

**“The Bombs Were Coming—And So Was I”: The Trauma of War and the Balm of Bibliotherapy in Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief***  
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In 2005, Australian young adult writer Markus Zusak published his latest novel, *The Book Thief*. Set in Germany during the Second World War, the narrative follows the experiences of protagonist Liesel Meminger. The novel opens in January 1939 as the nine-year-old girl is being delivered to foster parents after her communist father has already been taken away (and presumably killed) by the Nazis, and it ends with the conclusion of the war. The loss of human life—from combat, malnutrition, disease, civilian bombing campaigns, and the brutality of the concentration camps—is pervasive. On the train ride to Liesel’s new home in the fictional town of Molching just outside of Munich, for instance, she witnesses her younger brother, Warren, die from malnutrition, illness, and exposure. Meanwhile, the son of Liesel’s foster parents, Rosa and Hans Hubermann, is among the hundreds of thousands who perish in the brutal battle of Stalingrad. Then, about a year after Liesel arrives, Max Vandenburg, a Jewish man who is the son of Hans’ close friend from the army during the First World War, takes refuge in the Hubermann home; in time, however, he is captured by the Nazis and taken to Dachau. Finally, in the closing section of the novel, Allied aircraft carpet bomb Molching, killing Liesel’s neighbors, friends, and foster parents. The young girl is the sole survivor. Appropriately, given the massive loss of life that occurs throughout the novel, *The Book Thief* is narrated by none other than Death itself. As Zusak’s articulate, reflective, and often poetic storyteller laments about his role in the midst of war, “The bombs were coming—and so was I” (335).

*The Book Thief* has been acclaimed for its representation of trauma, its depiction of the horrors of the Holocaust, and its portrayal of wartime violence against civilians in general and children in particular. Zusak’s 2005 novel has received an array of honors and awards: it was named *Publisher’s Weekly* Best Book of the Year and *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year. In addition, it was chosen as a Michael L. Printz Honor book, selected as a *Booklist* Editors’ Choice, and listed among the Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults by the American Library Association. *The Book Thief* has been equally popular with readers. Zusak’s novel appeared on *The New York Times* list of bestselling books for children for more than one hundred weeks (“Children’s Books”).

While *The Book Thief* has earned the respect of many readers and critics for its powerful portrayal of human suffering during the Second World War, the novel is at least as much about the process of coping with these horrific events as the events themselves. As the title of Zusak’s novel indicates, protagonist Liesel Meminger compulsively steals books: the young girl takes the first one, *The Grave Digger’s Handbook*, after it was dropped by one of the attendants at her brother’s funeral. Although Liesel is illiterate at the time, the process of learning to read the text, and the beauty as well as power of the language that she encounters in it, provides her with a means to process, understand, and ultimately survive the events around her.

Accordingly, this essay will take a different tact from the bulk of previous discussions about the representation of violence in books for young readers in general and *The Book Thief* in particular, by focusing not simply on the traumas associated with corporeal violence and murder, but on the impact and aftermath for its victims, witnesses, and survivors. As the pages that follow will discuss, Zusak’s narrative engages with the expected issues of historical memory and trauma theory, and also with the unexpected ones of cognitive psychology and expressive arts therapy. To be sure, while Zusak may have named the novel after his protagonist, Liesel Meminger is not the only character who finds solace in books and reading. Nearly every other figure in the 2005 narrative uses some form of printed, visual, or written text as a means to cope: from painting and drawing to autobiography and storytelling. In so doing, *The Book Thief* demonstrates that, even during times of crisis when the basics of life such as food, safety, and

shelter are uncertain, art is not a luxury. Rather, it is an essential and even necessary means of survival. In this way, *The Book Thief* offers a poignant meditation on the power of language both during the mid-twentieth century when the novel is set and in the opening decade of the new millennium when it was released. As Zusak's narrative reveals, words have the ability to save a life, but, in the hands of a skilled rhetorician like Adolf Hitler, they can also be used to precipitate mass murder.

### **“Hard Times were Coming. Like a Parade”: The Visible, as well as Invisible, Wounds of War**

As Laurence J. Kirmayer, Robert Lemelson, and Mark Barad have written, “Trauma has become a keyword through which clinicians and scholars from many disciplines approach the experience of violence and its aftermath” (1). Originating from the Greek word *Τραύμα* for “wound,” the term most commonly refers to a visible physical injury: an abrasion, contusion, or dislocation. However, trauma has come to encompass a wide array of other ailments, both visible and invisible. In the words of Kirmayer, Lemelson and Barad: “The metaphor of trauma draws attention to the ways that extremes of violence break bodies and minds, leaving indelible marks even after healing and recovery” (1). As a result, they continue, “the notion of trauma has been extended to cover a vast array of situations of extremity and equally varied individual and collective responses. Trauma can be seen at once as a sociopolitical event, a psychophysiological process, a physical and emotional experience, and a narrative theme in explanations of individual and social suffering” (Kirmayer, Lemelson and Barad 1).

*The Book Thief* traffics in this expansive view of trauma. Protagonist Liesel Meminger bears an array of tangible physical wounds from the death, destruction, and dislocations of war, along with a plethora of equally intense intangible ones. Her experiences with everything from deep emotional pain and recurring psychological problems to strained interpersonal relationships and compromised opportunities for intellectual development, aver Roberta J. Apfel and Bennett Simon's assertion that wartime leads to “overarching deprivations” for children (1).

