

# The Book Thief



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARKUS ZUSAK

Markus Zusak was born and raised in Australia, but his mother had emigrated there from Germany and his father from Austria, so he grew up hearing their stories about World War II. Zusak's father was a house-painter (like Hans Hubermann) and neither parent spoke English very well, but they made sure their children did plenty of reading. When he was a teenager Zusak decided he wanted to be a writer. He is the author of five books: *The Underdog*, *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, *When Dogs Cry*, *The Messenger*, and *The Book Thief*. *The Book Thief* is his best known work by far, and has been translated into more than thirty languages. Zusak lives in Sydney with his wife and daughter.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*The Book Thief* is set in Germany during World War II and the Holocaust, where six million Jews were killed by the Nazis. Adolf Hitler, the leader of the Nazi party, rose to national power in 1934 and began enforcing his policies of anti-Semitism and German aggression, which led to World War II. Events that directly affect the novel are the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 and the Allied fire-bombings of Munich, Stuttgart, and the fictional Molching in 1942 and 1943.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Everything is Illuminated* by Jonathon Safran Foer and *The History of Love* by Nicole Krauss are both similar contemporary Holocaust novels written in a postmodern style. Peter Hedges' *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* and Ernest Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* inspired the teenage Zusak to become a writer.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Book Thief*
- **When Written:** 2002-2005
- **Where Written:** Sydney, Australia and Munich, Germany
- **When Published:** 2005
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Fiction
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Fictional town of Molching, Germany, 1939-1943
- **Climax:** The fire-bombing of Molching
- **Antagonist:** Adolf Hitler, World War II and the Holocaust
- **Point of View:** First person omniscient, with Death as the narrator

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Bread.** Zusak was inspired to write *The Book Thief* by a story his mother told him, which involved a boy giving bread to a starving Jew who was being marched to a concentration camp. A Nazi soldier noticed and whipped both the boy and the Jew. This scene is recreated in *The Book Thief* with Hans Hubermann in the place of the boy.

**Rudy.** Zusak's favorite character from any of his books is Rudy Steiner, Liesel's best friend.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Death introduces himself as the narrator and describes the three times he saw "the book thief." The story begins with Liesel, her mother, and her brother Werner riding on a train. Werner dies and Liesel and her mother disembark to bury him. At the funeral Liesel finds a book called *The Grave Digger's Handbook* in the snow, but she doesn't know how to read. Liesel's mother drops her off in Molching, where Liesel moves in with foster parents, Hans and Rosa Hubermann. Rosa is loud and insulting, but Hans wins Liesel's trust through his gentleness and support.

Liesel has nightmares of her dead brother nightly, but Hans sits with her and comforts her. She meets a boy named Rudy Steiner who idolizes the athlete Jesse Owens, and they become best friends. Rudy constantly asks Liesel to kiss him, but she always refuses. Hans discovers Liesel's book and starts giving her reading lessons in the basement. Meanwhile World War II begins, and Molching has a book-burning to celebrate Hitler's birthday. Liesel steals a book from the fire. She is sure the mayor's wife sees her steal it.

Rosa does the laundry for a number of wealthy townspeople, including the Mayor. On a day soon after the book burning, Liesel has to deliver the laundry to the mayor's wife, Ilsa Hermann. Ilsa invites Liesel into her library and Liesel is amazed at the books. She returns many times to read.

Meanwhile, a young Jewish boxer named Max Vandenburg hides in a storage room for weeks. A friend brings him an identity card hidden in a copy of **Mein Kampf**, Hitler's book. Max travels to Molching and finds the Hubermanns. Death explains that Max's father Erik saved Hans's life in World War I, and Hans promised to help Max's mother should she ever need it. The Hubermanns let Max in and hide him in the basement, where he starts to imagine boxing with Hitler. Max and Liesel share nightmares and soon become friends. Max paints over the pages of *Mein Kampf* and writes a book called *The Standover*

Man for Liesel.

