

The Book Thief Study Guide

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak

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Plot Summary

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak is a novel of cruelty, poverty, and hope. Liesel Meminger is a young girl who has been placed in foster care by her mother. Liesel's brother dies en route to their new home and this leaves Liesel traumatized, causing her to have terrible nightmares in the middle of the night. Liesel's foster father begins teaching her to read on these nights to distract her from her pain. Liesel learns to turn to books for comfort. When the war begins, comfort becomes a rare state of mind, so Liesel finds ways to seek it out. Liesel begins to steal books in her efforts to deal with the cruelty of the world around her. The Book Thief is a complicated story of survival that will encourage its readers to think and to be amazed at how resilient the human spirit really is.

Liesel Meminger travels by train to Munich with her brother and mother. Before they reach their destination, Liesel's brother dies and is buried in a strange town by strange people. During the funeral, Liesel steals a book someone has carelessly left beside the grave. Liesel and her mother continue on their journey. Liesel is taken to the rural town of Molching where she is placed with a foster family. The mother is a foul mouthed, tough woman who does not know how to be gentle with the traumatized child. The father is a kind, accordion-playing house painter who knows exactly what Liesel needs to hear.

Liesel has nightmares in the middle of the night that make it impossible for her to sleep. Hans, her foster father, comes to her rescue on these nights, sitting up with her until she feels secure enough to sleep. On one of these nights, Hans discovers the book Liesel has stolen. As a way to keep her distracted from her dreams, Hans begins to teach Liesel how to read the book. It is a slow process since Hans does not read well himself. However, Liesel soon learns to read well enough that she begins to perform better in school.

Liesel begins to settle into her new home. Soon Liesel makes friends with a neighbor boy her own age named Rudy. Rudy and Liesel play soccer together with the other neighborhood children on the afternoons when Liesel is not required to help her foster mother, Rosa, pick up or deliver the laundry she washes to make extra money. When the war breaks out and money becomes tight, Rosa begins sending Liesel on the laundry runs alone, hoping the customers cannot fire Rosa when faced with communicating with the child. However, this proves to be a misconception in this time of economic struggle.

One of the few customers remaining on Rosa's customer list is the mayor and his wife. Liesel finds the mayor's wife, Ilsa, cold and quiet. However, Liesel becomes frightened of the silent woman when she witnesses Liesel stealing a forbidden book out of a Nazi party bonfire. Liesel is sure the woman will tell on her and cause her to be arrested. Instead, Ilsa invites Liesel into her house and gives her the use of her private library. Liesel visits the library often, spending the afternoon reading out of as many books as she can. Soon Liesel finds herself engrossed in one specific book, *The Whistler*. Ilsa



tries to give this book to Liesel, but Liesel refuses. On the afternoon Liesel finally accepts the book, Ilsa tells her that she must fire Rosa from doing her laundry. Liesel is so angry she returns the book.

In the time leading up to Liesel's break with Ilsa, she has been going with Rudy to steal fruits and vegetables from neighboring farms. This experience causes Liesel to think of other robberies she might commit. Wanting *The Whistler* back, Liesel is too ashamed of herself to ask Ilsa for it. Instead, Liesel breaks into Ilsa's library and steals it. When Liesel finishes reading this book, she returns for another. Soon Ilsa catches on to what Liesel is doing and begins leaving gifts for her, including a dictionary she hopes will help Liesel understand what she is reading.

During this time, the Hubermanns, Liesel's foster parents, have been hiding a Jew in their home. Max Vandenburg is the son of a man Hans credits with saving his life during World War I. Hans promised to do anything he could for this man's wife and son, so when Max needs a place to hide from the government, Hans opens his home to him. Max hides in the basement, screened by paint cans and drop cloths stacked up at the entrance to the hidey hole under the stairs. During the winter, Max sleeps in the living room in front of the fire. On one of these nights, Liesel discovers that Max has nightmares similar to her own. This fact cements a bond between the two that will help them both survive the hard times yet to come.

After more than a year of Max living in his house, Hans makes a public mistake. Hans watches as a group of Jewish prisoners are marched through Molching. Hans sees an old man who is clearly starving to death and is overcome with a need to help him. Hans gives the man a piece of bread and is severely beaten by one of the guards for his gesture. Hans becomes frightened that the Gestapo will come to his house to arrest him and to search for hiding Jews. Hans decides he must send Max away. However, instead of arresting Hans, the Nazi Party accepts his membership and forces him to join the military. At war, Hans becomes a member of a group of soldiers who are the first into bombed areas in order to put out fires and shore up damaged buildings. While working at this duty, Hans breaks his leg in a car accident and is returned home. Six months later, Hans and Rosa are killed when a bomb is mistakenly dropped on Himmel Street. Liesel is the sole survivor of this disaster.



Prologue, A Mountain Range of Rubble, and Part One, The Grave Digger's Handbook

Prologue, A Mountain Range of Rubble, and Part One, The Grave Digger's Handbook Summary

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak is a novel of cruelty, poverty, and hope. Liesel Meminger is a young girl who has been placed in foster care by her mother. Liesel's brother dies en route to their new home and this leaves Liesel traumatized, causing her to have terrible nightmares in the middle of the night. Liesel's foster father begins teaching her to read on these nights to distract her from her pain. Liesel learns to turn to books for comfort. When the war begins, comfort becomes a rare state of mind, so Liesel finds ways to seek it out. Liesel begins to steal books in her efforts to deal with the cruelty of the world around her. The Book Thief is a complicated story of survival that will encourage its readers to think and to be amazed at how resilient the human spirit really is.

The narrator has been watching this one, particular girl for many years. The first time he sees the girl is on a train when a small boy dies, the girl's brother. The second time is when bombs fall on the street where she lives. The girl walks among the dead with a stunned demeanor, clutching a book to her chest. The narrator is death and he only comes when someone has died.

In the beginning of her story, the young girl is traveling by train to Munich with her mother and brother. The brother is sick, coughing a great deal. Then the coughing stops and the girl, Liesel Meminger, realizes the boy has died. Liesel and her mother disembark the train with two guards and bury the child in a nearby cemetery. While there, Liesel spots a book abandoned nearby. Liesel steals the book before reboarding the train with her mother and continuing her journey. When Liesel and her mother arrive at Munich, they are escorted by a child welfare worker to the small town of Molching where Liesel is placed in the care of her foster parents, Hans and Rosa Hubermann.

Rosa Hubermann is a rough woman who insists on calling everyone vulgar names. Rosa is not cruel, she is simply vulgar. Her husband, Hans, is kind. It is Hans who convinces Liesel to take a bath a few weeks after arriving in his home. When Liesel has a nightmare that same night, it is also Hans who sits with her until the terror has passed. Sometimes he plays his accordion for her to distract her from her dreams. Over the first few months, Liesel begins school, at which she does not excel because she does not know how to read. Liesel is also enrolled in BDM, the Band of German Girls, a required organization for German youth. Liesel is also expected to help Rosa collect and deliver the laundry she does as a means of making extra money. Another chore Liesel does is clean the door every afternoon after a neighbor, Frau Holtzapfel, has spit on it. Frau



Holtzapfel and Rosa Hubermann have had a falling out and this is why Frau Holtzapfel spits on the door.

A few weeks after she first arrives, Rosa allows Liesel to play outside with the neighbor kids. There is a soccer game going on and Liesel joins them, only to become angry when she is told she cannot play the position she wants. However, Liesel meets Rudy Stiener that day, the boy who is destined to become her best friend. Rudy takes Liesel on a tour of town and points out the neighborhood eccentrics, including the shop keeper who is a passionate follower of Hitler, the old man who whistles constantly, and the street where the Jews live. Rudy is a passionate runner who admires the Olympic gold medalist, Jesse Owens. After watching Owens on television, Rudy once painted himself black with a piece of coal and pretended to be Owens. Rudy's father warned Rudy at the time to be careful about admiring such a man because the fuhrer and his followers would not understand. However, it is Rudy who does not understand.

One night, in the grip of a nightmare, Liesel wets her bed. While changing the sheets, Hans finds the book Liesel stole from the cemetery where her brother was buried. Liesel tells Hans she would like to read the book. Hans agrees, but warns her he is not a strong reader himself. However, Hans spends several months patiently teaching Liesel how to read the book. The book, the Grave Digger's Handbook, is hardly the ideal primer, but Hans sees how important it is to Liesel. Hans begins with simple words, writing them out on sandpaper and illustrating each, teaching Liesel how to read these, and then begins with the book. The lessons continue each night Liesel has a nightmare and expand into the day time. Hans takes Liesel to a nearby river where he often goes to play his accordion. On cold days, Liesel and Hans work in the basement so they will not disturb Rosa. In the basement, rather than use sandpaper, Hans began writing the words on the walls with the paint he uses in his profession as a housepainter.

Liesel continues to go to school where she has been moved up to the class with her peers, rather than the younger class where she had been placed due to her inability to read. This move is caused not by her progress with her reading lessons, but because Liesel has become somewhat of a bully toward the younger students. Soon after the change, there is a reading test in her classroom. The teacher purposely overlooks Liesel even though she believes she is ready for such a test. When Liesel protests, the teacher allows her to take the test. However, Liesel cannot read the appointed text and instead recites a section of the Grave Digger's Handbook from memory. This causes several students to ridicule Liesel. Angry, Liesel attacks one of these students on the playground, beating him mercilessly. Afterward, the stress of everything that has happened weighs heavy on Liesel and she turns to Rudy for comfort.

Prologue, A Mountain Range of Rubble, and Part One, The Grave Digger's Handbook Analysis

The narrator is introduced in the prologue. The narrator never names himself, but from his description of his experiences, the narrator is Death. With the choice of this narrator and the tone he sets for the novel, the reader senses it will not be a happy novel. The



narrator even goes as far as to say he wants to put a cheerful twist on the story, but then he goes on to recount the times in which he has come in contact with the main character. Each of these times was a time of deep grief for the young woman as each of these times someone has died.

The main character is introduced during one of these moments of grief. The young girl is on a train and her brother has just died. The girl is young, not yet ten years old, and the death of her brother is devastating. The girl responds to this death by stealing a book someone has carelessly left lying near the grave. Later the girl is caught with the book, but her foster father does not know it is stolen. The girl, Liesel, confesses that she cannot read the book, so her foster father begins to teach her. Liesel clings to these lessons because they distract her from the terrible nightmares she has been having since her brother's death. These lessons are important not only because they teach the child to read, but because Liesel turns to these lessons as a way to cope with the darkness that is in her life. This is important because the girl is on the brink of a terrible time—a war is beginning to start in the country in which she lives.

The characters of Liesel's foster parents are also introduced in this first section of the book. Hans and Rosa Hubermann could not be more different. Rosa is vulgar, tough, and full of negative energy that the reader does not know the origin of. Hans, on the other hand, is sad but kind. Hans is the one who convinces Liesel to take a bath and who spends his nights consoling Liesel after her nightmares. It is also Hans who takes the time to teach Liesel to read despite the fact that he does not read well himself. Hans is a house painter who also plays the accordion, often playing his accordion in order to distract Liesel from her nightmares. The accordion plays an important role in Hans' life and the narrator suggests that there is a good reason for this. The reader hopes this reason will be revealed later as the plot continues to develop.