Liesel's traumatic experiences begin even before the official outbreak of hostilities. The ascension of Adolf Hitler and the implementation of the Nazis' socio-political agenda results in the destruction of her nuclear family. Her father has been imprisoned—and likely executed—for being a communist. Meanwhile, her mother has struggled both to economically support her two children and to avoid meeting similar fate at the hands of the state. The physical as well as psychological toll that these years of poverty, fear, and material deprivation have had on Liesel is vividly apparent. In the words of the narrator, “Everything about her was undernourished. Wirelike shins. Coat hanger arms. She did not produce easily, but when it came, she had a starving smile” (31). Ultimately, in hopes of giving her children a more safe, secure, and comfortable life, Mrs. Meminger decides to relinquish both Liesel and her younger brother Warren to foster care. Just as the pair are on their way to their new foster home, however, Warren dies from a combination of malnourishment, illness, and exposure. Liesel witnesses this terrible event: “With one eye open, one still in a dream, the book thief—also known as Liesel Meminger—could see without question that her young brother, Warren, was now sideways and dead. His blue eyes stared at the floor. Seeing nothing” (20).

Liesel and her mother exit the train at the next stop with the body, and Warren's funeral is as pitiable as his life. As the narrator reveals, “For Liesel, the town was nameless, and it was here that her brother, Warren, was buried two days later. Witnesses included a priest and two shivering grave diggers” (22). Echoing Eileen H. Jones's observations about the behavior of bereaved children, after the service is over, Liesel refuses to leave the gravesite. Zusak writes:

Still in disbelief, she started to dig. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't—

Within seconds, snow was carved into her skin.

Frozen blood was cracked across her hands.

Somewhere in all the snow, she could see her broken heart, in two pieces. Each half was glowing, and beating under all that white. She realized her mother had come back for her only when she felt the boniness of a hand on her shoulder. She was being dragged away. A warm scream filled her throat. (23 – 4)

These images of her dead brother on the train, her mother carrying his limp body into the station, and his ascetic gravesite would haunt the young girl for years. Experiencing what we would now characterize as post-traumatic stress disorder, Liesel begins having night terrors: “She would wake up swimming in her bed, screaming, drowning in the flood of sheets” (36). Echoing another symptom of PTSD, she always dreams the same recurring dream: “As usual, her nightly nightmare interrupted her sleep and she was woken up by Hans Hubermann. His hand held the sweaty fabric of her pajamas. ‘The train?’ he whispered. Liesel confirmed. ‘The train’ ” (86).

Sending her daughter to live with a family who resides on Himmel Street—as Zusak’s narrator points out, “Himmel” is the German word for Heaven—Mrs. Meminger undoubtedly hoped that the youngster’s hardships would come to an end. Unfortunately, this is not the case. As Death sagely but sorrowfully remarks, “Hard times were coming. Like a parade” (358). Liesel arrives at the Hubermanns in January 1939, and, of course, that September, Germany invades Poland and the Second World War commences. Although Molching is a small town that contains no military bases, munitions factories, or armament plants, it is still profoundly affected by the war. The Hubermanns are poor before the outbreak of hostilities—Hans works as a housepainter while his wife Rosa earns money taking in laundry—and the conflict only exacerbates their situation: few households are willing to spend their increasingly scarce money on painting projects while even relatively comfortable families decide to economize by doing their own laundry rather than sending it out. These losses of income have a direct impact on dinner table. “Do you want to run away together?,” Liesel’s best friend Rudy Steiner asks her one day, and they have following exchange: “‘We’ll starve.’ ‘I’m starving anyway!’ they laughed” (130). In time, hunger leads the duo to steal food from local farmers, other children, and, at one point, even local clergymen. “‘All those priests,’ Rudy explained as they walked through town. ‘They’re too fat anyway. They could do without a feed for a week or so.’ Liesel could only agree” (162).

As the war progresses, so do its hardships. Given the town’s close proximity to Munich coupled with the advance of the Allied forces, Molching soon begins having air raids. As one might imagine, Zusak’s young protagonist finds the experience terrifying. Before long, the town is bombed. Zusak’s narrator describes the event and its catastrophic aftermath: “Within minutes, mounds of concrete and earth were stacked and piled. The streets were ruptured veins. Blood streamed till it dried on the road, and the bodies were struck there, like driftwood after the flood. They were glued down, every last one of them. A packet of souls” (12). Occurring without warning in the middle of the night, the bombs completely destroy Himmel Street and kill all of its residents except the young girl. “Rudy Steiner slept. Mama and Papa slept. Frau Holtzapfel, Frau Diller. Tommy Müller. All sleeping. All dying” (498).

Liesel is rescued from the rubble and views the devastation in dismay. “When they pulled her out, it’s true that she started to wail and scream. . . She did not know where she was running, for Himmel Street no longer existed” (533). For the next few hours, the young girl wanders through the debris, in shock. First, she encounters the body of her best friend, Rudy Steiner. Crushed beneath debris and still in his pajamas, “She leaned down and looked at his lifeless face and Liesel kissed her best friend. . . soft and true on his lips” (538). Afterward, and

even more devastatingly, she sees the bodies of her foster Papa and Mama. Zusak's narrator relays the heartbreaking scene: "Liesel did not run or walk or move at all. Her eyes had scoured the humans and stopped hazily when she noticed the tall man and the short, wardrobe woman. That's my mama. That's my papa. The words were stapled to her" (536). The youngster not only approaches the bodies, but sits down between them. Her grief is overwhelming: "She began to rock back and forth. A shrill, quiet, smearing note was caught somewhere in her mouth" (537).

