi Party. He feels that you are either for Hitler or against him. How does it take courage for a German to oppose Hitler? There isn't one coward in the Hubermann household. Discuss how they demonstrate courage throughout the novel.
 14. Define foreshadowing. Cite examples of foreshadowing in the novel. Zusak also uses the literary device of flashback. Identify an example of flashback. How do these literary devices pull the reader into the story and contribute to the plot development?
 15. Zusak uses figurative language to create certain images. Review the definition of imagery, simile, and metaphor, and point out examples of each.
 16. What is the difference in a motif and a symbol? Identify examples of these literary devices in the story. Explain how these devices advance the plot, and clarify the themes of the novel.
 17. The climax of a novel is the "high point" or "turning point." What is the climax of *The Book Thief*? Everything that happens after the climax is called falling action. How soon after the climax of *The Book Thief* does the novel reach a conclusion?
 18. Explain the structure of the book. What is the purpose of the prologue? In what way does it prepare the reader for part 1? Discuss the epilogue. Why is the epilogue called "The Last Color"? Explain Death's last words in the novel: "I am haunted by humans" (p. 550). Why does Death feel a need to confess? Draw a connection between the prologue and the epilogue.
 19. Liesel Meminger lived to be an old woman. Death says that he would like to tell the book thief about beauty and brutality, but those are things that she had lived. How does her life represent beauty in the wake of brutality? Discuss how Zusak's poetic writing style enhances the beauty of Liesel's story.

ACTIVITIES

1. Discuss the three types of irony: situational, dramatic, and verbal. Point out each type of irony in the novel. Then write a paper titled "Irony in *The Book Thief*." Address how the use of irony enhances character and plot development and illuminates the overall themes in the book. Cite specific scenes or quotes from the novel to support your thoughts.
2. An allegory is a full story in which characters or events represent bigger ideas, sometimes political. Think about the political events and the moral dilemmas in the novel. Then write a short paper that discusses *The Book Thief* as an allegory. Cite specific scenes to support your thoughts.
3. Write a letter that Liesel Meminger might write to her grandchildren that tells them about the kindness of Hans Huberman and Rudy Steiner.

4. Rudy Steiner is a member of the Hitler Youth. Read about this organization on the following [website](#). Discuss the purpose and the work and activities of the organization. How did this group brainwash German youth? Gather information about Rudy from the novel. Then write a paper titled “Rudy Steiner, an Unlikely Member of Hitler Youth.”
5. Read about the [Declaration of Human Rights](#) and its thirty articles. Then write a paper that argues why the United Nations felt this document necessary post–World War II. Think about the thirty articles, and include a discussion about the importance of this document today.
6. Kristallnacht (the Night of Broken Glass) took place in November 1938 in Nazi Germany. Use books in the library or sites on the internet to find out more about this night. Then write a paper called “Kristallnacht: A Violation of Human Rights.”
7. Take a virtual field trip of Dachau, the first Nazi concentration camp, on the following [website](#). Take notes as you move through the exhibits. Write a newspaper editorial that encourages people to visit the site for a better understanding of this dark period in history. Make specific reference to the exhibits.
8. There are people in the United States who oppose Holocaust education; others believe that it’s absolutely necessary. Sponsor a class debate about this issue called “Holocaust Education: Opposing Viewpoints.” Offer a list of books and websites used to shape your side of the debate.

BONUS ACTIVITY

- If possible, view *The Book Thief* movie. How is the voice of Death portrayed in the movie? Explain how the background music contributes to the dark tone. At what point in the movie does the music crescendo? Debate whether the setting and the actors are accurately depicted. Then write a review of the movie that includes a comparison to the novel.

VOCABULARY/ USE OF LANGUAGE

- Identify words specifically related to World War II and Nazi Germany. Such words may include: *communist*, *Hitler*, *yellow stars*, *Nazi Party*, *Führer*, *Final Solution*, and *Gestapo*. Make a glossary of words and terms to include in a study of *The Book Thief*.

INTERNET RESOURCES

- [Jewish Virtual Library](#)
Provides a comprehensive Jewish encyclopedia, with articles about the burning of books by the Nazis and other related topics.
- [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#)
The official site of the museum.
- [The World Holocaust Remembrance Center](#)
The official site of the Holocaust Museum and Remembrance Center in Jerusalem.
- [The National World War II Museum](#)
Located in New Orleans, Louisiana, this museum offers Holocaust exhibits.

Guide written by Pat Scales, children’s literature consultant.



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