

Reading as protection and enlightenment in Marcus Zusak's *The Book Thief*.

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In 1823 almost a hundred years before the advent of Adolf Hitler's regime which led to World War Two, the German-Jewish poet, Heinrich Heine declared: 'Wherever they burn books they will also, in the end, burn human beings.'ⁱ Twenty thousand books were burned in Berlin on May 10th 1933 in celebration of Hitler's birthday. The Nazis regarded the literature of the Jews as both a symbol and a threat. Joseph Goebbels, Reich Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda speaking at the book burning of May 10th, incited the crowds to hatred of the Jews with the words:

"German men and women! The age of arrogant Jewish intellectualism is now at an end! . . . You are doing the right thing at this midnight hour—to consign to the flames the unclean spirit of the past. This is a great, powerful, and symbolic act. . . 'ⁱⁱ

The Holocaust, (literally meaning 'death by fire') which ensued, saw the execution of six million Jews burned in the flames of the incinerators in the Death Camps during World War II.

The Nazis perceived literature as being dangerous to their desire for totalitarian rule and not without cause, for reading is a means of access to ideas, philosophy, thought, history and identity. It changes minds and shapes past, present and future. The best of literature disturbs and provokes the reader to think further and to pursue the labyrinths of the mind. Set in Germany in World War II Marcus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005) is a thought-provoking novel which focusses upon the importance of books and reading as being central to humanity. Zusak brings together an exploration of the importance of reading and the subject of how the events in Germany prior to and during World War Two could have been experienced by ordinary people.

The inspiration for Zusak's novel comes from the memories of his parents. They had grown up in Germany in the war years and then emigrated to Australia where Zusak was born and still lives in Sydney. As a child they told him stories of their experiences of the war. Zusak's experience of war-time Germany was therefore through story. Zusak notes:

When I was growing up, I heard stories at home about Munich and Vienna in war-time, when my parents were children. Two stories my mother told affected me a lot. The first was about Munich being bombed, and how the sky was on fire, how everything was red. The second was about something else she saw.ⁱⁱⁱ

The second story Zusak's mother told him was about the treatment of Jews being marched to Dachau:

One day, there was a terrible noise coming from the main street of town, and when she ran to see it, she saw that Jewish people were being marched

to Dachau, the concentration camp. At the back of the line, there was an old man, totally emaciated, who couldn't keep up. When a teenage boy saw this, he ran inside and brought the man a piece of bread. The man fell to his knees and kissed the boy's ankles and thanked him . . . Soon, a soldier noticed and walked over. He tore the bread from the man's hands and whipped him for taking it. Then he chased the boy and whipped him for giving him the bread in the first place. In one moment, there was great kindness and great cruelty, and I saw it as the perfect story of how humans are.^{iv}

Through his writing of *The Book Thief* Zusak's intention was to portray 'another side to Nazi Germany'^v which was to demonstrate that *humans are actually worthwhile*^{vi} (italicized in the original). Initially he had thought of writing a biography, however, as a fiction writer he turned to the notion of a 'personal story about a girl'^{vii} which he then coupled with his thoughts about a 'stealer of books' and the power of words, both those of Hitler and of his character, Liesel. What Zusak wanted 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.^{viii}

In *The Book Thief* Zusak does not attempt to explain the acts of history but rather explores how people survived emotionally as well as physically helped by experiences associated with books and reading. The motifs of the power of words for evil and for good, the importance of books, reading and also music are wound together through this poignant novel acting against the physical atrocities ensuing from political incitement and violence. As a result *The Book Thief* is a very disturbing novel dealing with matters associated with war, childhood and the determination to survive. Paradoxically this story has a focus on death, who is brought to life as a narrator. Death overarches the text as narrator and as the pervading experience of those affected by war. The narrator Death points out that a focus is the survivors, 'the leftover humans' (Zusak, 2005 p.5). From the offset of the novel there is a raised consciousness of language. Death, as the narrator, takes the reader through Liesel's journey to emancipation. He adds his commentary and observations throughout with a raised consciousness of language by employing the technique of defamiliarisation. Words are dislocated from their normally accepted meanings thus making the reader observe life differently, as when Death talks about the sky at the moment when he will come for the reader at their moment of passing from this life:

The question is, what colour will everything be at that moment when I come for you? What will the sky be saying?

Personally I like a chocolate –coloured sky. Dark, dark chocolate. People say it suits me. I do, however, try to enjoy every colour I see – the whole spectrum. A billion or so flavours, none of them quite the same, and a sky to slowly suck on. (4)

Perception and expectation are disrupted and the reader is made aware of a conceptualisation of nature which is entwined with sensation and physicality. Furthermore Zusak's use of the literary technique of defamiliarisation or *ostranenie* reflects the state of mind and being of those who are caught up in war without understanding why or what is happening to them.