It takes time for Liesel to settle into life on Himmel Street. However, it becomes easier when she makes friends with a neighbor named Rudy. Rudy is an athletic young man who admires the Olympic gold medalist, Jesse Owens. Rudy even paints his body black and tries to emulate his hero. However, this act worries Rudy's father who knows that admiring someone outside of the ideal German race is dangerous in the view of those loyal to the fuhrer. Rudy's father tries to explain this to his son, but it is difficult for someone so young to understand. This advice, however, shows the reader the environment Rudy and Liesel live in and it suggests further difficulties as the plot progresses.

Liesel is struggling with the difficulties in her life. Between the loss of her parents, the death of her brother, her new home, and the ridicule she suffers at school, Liesel is beginning to show signs of stress. Liesel has lost her identity, a theme of the novel, and is struggling to find out who she is in this time of turmoil. Liesel acts out, getting into fights at school. Eventually Liesel breaks down and turns to Rudy for support. Although Rudy does not have the answers Liesel needs, a friendship is solidified between these two young people, and there is the suggestion that it will continue to be an important friendship in the years to come.



Part Two, The Shoulder Shrug

Part Two, The Shoulder Shrug Summary

A week before Christmas, Liesel and Hans finish reading *The Grave Digger's Handbook*. It is a great accomplishment for Liesel. Her reading ability has come a long way since she first came to Himmel Street, but she still struggles far behind the rest of her class. At Christmas, Hans gives Liesel two books that he bought by selling some of his hand rolled cigarettes. They are a precious gift for Liesel and she cherishes them almost as much as the time Hans spends helping her read them. About this same time, one of Rosa's customers fires her, blaming the slowly failing economy. Rosa gets the idea that if she sends Liesel to collect and deliver the laundry alone, her other customers will have pity on her and not fire her. From this time on, Liesel spends her afternoons making the deliveries. Sometimes Rudy will come along.

Liesel learns how to write letters in school and gets the idea to write to her mother. Liesel asks Hans if it would be okay and he says it is. However, Liesel overhears Rosa tell Hans it is a futile task since they do not know where her mother is, if she is even still alive. Liesel continues to write the letters, however, once even taking some of the laundry money in order to pay for stamps. When Liesel is caught in this theft, Rosa beats her with a wooden spoon. It is at that moment that Liesel realizes she will never see her mother again.

Molching's citizens decide that this year, for the Fuehrer's birthday, they will have a bonfire and burn all the books in town that are vulgar or go against the Fuehrer's teachings. Liesel is excited about the bonfire because she has never attended one before. The Hubermann's grown children come for the celebration. Over lunch, however, Hans and his son, Hans Jr., have a fight. Hans does not believe that his father is truly faithful to the Nazi party and he is embarrassed that his father has yet to be accepted as a member of the party. Hans has applied to the party, but has been placed on a waiting list because he once helped a Jewish man whose home was defamed. Hans Jr. is embarrassed by this fact. Hans Jr. criticizes the books Liesel is allowed to read and then storms from the house when Hans tries to defend the girl. The whole episode gives Hans something to think about, especially Hans Jr.'s reference to Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*.

That evening, Liesel rushes downtown to watch the bonfire. While standing among the townspeople, Liesel overhears someone talking about Communists. This word sparks something in Liesel's memory and she realizes it has something to do with why she can no longer live with her parents. The realization is like a punch in the stomach. Liesel attempts to escape the crowd, but it has become chaotic. Liesel is nearly out of the crowd when she sees a friend from school who has broken his ankle. Liesel goes back to help him to the steps of the church. When the bonfire is over, Liesel waits here for Hans to meet her. When Hans arrives, Liesel asks him if her mother was a communist. Hans says he does not know, but Liesel suspects he is lying. Liesel asks if the Fuehrer



took her mother away. When Hans admits he probably has, Liesel confesses to hating the fuehrer. Hans hushes her and explains that she cannot talk that way in public.

A group of men are putting out the last of the bonfire. Hans goes up to speak to one of them. Liesel sees that some of the books have not burned. Cautiously, Liesel grabs a book, *The Shoulder Shrug*, out of the fire and hides it under her shirt. The book is still hot and it begins to burn her ribs. Liesel holds on to the pain, embracing it because it makes her feel more alive. Liesel believes she has gotten away with the theft, but then she feels someone's eyes on her. Liesel sees someone watching her from a nearby alley.

Part Two, The Shoulder Shrug Analysis

Liesel is coming along in her reading and has finished reading the *Grave Digger's Handbook*. Now Liesel needs new books to read. Hans sells some of his precious cigarettes to get Liesel two new books. Hans' unselfishness here shows the depth of his affection for Liesel. Liesel is only his foster child therefore he does not need to develop affection for her, but in this case Hans clearly has. This is important because it shows the relationship between child and father as well as gives motivation for both characters to keep each other happy and safe.

Rosa loses one of her jobs and decides to send Liesel to collect and deliver the laundry from then on, hoping the other customers will not be able to fire a child. This idea is a good one, but the reader suspects it will not be successful because of the financial crisis the war is bound to bring the citizens of Molching. Liesel's new chore will also put her in a position to come into contact with some of Molching's richer citizens, including the mayor and his wife, suggesting a later development in a that relationship.

Liesel learns how to write letters and decides to write letters to her mother. Liesel was left with the Hubermanns with the idea that it would be for a short time and her mother would one day return for her. However, as Liesel's letters go unanswered, Liesel begins to realize that her mother might not come back for her. When Liesel overhears people talking about communism, she remembers the word from her childhood and wonders if perhaps this is the reason she can no longer live with her parents. Liesel asks Hans if this is true and learns it is. Liesel decides she hates Adolf Hitler. It is dangerous for a citizen to dislike the fuehrer, so Hans warns her to be careful about speaking that way in public. The reader suspects this may become an issue later in the book and add tension to the plot development.

There is a bonfire in town to celebrate Hitler's birthday. On this day, the Hubermanns' grown children come for a visit. Hans Jr. argues with his father over the fact that he has not been accepted into the Nazi party and over the material Hans allows Liesel to read. Hans Jr. believes Liesel should be reading *Mein Kampf*. When Hans defends Liesel, Hans Jr. leaves the house and the narrator suggests he will never return. The argument is of the same tone as Hans' warning to Liesel regarding her opinion of Hitler. Again

tension is introduced into the story as the reader worries that Hans has political opinions that will pit him against followers of Hitler.

At the bonfire, Liesel sees an opportunity to steal a book. Liesel takes the book, *The Shoulder Shrug*, from the fire and hides it under her shirt, not allowing even Hans to see what she has done. However, someone is watching Liesel from the alley. The reader wonders what will happen to Liesel since it is clear that reading these books is not acceptable in this atmosphere of oppression.



Part Three, Mein Kampf

Part Three, Mein Kampf Summary

On the way home, Hans discovers that Liesel stole the book because it is burning her ribs so badly she is forced to take it from under her shirt. Hans is not upset and promises he will not tell Rosa. In fact, this and what Hans Jr. said about Mein Kampf give him an idea. Hans asks Liesel if she would be able to keep a secret for him if he ever asked. Liesel assures him she could. The next day, Hans goes and buys a copy of Mein Kampf.

Liesel knows it is the mayor's wife who saw her steal the book from the bonfire. When Liesel goes to the mayor's house to collect the laundry, she is afraid the woman will accuse her or tell someone what she has done. The first time, Liesel purposely skips the Hermann house and the second time, she takes Rudy with her. Liesel is frightened when Frau Hermann opens the door. However, Frau Hermann never says a word. Liesel believes she is safe, that perhaps Frau Hermann saw nothing. The next time Liesel goes to the Hermann home, Frau Hermann invites her inside. Frau Hermann shows Liesel her library, filled with more books than Liesel ever imagined existed. Liesel walks around the room, touching the spine of each book, overwhelmed. It takes Liesel three attempts to leave and when she does, she realizes she did not say thank you. Liesel returns and offers awkward words of gratitude.

There is a young man in Stuttgart who lives in darkness, sitting on the floor in fear all day, unable to sleep, unable to move. A friend comes to see him from time to time, bringing him small amounts of food, but these visits are far and few between. One day the friend brings him a book in which is hidden an identity card and a key. The man is to use these to escape and find a man named Hans Hubermann.

Liesel spends the summer reading the *Shoulder Shrug* with Hans in the middle of the night and reading the books in Frau Hermann's library during the day. Liesel sits on the floor in the library and surrounds herself with books, reading a paragraph out of each. In one, Liesel sees a name and asks Frau Hermann who the boy is. Liesel realizes this is the dead son of the mayor and his wife. Frau Hermann is clearly still grieving the loss of her only child and Liesel finds herself struggling with the remorse she feels for this kind woman. Liesel also spends the summer playing soccer with the neighborhood boys. Late in the summer, Liesel and Rudy also indulge in another activity, stealing. The Steiner family is having trouble making ends meet since Herr Steiner's tailor shop has lost most of its Jewish customers. The Hubermanns are also having trouble since Hans can find few painting jobs, so Rosa makes pea soup once a week to feed them every evening. As a result, Rudy finds himself searching for new sources of food. Rudy talks Liesel into joining him when he goes to raid a local farm with a group of local boys. The raid goes well and Liesel and Rudy end up with a basket full of apples. They eat them all themselves rather than face explaining to their mothers where the food came from and end up spending the night with a belly ache. It is a good belly ache, however.



Toward the end of summer, Liesel and Rudy find a coin in the street. They go to the shop of Frau Diller, a passionate member of the Nazi party, and buy a piece of candy. They have to share the small piece, but nothing has ever tasted quite so good. At the same time, the young man has left his dark hiding place and boarded the train. The man is frightened because if he gets caught it will mean going to a concentration camp or worse. The young man reads the book he was given on the train ride to keep his mind off his danger. The book, *Mein Kampf*, is not his choice of reading material, but he reads it closely just the same.

Another of Rosa's customers fires her and Rudy and Liesel continue their acts of thievery. One day Rudy tells Liesel about a young man who goes to the church once a week with a basket full of food. Rudy convinces Liesel to help him throw water on the ground in order to cause it to ice over. When the boy falls, Rudy and Liesel will steal his basket. The plan works, although the boy appears to be more badly hurt than Rudy or Liesel either expected. They take the food anyway and share it with the group of boys they have been stealing with since summer. The following day, Liesel and Rudy go to rob another farm. However, this time the farmer catches them. As Rudy climbs the fence to get away, he gets stuck. Both Liesel and the gangs leader go back to help him despite the danger. This episode brings the three children closer together, but the gang leader will move away just three weeks later. When all the excitement is done, Liesel and Rudy sell their goods and go back to Frau Diller's for more candy. Late that night, the young man arrives in Munich and walks to the Hubermann home in Molching. The young man uses the key from *Mein Kampf* to open the door, afraid of what he will find on the other side, but more afraid of what is on the outside of the door.

Part Three, *Mein Kampf* Analysis

Liesel is forced to admit to Hans that she stole a book. Hans is not upset and promises to keep her secret. Hans then asks Liesel if she could keep a secret for him. This seems to come out of nowhere and leaves the reader wondering what secret Hans might have that Liesel would be required to keep. The next day Hans buys Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*. The reader is curious what Hans might want with this book since he does not seem to hold the same beliefs as the fuhrer, but soon will learn the reason. There is a young man in hiding who is desperate for another place to hide. The young man lies in the dark all day and night, afraid to move, afraid to even sleep in fear that someone might discover him. One day someone brings him a copy of *Mein Kampf* with an identity card and a key hidden inside. When the young man thinks how he will use this to find a man he does not know, Hans Hubermann, the reader begins to put two and two together. This young man is clearly in trouble, hiding because he is a Jew. Clearly Hans has bought this copy of *Mein Kampf* to help this young man. The reader still does not know why, but realizes that helping this young man is clearly something a selfless man like Hans might do, touching for the first time on the theme of human cruelty versus self sacrifice.