Zusak's protagonist, however, is not the only character who experiences the traumas of war. As the novel's narrator wisely remarks, "On the ration cards of Nazi Germany, there was no listing for punishment, but everyone had to take their turn" (416). Liesel's foster father, Hans Hubermann, is unexpectedly drafted into the army. Assigned to the *Luftwaffe Sondereinheit (LSE)*—the Air Raid Special Unit—his unit performs one of the most undesirable tasks in the German army: "The job of the LSE was to remain aboveground during air raid attacks and put out fires, prop up the walls of buildings, and rescue anyone who had been trapped during the raid" (432). The dangerous and gruesome job takes an emotional toll on Herr Hubermann: "The dangers merged into one. Powder and smoke and the gusty flames. The damaged people. Like the rest of the men in his unit, Hans would need to perfect the art of forgetting" (435).

While all of the characters in *The Book Thief* suffer from the traumas of the Second World War, none experience more hardship than Max Vandenburg. Although Max does not appear until more than one-hundred pages into the novel, he quickly becomes one of the book's main and most memorable characters. As a Jew living in Nazi Germany, Max has endured increasing levels of state-sanctioned persecution since Hitler came to power: he has lost his job, been forcibly separated from his family, and seen Jewish homes looted and businesses destroyed. When readers are first introduced to Max, he is hiding in the secret storage room of his Christian friend and boyhood playmate, Walter Kugler. While Walter provides Max with food, water, and protection, his constant fear of being discovered had compromised both his physical and mental well-being. Indeed, every time Max takes a bite of food or swallows a sip of water, he is convinced that he will be heard and discovered. "The noise was astounding. Surely, the *Führer* himself could hear the sound of the orange crush in his mouth" (140). Coupled with these everyday hardships, the young man is haunted by the knowledge that he has left his family behind, probably to their deaths. As the narrator reports flatly, "It tortured him" (193).

Now, Max's situation has become even more dire: Kugler, who has been drafted into the German army, is being deployed to Poland and can thus no longer harbor his friend. Accordingly, he arranges for Max to take refuge in the home of his father's former army buddy: Hans Hubermann. Max arrives in Molching a few months after Liesel. Amidst the stress and anxiety of his travels, Max sleeps for three full days after entering the Hubermann abode. "In certain excerpts of that sleep, Liesel watched him. You might say that by the third day it became an obsession, to check on him, to see if he was still breathing" (205). During this time, though, the young girl discovers an unexpected kinship with the stranger: "Liesel in her act of watching was already noticing the similarities between this stranger and herself. They both arrived in a state of agitation on Himmel Street. They both nightmared" (206). Finally, after Max had been in the Hubermann home for a few weeks, Liesel works up the courage to talk with him. The subject that she chooses is this shared symptom of their trauma:

\* \* \* THE SWAPPING OF NIGHTMARES \* \* \*

*The girl:* 'Tell me. What do you see when you dream like that?'

*The Jew:* ' . . . I see myself turning around, and waving goodbye.'

*The girl:* 'I also have nightmares.'

*The Jew:* 'What do you see?'

*The girl:* 'A train, and my dead brother.' (220)

This exchange creates an instant bond between the two figures. However, as the narrator notes, the connection does not bring an end to their suffering: “It would be nice to say that after this small breakthrough, neither Liesel nor Max dreamed their bad visions again. It would be nice but untrue” (220).

The fictional town of Molching where the Hubermanns live is just a few miles away from Munich and, thus, also from Dachau. After the concentration camp becomes operational, groups of prisoners are occasionally marched through town. The physical condition of these individuals shocks everyone, especially Liesel’s foster father. Being a witness to their suffering is too much for him to take and, thus, in bold defiance of Nazi creed and conduct, he acts:

Papa reached into his paint cart and pulled something out. He made his way through the people, onto the road.

The Jew stood before him, expecting another handful of derision, but he watched with everyone else as Hans Hubermann held his hand out and presented a piece of bread, like magic.

When it changed hands, the Jew slid down. He fell to his knees and held Papa’s shins. He buried his face between them and thanked him. . . . Other Jews walked past, all of them watching this small, futile miracle. (394)

When the guards see this exchange, they have a decidedly different reaction: “The Jew was whipped six times. On his back, his head, and his legs. ‘You filth! You swine!’ Blood dripped now from his ear” (394). Hans is given a similar reproach: “Then it was Papa’s turn. . . . He was struck four times before he, too, hit the ground” (394). While the beating is physically painful Herr Hubermann realizes that his actions have an additional, and even more serious, repercussion: they jeopardize the safety of Max, who is hiding in their basement. “They’ll come now. They’ll come. Oh, Christ, oh, crucified Christ. . . . ‘What was I thinking? . . . Oh my God, Liesel, what have I done?’” (395 – 6). For the sake of everyone’s well-being, Hans realizes that it would be best if Max left. Liesel records her Papa’s reaction after the young man walks out the door and down the street, “she had never seen a man so devastated. There was no consolation that night. Max was gone, and Hans Hubermann was to blame” (399)

While Hans arranges to reunite with Max in a few days—presumably after the Gestapo have come and searched the house—the Jewish man declines: “You’ve done enough,” he writes in a note left at their rendezvous point (398). Max evades capture for several months, but he is eventually apprehended by the Nazis and—in a Dickensian detail—marched to Dachau through Molching. Liesel, who has been scanning the faces of the Jews paraded through town, partly hoping to see her friend and partly hoping that he is still free, spots him in the crowd. Their reunion, though brief, is heart-wrenching:

‘I’m here, Max,’ she said again. ‘I’m here.’

