

# Zusak's death breaks the mould



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In *The Book Thief*, Zusak expounds upon the concept of death as a passive force and not a vengeful creature. Zusak presents the character Death in a manner that is more effectively conceived than the traditional rendition of Death's personae. This unconventional characterization is validated by the realization that dying is a natural occurrence whereby Zusak's Death does not hunt, but merely collects souls whose times have run out.

Zusak first touches upon the topic of human demise when Death states in the beginning of *The Book Thief* "A small fact: You are going to die" (3). Almost immediately upon opening the book, the reader sees that Death is the narrator, and they are surrounded with an aura of distress. However, the character of Death quickly proves not to be as cruel and heartless as his scythe-wielding counterpart. Death states that he is "not malicious. I am not violent. I am a result." (6). Zusak's Death does not methodically or whimsically reap the souls of the miscellaneous peoples he happens to come across. Rather, he approaches the souls when the time is appropriate and unavoidable, and leaves behind the souls' survivors with an apologetic air. When presented in this benign, passive manner, and not as a hunter or malefactor, the character Death effectively mimics the actuality of dying.

The character Death also does not choose the time, place, or manner in which a person dies. Instead, he is merely a means of collection and transportation for the souls. There are multiple instances in *The Book Thief* when Death questions the way a person's life has ended.

One example of this is when Death refers to the passing of a young German boy named Rudy. On page 241, Death makes a side note in the text, saying

" A Small Announcement About Rudy Steiner: He didn't deserve to die the way he did." This selection brings multiple subjects into question, one of which is the matter of emotions. By saying that Rudy died unjustly, Death implies that he believes Rudy deserved better, which, in turn, leads the reader to conclude that Death cared about the fate of this little boy. There are also numerous references to Death questioning the cruelties bestowed upon the vast amounts of Jewish souls he carries in his arms, and there are a few times he questions the point of the reckless killings that make him terribly busy. Also, it appears that people died whom Death would have preferred to have live. He asks, " Did they deserve any better, these people? How many had actively persecuted others, high on the scent of Hitler's gaze, repeating his sentences, his paragraphs, his opus? Was Rosa Hubermann responsible? The hider of a Jew? Or Hans? Did they all deserve to die? The children?" (375). Death's questions express the uncertainty he faces while performing his job, as well as his innocence concerning the actual deaths of the people whose souls he collects. He questions the necessity of the blameless' demise with a hint of sorrow. This disquiet proves that Death is neither malicious nor violent, just as he claims earlier in the book. The traditional rendition of death personified involves malicious intent and cruelty. In keeping with unconventional characterization, however, Zusak's Death shies away from the gore and pain he is commonly associated with.

In conclusion, Zusak's representation of Death is more effectively perceivable due to Death's empathetic appearance as a bystander and not a destructive hunter, out to destroy mankind. Portraying Death as an emotive creature who is riddled with regrets opens the doorway for readers to

explore the notion of Death standing in the contradictory position of a “humane monster”. By making Death appear more human in nature, Zusak allows his readers to feel as if they can relate to Death and his emotions - a skill which not only brings a clearer image of Zusak's rendition of Death to mind, but allows readers to form attachments to a creature so often viewed as cruel.