Liesel is afraid she will be punished for stealing a book from the bonfire. The mayor's wife sees Liesel do this, so whenever Liesel goes to her house to collect the laundry



she is terrified. However, when Liesel finally overcomes her fear, she finds that not only does the woman not want to harm her, but she wants to share more books with her. Liesel is overwhelmed by this kindness, perhaps the first true kindness Liesel has ever experienced. Frau Hermann is also showing a selfless side, offering Liesel the one thing that brings her happiness in this quickly deteriorating world. Frau Hermann's kindness introduces her as a woman who will do anything to help a child, especially in light of her own son's death. In the volatile world in which Liesel lives, the reader suspects that Frau Hermann's generosity will come to Liesel's rescue time and again.

Liesel spends the summer with Rudy. Money is becoming tight in both the Steiner and Hubermann family, so when Rudy suggests they join a gang of boys who rob from the local farmers, Liesel agrees. Liesel has already started a career as a thief, so stealing a few apples seems like a minor escapade to her. However, when a boy gets injured and Rudy is nearly caught, the children begin to reconsider their choices. However, the benefits far outweigh the dangers, especially when they earn enough money from their escapades to buy candy, a rare treat. The reader wonders how brave these children will become, how often they will steal in the future and if their goals will change.



Part Four, The Standover Man

Part Four, The Standover Man Summary

When Hans Hubermann was a young man during World War I, he was in the army stationed in France. One of Hans' fellow soldiers was a young man named Erik Vandenburg, a Jew. This man was an accordion teacher before the war and he taught Hans how to play. One day, the sergeant asked who had good handwriting. Vandenburg volunteered Hans. Hans remained on base while the rest of his squad went into battle. None of the soldiers would return. Hans believes Vandenburg saved his life. Hans rescued Vandenburg's accordion from among his belongings and tried to return it to his widow. Frau Vandenburg did not want the instrument back, but accepted Hans' address when he offered to help the widow and her son in any way he could. Today is that day. Max Vandenburg is standing in Hans' kitchen, wondering if he still plays the accordion. Hans has never agreed with the persecution of Jews and because of this he has always done what he can to help them, even to his own detriment and the embarrassment of his only son.

Max Vandenburg grew up in Struttgart. As a child, Max was bullied by his classmates because he is a Jew. One of these bullies was a boy named Walter Kugler. Max and Walter had many fights, thirteen, and most of them Walter won. However, Max was a good boxer and often put on a good fight. This won Walter's respect and they grew to be friends. One night, all the Jews in Struttgart were gathered up and moved to concentration camps. Walter came to Max's apartment and helped him to escape. Max did not want to go, he did not want to leave his family, but his mother insisted. Max's mother gave him a name and an address before sending him away. After hiding Max for six months, Walter takes this name and address and finds the man who wrote it. Hans Hubermann listens to Walter's story and agrees to help if he can.

Liesel goes into the kitchen and is quickly sent back to bed by Hans. Rosa then enters the kitchen and warms a bowl of pea soup for Max. Max has eaten so little in the past few months that he eats too much and becomes sick. Hans puts Max to sleep in the spare bed in Liesel's room. The next morning, Liesel stays home from school. In the basement, Hans talks to her in a way he has never talked to her before. Hans is stern, explaining to Liesel that no one can ever know that Max is in their house. Hans says that if Liesel should tell anyone, even Rudy, that the Gestapo could come and take Hans and Rosa away forever. Hans says if Liesel does not want Hans and Rosa to go away, she must keep this secret forever. Liesel agrees.

Max sleeps for three days. Liesel watches him and thinks how his hair looks like twigs. Max has nightmares just like Liesel, only his dreams come from the guilt he feels at leaving his family to be arrested. When Max finally wakes, he is angry with himself for sleeping in Liesel's room like a guest and vows to never do it again. Hans and Rosa take Max down into the basement and make a space for him underneath the stairs. Hans covers the entrance to the space with paint cans and drop clothes in case anyone



ever comes into the basement, so they will not find him. At first Liesel has little contact with Max. Life continues pretty much like normal for Liesel. Liesel attends school, collects and delivers the laundry even as another customer fires Rosa, and spends afternoons reading in Frau Hermann's library.

The weather turns cold and the basement is too cold for Max to live in. At night, Hans and Rosa allow Max to come into the living room and sleep in front of the fire. After a time, Liesel overcomes her fear of Max and asks him about the book he is always reading. Max tells Liesel the story of how the book saved his life and this begins a nightly ritual of storytelling. One night, when Liesel wakes from one of her nightmares, she hears Max struggling with a nightmare of his own. Liesel goes into the living room and tells Max about her dreams and he about hers. Shortly after this, Liesel's dreams lessen in frequency and she is able to tell Hans it is no longer necessary for him to sit up with her at night.

On Liesel's next birthday, she receives another book as her gift. Max did not know it was her birthday and is ashamed at having no gift to give her. Liesel gives him a hug that assures him that she does not mind he has no gift to give. Max works in the basement for several weeks painting the pages of *Mein Kampf* and using them to create a new book for Liesel. This book is called the Standover Man and is about a man who has always had someone standing over him. One day this man meets a little girl who has many things in common with him. This little girl gives the man a gift that changes the way he views the world. Liesel is touched by this book and treasures it among her other, meager possessions.

Part Four, The Standover Man Analysis

The reader already knows that Hans is a kind man. Hans takes in Liesel when she needs a place to go and welcomes her with open arms. Hans spends his nights calming Liesel's fears and teaching her to read. Hans is open and self sacrificing. Therefore it is no surprised when Hans welcomes Max Vandenburg into his home. The reader learns how Max's father saved Hans' life by volunteering him to remain in camp the day their entire army squad is killed in battle. Now Hans feels he can return this gift by helping Max. Hans agrees to hide Max in his home.

Max is introduced with some background information. Max has grown up among prejudice, often fighting in school to defend himself and his religion. Through this conflict, Max has made a friend who has placed himself in danger in order to help Max escape arrest. Max is hidden away until such a time that his friend feels it is safe to contact Hans and ask for help. Max is grateful to escape the persecution his family faces, but feels guilty that he survived and his family did not. Max often has nightmares and it is these nightmares that forge a relationship between him and Liesel. Liesel is reluctant to speak to Max, unsure how to relate to him. However, when Liesel learns that Max has nightmares like she does, she finds that they have a great deal more in common than she might have thought. Liesel learns tolerance, that Jews are people just like herself. It is an important lesson that will stay with Liesel for a long time to come.



Max sleeps a great deal his first few days in the Hubermann home due to the exhaustion he has suffered in his fear of being discovered. Afterward Max is hidden in the basement and spends most of his days reading *Mein Kampf*. The book makes Max angry, but he credits it with saving his life. Later, when it is Liesel's birthday and Max wants to give her something, he uses the pages of the book to create a small picture book for Liesel because he is so grateful for her friendship and the affection she has shown him. A great friendship is developing between these two and the reader suspects that this friendship will have a powerful impact on Liesel as she continues to grow and mature.



Part Five, The Whistler

Part Five, The Whistler Summary

Life begins to take on the routine of normalcy once more in the Hubermann home. Liesel begins to spend a great deal of time in the basement, sometimes working on her reading lessons with Hans and sometimes just talking with Max. One afternoon, Max requests a haircut and Liesel gives it to him, getting it mostly even. On another afternoon, Liesel is once again reading in Frau Hermann's library. Lately Liesel has been reading only one book, the Whistler. On this afternoon, Frau Hermann offers it to Liesel, but she refuses. On the way home, Liesel finds a newspaper in the trash and takes it home to Max so he can do the crossword. Later they will read the articles together.

One day Max asks Liesel to tell him what the weather is like. Liesel describes it with as many colorful words as she can think up. This soon becomes a routine between them. Max has very little to do in his cubby hole in the basement. Often he will sleep. Max begins having dreams about Hitler in which he is a boxer and Max is his opponent. They fight each other for hours, neither winning nor losing. Then Max imagines the entire nation of Germany climbing into the ring on Hitler's side and beating him down. Max is nothing, only a Jew and he cannot possibly win against Hitler. Max begins to do exercises in the dark. One night he tells Liesel about this dream and tells her that sometimes he wins. Another afternoon Max decides he wants to keep a journal of sorts. Max enlists Liesel's help in painting over the remaining pages of Mein Kampf to use as his journal. Liesel gets a peek in the journal one day and is shocked by the pain and anger she sees within its pages.

Liesel goes to Frau Hermann's again and spends the afternoon reading on the floor of the library. Once more Frau Hermann asks if she will accept The Whistler. Liesel tries to decline the offer, but this time Frau Hermann is more insistent. Finally Liesel accepts. When Liesel starts to leave, instead of giving her the laundry, Frau Hermann gives her a letter for Rosa. Liesel knows what it says, but she opens it outside the house anyway. Liesel is so angry that Frau Hermann has fired her mother that she returns to the house. Liesel tells Frau Hermann that she is a pathetic woman who has held onto the memory of her dead son for too long. Then Liesel returns the book and says she will never take a gift from such a woman. Afterward Liesel feels ashamed of herself and guilty for what she has done.

Rudy is having trouble in his Hitler Youth division. Tommy Muller, a classmate who is hard of hearing because of a terrible illness when he was young, cannot hear the leader when he calls out orders while the division is marching. Tommy always stops too late or turns late, causing the division to move unevenly. The leader is constantly yelling at Tommy. One day Rudy intervenes on Tommy's behalf, drawing the ire of the leader himself. Rudy is punished with Tommy, forced to do push ups. At about the same time, the apples began to ripen on the trees. Rudy and Liesel hook up with the same gang



from the year before. However, since the leader had moved away, there was a new leader, Viktor Chemmel. Viktor is not as kind as the last leader and is not impressed with Liesel because of her gender. Viktor allows Liesel and Rudy only one apple between them and when Rudy objects, Viktor knocks him down and pins him to the ground, proving who is the tougher boy.

Rudy's trouble with the Hitler Youth division leader are growing. One day the boy forces Rudy to do push ups in a field that has been freshly fertilized with manure. Rudy is becoming frustrated and needs to do something to make him feel like a winner. Liesel thinks stealing something new might cheer Rudy up. Liesel suggests they break in to the mayor's house through a window that is always kept open. However, the day Liesel suggests this, the window is closed. They do not give up and return to check several times. When they finally find the window open, Rudy and Liesel debate over who should go in and who should keep watch. Liesel insists on being the one to go in. Liesel slips off her shoes and climbs into the window, promising as she does that she will try to find some food. Instead, Liesel searches the shelves for *The Whistler*. Liesel does not find it on the shelf, but lying on Frau Hermann's desk. Liesel grabs the book just as Rudy warns her of movement upstairs. Liesel jumps out the window and she and Rudy run away. However, they have forgotten her shoes. Rudy returns to the house for her shoes, attempting to prove to Liesel how brave he really is.