The Book Thief vividly takes the reader back to the pre-World War Two period in Germany and situates Liesel, the protagonist, in the confusion of the growing tension. From the reader's perspective the context and time period of the novel are not specified at the beginning, for information which eventually places the action just prior to World War Two is gradually introduced into the text. Guards are mentioned and there is a German phrase included in the dialogue (17). This could therefore be either World War One or Two however, the inclusion of a crashed airplane more strongly indicates war-time and Germany during the Second World War, although there were flying forces in World War One. The placing of the narrative in 1939 is not confirmed until twenty pages into the text, and this subtly emphasises a child's perspective of living in the moment and not in political time. Liesel is dreaming of Hitler 'listening contentedly to the torrent of words that was spilling from his mouth' (20) Words become images and such powerful images are welded to emotions and into the subconscious, surfacing in dream and nightmare. Zusak encapsulates the innocence of the child through Liesel's dream. Unknown to Liesel her family is one of the target groups of the Nazis as her father is a Communist, yet she is listening 'contentedly' to the dictator whose intent is to destroy her family and the child herself. The words themselves are what catch Liesel's fascination, not their meaning, nor the speaker, yet the power of the dictator invades even the depths of the mind of a child through the sound of his emotive speeches. The reader is thus positioned as a child with Liesel's confusions in the process of picking up clues and piecing together what is happening. Thus the 21st century reader and the girl in the book join together in trying to find out and understand what was happening in Nazi Germany at that time. Zusak employs a 'bottom-up' approach, akin to that employed in social history, to the recounting and development of understanding of the political and social history of the period. He places the reader in the immediacy of the experience of Liesel, who is caught up in the wider machinations of war. The perspective is an intensely personal one. The words of Hitler have been so pervasive that they have occupied her dreaming as well as her waking life. The reader is engaged emotionally and intellectually through the imaginative experience of dream following on into the actualities of Liesel's life. What Liesel learns is that the power of language can be employed for both evil and good, for subjection or for emancipation, but before she comes to such knowledge she undergoes a painful learning curve of suffering.

Liesel's story is punctuated by incidents of being left, beginning with the journey to the foster parents where her mother plans to leave her children to protect them, unbeknown to Liesel, from the growing animosity and violence from the Nazis towards Communists. On this journey Liesel's brother dies. At his burial an apprentice gravedigger drops a book which Liesel picks up. The subject matter of the book is a stroke of bitter irony as this will be the text which is her precious possession, her reading obsession: *The Gravedigger's Handbook*. The Handbook is also an echo of the fate of millions during the coming war and under National Socialist rule. Poignantly a child has the instructions for disposal of the carnage of conflict. Ironically Liesel is illiterate.

To learn to read is her obsession in Liesel's disturbed life. She sleeps badly and dreams of the trauma already visited upon her. Hans Hubermann, her foster-father, sits through the nights with the child 'as Liesel cried into his sleeves and breathed him in' (38). Her obsession to learn read consequently performs a dual purpose in that in addition to becoming literate the close relationship which Hans forms with her enables her to gradually come through the trauma. By his actions Hans teaches her, as Death observes, the meaning of a phrase 'not found in the dictionary' that is:

Not-leaving: an act of trust and love, often deciphered by children.' (38)

Hans realises that she needs far more love and care as a traumatised and deeply distressed child. He also incorporates his own emotional experiences through music when he plays his accordion for her.

Liesel would sit up and hum. Her cold toes clenched with excitement. No-one had ever given her music before. (38)

Zusak's choice of the accordion for Hans' instrument is particular, he could, for instance have been a guitarist which is also a highly portable and popular instrument, but the accordion, as Zusak emphasises, is an instrument which breathes, which has a musical language of its own.

The accordion's scratched yet shiny back exterior came back and forth as his arms squeezed the dusty bellows, making it suck in the air and throw it back out.... Papa made the accordion live. (39)