‘I can’t believe. . . .’ The words dripped from Max Vandenburg’s mouth. ‘Look how much you’ve grown.’ There was an intense sadness in his eyes. They swelled. (510 – 1)

When the guards see the pair, their punishment is as vicious as it is violent: “The whip continued from the soldier’s hand. It landed on Max’s face. It clipped his chin and carved his throat. . . . Max hit the ground and the soldier now turned to the girl. . . . The whip sliced her collarbone and reached across her shoulder blade” (513). It takes not simply one, but two of Liesel’s male classmates to restrain her from following Max when he is forcibly marched down the street. “Together, they watched the humans disappear. They watched them dissolve, like moving tablets in the humid air” (515). Realizing the fate that awaits Max at Dachau, the

Hubermann household is cheerless: “None of them ate that night. . . For three days, [Liesel] stayed in bed” (516).

### **“The Books and the Words Started to Mean not just Something, but Everything”: Reading as Remedy**

Near the end of *The Book Thief*, the narrator provides a heartbreaking overview of the traumatic events and personal losses that Liesel Meminger has experienced over the course of the text: “She had seen her bother die with one eye open, one still in a dream. She had said goodbye to her mother and imaged her lonely wait for a train back home to oblivion. . . . She had seen a Jewish man. . . marched to a concentration camp” (520 – 1). This recitation of devastating occurrences would seem to exhaust the resources of even the most resilient individual. However, as Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl has written about the human will to live, “Give me a why and I’ll find the how” (qtd in Apfel and Simon 10). While Frankl goes on to identify largely human-based reasons for staying alive—such as friends, neighbors, and family—*The Book Thief* spotlights inanimate ones. For Liesel, along with many others central characters in Zusak’s novel, both the why and the how of survival takes the form of books and reading.

As Roberta J. Apfel and Bennett Simon have documented, individuals who experience traumatic experiences such as those associated with war may benefit from an array of different treatments, ranging from talk therapy, hypnosis, and psychopharmacology to behavior modification, play therapy, and group discussion sessions. During the 1920s, clinical psychologists experimented with a new method: bibliotherapy. As Amy Recob has written, “Bibliotherapy is just that—book therapy” (vii). A form of cognitive behavioral therapy, the treatment is predicated on a basic principle: “that reading could affect an individual’s attitude and behavior and is thus an important influence in shaping, molding, and altering values” (Lenkowsky 123). By examining a novel, poem, story, or play that relates to a person’s situation, individuals are able to confront their feelings and cope with their experiences. As a result, as Anita Iaquina and Shellie Hipsky have explained, “The process of bibliotherapy is based in classic psychotherapy principles of identification (with the character or situation in the story), catharsis (wherein the student gains inspiration), and insight (which leads to motivation for positive change)” (209).

While the use of published texts in therapeutic settings is a relatively new clinical practice, Eileen H. Jones reminds us “that bibliotherapy, under other names, is at least as old as the sign over the entrance to an ancient Greek library that proclaimed it as ‘the healing place of the soul’ ” (15). Indeed, she goes on to note, long before bibliotherapy emerged as a distinct field of psychological practice, the use of fiction and nonfiction texts in clinical settings existed under an array of different labels, including library therapeutics, bibliocounseling, literatherapy, reading therapy, therapeutic reading, and biblioprophylaxis (Jones 15).

Although neither Liesel Meminger nor any other character in Zusak’s novel seeks formalized, professional treatment for their wartime traumas, they engage in bibliotherapy. At numerous points throughout the novel, these figures find comfort, escape, and even meaning in words, stories, and language. From the moment that readers encounter Liesel, for instance, she is defined by her love of books. Indeed, as the title of Zusak’s narrative suggests, the young girl is so fascinated with texts that she steals them. The book thief’s first act of literary larceny takes place at the unlikely locale of her brother’s gravesite. Death describes the scene:

\* \* \* A SMALL IMAGE, PERHAPS \* \* \*  
TWENTY METERS AWAY  
When the dragging was done, the mother and  
the girl stood and breathed.  
There was something black and rectangular

lodged in the snow.  
Only the girl saw it.  
She bent down and picked it up and  
held it firmly in her fingers.  
The book had silver writing on it. (24)

The silver words on the cover spell out the book's macabre title, *The Grave Digger's Handbook*. Meanwhile, a statement on one of its opening pages confirms its instructional purpose: "A Twelve-Step Guide to Grave-Digging Success" (29).