Some time later, Rudy steals an apple from the market and is caught. Rudy claims that his family is starving and that all their money has gone to buy a coat for his sister. When a customer backs Rudy's story, the store owner lets him go. A few days later, Rudy gets into a fight with his Hitler Youth division leader. Rudy likes to be insubordinate during meetings. On this day, the leader is still angry with Rudy for being especially difficult at the last meeting. When Liesel and Rudy come across the leader on the street, he takes after Rudy and forces him onto his knees on the street. The leader asks Rudy when Hitler was born and Rudy purposely answers incorrectly. The leader beats Rudy in the ribs and face, then cuts his hair with a pocket knife, humiliating him in front of all of his friends. A short time later Rudy joins a new division of the Hitler Youth.

An afternoon in December, Liesel and Rudy run into Viktor Chemmel while walking beside the river. Chemmel sees the book Liesel is carrying and snatches it from her. Rudy tries to get it back, but Chemmel throws it into the river and laughs as it floats away. Rudy goes into the river and rescues the book for Liesel. Liesel waits for him to ask for a kiss, thinking this may be the one time she will agree. Rudy asks, but does not accept the kiss and never asks for another.

Part Five, The Whistler Analysis

Liesel has come to enjoy her afternoons reading in Frau Hermann's library, especially one book in particular. Frau Hermann sees how much Liesel likes this one book and attempts to give it to her on several occasions. Liesel is too polite to accept such a gift. However, when Frau Hermann fires Liesel's mama from doing the laundry, Liesel loses all respect for Frau Hermann. Liesel becomes angry because she knows how much this



little amount of money means to her mama. Already the family is forced to eat pea soup every night and they are struggling to make ends meet. Hans cannot find work because of his kindness to the Jews and because of a lack of need for house painters during this economic downturn. Life is difficult and Frau Hermann's decision to stop having Rosa do her laundry just makes the future look that much bleaker for the Hubermann family. Liesel takes out her fear and anger on Frau Hermann, calling her pathetic for still grieving her son after so many years. Liesel then returns the book to her.

Liesel and Rudy are still robbing farmers of their produce. However, they are having little success under the new leader of their gang. Liesel decides that Rudy needs a better target and decides to try to rob the mayor's house. Liesel allows Rudy to believe she is breaking into the house to steal food, but really she only wants that book, *The Whistler*. Liesel feels the book belongs to her anyway, but she is too ashamed to knock on the door and ask for it. Instead, Liesel sneaks into the house and takes it. It is an act that is supposed to make Rudy feel better, but the reader gets the impression that it is Liesel who benefits the most. Now Liesel feels empowered, as though she has some control over her life. Liesel is the book thief, this is her identity and it is an identity she can live with.

Max has settled into the Hubermann household. Max fantasizes about beating up Hitler, a metaphor that gives the reader a clear picture of the anger and grief that grips this man every day he has to hide in the basement. Max writes these feelings down in a journal he has begun, filling it with pictures that disturb Liesel when she steals a peek at them. Liesel cannot fully appreciate the pain that fills Max every day. However, Liesel understands his boredom and does all she can to help him fill his days. Liesel brings Max newspapers and tells him the weather, helping him imagine what the outside world looks like. Both the reader and Liesel are struggling to understand what life is like for Max, but it becomes clear in the little things that Liesel is able to do for him.

Rudy is growing into adolescence and becoming more mature. In his growth, the reader is beginning to get a glimpse of the man Rudy might one day become. Rudy stands up for his friend and takes the resulting punishment. Rudy is tormented by the leader of his Hitler Youth division, but he does not stop standing up for what he believes is right. Even when Rudy is forced to do push ups in manure, he does not hesitate to stand up for his beliefs. However, the pressure of this conflict and the poverty his family suffers is taking a toll on Rudy. Rudy is frustrated and needs to come out on top in something. Rudy seems to fail at all he tries to do. The reader feels Rudy's frustration and suspects that in a future chapter Rudy will attempt to come out on top. The only question is whether or not it will end well for Rudy or he will end up in deeper trouble than before.



Part Six, The Dream Carrier

Part Six, The Dream Carrier Summary

On Christmas Eve, Liesel brings snow into the basement so that she and Max can build a snowman. Max is excited by this and thrilled that Liesel has given him such a gift. However, shortly after this Max begins to get sick. Rosa believes it is caused by the cold of the basement and the snow. One day in January Max collapses. Rosa and Hans put him in Liesel's bed where he sleeps for a long time. Liesel sits with Max, praying he will wake up. Liesel reads to him for hours at a time. At one point, Liesel thinks that if she brings him gifts, Max will wake up. Liesel begins gathering gifts for Max, including a flattened soccer ball, a feather, and a description of a perfect cloud. All in all, there are thirteen gifts. Liesel hates to leave Max's side, afraid he will wake without her.

Liesel has finished reading *The Whistler* to Max and decides to steal another book from Frau Hermann's library. Rudy wants to be the one to go inside this time, but Liesel talks him out of it. Liesel sneaks inside and takes a book called, *The Dream Carrier*. When she slips back out the window, Rudy is waiting, this time with her shoes. Liesel hurries home and begins reading the book to Max. One night, Liesel overhears Rosa asking Hans what they will do with Max if he dies. They cannot exactly bury him down at the local cemetery. This frightens Liesel even more. Liesel makes Rosa promise that if Max were to wake while she is in school, she will come to the school and tell her. Liesel tells Rosa to yell at her about something to cover the real reason for her visit. A few days later, Rosa shows up at the school and yells at Liesel for using her hairbrush. Max is awake. Liesel rushes home to see him and he thanks her for her gifts.

In June, Liesel is out playing soccer when she sees a group of party members going around to the neighbors' homes. Liesel learns that they are checking everyone's basements to see if they are appropriate to use as bomb shelters. Liesel realizes they will be at her home soon, so she purposely falls down and injures herself. Hans comes out to help Liesel home and she is able to tell him what is happening. Hans warns Max just seconds before the party man knocks on their door. Max is not discovered and the party man announces that their basement is too shallow to survive a bomb.

Part Six, The Dream Carrier Analysis

Max is growing weary of hiding in the basement and has begun wish the whole ordeal was over. Liesel brings him snow to make a snowman and Max is grateful to her for alleviating some of the boredom and bringing something normal into his life. The reader most likely cannot imagine what life is like for Max, always having to be afraid of discovery. It is worse than being in prison, since prison means some time outside and visitors. This fear is nearly realized when a party member comes to the Hubermann home to inspect the basement for possible use as a bomb shelter. Liesel is able to warn Hans, who in turn warns Max, but only by seconds. If there had been no warning, Max



surely would have been caught. This would have meant prison for all the adults in Liesel's life. Now Liesel has this added burden on her shoulders of protecting her entire family. Liesel does well, but the reader can see it is a burden that takes a terrible toll and is not one that a child should have to suffer.

Max becomes ill and the depth of Liesel's feelings for him are truly revealed. Liesel is frightened that Max will die. Liesel brings him gifts and reads to him every day, even stealing a new book when she runs out of fresh material to read him. Liesel clearly cares a great deal for Max. At the same time, Max's illness proves a difficult dilemma for her parents. If Max dies, there is nothing they can do with the corpse because he is not supposed to exist. The Hubermanns cannot take him down to the local cemetery to bury him. It is a quandary that is more dangerous for the Hubermanns than simply hiding him in their basement. Fortunately, Max does not die, but the depth of the Hubermanns' trouble is revealed during this time, increasing the tension within the plot as the reader is left on pins and needles, worrying about the possibility of discovery.



Part Seven, The Complete Duden Dictionary and Thesaurus

Part Seven, The Complete Duden Dictionary and Thesaurus Summary

During the summer of 1942 Hans Hubermann suddenly has work again. The people of Molching need to darken their windows as the threat of air raids becomes a reality. Hans has so many jobs that he runs out of black paint with which to cover the windows. As a result, Hans begins mixing odd colors to make a close replica of black. Liesel begins going on jobs with Hans and is amazed at how complicated mixing paint proves to be. Liesel also discovers that Hans is not always paid cash for the work he does. One day Hans is paid in champagne. Liesel is allowed to share in this drink and vows to never drink champagne again because it could never taste as sweet as it does when shared with Hans.

Rudy is busy that summer training. The Hitler Youth carnival is coming up and Rudy is signed up for four races in the track and field events. Rudy wants to prove to his old division leader that he is better than everyone else. Rudy easily wins the first race, then the second. By the third, Rudy is growing tired, but he wins that one as well. However, Rudy is exhausted when it is time to line up for the fourth. Afraid of losing that one race and being a failure in front of his old division leader, Rudy purposely gets himself disqualified. Rudy is satisfied with winning three of the four.

Liesel steals another book from the mayor's house, this time going alone. A few days later, Rudy comes and gets Liesel. Propped up in the window of Frau Hermann's library is a book. Liesel goes to the window and steals the book, discovering it is a dictionary and thesaurus. Inside is a letter from Frau Hermann. The letter tells Liesel that Frau Hermann knows she has been stealing from her library. Frau Hermann is not angry about this, only apologetic that Liesel is angry with her. Frau Hermann hopes that one day Liesel will come to the front door instead of sneaking through the window to visit the library. Liesel attempts to go back and knock on the front door, but discovers she cannot make herself do it.

In the middle of the night the air raid sirens go off. Liesel, Hans, and Rosa go across the street to a neighbor's house to hide in a basement that has been rated suitable as a bomb shelter. There are twenty-two people stuffed into the tiny room. There is nothing but fear in that room as they all wait the signal that it is safe to return home. Liesel clings to her books and thinks about Max, hoping he will be okay in the basement of the Hubermann home should the bombs fall on Himmel Street. When the signal comes, Liesel races home to be sure Max is okay. Max confesses that while everyone was hiding from the bombs, he snuck upstairs to look out the window. It is the first time Max has seen the sky in nearly two years.



Another raid takes place a few weeks later. Everyone is frightened and there is much tension in the bomb shelter. Liesel takes out one of her books and begins to read aloud. Soon everyone grows quiet and listens. Liesel reads until the signal comes that all is well. A few days later, Frau Holtzapfel comes to the Hubermann house and speaks to Rosa for the first time in many years. Frau Holtzapfel liked the story Liesel read in the shelter so much that she is willing to trade her coffee rations if Liesel will come read to her several afternoons a week. Rosa agrees and sends Liesel over right away.

A couple of weeks later, a truck carrying Jewish prisoners to Dachau breaks down outside of Molching. The soldiers decide to march the prisoners through town. One of the soldiers is an old man who is starving and near death. Hans Hubermann is among the Molching townspeople watching this procession. Hans cannot stand by and watch this poor man suffer. Hans takes a piece of bread from his lunch box and offers it to the dying man. A soldier sees this and beats both the prisoner and Hans with his whip. Hans does not realize the magnitude of his actions until it is over. Many people from town have seen what happened. Hans knows the Gestapo will soon come to arrest him and when they do they will search the house. They will find Max. Hans tells Max he has to leave.