As an accordionist myself, I know there is a special relationship when playing the instrument of almost synchronising your breathing with the action of the bellows, like an external organ held close to the body. Playing an accordion is a physically embracing experience, for the instrument becomes an extension of the body which you almost hug to produce the sounds. Zusak's giving Hans an accordion raises further interesting connections with the potential for Hans' submerged character and also brings connections with political and subversive nuances from his past life. Hans is sympathetic toward the plight of the Jews. As the story progresses Hans demonstrates courage in his subversive actions by, for example, continuing to carry on his business as a decorator while he can, irrespective of whether or not his clients are Jewish. A further act of humanity and courage shared with his wife, is that of sheltering a Jew in the basement of their home. Here the connection is made with his accordion. Hans was taught to play the accordion in World War One by Erik who was the father of Max Vandenburg, the very Jew he will later hide in his basement. Hans had salvaged the accordion from the rubble surrounding the Erik's shell shattered body. The instrument thus holds layers of memory and association beyond the immediacy of the music itself. One can also conjecture that the tunes and melodies which Hans learned from his Jewish friend would not necessarily have been German folk and popular tunes, but those from the Jewish tradition, adding a further layer of subversion surrounding the seemingly innocuous act of playing the accordion. At home his playing at breakfast also incenses his wife, which also called for some 'courage'! For Liesel the sound of the accordion was 'in actual fact, also the announcement of safety' (39).

There is further significance in Zusak having made Hans an accordionist for historically the accordion had very strong associations with German national identity. Invented in Germany by Christian Friedrich Buschmann in 1822^x, the piano accordion was developed and patented by Cyrillus Damian in 1829. As a very portable instrument it was taken abroad by German emigrants when they left to escape the poverty of nineteenth century Germany. Between 1841 and 1913 over six million Germans emigrated, many of them to America. The popularity of the accordion was marked by requests for instruments to be sent to the American settlements and also by sales representatives setting up business in America. Although it remained popular as an instrument with the German public, it was not beloved by the Third Reich. They strongly objected to classical music being played upon the accordion as it was thought to 'pollute' the purity of music which embodied the Germanic spirit. Furthermore the accordion was associated by the Nazis with the jazz and rhythms of African American music which had been taken up by German emigrants during their time in America and the instrument was therefore further objected to on racist grounds. ^x When the Nazis came to power the manufacture of accordions slowed. Hans as an accordionist therefore takes on subtle political and humanitarian nuances.

The accordion music creates an emotional bond between Hans and Liesel in addition to his looking after her. It is a natural progression for Liesel to accept help from Hans to learn to read when they realise that she is significantly way behind the other children in school. The act of learning to read brings together the traumatised child and her somewhat awkward, hen-pecked foster father: security and love are founded through the process of learning to read and being read to. The subject matter is almost immaterial: the book as an object is important as this is a material link with her painful history for the only book in the Hubermann household (39) is *The Gravedigger's Handbook* which Liesel picked up and now sleeps upon under her pillow. Although she cannot initially read the print, as Death points out:

It didn't really matter what that book was about. It was what it meant that was more important (39)

For Death knows that to Liesel the 'Books Meaning' was

1. The last time she saw he brother.
2. The last time she saw her mother.

Liesel's learning to read, becoming part of the Hubermann family and being settled with them means that she also has to take part in the activities expected of a ten year old child in Germany at that time, which included joining the Bund Deutscher Mädchen, the United German Girls, which was part of the Hitler Youth Movement. This was obligatory as part of the socialisation process required by the Third Reich to ensure a compliant generation to further their future political and social aims. There is no option but to be compliant although Hans and Liesel are not enthusiastic nor convinced about the activities as indicated by the fact that they 'never spoke about it much. They just held hands and listened to their feet..' (41) Again Zusak conveys the depth of feeling and thought by unconventional use of language. The silent resistance of Hans and Liesel is symbolised in that they focus on their own bodies and listen not to the words of power circulating about them, but their own feet. This action is invisible to the outside world and seemingly insignificant but demonstrates the way in which Hans and Liesel create a barrier to the language of the symbolic order of the politically and ideologically dominant. Their subversive acts are quiet and personal and show how one could imagine that the ordinary people who were

not swayed by Fascist views might have protected themselves from the ideology and propagandist fervour in pre-war Germany.

Liesel's fascination and obsession with books takes her into other areas of the impact of war when she steals books from Helena Schmidt, the mayor's wife, one of her foster-mother Rosa's customers, as Rosa does ironing and laundry to make money for her family. Frau Schmidt is lonely and depressed: wealthy, but unhappy. Her only son was killed fighting in World War I and since then she has been withdrawn and deeply lonely. She is described as having 'the posture of defeat' (44); she has been broken by her bereavement resulting from the 1914-18 war which continues to have repercussions in her life. Fortunately for Liesel Frau Schmidt has a rich library of books from which Liesel steals. Liesel's initiation into the conventions of libraries is somewhat unconventional, however, her breaking conventions also leads to the breaking down of emotional boundaries as a bond is gradually formed between the old woman and the child. Books and reading are the catalysts. The written words of others enable these traumatised people to speak to each other and to overcome some of their deep loneliness.