Ironically, though Liesel feels compelled to steal the book, she is unable to read it. The hardships of the young girl's life up to this point have taken their toll on her educational progress and she is illiterate. As Death reveals, however, *The Grave Digger's Handbook* possesses a significance that transcends reading:

\* \* \* THE BOOK'S MEANING \* \* \*

1. The last time she saw her brother.
2. The last time she saw her mother. (38)

Liesel brings the nonfiction narrative with her to the Hubermann home, hiding it under her mattress. The book remains there for many months, until Papa discovers it one night when he strips the sheets after Liesel has wet the bed during one of her nightmares:

\* \* \* A 2 A.M. CONVERSATION \* \* \*

'Is this yours?'  
'Yes, Papa.'  
'Do you want to read it?'  
Again, 'Yes, Papa.'  
A tired smile.  
Metallic eyes, melting.  
'Well, we'd better read it then.' (64)

After looking at the title, Papa asks why such a young girl would want to read such a morbid book. Liesel is unable to explain. "As for the girl, there was a sudden desire to read it that she didn't even attempt to understand. On some level, perhaps she wanted to make sure her brother was buried right. Whatever the reason, her hunger to read that book was as intense as any ten-year-old human could experience" (66). Hans commences with the introduction, and the young girl is mesmerized: "In the darkness Liesel kept her eyes open. She was watching the words" (68). When Papa discovers that Liesel cannot read any of the words herself, he adds another facet to the session. Initially using the smooth backsides on pieces of sandpaper and then the leftover paint on the wall in the basement, Papa teaches Liesel how to read and write: first, the letters of the alphabet and, eventually, the words in the book. Thus begins a nightly ritual between the two. "Over the next few weeks and into summer, the midnight class began at the end of each nightmare" (69).

Papa understands that their nightly sessions with *The Grave Digger's Handbook* are about much more than simply literacy education; they are also about helping the young girl confront the loss of her parents, combat memories about the horrible hardships she has suffered since the Nazis took power, and process the trauma of her brother's death. As Zusak's narrator says about the protagonist's relationship to printed texts: "the books and the words started to mean not just something, but everything" (30). Indeed, the evening that the pair completes the final chapter of the grave-digging manual, the young girl vocalizes this function or purpose: "Liesel still held the book. She gripped it tighter as the snow turned orange. On one of the

rooftops, she could see a small boy, sitting, looking at the sky. ‘His name was Werner,’ she mentioned. The words trotted out, involuntarily. . . . Papa said, ‘Yes’ ” (87).

By trading his ration of cigarettes, Hans is able to give his foster daughter not one but two books for Christmas that year. However, a combination of the speed with which the young girl devours the stories and the difficult economic conditions that prevent the Hubermanns from being able to afford any more new titles, bring her back to her original and signature method of acquisition: thievery. Indeed, indicating the centrality that books hold in Liesel’s life, they become even more important to her than food: “‘You hungry?’ Rudy asked. Liesel replied. ‘Starving.’ For a book” (287).

Both the content of, and the context in which, Liesel steals her next book is as symbolic as it is therapeutic: she nabs a smoldering text from a bonfire created to celebrate Hitler’s birthday. Although ostensibly an act by a poor girl who is simply desperate for a new possession, it can also be seen as a direct affront to the Nazi Party and Hitler’s ideology. The book that Liesel steals, a fictional narrative called *The Shoulder Shrug*, is, of course, contraband. It is reading material that has been placed on the bonfire because it was considered intellectually polluting, socially corrupting, even mentally poisonous. As Hans reflects while he and Liesel read the text: “The authorities’ problem with the book was obvious. The protagonist was a Jew, and he was presented in a positive light. Unforgivable” (143).

Hans Hubermann is not the only individual who witnesses Liesel’s theft. So, too, does Ilse Hermann, the mayor’s wife. The young girl spends several days terrified that Frau Hermann will report her to the authorities. But, the mayor’s wife responds in an entirely different manner. When Liesel comes by to pick up the laundry for her foster mother, the mayor’s wife invites her into the house and its voluminous library. Liesel’s sense of wonder reveals how her bibliotherapy has turned into bibliophilia:

Books everywhere! Each wall was armed with overcrowded yet immaculate shelving. It was barely possible to see the paintwork. There were all different styles and sizes of lettering on the spines of the black, the red, the gray, the every-colored books. It was one of the most beautiful things Liesel Meminger had ever seen.

With wonder, she smiled.  
That such a room existed! (134)

After asking for permission to touch the books, “She ran the back of her hand along the first shelf, listing to the shuffle of her fingernails gliding across the spinal cord of each book. It sounded like an instrument, or the notes of running feet” (135). Liesel spends much of the afternoon browsing through the seemingly innumerable volumes in the Hermann’s library. Then, after a while, “the words fidgeted, but they came out in a rush. ‘I should go.’ It took her three attempts to leave” (136).

