

The pen is truly  
mightier than the  
sword



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* follows the life of the once illiterate Liesel Meminger and her progression into literacy set primarily during WWII in Molching, Germany. Liesel is adopted by a German couple in Molching, Germany after the death of her brother on the way to Molching and the implied death of her own mother. She begins to form relationships with town folk such as her adoptive parents, Rosa and Hans Hubermann, Max Vandenburg, a Jew the Hubermanns hide in their basement, Rudy Steiner, her childhood friend, and many other denizens of Molching. As she forms relationships with said town folk and develops her literacy, the double-edged nature of words becomes apparent, which bring both desolation and consolation. Adolf Hitler, the unseen antagonist of the entire novel, exemplifies the desolation of words and their impact on an entire country of impressionable people and an entire race of Jewish people during the Holocaust. As a result of widespread desolation, Liesel realizes the consolation of words, as they are able to comfort her bereaved soul by developing friendships with others. However, the fullness of human experience in Zusak's *The Book Thief* is captured through a mixture of consoling and desolating words; words can demonstrate healing out of a place of destruction. Therefore, words can be a double-edged sword, bringing both desolation and consolation to a speaker and observer, and *The Book Thief* exemplifies this quality, displaying qualities of desolation in Hitler's rhetoric as seen in Max Vandenburg's *The Word Shaker*, consolation in a growing relationship between Liesel Meminger and Max Vandenburg through *The Standover Man*, and a mixture of both in a father-daughter relationship between Hans Hubermann and Liesel through *The Gravedigger's Handbook*.

Even though Hitler was never a tangible character in *The Book Thief*, his omni-presence looms over the characters of the novel, demonstrated through his depiction in Max Vandenburg's novella, *The Word Shaker*. Vandenburg is a German Jew hiding in the basement of the Hubermanns and acts as a physical representation of the displacement and impending destruction of an entire race because of Hitler's social Darwinism. As a gift for Liesel, he writes a novel called *The Word Shaker* which provides a Jewish perspective on Hitler with imagery of Hitler's use of rhetoric as a tool for world domination in its exposition. Max muses that "Yes, the Führer decided that he would rule the world with words. 'I will never fire a gun,' he decides...His first plan of attack was to plant the words as many areas of the homeland as possible...It was a nation of farmed thoughts" (Zusak 445). Hitler never directly affects anything, but he indirectly directs the destruction and the terror of the events of the novel through his rhetoric according to *The Word Shake*; his rhetoric creates forests of rampant nationalism throughout Germany, causing the sons of the Holtzapfels, neighbors of the Hubermanns to die, drawing the Hans Jr. Hubermann, a Nazi soldier to die in the brunt of a Russian invasion, and ultimately provoking Allied nations to kill innocent Germans, including those in Molching. His words serve as weapons, uniting the nation under his racially driven demonization of Jews in *Mein Kampf*; his words farm a forest of concentration camps sprawled throughout Germany and Poland, including Dachau and Auschwitz. Book burnings, air raids, hate crimes, and concentration camps are all a product of the machine-gun like words of Hitler's machinations. He never needed to fire a gun because his words drove others to fire guns for him. The destructive words set into motion the misfortunes of Molching and abroad, create

tension between people and people groups, and significantly shape the lives of the souls on Himmel Street.

Despite the destruction created by Hitler, words also bring consolation to both Liesel and Max, evidenced by Max's *The Standover Man*. The pair's relationship begins with Max's moving into the Hubermann household away from his entire family in fear of Hitler. The German Jew has nightmares, very similar to the nightmares of Liesel herself, and they form a strong relationship that lasts until the end of the novel. Because of their strikingly similar experiences, the two begin to discuss their similarities when she asks him to explain his dreams. Not only is he just a lucky survivor left alone in a dark basement, unexposed to the world, he develops a multi-dimensional character to Liesel, not simply a foil Liesel's personality traits. Vandenburg encapsulates this sentiment to Liesel through his self-written novel, *The Standover Man*. The novella of sorts demonstrates Max's constant fear of men standing over him, except when Liesel stands over him herself, soon sharing her similarities including the stuff of her dreams, writing, " She said, ' Tell me what you dream of...' In return, she explained what her own dreams were made of. Now I think we are friends, the girl and me...the best standover man I've ever known is not a man at all" (Zusak 233-235).