Part Seven, The Complete Duden Dictionary and Thesaurus Analysis

Hans finds work again as the people of Molching prepare their homes for the air raids that are coming. It is sad work, but it provides well for the Hubermann family, even when Hans' customers cannot pay him in cash. Liesel has her first taste of champagne thanks to this harrowing change. At the same time, Rudy is still out to prove something to himself. As predicted in a previous chapter, Rudy finds a way to make himself feel like a winner after a string of mishaps and near disasters. Rudy trains for a field and track competition, signing himself up for four different races. Rudy manages to win three of these races and is disqualified from a fourth. All in all, it seems that Rudy has finally proven his prowess among his peers, especially the division leader who humiliated him. Proving himself to be athletic, however, may come back to haunt Rudy as the plot continues its race toward a climax.

Liesel continues to steal books from the mayor's house, this time going by herself instead of taking Rudy along. A few days later, Liesel discovers that Frau Hermann is onto her tricks. Instead of being angry, however, Frau Hermann leaves Liesel a gift with a letter inside. The letter tells Liesel that Frau Hermann is not angry and would like Liesel to knock on the front door next time. Liesel attempts to do just this, but loses her courage at the last minute. Liesel likes the thrill she gets from stealing. Book thief is Liesel's identity, a theme of the book, and to change that now would be devastating to her sense of self.

Air raids begin in Molching. At first, the people are terrified of what will happen if the bombs hit near their homes. However, Liesel begins to read in the bomb shelter and this helps people to forget their fear. Touching on the theme of fantasy, the stories and



Liesel's recitation of them allow the people to concentrate on something that is not frightening, to let go of reality for a short time. In the same vein, Max is able to sneak upstairs and have a look at the sky for the first time in almost two years. Max, too, is able to let go of reality for a short time and indulge in fantasy, making his predicament a little easier to endure.

Hans is a caring man who does things without thinking at times. When a group of Jewish prisoners are marched through town, Hans does not think when he offers one of them some bread from his own lunch. Not only does Hans not think of how this will affect him personally, he does not think of what it will mean for Max. In this way, Hans shows the reader once again how self-sacrificing he can be, illustrating a theme of the novel. However, Hans's selflessness cause him to have to send Max away. Now the reader is left wondering what will happen to Max.



Part Eight, The Word Shaker

Part Eight, The Word Shaker Summary

Rudy comes home one night and finds that two men have come to speak to his parents about him. Rudy is not allowed to attend this meeting and chooses not to eavesdrop on the conversation. Later Rudy learns that the men wanted him to attend a special school for Nazi youths. Rudy's parents have heard stories about these schools and do not want to allow Rudy to go. When Rudy relates this story to Liesel later he tells her how the people from the school heard about Rudy winning so many races so they sent a doctor to check him out for physical fitness. Rudy was forced to get naked in front of the doctor, a nurse, a school official, and two other boys also being examined at the same time. It was humiliating and it was an experience that would stick with him. It is also a story that cause Liesel to have thoughts of Rudy she never has had before.

Hans waits weeks for his punishment to come for helping the starving Jew. However, instead of a knock on the door, Hans receives a letter telling him he has been accepted into the Nazi party. The following day, Hans receives another letter informing him he is expected to join the military to help defend Germany in the war. At the same time, the Steiner family learns that Rudy's father is also expected to join the military as punishment for not allowing his son to enter the special school. The night before he is due to go to boot camp, Hans and Herr Steiner get drunk. When Hans comes home, he accidentally goes to the wrong house and awakens Frau Holtzapfel. The next morning, Rosa is forced to wake Hans with a bucket of water. At the train station, it is a sad sight as Liesel and Rosa say their goodbyes.

A short time later, after Herr Steiner has gone as well, Rudy decides to run away. Liesel goes with him. They walk until they reach the outskirts of town. Rudy tells Liesel that he feels responsible for his father having to leave. Rudy confesses to hating Hitler. When Rudy has released all his anger, he and Liesel return to town to face the anger of their mothers. A few nights later, Liesel wakes in the middle of the night and hears Hans' accordion. Believing he has come home, Liesel rushes out to the living room. However, Liesel only finds Rosa sitting on her bed with the accordion strapped to her chest.

Herr Steiner is assigned to repairing the many uniforms the soldiers damage every day after his training. Hans is assigned to a unit called the LSE. This unit goes in to bomb damaged areas to put out fires and shore up damaged buildings. It is a very dangerous assignment, but Hans learns quickly how to survive. Hans proves to be a valuable member of the squad. However, Hans sees so much pain and destruction every day that he cannot bring himself to write letters home to Liesel and Rosa, afraid he will give something away about his job and cause them unnecessary pain.

The parade of Jewish prisoners through Molching continues. One day Rudy and Liesel decide to lay bread out along the road for the prisoners to eat. Then they hide in the trees to watch. Liesel is more intent in her study of the prisoners because she suspects



she might one day see Max among these people. In her intensity, Liesel stands too far out among the trees and is chased away by a guard.

A few days before Christmas, Rosa gives Liesel the journal Max kept while living in their basement. In the book is a story called the Word Shaker. This story is a fictional account of a young woman whose job it is to shake words out of trees for Hitler. One day, the word shaker took the tear she shed for a young Jewish man and used it to plant a tree. When the tree grew, the word shaker climbed into it and watched as many people attempted to cut it down. No one could cut the tree down. Finally, the Jewish man returns. The Jewish man climbs the tree and joins the word shaker. Now the ax marks are visible on the tree and it begins to bend. The Jewish man and the word shaker leave the tree, confident that it can never be broken. After reading the book many times, Liesel pulls herself away from it long enough to give Rudy a gift. Liesel takes Rudy to his father's tailor's shop and gives him a suit.

Part Eight, The Word Shaker Analysis

Rudy's parents are surprised when a couple of men come to their house and want to take Rudy away to a school for special Hitler Youths. Rudy has impressed these people with his athletic ability, especially the races he won at the carnival. The reader suspected these wins might come back to haunt Rudy, but did not know how until this moment. However, Rudy's parents have heard about abuses at these schools and choose not to send him. This is unacceptable in a political climate where obedience is expected over all else. As punishment, Rudy's father is forced to join the military and go to war. Rudy's father does not go into battle, but works as a tailor for the soldiers. Rudy's father is taken from home, though, so the punishment is as severe as it could be for a man with a family during this tumultuous time.

Hans has been waiting to be arrested for weeks. Instead of arrest, however, Hans is also forced to join the military. Hans does not have to go into battle either, but he is given a job that is very dangerous and might result in his death. Hans is assigned to a group whose job it is to go into bombed areas to put out fires and shore up damaged buildings. To Hans' credit, he does not resent this move, nor does he take out his unfortunate circumstances on the people around him. True to his character, Hans does his job well and tries to protect Rosa and Liesel from the reality of it by not writing them letters that might contain something that will worry them.

Back home, Rudy is wracked with guilt over his father's punishment. Rudy wants to run away, to go find his father and bring him home. Liesel goes with him, proving her devotion to him, and allows him to work out his frustrations before guiding him back home. Later, Rudy shows his disregard for the fuhrer by leaving bread for the Jewish prisoners on the road they are being marched down, with Liesel's help. Rudy and Liesel have grown very close over the past few years and the reader can see a lifelong relationship blooming between them. The reader imagines what their life will be like ten, twenty years down the road. However, the narrator has already hinted that Rudy will not live this long, so the reader views this blooming relationship with a tone of sadness.



At Christmas, Rosa gives Liesel the journal Max spent so much time writing in. Inside the journal is a story called the Word Shaker. The story is a metaphor for the friendship that has developed between Max and Liesel. It is an unlikely relationship that never would have existed under any other circumstances. However, due to the war, something beautiful has grown out of something dark and cruel. Max clearly cherishes this relationship as does Liesel, as is evident when she diligently watches the parade of Jewish prisoners, half hoping to see Max, and half hoping not to see him.

Part Nine, The Last Human Stranger

Part Nine, The Last Human Stranger Summary

A few weeks after Christmas, Liesel and Rudy return to the mayor's house in order to steal a new book. Liesel finds a plateful of Christmas cookies waiting on Frau Hermann's desk. Liesel hands the cookies out the window to Rudy and then grabs a new book. Before Liesel can get out the door, Frau Hermann comes into the room. Liesel asks her if this library is hers. Liesel is surprised when Frau Hermann admits it is her room, but that Liesel is the only person getting any use out of it lately. An awkward moment passes between Liesel and Frau Hermann before Liesel slips out the window. Liesel and Rudy share the cookies while Hans is outside the town of Essen. The LSE men are playing cards when one of them becomes angry when he loses.

In January, Liesel arrives at Frau Holtzapfel's house and finds a young man there with her. It turns out the young man is one of Frau Holtzapfel's sons. Frau Holtzapfel had two sons who went to war. Only one has returned. One died in a hospital outside Stalingrad with his brother by his side. Frau Holtzapfel says Liesel cannot read to her when she first arrives. The son, Michael, comes to get Liesel later, but when she arrives, Frau Holtzapfel is unresponsive. This episode increases Liesel's concern for Hans. At the same time, Liesel is saddened because she feels that she cannot steal from Frau Hermann any more. Liesel returns the plate to the Hermann home, leaving it at the front door, and walks away.

A few weeks after the poker game, Hans and the other members of his squad are climbing into their truck after a long day of work. The disgruntled poker player insists on riding in Hans's seat for reasons he does not make clear. Rather than argue, Hans allows this change. A few minutes into the trip back to camp, however, the truck blows a tire and crashes. When everyone climbs out of the truck and begin to check each other for injuries, they discover the disgruntled poker player has died. Once again Hans's life has been spared. However, Hans has broken his leg. His commander tells Hans that he will recommend he be sent home. When Hans finally writes a lengthy letter home, it is full of news of his homecoming. Hans will be home in April.

Rudy packs a toolbox with things he imagines he might need to break into a house and has decided to break into one of the fancy homes on the rich side of town. Rudy wants to punish these people who he sees as responsible for his father having to go off to war. Liesel accompanies Rudy as he walks up the street, trying to pick his target. The longer Rudy walks, the more Liesel realizes he will not rob any of these houses. Rudy goes as far as taking off his shoes and socks, but then decides it is time to go home. Rudy grabs his shoes and leaves his socks in the street, a gift to his potential victims.

A few weeks later when an air raid is called, Michael Holtzapfel comes to the Hubermanns and tells them his mother will not go to the shelter. Rosa goes to Frau Holtzapfel and tries to bully her into leaving, but has no success. Liesel tries, but Frau



Holtzapfel is unresponsive. Finally, Rosa, Liesel and Michael go to the shelter and leave Frau Holtzapfel in her home. Michael becomes despondent at the thought of his mother remaining behind. Michael feels as though he should have stayed with her. Frau Holtzapfel finally arrives in the shelter and comforts her son. The neighbors remain in the shelter for hours while Liesel reads. When the signal finally comes releasing the neighbors from the shelter, Rudy runs outside and sees a fire in the distance. Rudy and Liesel run toward the fire to see what it is. When they arrive, they discover an American airplane has crashed beside the river. Inside is the pilot, severely injured. Rudy tries to protect Liesel from the sight, but she is determined to see. As the pilot dies, Rudy gives him a teddy bear to help comfort his final moments.

Part Nine, The Last Human Stranger Analysis

Liesel finds that Frau Hermann has left her some cookies, a rare treat in a time when many people are starving. Liesel takes the cookies and another book, only to have Frau Hermann walk in on her. Liesel speaks to her for a few minutes and learns that the library belongs to Frau Hermann. Liesel had thought the room belonged to the mayor and is impressed that a woman could be the owner of something so impressive. It is an important moment for Liesel because it shows her what women are capable of in a world where power and ownership seems like a lost dream.