In *The Book Thief* literature and reading is a liberation for some whilst being a threat to others. A consequence of literacy is in one way freedom, in another, persecution for those who wrote "un-German" books. Zusak takes the reader into the heart of the tension and hatred which consumed Germany during those years leading up to World War Two, symbolised by the book burning ceremonies one of which was referred to above. The context which underpins Liesel snatching the second book which she owns is the Nazi book burning of "un-German" books.

On April 6, 1933, the German Students Association's Main Office for Press and Propaganda proclaimed a nationwide "Action against the Un-German Spirit," to climax in a literary purge or "cleansing" (*Säuberung*) by fire. Local chapters were to supply the press with releases and commissioned articles, sponsor well-known Nazi figures to speak at public gatherings, and negotiate for radio broadcast time.

On May 10, 1933, in a symbolic act of ominous significance, the students burned upwards of 25,000 volumes of "un-German" books, presaging an era of state censorship and control of culture. That night, in most university towns, right-wing students marched in torchlight parades "against the un-German spirit."

Liesel has first-hand experience of the translation of propaganda and incitement to violence and action when Max Vandenburg, a Jew, hounded and persecuted by the Nazis is given shelter by Hans and his wife in 1940. The action in Germany had deepened into the pursuit and murder of Jews. As Hans feels about his accordion, so Liesel feels about her books, including the ones which Hans has procured by trading cigarettes. The only way in which Hans can think to enforce the seriousness of the situation should she tell anyone about Max being hidden in their home is to threaten to burn her books if she disobeys the order of silence.

The importance of literature is continued through Max, the Jew confined for his safety to the basement rooms. To pass the time Max writes his own book. In an act of defiance and black

humour he paints out and overwrites a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, writing of his own life and struggles, blotting out those of his persecutor and the persecutor of his race. Books by Jews had been forbidden and Liesel is the reader of one such book: a statement of defiance and refusal to be downtrodden by both Max and his young reader Liesel. There are multiple paradoxes here to be pursued since the overwritten book is *Mein Kampf*, (The Struggle.) Firstly, as Max says, it was the book which saved his life, despite the content, for hidden inside the book on a loose leaf was the map to the Hubermann household. It had also become obligatory for people to own and carry a copy to overtly display their 'loyalty' to Hitler and the Nazi Party, whether it was true or not. The title of *Mein Kampf*, also ironically encapsulates the life of Max, for his very existence has been a struggle against political and religious oppression and the eradication of his race. Finally and in the greatest intellectual act of subversion before he has to leave the safety of the Hubermann's, Max inscribes his life over that of Hitler so that only the biography and struggles of a Jew can be read.

As she grows older writing also comes to be as important a personal act for Liesel as reading. On being given a blank book she takes control of her own narrative and writes her own life story which she calls *The Book Thief*. The powerless become powerful through words, through language, through the courage to record that which is both the source of pain and of enlightenment. Being read to by Hans was solace, relief from the torturous experiences which were already embedded in her short life. Reading in the library was escape and comfort: finding new places albeit in the imagination. Witnessing Max write his book, blanking out the words of Hitler and replacing them with the words of an imprisoned Jew was witnessing an act of empowerment. His words disempower the words of the persecutor of his race and Liesel's enemy. Liesel's own book, her life story, is empowering. By recording her story she is also growing to understand, to gain knowledge about her own circumstances and experiences; starting to control the past, to control the trauma. The very act of writing in the basement saved her life, since the house was bombed and all her loved ones were killed while they slept in the upper rooms. In despair Liesel drops her book and it is retrieved by Death who reflects:

After that, there were weeks and months, and a lot of war. She remembered her books in the moments of worst sorrow, especially the ones that were made for her and the one that saved her life. One morning, in a renewed state of shock, she even walked back down to Himmel Street to find them, but nothing was left. There was no recovery from what was left. That would take decades. It would take a long life

What is left though is Liesel's text, the record of her memories and fears, emotions and events, held safe by Death who returns the book to her when he comes to collect her in her old age and she can hold those deep memories through her own narrative:

The fingers of her soul touched the story that was written so long ago in her Himmel Street basement. (553)

Death had read her story many times and in death her story retains life and nurtures hope. *The Book Thief* is far more than escapism as fiction can popularly be viewed; it is testament to reading as a form of protection and a force for enlightenment and reason when contemplating the

awful confusions of human actions both past and present. Perhaps *The Book Thief* has stolen a little hope from the desolation of the ravages of a dreadful abomination upon human history....

Works cited:

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^v ibid

^{vi} ibid

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