Because of their exchange of words, they achieve a certain level of consolation juxtaposed against such a desolate epoch of time; because of their exchange of words, Max no longer becomes afraid of standover men, be it his father, a boxing opponent, or a Nazi officer because he realizes that some standover men, like Liesel Meminger, are able to bring him to a degree of happiness when everything is falling apart; she is the best standover man

of them all. Instead of tearing apart the fabric of a racial group, words stitch the damaged fabric with a meaningful relationship.

Despite the seemingly mutually exclusive factors of desolation and consolation, at times, both are necessary for the fullness of the human experience, demonstrated by the beginning of Hans and Liesel's relationship through *The Grave Digger's Handbook*. Before Liesel reaches the Hubermann household, she witnesses the death of her own brother, Werner and takes a book near her brother's buried corpse entitled *The Grave Digger's Handbook* perhaps as a memento or an impulsive action in an emotionally charged moment. In her first few nights at the Hubermanns, her adoptive parents, she urinates in her sleep because of the nightmares that were borne out of her traumatic experience. However, Hans Hubermann, her adoptive father, helps her read the morbid handbook to ease her nightmares, described as, "...Liesel could tell exactly what her papa was thinking...he was clearly aware that such a book was hardly ideal...as for the girl, there was a sudden desire to read it...perhaps she wanted to make sure her brother was buried right" (Zusak 66). Despite her traumatic experience, she seeks for comfort with her father with a particularly morbid guidebook. The desolation of her nightmares and the traumatic experience contributed to the consolation she experienced through building a relationship with Hans Hubermann. Her adoptive father eventually teaches her to read out of this seemingly inappropriate book. The gateway to her experiences with words, both desolating and consoling, is this guidebook on the digging of graves. On a microscopic scale, Liesel is able to turn an embarrassing and uncomfortable moment into a consoling relationship involving her progression into literacy.

The handbook with such powerful memories tied to it ironically allowed Liesel to reach closure with the death of Werner, as the fragment of the tragedy brought her closer to Hans Hubermann. However, on a grander scale, *The Grave Digger's Handbook* serves as a gateway to her experiences with more and more books that shape her as a character and introduce her to more instances of consoling and desolating words.

All of the novels mentioned in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak have both a desolating and consoling effect on the protagonist, Liesel Meminger. She experiences a range of emotions tied to some books like *The Word Shaker*, *The Standover Man*, and *The Grave Digger's Handbook*. Often, the adage, "The pen is mightier than the sword," coined by English author Edwin Bulwer-Lytton, becomes contrite in the today's vernacular. However, Zusak illustrates this adage well in this novel, as Hitler's rhetoric is able to build up and destroy whole nations and cause the everyman to take arms against a fellow human. However, Liesel's friendship with Hans or Max allows her to feel friendship, a rare emotion in a time of hatred and discrimination. The important lesson from this thematic facet of *The Book Thief* is to be wary of how one utilizes words and understands another's words. For example, the political arena becomes a hotbed for rhetoric in speeches, especially with the previous 2016 U. S. Presidential Election. When one listens to a speech, he has to be cautious of ideas sugarcoated with anaphora, alliteration, praeteritio, and the like. Yes, rhetoric is an effective tool designed to capture an audience's attention, but it can also build up or destroy because of its sheer power in alluring people with often faulty ideas. Furthermore, people have to be mindful of how words can be used to comfort the suffering. An

important facet of the human experience is sadness, so others should be equipped with the knowledge of how to make amends or sympathize with consoling language. All in all, the power of words comes as a double-edged sword, having the two qualities of being both comforting and disquieting. Everyday people should be aware of the power of words, lest another Hitler comes along to rally them up for an unethical purpose.