Directions:

1. Mark your confusion.

2. Show evidence of a close reading. Mark the text with questions and comments.

3. Write a one-page reflection on your own sheet of paper.

***The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak**

John Green - NYTimes May 14, 2006

The Australian writer Markus Zusak's brilliant and hugely ambitious new young-adult novel is startling in many ways, but the first thing many teenagers will notice is its length: 552 pages! It's one thing to write a long book about, say, a boy who happens across a dragon's egg; it's quite another to write a long, achingly sad, intricately structured book about Nazi Germany narrated by Death itself.

Readers are introduced to this Death-as-storyteller concept in a too-long invocation that begins "The Book Thief." This is no Grim Reaper — we have here a kinder, gentler Death, who feels sympathy for his victims. As Death himself puts it on Page 1: "I can be amiable. Agreeable. Affable. And that's only the A's." Maybe so, but Death is so innocuous that he's not very absorbing. Or affecting. His periodic soliloquies aren't the most effective moments of the novel, and if he took an M.F.A. class, Death would doubtless be criticized for telling instead of showing.

Fortunately, this book isn't about Death; it's about death, and so much else. Principally it is about Liesel Meminger, whose little brother dies just before Liesel's mother leaves her with foster parents in a dismal town in southern Germany (her father, a Communist, has been taken away).

Her new Papa is the implausibly saintly Hans Hubermann (that is, über-man), so good a person he even manages to love his wife, Rosa, who is one of the more memorable foster moms in young-adult fiction. She looks, Death tells us, "like a small wardrobe with a coat thrown over it. There was a distinct waddle to her walk. Almost cute, if it wasn't for her face." Rosa periodically beats Liesel with a wooden spoon, and uses exceedingly foul language. Much of it can't be quoted in a family newspaper, but suffice it to say that she routinely refers to her husband and foster daughter as "filthy pigs." Still, she cares for Liesel — and as Death eventually shows us, "She was a good woman for a crisis."

Liesel finds ways of coping with her losses. But she is disruptive in school (she volunteers answers to questions) and is predisposed to fighting with boys. More important, she becomes a thief. She commits her first theft at her brother's funeral, taking "The Grave Digger's Handbook," which had fallen on the ground. Hans teaches her to read it at night. While Liesel sometimes joins up with a gang to steal food and the like, her only thieving passion is for books. Not good books or bad books — just books. From her bedroom to the bomb shelter down the road, reading helps her commune with the living and the dead — and finally, it is the mere existence of stories that proves to be her salvation.

Liesel is a very well-drawn character (and immensely likable), but many young readers will find the going slow until Max Vandenburg, a 24-year-old Jewish boxer, shows up at the family doorstep. Hans, as it happens, owes the fighter's dead father a favor, so he houses Max in the basement.

Aside from his friendship with Liesel (in one of the book's many resonant metaphors, he makes her a comic book using painted-over pages from "Mein Kampf"), Max is arresting because of his situation. He has abandoned his doomed family in order to live in hiding. After leaving them, "the relief struggled inside him like an obscenity. It was something he didn't want to feel, but nonetheless, he felt it with such gusto it made him want to throw up. How could he? How could he? But he did." There is a cowardice to Max's fight for survival, and his guilt and shame tear at him. He and Liesel both suffer from nightmares — but Liesel's grief is relatively uncomplicated. She must live with her mother's choices. Max must live with his own.

Max isn't the only fighter Marcus Zusak has written about. His first novel published in America, "Fighting Ruben Wolfe" (2001), follows the fistic exploits of Cameron and Ruben Wolfe, brothers who scrape by in a working-class neighborhood in Sydney. As boxers in an illicit league, Ruben becomes a champion and his little brother Cam, an inferior boxer, is known for his strong chin and resilience. In the end, it's Ruben who wants to be like Cam — better to be a fighter than a winner.

That novel was followed by a sequel, "Getting the Girl" (2003), which is about learning to fight for, and open up to, love, and then by the award-winning "I Am the Messenger" (2005), a strange and alluring novel about a 19-year-old compelled to vigilantism by anonymous instructions delivered on playing cards.

All of Zusak's protagonists have been fighters, whether born or made. But while his writing has always been ambitious and his characterizations precise, his early books merely celebrated fighting. In "The Book Thief," where battling to survive is sometimes an act of weakness, we see fighting in all its complexity. Max dreams, for instance, that he is boxing with the Führer. "There was only one round, and it lasted hours, and for the most part, nothing changed. The Führer pounded away at the punching-bag Jew." But then Max recovers and knocks [Hitler](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/h/adolf_hitler/index.html?inline=nyt-per) down. Hitler takes off his gloves, seemingly defeated — until he whips the crowd into a fury. The "fists of an entire nation" attack Max, and he cannot fight them all off. This is fighting as "The Book Thief" understands it: winners often lose.

Indeed, everything is upside down in Zusak's Nazi Germany. Sounds are tasted, visions are heard, death has a heart, the strong do not survive, and your best chance of living may be a concentration camp. The entropy of this world is near complete.

Some will argue that a book so difficult and sad may not be appropriate for teenage readers. "The Book Thief" was published for adults in Zusak's native Australia, and I strongly suspect it was written for adults. Adults will probably like it (this one did), but it's a great young-adult novel. Many teenagers will find the story too slow to get going, which is a fair criticism. But it's the kind of book that can be life-changing, because without ever denying the essential amorality and randomness of the natural order, "The Book Thief" offers us a believable, hard-won hope. That hope is embodied in Liesel, who grows into a good and generous person despite the suffering all around her, and finally becomes a human even Death can love. The hope we see in Liesel is unassailable, the kind you can hang on to in the midst of poverty and war and violence. Young readers need such alternatives to ideological rigidity, and such explorations of how stories matter. And so, come to think of it, do adults.