Frau Holtzapfel is a mean old woman. Liesel has never thought of anything else in regards to her, so when she realizes Frau Holtzapfel has two sons, Liesel is surprised. Liesel is more surprised when one of these sons comes home from the war. The boy, Michael, is injured and traumatized from his time in the war. Michael also brings home the news that his brother was killed in Stalingrad. Frau Holtzapfel takes this news hard, falling into a dark depression. When an air raid is signaled some time later, Frau Holtzapfel refuses to seek shelter. Michael goes to the shelter, but then immediately feels guilt for leaving his mother behind. Michael is devastated by his own actions, believing he has no right to want to live after all he has seen and done. The reader sees this and wonders if Michael's guilt will not prove to be motivation for future actions, what ever these actions might be.

Rudy wants to steal from the rich people in town to punish them for his father having to go to war. However, Rudy proves to not be as brave as he first thought. Rudy is brave enough, however, to rush to the sight of a downed airplane and watch the American pilot die. Rudy shows his softer side by giving the man a teddy bear to comfort him in his final moments. These two episodes show how much Rudy has grown through the course of the novel. Rudy is a mature young man now, dealing with the difficulties of his life with, if not maturity, with confidence and common sense.

Hans has difficulty with one of the men on his squad when the man loses to him at poker. A few weeks later, this same young man insists on taking Hans's place in the truck. An accident takes place and this young man is killed, sparing Hans sure death for a second time. Hans is grateful and even more grateful when he learns his broken leg will allow him to return home. Hans has paid his debt, it seems, and will be allowed to

return to Rosa and Liesel. It is a small amount of happiness amongst the terrible cruelties that have become a way of life for this family.

Part Ten, The Book Thief

Part Ten, The Book Thief Summary

Hans's homecoming is a happy time in the Hubermann home. Hans plays his accordion and settles in to his desk job in Munich. The only shadow on his homecoming is the news of the death of Frau Holtzapfel's son and the knowledge that the Hubermanns' own son is fighting in Stalingrad. The parade of Jewish prisoners continues through town. Every time they march, Liesel watches for Max Vandenburg. In July, the body of Michael Holtzapfel is found hanging in a shop downtown. Michael left a note apologizing to his mother and confessing that he could not live with himself for wanting to live while his brother lies in a grave. Hans Hubermann is the one to give the news to Frau Holtzapfel.

It happens finally. Liesel is watching the prisoners being marched through town and she recognizes one of the faces. Max Vandenburg. Liesel calls to him and joins the ranks of the prisoners, marching at his side. A soldier grabs her and pushes her away, but Liesel returns. Max tells her how he got caught a few months ago on his way to Struttgart. Max is okay for the time being. Liesel wants to stay with him, stay by his side to be sure he is safe. The soldier grabs Liesel again and beats her with his whip. Rudy sees what is happening and he grabs Liesel, pulling her to safety. Liesel fights Rudy at first, but then allows him to help her. Later, Liesel tells Rudy all about Max and the time he spent hiding in her basement.

A week later, Liesel sneaks into Ilsa Hermann's library for the final time. Liesel is overcome with anger and grief while reading a book, so she tears the book to shreds. Overcome with remorse, Liesel writes a letter to Frau Hermann, apologizing for the damage. Liesel also says goodbye, imagining she will never see Frau Hermann again. Frau Hermann is so touched by the letter that she comes to Himmel Street and gives Liesel a blank book. Frau Hermann tells Liesel she has a gift for writing and she should use the book to write down her story. Liesel goes into the basement that night and begins to write. Every night Liesel writes a new chapter, filling the pages over the next ten days. Liesel calls the book *The Book Thief*.

On the tenth night, there is an air raid. This one is a mistake and it comes so quickly that there is no time to warn anyone. The bombs fall on Himmel Street, destroying homes while people sleep. Liesel survives because she is in the basement. Liesel is the only survivor. Liesel walks along the street in shock and watches as the bodies of her friends and neighbors are pulled from the ruins. Liesel finds Hans and Rosa. Liesel sits beside their bodies, holding her papa for a long time. The accordion is discarded and Liesel grabs it, giving it back to Hans for the last time. Liesel finds Rudy's body, too, and finally gives him the kiss he has asked for so often. Liesel is finally led away. *The Book Thief* is left in the street, forgotten.



Part Ten, The Book Thief Analysis

Hans's homecoming is overshadowed by the suicide of Michael Holtzapfel. The reader might have suspected in a previous chapter that Michael was emotionally unstable, and now the reader sees just how deeply his emotional scars ran. Michael has killed himself because he feels guilty for surviving when his brother died. Now Frau Holtzapfel has lost both her sons, but won the compassion of her neighbors. It is small consolation. This episode shows the reader how devastating war can be and how it can affect everyone, even the mean old lady who seems impervious to human emotion.

Liesel has been watching the parade of Jewish prisoners carefully ever since Max was sent away. Therefore it is no surprise to the reader when she finally sees Max. Liesel risks her own life to walk beside him and act as though he is her equal, not the criminal the soldiers believe him to be. Liesel is beaten and sent away, but she keeps coming back until Rudy rescues her. Rudy once again shows his growth of character and his understanding of self preservation. Rudy learns the truth about Max and is not surprised, nor angered. Rudy believes much the same as Liesel, that Jews are not inferior, proving that not all Germans were cruel.

Liesel goes to Frau Hermann's one last time and leaves her a note, telling her how she felt she was her friend and how sorry she was for hurting her. Liesel has finally been able to express her feelings toward Frau Hermann. The reader has suspected all along that Liesel's feelings for Frau Hermann were not malevolent, but now knows it as fact. Frau Hermann returns the gesture by going to Liesel and giving her a blank book in which to record her story. Liesel does this and the act of writing in the basement in the night proves to be the act that saves her life. A bomb falls on Himmel Street, killing everyone but Liesel. Although this moment has been hinted at by the narrator, it still comes as a shock to the reader who watches as Liesel says goodbye not only to her parents, but to Rudy. The hope of a lifetime friendship is gone for these two, but the reader can still clearly feel their love for one another and know that it will never end.



Epilogue, The Last Color

Epilogue, The Last Color Summary

Liesel is taken to the police station where Frau Hermann comes and takes her home. Liesel is in shock and refuses to take a bath or to eat. Frau Hermann cares for Liesel the best she can. Herr Steiner returns from the war upon the news of his family's deaths. Liesel and Herr Steiner forge a close friendship in their mutual grief. Liesel begins to work for Herr Steiner in his tailor's shop. It is here that Max finds her when the war has ended.

Liesel dies in Sydney, Australia, an old woman with her children around her. When Death comes for her soul, Liesel is waiting. Death shows Liesel *The Book Thief*. Death has carried it around in his pocket since he found it discarded that day in Molching. Death has hoped that its words can help him understand human behavior. Liesel asks if the book has helped. Death admits that it has not. Death feels as though he is haunted by humans.

Epilogue, The Last Color Analysis

Liesel is taken in by Frau Hermann, her old friend. Perhaps the reader has seen this coming, since there is such a strong relationship between these two and Frau Hermann is childless. They have both survived terrible grief. Perhaps they can learn to heal together. Herr Steiner too has returned to Liesel's life. Herr Steiner has suffered a huge loss as well and feels guilt for surviving. Herr Steiner suffers the same fate as Michael Holtzapfel, survivor's guilt. However, Herr Steiner chooses to live where Michael Holtzapfel gave up. Max also returns, having survived the concentration camps, a happy ending to a sad tale.

Liesel has lived a good life, the reader is glad to note. Liesel dies an old woman in Sydney, having escaped the cruelty of Germany. Death tells Liesel how he took her book and has read it many times trying to understand how humans can be so cruel and yet so good all at the same time. It is a quandary that has baffled man all through the ages and one that will never be answered completely. It is a final ironic jab, however, that even Death cannot understand.



Characters

Liesel Meminger

Liesel Meminger is a young German girl whose mother has given her up to the foster parent system because she can no longer care for her. Liesel does not know why her mother cannot care for her, but remembers certain incidents in her childhood that point to the idea that her father may have been a Communist in a time when political beliefs other than Hitler's were severely punished. Liesel was supposed to go into foster care with her brother. However, Liesel's brother dies on the train ride to Munich.

Liesel is placed with an older couple. The man, Hans, is very kind to Liesel and often sits up with her in the middle of the night when she has nightmares about her brother's death. During these nights, Hans teaches Liesel how to read. Rosa, her foster mother, is a strong, angry woman who calls Liesel terrible names. However, as Liesel gets to know Rosa, she learns that this language is only a hard shell to hide the soft heart inside. Liesel comes to love both Hans and Rosa, calling them *momma* and *papa* from the very beginning.

Liesel's life is as normal as can be expected during the turbulent years of World War II. Liesel goes to school, makes friends, and plays soccer. In the afternoons, Liesel is expected to help Rosa collect and deliver the laundry she washes for extra money. During this time Liesel meets the mayor's wife, Ilsa Hermann, and discovers her magnificent library. Liesel often spends her afternoons reading in the library until the recession of the war causes the Hermann's to fire Rosa as their laundress. After this point, Liesel begins to break into the library and steal the books she wants. Ilsa is aware of Liesel's thievery and does nothing to stop her. Liesel also participates in other types of thievery, including stealing apples from nearby orchards.

At the beginning of the war, Hans finds himself in a position to help out the son of an old war buddy. This man is a Jew and needs a place to hide until the war is over. The Hubermann's take Max into their home and hide him in the basement for more than a year. Liesel makes friends with Max and finds that they have a great deal in common. Liesel is saddened when Max is forced to leave their home after Hans commits a mortal sin in public—trying to help a Jewish prisoner. Soon after this, Hans is sent to war and Liesel is left to care for her *momma*.

Hans Hubermann

Hans Hubermann is a house painter. Hans has trouble finding work during the time in which Liesel lives with him because he once was kind to a Jewish family shortly after laws were passed that made aiding the Jews an unwise thing to do. Customers loyal to Hitler do not want a Jew-lover to paint their houses. Hans does not let this situation get him down, however. Hans likes to play the accordion and spends most of his evenings



playing it at a local club. Hans learned how to play the accordion during World War I from a fellow soldier. One day, this same soldier volunteered Hans to remain in camp to write some letters while the rest of his squad went into battle. Hans was the only man to survive that day. Hans believes that the soldier saved his life and he made a promise that if the man's wife and son ever needed his help, he would provide it. Then, one day after the war begins, Hans is approached by a young man who is friends with the soldier's son, Max. Max needs a place to hide. Hans agrees to take Max into his home.

Hans, Rosa, and Liesel hide Max in their basement for more than a year. However, one afternoon Hans is watching as a group of Jewish prisoners are marched through town on their way to a nearby concentration camp. Hans has pity on one of the prisoners and offers him some bread. This act is witnessed by many people in town. Afterward Hans is frightened that he will be arrested and his home searched, so he sends Max away. Hans is not arrested, however. Instead, Hans is forced to join the military. Once in the military, Hans becomes a member of the LSE, a group of soldiers who go into bombed towns to put out fires and attempt to reinforce damaged buildings so that they will not fall on victims. This is a dangerous job, but Hans proves to be a competent member of the squad. One day Hans is in a car accident when returning to base from one of these bombed cities and breaks his leg. Hans is sent home. However, an ally air raid squad mistakenly drops their bombs on Himmel Street six months later and Hans is killed.