Ilsa Hermann quits the laundry service, and Liesel insults her. Later Liesel returns with Rudy and they start stealing books from Ilsa's library. Max gets sick and falls into a coma, but he finally recovers to the joy of the household. Nazi Party members check the basement for its ability to serve as a bomb shelter, but don't notice Max hiding there. Ilsa Hermann, meanwhile, leaves Liesel a note in one of the stolen books and Liesel realizes that Ilsa is letting her steal the books. The war escalates and there is an air raid in Molching, and the Hubermanns have to leave Max in the basement. At the next raid Liesel reads out loud to the others in the shelter.

Soldiers parade Jewish prisoners through Molching on their way to a concentration camp. Hans, moved to pity, gives an old Jewish man a piece of bread and gets whipped. Max leaves that night, not wanting to get the family in any more trouble. The Gestapo come to recruit Rudy for an elite Nazi school, but Alex Steiner refuses to let him go. Soon, both Hans and Alex are drafted into the army. Rudy and Liesel leave bread on the street for the next parade of Jews. Rosa gives Liesel Max's sketchbook, which includes a story called *The Word Shaker*, about the power of words and Max's friendship with Liesel.

In the army, Hans is assigned to a squad that cleans up after bombings, but his bus crashes. Hans breaks his leg, and he is allowed to return home to heal. An Allied pilot crashes during another raid and Liesel and Rudy watch the pilot die. There are more parades of Jews, and one day Liesel sees Max among them. They find each other and both are whipped. Liesel goes to the mayor's library and rips up books in her frustration.

Ilsa Hermann gives Liesel a notebook so she can write her own story. Liesel starts writing a book called *The Book Thief* in the basement. Just after she finishes, but while she is still reading it in the basement of her house, the neighborhood is bombed. Hans, Rosa, Rudy, and the other residents of Himmel Street all die. Workers rescue Liesel and she finds Hans's **accordion** and then her parents' bodies. She kisses Rudy's corpse. Death rescues *The Book Thief* from a garbage truck.

Liesel goes home with Ilsa Hermann and is later reunited with Max. Liesel moves to Australia and grows to be an old woman with a family. Death comes for her soul and shows her *The Book Thief*, and tells her that humans haunt him.

novel, but through learning to read, stealing a series of different books, and her developing relationship with her foster parents, her friend Rudy, and a Jewish young man named Max whom the Hubermanns hide in their basement for a time, she grows from a troubled girl into a compassionate, creative young adult.

**Death** – The narrator of the novel, the mysterious figure who collects human souls when they die. Death enjoys noticing colors, particularly in the sky, and he is mystified by the contradictory nature of humans—both beautiful and ugly. As World War II continues and he must collect so many souls, he grows weary with his work.

**Hans Hubermann** – Liesel's foster father, a silvery-eyed house painter and **accordion** player. Hans is exceedingly kind and gentle, and has a quiet strength and courage. He follows his own moral compass even when it puts him in harm's way, and is no fan of the Nazi's. Liesel grows closer to Hans than to anyone else, and it is he who teaches her to read.

**Max Vandenburg** – A Jewish fist fighter who comes to the hide in the Hubermanns' basement. Max arrives sick and emaciated, but he soon joins the family and keeps himself alive through a strong hatred of Hitler. Max is also an artist and writer, and he and Liesel bond through sharing both their nightmares and their words.

**Rudy Steiner** – Liesel's neighbor and best friend, Rudy loves Liesel from the start and is always asking her for a kiss. Rudy seems like Hitler's "Aryan ideal" – he is blonde, blue-eyed, and an exceptional student and athlete, but Rudy hates the Hitler Youth and ultimately Hitler himself. He becomes Liesel's partner in their adventures of both crime and charity.

**Ilsa Hermann** – The mayor's wife in the town where the Hubermanns live and one of Rosa's washing customers, Ilsa subjects herself to cold weather as a punishment for living when her son has died (even though his death was no fault of her own). She introduces Liesel to her library, and both gives Liesel books and allows Liesel to steal them from her. Ilsa starts out hardly able to speak, but by the novel's end she encourages Liesel to write and then takes her in after the bombing.