Even in this instance, Liesel’s bibliophilia serves a therapeutic purpose, for the books that she encounters help her to cope with, process and—in moments of heightened stress and anxiety—even escape from the war. Echoing Cathy Malchiodi and Deanne Ginns-Gruenberg’s observation that “Reading can also involve calming rituals and self-soothing experiences” (169), Liesel uses one of the books that she acquires from the Hermann’s library to calm herself during an air raid. As the narrator relays, “for comfort, to shut out the din of the basement, Liesel opened one of her books and began to read” (381). However, with the sirens wailing outside and the chatter of voices inside, she can’t concentrate. So, the young girl begins reading aloud to herself, and something incredible happens: one-by-one, the frightened men, women and children in the shelter systematically quiet down and listen. “When she turned to page two, it was Rudy who noticed [her voice]. He paid direct attention to what Liesel was reading, and he tapped his brother and his sisters, telling them to do the same. Hans Hubermann came closer

and called out, and soon, a quietness started bleeding through the crowded basement. By page three, everyone was silent but Liesel” (381). As the raid goes on, the young girl reads on, acutely aware of how she is helping to calm everyone: “For at least twenty minutes, she handed out the story. The youngest kids were soothed by her voice” (381). Amazingly, even when the sirens sound to indicate that the raid is over and they may exit the shelter, the group does not disperse. Instead, they request that Liesel finish with the section.

Max likewise discovers the therapeutic power of books. An unexpected volume plays an instrumental role in his survival: Hitler’s autobiography, *Mein Kampf*. A copy of the book forms a key prop as he makes his way from the refuge at Walter Kugler’s house to the safe haven waiting for him at the home of Hans Hubermann. Death describes this tension-filled journey: “It was November 3, and the floor of the train held on to his feet. In front of him, he read from the copy of *Mein Kampf*. His savior. Sweat was swimming out of his hands. Fingermarks clutched the book” (157). Not only is the copy of Hitler’s autobiography a good form of protection—allowing him to blend in—but it is also a practical aid: between the pages of the thick volume Max conceals his travel papers, his forged identity card, and the key to the Huberman’s house. The irony that the foundational text of the Nazi movement being used to help save a Jew’s life is not lost on Max: “*Mein Kampf*. Of all the things to save him” (160). By the time that Max arrives in Molching, the volume has become part of his physical identity. As Zusak’s narrator notes, when the Jewish stranger enters the Hubermann abode, “His fingers smelled of suitcase, metal, *Mein Kampf*, and survival” (185).

Surprisingly, Max does not discard the volume after his travels. Living under the stairs in the basement of the Hubermann home, he spends long hours alone. Eager for a means to occupy his time and also intrigued by the writings of the man who started the Nazi movement, he reads *Mein Kampf*. Once, when Liesel sees him with the volume, she asks him if it is any good. His response reveals his complicated feelings toward the text: “He looked up from the pages, forming his fingertips into a fist and then flattening them out. Sweeping away the anger, he smiled at her. He lifted the feathery fringe and dumped it toward his eyes. ‘It saved my life’” (217).

### **“She Was Holding Desperately on to the Words Who Had Saved Her Life”: Writing, Painting, Drawing—and Surviving**

The bibliotherapy practiced by various characters in *The Book Thief* embodies what can be seen as a “passive” method for coping. Figures like Liesel and Max Vandenburg receive, examine, and absorb narratives that others have written. By the end of Zusak’s novel, however, the multitudinous hardships of the war, coupled with a desire for healing, precipitate a secondary and what might be called a more “active” means for dealing with these circumstances: composing stories, memoirs, drawings, and paintings about their wartime experiences.

The creation of original works of printed, visual, and material art can be a powerful means of processing, enduring, and even transcending trauma. As Cathy A. Malchiodi has written: “Being able to communicate what has happened through pictures, play, and other media allows for emotions, events, and memories to be witnessed by others and is the powerful first step in addressing the needs of any trauma survivor” (xvi). Although the title that Markus Zusak bestowed on his text ostensibly privileges reading, the acts of writing, drawing, and painting play a central role in the leisure time activities, emotional well-being, and ultimate survival of his characters. Long before the action of the novel begins, for instance, Liesel’s foster father, Hans Hubermann experiences the power of language. As the young girl reveals near the beginning of the narrative, “*words and writing actually saved his life once*” (64; italics in original). While serving in the First World War, Max’s father, Erik Vandenburg, volunteered Hans for a base-side duty. The young German man fully expected to peel potatoes or clean latrines, but he was instead given an unexpected assignment: writing letters for an ailing officer.

Although neither Hans nor Erik could have known it at the time, this seemingly mundane clerical act saved his life. While Hans was back at the base composing the missives, the rest of the unit was called into battle; none of them survived.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, when a school assignment asks Liesel to compose a letter to a classmate, her awareness about the pleasure of reading words extends to a cognizance about the power in writing them. As the narrator notes, when the young girl sits down at home to complete the assignment, “Liesel decided that writing to Rudy or some other *Saukerl* was actually ridiculous. It meant nothing” (25). As a result, she decides to direct her missive to different and far more meaningful addressee: her mother. The time, care, and attention that Liesel devotes to the document reveals both its importance and its deeply personal nature: “It took three hours and six drafts to perfect the letter” (95). Both the act of writing this letter and especially the fact that she actually mails it helps Liesel to better understand her circumstances.

