

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak.txt

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak (Random House)

Review: Michiel Heyns

The Book Thief is being marketed as “young adult” reading. Generally the tag seems to mean that the book in question deals with adolescents coming to terms with adult issues, and may feature some mild swearwords and some sexual stirrings, but nothing too advanced. At its best, as in Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* or Michael Frayn’s *Spies*, the genre is equally accessible to all age groups, though offering different levels of enjoyment and understanding to its various strata of readers.

The Book Thief readily conforms to this formula, though this is not to say that it is a formulaic novel in a limiting sense. Its central character is a young girl just entering maturity; and her world is a partly bewildering, partly exhilarating amalgam of the adults who have power over her, and her peers, over some of whom she has power.

What makes Liesel Meminger’s situation remarkable is that she is growing up in Nazi Germany. A foster child, she is looked after by the stern and foul-mouthed Rosa Hubermann and her somewhat feckless but generous husband, Hans, in Molching, on the outskirts of Munich, which is to say near Dachau. As much subject to Nazi propaganda as all her fellow-Germans, Liesel is yet not entirely brain-washed by it, partly because something in her rebels against the book-burnings that form part of the ideological circus of Nazism.

It is one of the achievements of the novel that Liesel’s withdrawal from the Nazi ideology is so convincingly drawn as a gradual alienation rather than a startling insight. Part of the process, too, is the understated example of her foster father who, without any overt demonstration of dissent, is subtly at odds with his environment; so that by the time a Jew arrives on his doorstep begging to be taken in, Hans, whose life was once saved by the man’s father, takes him in without question.

Much of the tension in the novel derives from the deadly secret known only to Liesel and the Hubermanns; and much of its pathos derives from Liesel’s growing relationship with the Jew, Max.

In the town outside the Hitler Youth is strutting its stuff; and in revolt Liesel starts stealing books.

Never mind that the main victim of her thefts, the wife of the town’s mayor, seems to be in complicity with her: to Liesel stealing the books is a form of revenge on the violence done to words by the propaganda machine. Abetting her is a neighbour, young Rudy Steiner, who registers his own protest against Nazi ideology by painting himself black in emulation of Jesse Owens, the black athlete who so offended Hitler by his performance at the Berlin Olympics.

As this rudimentary synopsis will show, the subject matter is a tricky one for the genre. An unkind reviewer has referred to *Harry Potter Meets the Holocaust*, and though this is unfair, it does point to the central problem of appropriateness: talking about the Holocaust at all in terms remotely adequate to its immensity is difficult enough; how to do so through a child’s consciousness?

To deal with this problem, Zusak takes the bold step of introducing as frame narrator Death himself. “I am in all truthfulness trying to be cheerful about this whole topic,” he assures us on the first page, and he manages to keep up a sardonic rueful-but-resigned tone for the rest of the 550 pages over which he presides. “Even death has a heart,” he tells us.

Not everybody will warm to the cosiness of this device. It has about it too much of the book’s besetting sin, which is charm. The focus is so determinedly on the lovability of the central characters that at times one is in danger of forgetting that this is, after all, the Third Reich. Mrs Hubermann, at first sight a harsh disciplinarian, turns out to have a warm heart, her profane abuse no more than an eccentricity. Liesel and Rudy are forever calling each other “Saumensch”, “Saukerl” and “Arschloch” (roughly female and male

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swine, and gender-non-specific arsehole), though clearly deeply fond of each other. Hans sacrifices his cigarettes to buy Liesel a book; and Max paints over every page of Mein Kampf in order to write Liesel an alternative story, of which we have a generous extract.

In addition to Death's coy narrative, and the warm-heartedness of the characters, the novel is interspersed with arch announcements signalled as follows:

\*\*\* A HEADING \*\*\*

Followed by some statement  
centred on the page  
like this  
to make it seem momentous.  
Or facetious.

The device, like Death's narration, does give visual diversity and variety of tone to a long novel. Its drawback, though, is that it intervenes so radically between the reader and the terrible subject matter that one is left relatively cold by the latter. Whereas Zusak's evident desire not to sensationalise his subject is commendable, he can hardly have wanted to mute its horror to this extent.

Zusak is a wonderfully inventive writer commanding a vivid turn of phrase: "The walls and widows were manicured," he says about a well-to-do neighbourhood, "and the chimneys almost breathed out smoke rings." There is no doubt that he can write. Perhaps if he were to set out to write for adult adults, he might escape the tendency to ingratiate his characters with his readers.