**Adolf Hitler** – The *Führer* (leader) of Nazi Germany and antagonist of the novel. Hitler never physically appears in the story, but he stands as a symbol for all the evil caused by the Nazis and the War. Hitler's use of language and propaganda to cause suffering shows an abuse of the power of words, and his book **Mein Kampf** plays a major role in the plot.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Liesel Meminger** – The protagonist of the novel, a young girl who comes to live with Hans and Rosa Hubermann, her foster parents. Liesel's real parents, who were communists, were probably killed by the Nazis, and her brother Werner dies in the story's first scene. Liesel experiences great suffering in the

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**Rosa Hubermann** – Liesel's foster mother, a loud, impatient woman fond of cursing and insulting everyone. Under her angry exterior Rosa has a brave, caring heart, and she takes in Liesel and Max without question.

**Alex Steiner** – Rudy's father, a tailor who is drafted because he refuses to send Rudy away to Nazi school. Alex survives the war and returns home after the final bombing. He and Liesel become friends at the end of the novel, as the only two survivors of Himmel Street.

**Frau Holtzapfel** – The Hubermanns' neighbor who has a long-standing feud with Rosa. After the first air raid she asks Liesel to read out loud to her and she slowly grows more friendly. Later she has to deal with the deaths of both of her sons.

**Michael Holtzapfel** – Frau Holtzapfel's son who survives the war at Stalingrad but watches his brother die. Michael suffers from survivor's guilt, and later hangs himself.

**Hans Hubermann, Junior** – The Hubermanns' grown son, a patriotic Nazi who insults his father and leaves the family because Hans doesn't support Hitler.

**Tommy Müller** – A neighbor and classmate of Rudy and Liesel's, he is physically weak, hard of hearing, and twitchy, and his weakness incurs the wrath of Liesel and later Franz Deutscher.

**Franz Deutscher** – The sadistic leader of Rudy's Hitler Youth squad. He enjoys punishing Rudy and Tommy for no reason.

**Arthur Berg** – The initial leader of the apple-stealing gang, he befriends Liesel and Rudy and treats the other kids in his group fairly.

**Viktor Chemmel** – The stealing gang's second leader, a cruel boy who exploits his own group and attacks Rudy and Liesel.

**Walter Krugler** – Max Vandenburg's friend and former boxing opponent, the man who saves Max from being arrested and helps him get to Hans.

**Trudy Hubermann** – The Hubermanns' daughter, quiet and not close to her parents.

**Reinhold Zucker** – A young man in Hans's division of the LSE in the army. He has a bad temper that gets him killed when he spitefully takes Hans's seat in the truck.

**Erik Vandenburg** – Max's father, a Jewish **accordion** player who befriends Hans in World War I and saves his life by volunteering him to write letters on the day of battle. Hans promises Erik's wife that he will help her, if she or her family ever needs help.

**Frau Diller** – A resident of Himmel Street who owns a store. A staunch patriot who makes everyone salute Hitler before she will speak to them.

**Werner Meminger** – Liesel's younger brother, who dies on a train at the beginning of the novel and then regularly appears in her dreams.

**Robert Holtzapfel** – Frau Holtzapfel's other son, who Death collects in a hospital after his legs were blown off at Stalingrad.

**Pfiffikus** – A crazy man of Himmel Street who likes to whistle and curse obscenely.

**Jesse Owens** – An African-American athlete who won four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics in Hitler's Germany. He is not present in the story, but is Rudy's hero and a symbol of opposition to the "Aryan ideal."

**Sister Maria** – Liesel's teacher who gives her many a beating.

**Ludwig Schmeickl** – A boy who mocks Liesel for being illiterate, but then she beats him up. Later the two of them apologize to each other.