Rosa Hubermann

Rosa Hubermann is Hans' wife and Liesel's new mother. Rosa is a rough woman who does not know how to be gentle with Liesel. Rosa often calls Liesel *saumensch*, which is a vulgar name. However, Rosa does not mean this name with the malice it implies. Rosa speaks with vulgarity and often beats Liesel for misbehaving, but underneath Rosa is a soft-hearted woman who simply does not know how to show her feelings. Rosa is also a woman who is burdened with poverty and is often frightened when she does not know where their next meal will come from. However, Rosa proves her love for Liesel on many occasions, often refraining from punishing the girl when Liesel believes she deserves the anger. Rosa also wholeheartedly accepts Max into her household even though having a Jewish man hiding in her house could cause both Rosa and Hans to be arrested. When Hans goes into the military, Rosa is heartbroken and will often lie awake at night with her husband's accordion strapped to her chest. In the end, Rosa dies sleeping beside her husband after a bomb mistakenly lands on their home.

Rudy Steiner

Rudy Steiner is a young boy the same age as Liesel. Rudy and Liesel become good friends partly because they live in the same neighborhood and their mothers are friendly. Rudy is an athletic young man who is smart and stubborn. When Rudy sees Jesse Owens at the Olympics, Rudy attempts to turn his entire body black and then run like Owens. Later, Rudy runs several races during a Hitler Youth field day event. Rudy wins three of the four races he runs. This catches the attention of the officials of a



special school for Hitler Youth. However, Rudy's parents refuse to allow him to go and as punishment, Rudy's father is sent to fight in the war.

Rudy is Liesel's constant companion throughout her time on Himmel Street. Rudy is the one who convinces Liesel to begin stealing food and it is Rudy who stands as lookout when Liesel breaks into the mayor's house to steal books. Rudy constantly asks Liesel for kisses and Liesel always refuses. Only once does Liesel consider the suggestion, but by this time Rudy is so used to her refusal he does not wait for a response to his request. When Rudy dies after the bombs fall on Himmel Street, Liesel regrets her decision not to give in to his frequent requests.

The Steiner Family

The Steiner family lives next door to the Hubermann family. Rudy is one of Liesel's good friends. Rudy has five brothers and sister. Life is difficult for the Steiner family after the laws against the Jews are passed because Herr Steiner is a tailor and his main customers were Jews. Steiner keeps the shop open, however, hoping that business will improve. This never proves to be the case, however. After the bombs fall on Himmel Street, Herr Steiner is allowed to return home from the military. Since they are the only two survivors of Himmel Street, Liesel and Herr Steiner become close friends. Herr Steiner reopens his shop because he does not know what else to do with his time. Liesel comes to work for him most afternoons. It is one of these afternoons when Liesel and Max are reunited.

Frau Holtzapfel

Frau Holtzapfel is an unpleasant woman who spits on the Hubermann door every time she walks past it because she and Rosa have had a falling out. It is Liesel's job to clean the door every day. Liesel does not like Frau Holtzapfel, so when Frau Holtzapfel asks Liesel to come to her house and read every afternoon, Liesel is reluctant. However, Liesel begins to learn things about Frau Holtzapfel that change her opinion of the woman. Liesel learns that Frau Holtzapfel has two sons who have gone to the war. One of these son's returns and the other does not. The son who returns is forced to tell his mother the sad news of her other son's death. Frau Holtzapfel is so depressed by this news that when an air raid is sounded, she refuses to seek shelter. Instead, Frau Holtzapfel remains in her house. The surviving son decides to seek shelter, leaving his mother to a possible death all alone. Afterward, the surviving son is so filled with guilt that he hangs himself. Frau Holtzapfel loses two sons to the war.

Max Vandenburg

Max Vandenburg is the son of Hans Hubermann's military buddy. Max's father saved Hans' life by volunteering him to stay behind the day of a major conflict and write letters for a superior officer. By doing this, Hans was spared the same death his fellow squad members suffered. As a result, Hans offers the soldier's wife his help in anything she



might ever need. More than twenty years later, Hans learns that Max needs a place to hide from the persecution of the Jews. Max is starving when he arrives and spends the first few days sleeping. After this, Max hides in the basement behind a pile of paint cans and drop clothes. Max spends the majority of his time reading Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*. After a time, Max uses the book for scrap paper to write a story for Liesel.

Liesel and Max become good friends. Liesel discovers that she and Max both have nightmares in the middle of the night and that they have other things in common. Liesel begins spending time with Max in the basement. When Max becomes sick from the cold in the basement, Liesel sits by his side for days at a time, worried that he will not recover. Liesel also gathers gifts for Max, hoping they will help him get better. Eventually Max does recover and tells Liesel her gifts are part of the reason why. A short time later, Hans tries to help a Jewish prisoner being marched through town. As a result, Hans is afraid he will be arrested and the house searched, so he sends Max away. Eventually Max is captured by the Nazis and put in a concentration camp. Liesel sees him being marched through town and she tries to march with him. The soldiers beat Liesel for this, but she stays with him for as long as she can anyway. After the war, Max comes back to Molching and finds Liesel.

Frau Ilsa Hermann

Ilsa Hermann is the wife of Molching's mayor. Ilsa is deep in a depression as a result of the death of her son many years before. Ilsa sees Liesel stealing a book and decides to share her library with the child. Ilsa invites Liesel inside one day when she comes to pick up the laundry. Liesel is overwhelmed with the number of books and spends all her afternoons at the Hermann house reading from the many books. Several times, Ilsa tries to give Liesel the book she has read the majority of her afternoons in the library. Liesel refuses. However, she finally accepts one afternoon when she realizes how important this is to Ilsa. On this same day, Ilsa tells Liesel that she no longer needs Rosa to do her laundry. Liesel becomes angry and returns the book.

Some time later, Liesel decides to break into the Hermann home and steal the book back. After this first time when Liesel gets away with the theft, she goes back and steals another book. Liesel does this several times and soon realizes that Ilsa knows that Liesel is stealing her books. Ilsa leaves Liesel some cookies at Christmas time and a dictionary at another time. Finally Liesel tells Ilsa that she will not come back. However, after the bombing on Himmel Street, it is Ilsa Hermann and her husband who come to Liesel's rescue, taking her into their home. Liesel will remain with the Hermanns until Herr Steiner returns.

Tommy Muller

Tommy Muller is a Molching boy who was once lost in the dead of winter. As a result of this trauma, Tommy became ill and lost some of the hearing in both his ears. Rudy and Tommy are friends and are in the same Hitler Youth group. Tommy often gets in trouble



because he cannot hear the orders while marching and often messes up the rhythm. When the group leader becomes angry at Tommy, Rudy stands up for him. This causes the leader to target Rudy and bully him, causing him a great deal of stress. It is this conflict that causes Rudy to decide to win the races at the Hitler Youth track and field event. As a direct result of these wins, Rudy gets the attention of government officials at a school for Hitler Youth. Rudy's parents refuse to allow Rudy to go to the school, so his father is punished by being forced into the military. This is why Herr Steiner survives the bombing of Himmel Street.

Adolf Hitler

Adolf Hitler was the ruler of Germany during World War II. Hitler felt that Germans, blue-eyed and blond haired Germans, were the superior race of the world. Hitler felt that Jews were the bottom of the ranking of human beings and sought to wipe them off the earth. As a result, many Jewish families were imprisoned and killed during the war. Max Vandenburg is a Jewish man who is forced to hide in the cold, damp basement of the Hubermann home. During this time, Max reads Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*. This book so angers Max that he begins to have dreams in which he would get into a boxing match with Hitler. Max would always win but it would take a long time and they would both be terribly wounded at the end.



Objects/Places

The Grave Digger's Handbook

The Grave Digger's Handbook is the first book Liesel steals. Liesel takes this book from the cemetery where her brother is buried.

The Shoulder Shrug

The Shoulder Shrug is the second book Liesel steals. Liesel takes this book from a bonfire designed to burn books that go against the philosophy of the Nazi party. Liesel's theft is witnessed by Ilsa Hermann, the mayor's wife.

The Whistler

The Whistler is a book that Liesel reads every time she goes to Ilsa's library. Ilsa tries to give Liesel this book, but she refuses it. Liesel finally returns to Ilsa's library, breaks in through the window, and steals it.

The Dream Carrier

The Dream Carrier is the second book Liesel steals from Ilsa Hermann's library.

The Complete Duden Dictionary and Thesaurus

The Duden Dictionary is a dictionary that Ilsa leaves for Liesel when she comes to steal another book.

The Standover Man

The Standover Man is a book that Max writes for Liesel. This book is about Hitler and his oppression of Jews.

The Word Shaker

The Word Shaker is a story that Max writes for Liesel. This story is a metaphorical illustration of Max and Liesel's relationship.



Hans' Accordion

Hans was taught to play the accordion by a man he credits with saving his life during World War I. Hans owns this man's accordion and often plays it at night to help Liesel forget her nightmares. When Hans goes to the war, Rosa straps his accordion onto her chest to help her feel close to him.

Paint Cans and Drop Cloths

The Hubermanns hide Max under the stairs and block the entrance to his space with paint cans and drop cloths.

The Book Thief

Liesel writes a book about her life called *The Book Thief*. This book is the reason Liesel is in the basement the night the bombs fall and the reason she survives. This book is also how Death learns about Liesel's life.

Bomb Shelter

Before the air raids begin on Munich, the Nazi party inspects local basements looking for appropriate places to be used as bomb shelters. The party inspects the Hubermann's basement while Max is there, but they do not find him or suspect anything.

Himmel Street

Himmel, meaning heaven, is the street where Liesel lives with the Hubermanns. This street is on the poorer side of Molching.

Molching, Germany

Molching, Germany is the small, rural community outside of Munich where the Hubermanns and the Steiners live.

Munich, Germany

Munich is a large, metropolitan city in Germany near where Liesel lives with the Hubermanns.



Themes

Human Cruelty vs. Self Sacrifice

One of the most notorious practices in Germany during World War II was the cruelty practiced against the Jews. Hitler felt that Jews were a vile race and needed to be eradicated from the world. As a result, many laws were passed making it impossible for Jews to make a living or to receive simple services such as clothing and food. When the war began, Hitler formed concentration camps and began arresting Jews, putting them in these camps where they would be put to death or forced to work.

Hans does not agree with Hitler's policies against Jews. However, it is social suicide to allow anyone to know how he really feels. Hans learns this when he paints the door of a Jewish neighbor after someone paints derogatory phrases on it. Hans loses many of his customers and finds himself having to scrape the bottom of the barrel to get by. Also as a direct result of this event, Hans is refused membership into the Nazi party, something that causes tension between Hans and his son, Hans Jr. Some time later, Hans learns that the son of the man he credits with saving his life during World War I needs a place to hide. This man, Max, is a Jew. Hans arranges for Hans to come to his home in Molching and allows Max to hide in his basement. During this time, Hans is deeply afraid of being caught with him in his house, something that would cause him to go to jail. That is why it is ironic that Hans brings the possibility of being caught on himself.