Unlike Liesel, who becomes an author only reluctantly and by accident, Max Vandenburg possesses a near-compulsion to write, draw, and paint. This passion is sparked by Liesel’s birthday and his strong desire to give his new friend a present. While the young man does not have any money to buy a gift, he does have his copy of *Mein Kampf*. Although Liesel loves books and reading, Max refuses to give such a propagandistic text to a young girl, reflecting “That would be like the lamb handing a knife to the butcher” (221). That said, Max discovers another use for *Mein Kampf*: he can take the pages from the volume, paint over them, and then use them to create a new book for Liesel. The finished book is an illustrated text called *The Standover Man*, and it is a moving account of Max’s life: from the death of his father in the First World War and his youth as an amateur boxer to the time he spent hiding in his friend’s secret storage room and his current life with the Hubermans. Throughout, Max presents himself in the illustrations as a bird. The shape of simple line-drawing resembles a crow, but its white color also suggests a dove. Either way, both the seeming physical frailty of this animal coupled with its ability to fly add an extra significance to the story.

In the first of several metafictional moments in Zusak’s novel, the full manuscript of *The Standover Man* appears as a book-within-a-book. Rather than appearing as standard printed typeface on a blank page, the words and the images that accompany them appear as palimpsests: they are presented in handwritten text on pages where glimpses of *Mein Kampf* bleed through. The symbolism of Jewish man’s tale about hope, endurance, and survival being written on top of Hitler’s volume about hate, vengeance, and persecution is not lost on the narrator. “There were the erased pages of *Mein Kampf*, gagging, suffocating under the paint as they turned” (237).

Max leaves *The Standover Man* beside Liesel’s bed one evening, and she adores it: “Liesel read and viewed Max Vandenburg’s gift three times, noticing a different brush line or word with each one” (207). In the weeks that follow, he continues to use writing and drawing as a means to cope with his grief, process his situation, and even express his affection for Liesel. Eventually, Max decides to remove the remaining pages of *Mein Kampf* and cover them over with paint. “Originally, Max had intended to write his own story. The idea was to write about

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<sup>1</sup> An awareness of the potentially life-saving power of words and writing was not the only gift that Erik Vandenberg bestowed on Hans Hubermann. He also taught him how to play the accordion and, in so doing, conveyed the personal and psychological benefits of music. Together with providing Hans with an additional source of income—as he plays in bars throughout Molching after the war—his accordion is a source of pleasure, entertainment, and even comfort to Liesel. Before the two begin their nightly ritual or reading together after his foster wakes from one of her nightmares, Hans plays songs on his accordion to soothe her: “Papa would play a little longer. He would wink at the girl, and clumsily, she’d wink back” (37). As Zusak’s narrator notes, via such moments: “Hans Hubermann and Erik Vandenberg were ultimately united by music” (248). Indeed, when Erik’s son Max arrives in Molching, this bond forms the basis for his codeword or passphrase: “In November 1940, when Max Vandenberg . . . stood shaking and shaken in the doorway. ‘Do you still play the accordion?’ Of course, the question was really, ‘Will you still help me?’ ” (185).

everything that had happened to him—all that had led him to a Himmel Street basement—but it was not what came out. Max's exile produced something else entirely. It was a collection of random thoughts and he chose to embrace them. They felt *true*" (278). Death provides more specific details about both the genre and the content of these musings: "The desecrated pages of *Mein Kampf* were becoming a series of sketches, page after page, which to him summed up the events that had swapped his former life for another. Some took minutes. Others hours" (277 – 8). Two of Max's drawings appear on the following pages. One shows Hitler standing on a pedestal singing a tune while a crowd below gives him the Nazi salute. The caption reads, "Not the Führer—the conductor!" Meanwhile, the other depicts a young couple outside standing atop a veritable mountain of dead bodies. A swastika appears in the center of the sun, and the young woman cheerfully quips, "Isn't it a lovely day" (280). Max says of these illustrations: "They were more real than the letters he wrote to his family and to his friend Walter Kugler, knowing very well that he could never send them" (277). However, the Jewish author-illustrator does have a reader for his work in mind: "He resolved that when the book was finished, he'd give it to Liesel, when she was old enough, and hopefully, when all this nonsense was over" (277 – 8).

While *The Book Thief* provides a poignant portrait of the power of words to help and even heal individuals during times of crisis, it is not oblivious to their equally strong potential to hurt and harm. Indeed, given both the way in which a copy of *Mein Kampf* helps to save Max's life but has also, of course, played a role in creating his situation, he is acutely aware of the power of language to empower and imperil. While this duality is embedded within *The Standover Man*, it is articulated even more directly in the second book that Max composes while living in the Hubermann's basement: a volume called *The Word Shaker*. Inspired by the news that Liesel calmed everyone in the bomb shelter by reading to them, the manuscript is not merely an autobiographical narrative nor simply one of political allegory. Rather it is a narrative that explores the power of words and language.

In *The Word Shaker*, Hitler decides to literally rule the world with words, " 'I will never fire a gun,' he devised. 'I will not have to' " (445). He plants trees made of words like "Hatred," and "Fear" throughout Germany, carefully tending and cultivating them until "It was a nation of farmed thoughts" (445). When the Führer's crops of words are ripe, he calls the people together: "They were all placed on a conveyor belt. . .Words were fed into them. Time disappeared and they now knew everything they needed to know. They were hypnotized" (445). "Word shakers" are employed to tend and harvest the Führer's forest. "The best word shakers were the ones who understood the true power of words" (446), and one such word shaker is based on the character of Liesel: "She was renowned as the best word shaker of her region because she knew how powerless a person could be without words" (446).

