

Hidden motives in the book thief by mark zusak

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The competitors took their marks. Butterflies fluttered through the stomachs of every runner, except for one who was very confident. The competitors got set. The confident man could feel the eyes of Hitler lurking upon him. The competitors took off. In the blink of a German eye, Jesse Owens had crossed the finish line with little competition. During the 1936 Olympics otherwise known as "The Nazi Olympics," many experienced a very peculiar outcome. Those who attended 1936 Olympics saw the dominance of Jesse Owens in many events. Throughout the writing of *The Book Thief*, Mark Zusak depicts the events of the 1936 Olympics very well, using the dominance of Jesse Owens, the reaction of Hitler and racism as a central focus. The well-written textual evidence from Zusak is supported by many other scholars. Specifically, Zusak is supported by Michael Mackenzie, The Historical Learning Site and Anthony Paul Farely.

As one looks into the words of Michael Mackenzie in the article "From Athens to Berlin: The 1936 Olympics and Leni Riefenstahl's Olympia" of *Critical Inquiry* the reader can see that throughout the writing of *The Book Thief*, Markus Zusak portrays the events of the 1936 Olympic very well. When Zusak writes about Rudy Steiner idolizing Jesse Owens he makes it known that during the 1936 Olympics, though his skin color was not , Jesse Owens was a hero. Zusak says that "Even the most racist Germans were amazed with the efforts of Owens, and word of his feat slipped through the cracks" (Zusak 56). Unmistakably, Zusak illustrates a taste of the 1936 Olympics. Michael Mackenzie confirms Zusak's claims throughout his article "From Athens to Berlin: The 1936 Olympics and Leni Riefenstahl's Olympia." When Mackenzie writes about the events of the 1936 Olympics, the heroic

efforts of Jesse Owens also appear. Mackenzie says, "... and if there is a single individual who draws the most attention, it is a black American, Jesse Owens—the symbol, the personification of all that contradicted Hitler and his theories of a master race." Obviously Mackenzie agrees with Zusak's portrayal of the 1936 Olympics.

Not only does Michael Mackenzie agree with historical accuracy Zusak uses about the 1936 Olympics, but there is also parallelism between *The Book Thief* and the Historical Learning Site. Zusak continues to write about the total and complete dominance of Jesse Owens during the 1936 Olympics. He also begins to write about how Hitler responded to Owens' dominance. Zusak writes that, "Jesse Owens had just completed the 4x100m relay and won his fourth gold medal. Talk that he was subhuman because he was black and Hitler's refusal to shake his hand were touted around the world" (Zusak 56). Obviously, Zusak displays that Jesse Owens had an outstanding performance during the 1936 Olympics in which he hardly had competition. Consistently, people saw the dominance of Jesse Owens and the disgust of Hitler during the Olympics. Zusak emphasizes on these events which shows the historical accuracy in *The Book Thief*. The Historical Learning Site echoes Zusak's evidence in its article entitled "The 1936 Berlin Olympics." The site also emphasizes the dominance of Jesse Owens during the 1936 Olympics. It says that, "The 'racially inferior' Owens won four gold medals; in the 100m, 200m, long jump and 4 x 100m relay... Hitler refused to place the gold medal around Owen's neck" (www.historylearningsite.co.uk). This site clearly supports the textual evidence from *The Book Thief*. It reiterates the dominance of Jesse Owens during the 1936 Olympics and also the complete

irritation of Hitler. Hitler was becoming very annoyed by Jesse Owens, who was not Aryan, winning everything he competed in. A man by the name of Balder von Shirach claimed Hitler said this after the 100m victory of Jesse Owens: "The Americans should be ashamed of themselves, letting Negroes win their medals for them. I shall not shake hands with this Negro..... do you really think that I will allow myself to be photographed shaking hands with a Negro?" Hitler was irate that an African American man was dominating everyone, including the Aryans whom he considered the perfect race. Zusak includes this type of reaction from Hitler in his writing which also shows the historical evidence in *The Book Thief*.

The textual evidence of Markus Zusak that makes the illustration of the 1936 Olympics is also backed up by Anthony Paul Farley in *The Bitter Tears of Jesse Owens*. During the 1936 Olympics, there was a multitude of racism in the atmosphere. Jesse Owens had to deal with this problem a lot throughout his career. When Zusak writes about the racism during this time through the conversation of Rudy Steiner and his father, it is clear that it was a big deal. Rudy says, "I just wish I was like Jesse Owens, Papa" (Zusak 60). Rudy's father responds by saying, "... you've got beautiful blond hair and big blue eyes. You should be happy with that; is that clear" (Zusak 61)? Clearly, Rudy's father does not want him to follow in the footsteps of an African American man because in that time, those who had blond hair and blue eyes were supposedly superior. This object of racial discrimination was very prominent in the life of Jesse Owens. He witnessed many people die because of the color of their skin. In Farley's *The Bitter Tears of Jesse Owens*, Jesse Owens reminisces "soul shattering" idea of lynching a human. He says, "

When in doubt about anything, murder a Negro ... Only this time one of the men they hung had a wife who was eight months pregnant...Only they didn't tighten the knot enough to kill her, just to dangle her above the fire they'd made so she'd slowly burn to death" (Farley 236). It is obvious that racism was a vast problem during the 1936 Olympics. Jesse Owens had to deal with it a lot, specifically when he became more successful.

Throughout *The Book Thief*, Markus Zusak gives his reader an amazing illustration of the 1936 Olympics and retains much historical accuracy. Zusak uses Jesse Owens's dominance in the Olympics, Hitler's reaction and Racism as a guide to give his readers a taste of the 1936 Olympics. Scholars in many fields agree with the writing of Zusak and agree that it is historically accurate. Michael Mackenzie supports Zusak's ideas on the dominance of Jesse Owens in the Olympics. The Historical Learning Site supports Zusak's claims about Hitler's reactions to the dominance of Owens. Finally, Anthony Paul Farley supports Zusak's textual evidence revealing the racism during the 1936 Olympics. Although he was not in attendance at the 1936 Olympics, through his textual evidence of historical accuracy it makes it seem as if he was sitting in the front row watching Jesse Owens fly by the finish line with no other competitors in his radius.