Hans sees a group of Jewish prisoners being marched through town. Hans sees one of the prisoners is starving to death. Hans offers the man a piece of bread. When the soldiers see what Hans is doing, he beats him with his whip. Hans sees that a group of his neighbors has seen what he did and knows he is in danger of being arrested. Hans is afraid if he is arrested, his house will be searched. Hans sends Max away. Hans feels very guilty about this, but he does not want Max to be found and taken to a concentration camp. However, instead of arresting Hans, the Nazi party accepts him among their ranks and then sends him into the military. Hans nearly pays for his mistake with his own life when he is in a car accident during his service. In the midst of government sanctioned cruelty, Hans proves that some people can put others before themselves, making human cruelty vs. self sacrifice a theme of the novel.

Identity

Liesel is taken from her family and placed with the Hubermanns for reasons that she does not understand. Liesel's father is gone and her mother takes her on the trip to meet the Hubermanns. Liesel was supposed to be placed in foster care for a short time with her brother. However, Liesel's brother dies on the trip to Munich. Over time, Liesel keeps hoping her mother will return, even writing letters to her, but comes to the realization that her mother will not return. When Liesel hears the word communist,



Liesel begins to realize why she has been separated from her parents. Liesel remembers hearing the word communist when her father disappeared.

Stripped from her biological family, Liesel does not know who she is. To add to this identity crisis, Liesel suffers ridicule by her teachers and classmates when it is discovered she cannot read. Liesel is placed in a class with younger students, further deepening her humiliation and her confusion over her personal identity. It is not until Hans Hubermann begins teaching Liesel how to read that she begins to come into her own, to begin to feel like a person separate from her parents, her foster parents, and her classmates. Liesel becomes independent in her reading and discovers worlds that she never would have existed without books. It is for this reason that Liesel becomes the book thief and how this identity begins to shape the woman she will become.

Fantasy

The world Liesel lives in is a harsh one. People are imprisoned simply because of their beliefs and good people are starving because all their customers have been banned from shopping in their stores. Liesel watches as her foster parents struggle to make ends meet and yet allow a Jew to hide in their basement despite their inability to feed him and their fear of getting caught. Liesel watches her papa beaten in the street like a criminal for trying to help another human being and then sent to war for the same reason. Liesel's world is difficult to comprehend and fearful for an adult, let alone an innocent child.

Liesel discovers books before the world turns cruel. When the war begins and Liesel's world begins to change, she discovers a world inside the books that helps her forget the cruelty. Liesel reads to help her deal with her brother's death, to forget her empty stomach, and to distract her neighbors from the bomb raid taking place outside their homes. This distraction helps Liesel keep her sanity and it helps her neighbors keep theirs. When Liesel goes to read for Frau Holtzapfel, she learns that the mean old lady is not as bad as she originally thought. Frau Holtzapfel is only a mother who is worried about her children. Books help Frau Holtzapfel survive her grief and loneliness, just as it helps Liesel remember there was once a kind world that may return again. Thus, fantasy is a major theme of the novel.



Style

Point of View

The novel is told in the first person point of view with Death as the narrator. The narrator is not a character within the novel, at least not directly, making his view unique in that he does not influence any of the plot events directly. The narrator is relating the story to his readers as he understands it through a story written by a little girl about her own life. The narrator adds in definitions and small things that he has observed, but does not take an active part in the overall plot. In the end, the narrator becomes involved in the story when he arrives to take the soul of the main character, now a grown woman who has lived a long and happy life.

The point of view of this novel is unique and creative. Death is a character with thoughts and opinions of his own. In this story, Death is trying to relate the story of a young woman he has observed on occasion and who captured his imagination with her will to live. Death has read the girl's story as she put it to paper and is now relating it to the reader with the goal of attempting to explain to his readers what confuses him the most about human nature. The point of view is clear, easy to follow, and entertaining in a comical way that gives a touch of amusement to a sad and difficult topic.

Setting

The novel is set on Himmel Street in Molching, Germany. Himmel means heaven, but Himmel Street is as far from heaven as one little girl can get. Himmel Street is one of the poorest streets in Molching. Molching itself is a poor town just a few miles outside of Munich. Molching is populated by farmers, blue collar workers, and devoted Nazi party members. The main characters of the novel begin the story getting by, paycheck to paycheck, like most people living in a rural community. However, as the war begins and restrictions are placed on Germany's citizens, the community begins to suffer, with some families going to bed without a meal and not knowing when their next meal will be. Jewish prisoners are marched through the streets and children steal food from neighboring farms. It is a difficult place to live and a difficult place to be a child.

The setting of the novel is one of the most important things to this story. If the novel were set in London, New York, or Paris, it would not be the same story. This story is about a young girl growing up in Germany during World War II. This story is not about the war, it is not about the girl alone, and it is not about the cruelty of Hitler. This story is about a German girl growing up in Germany. Due to this plot, the setting is almost a character in its own right, playing into the plot in such a way that the story would not be the same without it.



Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is clear, precise English that borders on formal. Due to the fact that the book is set in Germany, many German words are also included. Many of these words are defined by the narrator, but some of them are not. The words that are not defined are used in such a way that the reader can usually figure out what they mean by the preceding and following text. The number of foreign phrases is not overwhelming and it does not make the novel any more difficult to read than it would be were these phrases not used.

The language of the novel works because it helps to characterize the narrator. The narrator is Death. Due to the fact that the narrator is a state of mind being personified, his language skills help the reader imagine the kind of person he might be if he were a person. Also the use of German words and phrases helps to characterize the rest of the main characters. The novel is set in Germany, therefore the characters would all be expected to speak German. By including their native language in the novel, the writer has striven to stay true to his characters and to add a sense of realism to his story.

Structure

The novel is divided into ten parts, a prologue, and an epilogue. Each section is named for an important event or book title that appears in that section. Within each section there are smaller parts that each have a name of their own, also of an important event or book that appears in that section. Although the book includes so many named sections, each part is more like a chapter than a part that includes chapters. Within these parts, the narrator often gives brief synopsis of conversations, events, or gives the reader a definition of a word that plays an important role in a following scene or snippet of dialogue. At first these sections are distracting from the overall story, but in time the reader grows used to them and begins to look forward to their simple explanations. Finally the book includes several books within a book. These books are stories that Max has written for Liesel and are presented in their entirety for the reader.

The novel includes one major plot line and several subplots. The main plot follows the story of Liesel Meminger as she grows up in Molching, Germany the years before and during World War II. The war influences the direction of Liesel's life, motivating her to do things she might not have done under other circumstances. One of the subplots of the novel follows Liesel's friend, Rudy, as he struggles to get along with fellow classmates who have strong beliefs in the Nazi party. Another subplot follows the story of Max Vandenburg, a Jewish man forced to hide in the Hubermanns' basement from a government who wants to imprison him. These subplots interact seamlessly with the main plot and come to a climax along with the main plot.



Quotes

"Here is a small fact. You are going to die." Prologue, *A Mountain Range of Rubble*, p. 3.

"You see, to me, for just a moment, despite all of the colors that touch and grapple with what I see in this world, I will often catch an eclipse when a human dies.

I've seen millions of them.

I've seen more eclipses than I care to remember."

Prologue, *A Mountain Range of Rubble*, p. 11.

"The book thief and her brother were traveling down toward Munich, where they would soon be given over to foster parents. We now know, of course, that the boy did not make it."

Part One, *The Grave Digger's Handbook*, p. 19.

"Upon her arrival, you could still see the bite marks of snow on her hands and the frosty blood on her fingers. Everything about her was undernourished. Wirelike shins. Coat hanger arms. She did not produce it easily, but when it came, she had a starving smile."

Part One, *The Grave Digger's Handbook*, p. 31.

"Like most misery, it started out with apparent happiness."

Part Two, *The Shoulder Shrug*, p. 84.

"A small tribute to Arthur Berg, a still-living man. The Cologne sky was yellow and rotting, flaking at the edges. He sat propped against a wall with a child in his arms. His sister. When she stopped breathing, he stayed with her, and I could sense he would hold her for hours. There were two stolen apples in his pocket." Part Three, *Mein Kampf*, p. 167.

"For the next year, Hans was lucky that he didn't revoke his membership application officially. While many people were instantly approved, he was added to a waiting list, regarded with suspicion. Toward the end of 1938, when the Jews were cleared out completely after Kristallnacht, the Gestapo visited. They searched the house, and when nothing or no one suspicious was found, Hans Hubermann was one of the fortunate: He was allowed to stay.

What probably saved him was that people knew he was at least waiting for his application to be approved. For this, he was tolerated, if not endorsed as the competent painter he was."

Part Four, *The Standover Man*, p. 183.

"On many counts, taking a boy like Rudy was robbery—so much life, so much to live for



—yet somehow, I'm certain he would have loved to see the frightening rubble and the swelling of the sky on the night he passed away. He'd have cried and turned and smiled if only he could have seen the book thief on her hands and knees, next to his decimated body. He'd have been glad to witness her kissing his dusty, bomb-hit lips."

Part Five, *The Whistler*, p. 242.

"Christmas greetings from Max Vandenburg. 'Often I wish this would all be over, Liesel, but then somehow you do something like walk down the basement steps with a snowman in your hands.'"

Part Six, *The Dream Carrier*, p. 313.

"They were French, they were Jews, and they were you." Part Six, *The Dream Carrier*, p. 350.

"She was still clutching the book.

She was holding desperately on to the words who had saved her life."

Part Ten, *The Book Thief*, p. 499.

"A last note from your narrator. I am haunted by humans."

Epilogue, *The Last Color*, p. 550.

Topics for Discussion

Who is the narrator? Why is he telling the story? What is the reason this person is narrating the story? What is the narrator trying to achieve by telling this story? Does he achieve this goal? Why or why not? How is this narrator unique? Why did the author chose to tell his story in this way? How is the narrator a metaphor for the theme of the novel? How does this particular narrator set the tone for the novel?

Discuss Liesel Meminger. Who is Liesel? Why is she being placed in foster care? Why does she not know how to read? Why does she have nightmares? How do these nightmares affect her? Why does Max's arrival help alleviate Liesel's nightmares?

Why does Liesel steal books? Why books? What do the books mean to Liesel? Is there an emotional connection to the owner of the books? What do the books mean to other members of Liesel's family? What about her neighbors? How do these books affect the people around Liesel? Why is reading important to Liesel?

Discuss Max Vandenburg. Who is Max? Why does he come to live with the Hubermanns? What is Max's relationship to Liesel? Is this a healthy relationship? How does Max's relationship with Liesel change her outlook? How does Liesel change the way Max sees the world?

Discuss Hans Hubermann. Why does Hans teach Liesel to read in the middle of the night? How do these lessons help forge a bond between these two? Why is Hans refused admittance into the Nazi Party? Why does he apply for admittance? Does Hans believe in the philosophy of the Nazi Party? Why does Hans help Max? Why does Hans try to give bread to a Jewish prisoner? What is the result of this kindness? Why?

Discuss Rosa Hubermann. Why does she call Liesel and Hans vulgar names? Why is she always so angry? What does this façade hide? Is Rosa an unkind person? Why does Rosa allow Max to stay in her house? How does this reveal things about Rosa the reader might not have known before?

Discuss Ilsa Hermann. Why is Ilsa depressed? Why does Liesel find Ilsa pathetic? Does Liesel dislike Ilsa? Why does Ilsa allow Liesel access to her library? Why does Ilsa not report Liesel for breaking into her library and stealing books? Compare Ilsa to Rosa. How are they alike? How are they different?