One day, after meeting "a man who was despised by his homeland, even though he was born in it" (447), Liesel plants a tree of her own from a seed created by the word for friendship. The sapling grows faster than any of the trees in the Führer's hate-filled forest. Moreover, it is impervious to his efforts to chop it down: "A hundred and ninety-six soldiers could not make any impact on the word shaker's tree" (447). Throughout this time, the word shaker has been living in the tree. "It snowed. It rained. Seasons came and went. The word shaker remained" (448). Finally, after many months, the Führer and his men relent. Although they invite her to climb down, she declines: " 'No thank you,' she said, for she knew that it was only herself who was holding the tree upright" (448).

Only after the return of her longtime friend does Liesel finally descend from the tree and allow it to fall. This event, however, is far from the tragedy that it first appears. "The word shook, and when everything finally settled, the tree was laid out among the rest of the forest. It could never destroy all of it, but if nothing else, a different-colored path was carved through it" (450). The large arbor has covered the trees that Hitler grew from words like "fear" and "hatred." In the final lines of the story, the word shaker and her friend walk along the elevated pathway formed by the trunk of their felled tree and discover that they are not alone. In a



turned out, Ilse Hermann not only gave Liesel Meminger a [blank] book that day. . . . She gave her a reason to write her own words, to see that words had also brought her to life” (525).

Unbeknownst to either of them, this gift also saves the young girl’s life. When Molching is bombed in an Allied raid several weeks later, Liesel “survived because she was sitting in a basement reading through the story of her own life, checking for mistakes. Previously, the room had been declared too shallow [to serve as a neighborhood bomb shelter], but on that night, October 7, it was enough” (498). When rescuers pull her out, “She was still clutching the book. She was holding desperately on to the words who had saved her life” (499). However, upon seeing the total devastation of Himmel Street and the bloodied corpses of her friends, neighbors, and foster parents, she drops it amidst the rubble. “There was much work to be done, and with a collection of other materials, *The Book Thief* was stepped on several times and eventually picked up without even a glance and thrown aboard a garbage truck” (539).

Lest readers have not already realized this fact given the metafictional title of Liesel’s memoir, Zusak’s narrator retrieves the manuscript. It is Liesel’s text, coupled with Death’s own recollections and reminiscences, that form the basis for the novel. As Zusak’s narrator reveals: “Almost all of the words are fading now. The black book is disintegrating under the weight of my travels. That’s another reason for telling this story” (529). When Death finally comes to retrieve her soul—many decades after World War II, after the young girl has relocated to Australia, been married, had children and grandchildren—he reunites her with her book:

When I traveled to Sydney and took Liesel away, I was finally able to do something I’d been waiting on for a long time. . . . I pulled a dusty black book from my pocket.

The old woman was astonished. She took it in her hand and said, ‘Is this really it?’

I nodded.

With great trepidation, she opened *The Book Thief* and turned the pages. ‘I can’t believe. . .’ Even though the text had faded, she was able to read her words. The fingers of her soul touched the story that was written so long ago in her Himmel Street basement. (549 – 50)

The novel ends with Death’s desire to discuss the duality of language with Liesel: “I wanted to tell the book thief many things, about beauty and brutality, but what could I tell her about those things that she didn’t already know? . . . I wanted to ask her how the same thing could be so ugly and so glorious, and its words and stories so damning and so brilliant. . . .None of those things, however, came out of my mouth” (550). Indeed, as Zusak narrator already knows, the young girl has long been aware of this truth.

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As Eileen Nickerson aptly observed, “storytelling with a therapeutic purpose, is as old as the history of mankind. Peoples in all cultures and time periods have sought to ‘tell their story’—thus, passing on a form of heritage. A survival need was also served—for in the retelling of the incident, others were instructed, informed and hence, forewarned” (258). Both for the individual who told the tale and for the ones who listened, “Storytelling has. . . served a cathartic, ventilative avenue for people” (Nickerson 258). It has allowed individuals to share significant life experiences, explore their feelings about them, and, in so doing, disseminate wisdom. For this reason, Ann Cattanaach has asserted: “The stories we tell, whether they are about real or imagined events, convey our experience, our ideas, and a dimension of who we are” (213).

Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* provides a complex and powerful demonstration of this phenomenon in action. His novel explores the therapeutic effect that stories and storytelling

can have on agents, audiences, and authors. Although the 2005 novel is fictional, it draws on factual events, not simply from history but from the lives of the author's family. Zusak parents were both born in Europe and lived under the Nazis during the Second World War. In fact, *The Book Thief* is dedicated to his mother and father, Helmut and Elizabeth Zusak, and he has acknowledged in various articles and interviews that the text is based, in part, on their experiences during the war: "To a certain extent, the world of Molching was given to me. It was in my mind, dormant from childhood, on account of all the stories I was told by my parents" (Zusak "In His Own" 11 – 2). In this way, the bibliotherapy operating in and through *The Book Thief* is multi-fold or, at least, multidirectional. The novel serves a therapeutic purpose for its main character Liesel Meminger, for its author Markus Zusak, and—of course—for its young adult readers. In what has become an oft-repeated remark, Niall Williams once wrote: "We are our stories. We tell them to stay alive or keep alive those who only live now in the telling" (3). *The Book Thief* tells a story about the one of most horrific periods in human history. It is not simply Markus Zusak or Liesel Meminger who need these experiences to be remembered, relayed, and recorded; we all do.

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