**Johann Hermann** – Ilsa Hermann's son, who died in World War I.

**Otto Sturm** – A wealthy boy who delivers food to the Catholic priests on his bike. Liesel and Rudy steal his basket one day.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### DEATH

Death himself is the narrator of *The Book Thief*, and the setting is Nazi Germany during World War II, so there is a constant feeling of danger and suspense in the story. The narrator also reveals the fates of most of the characters beforehand, particularly the details of their deaths. This creates a different kind of suspense, where the reader knows some of the story's end but still wants to know how the characters arrive there.

Most of the characters deal with the death of a loved one, and they then struggle with survivor's guilt. Liesel's brother dies at the start of the story and his death haunts her throughout. Hans Hubermann helps Max Vandenburg because of his debt to Max's dead father, Ilsa Hermann grieves for years for her dead son, and Michael Holtzapfel commits suicide over guilt for surviving the war when his brother did not. In the end the many deaths of the novel become overwhelming and the reader is given a glimpse into the mind of Death, who is weary of working, horrified by war, and "haunted by humans."



### WORDS AND LANGUAGE

Markus Zusak constantly reminds the reader of the importance of language through his writing style. The disjointed narration, postmodern style (the starred, bold-faced interjections), and poetic phrasing emphasize the *words* used to tell the story, to the point that the reader is never allowed to sink unconsciously into the plot. There are also many reminders of language within the novel's action – Liesel and Hans write on the back of sandpaper, the

newspaper becomes imprinted against Hans's skin, and Liesel, Hans, and Max paint words in the basement. In the end Zusak gives language itself (like Death) as much physicality and agency as any character.

Like many novels about oppressive regimes, much of the story's evil comes in the form of propaganda and the suppression of free language, like the book burnings of the Nazis. Max Vandenburg's story *The Word Shaker* condenses Zusak's ideas about the power of words – in the story Hitler is someone who uses language for evil purposes, while Liesel, who loves language purely, is able to resist Hitler through reading and writing her own words. With them she creates a shelter for herself and Max to protect them from the cruel world. The last lines of Liesel's own book (*The Book Thief*) sum it up – "I have hated the words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right." She must take the language of the *Führer* and turn it to good.



## BOOKS

Related to words and language is the theme of books, which begins even in the novel's title. Books as objects play major roles in the plot, and the story itself is divided among the different books Liesel steals or is given. The Nazi book-burning is a central plot point, and represents the suppression of free speech but also an acknowledgement of the power of books themselves – Hitler fears books that contradict his propaganda. Liesel is able to fight Hitler in a small way by stealing a book from the flames. Ilsa Hermann's library later becomes a haven for Liesel because of the many books it holds.

Books are almost quasi-characters in the novel as well. *The Grave Digger's Handbook* starts Liesel's journey, *The Shoulder Shrug* burns against her chest, and Liesel rips up some of Frau Hermann's books in her despair. **Mein Kampf** (The book written by Hitler) is a destructive book because of its Nazi propaganda, but Max Vandenburg's copy contains the identification card that saves his life. Later Max is able to paint over the pages of *Mein Kampf* and write a story for Liesel, and in this way he is able to get some revenge on Hitler by writing over the evil words with his own creative, compassionate language. Liesel's own book, *The Book Thief*, saves her life both literally and figuratively. It keeps her in the basement during the final bombing, and writing it gives her a way to process all the suffering she has seen and experienced. By trying to make her language "right" she is able to gain a little bit of control over her terrifying world.



## STEALING AND GIVING

In the setting of Nazi Germany, the idea of criminality is turned upside down – Hitler's laws require citizens to commit crimes against humanity,

and when Liesel or Hans show kindness to Max (or any other Jew) they are harshly punished. The thievery of the novel's title also seems like less of a crime in the context of the story. When Liesel and Rudy steal books and food it is a small way of defying Hitler, empowering themselves, and building their identities. This is particularly true for Liesel, as the books she steals help form her own story, but for both children stealing becomes a way of taking some control over a world gone mad.

Rudy has his own unique relationship with stealing and giving. He wants to be a thief, and stealing things cheers him up when something bad has happened, but he ends up being better at leaving things behind. At first it is Liesel's shoes, but then he purposefully leaves the teddy bear for the dying pilot and bread for the starving Jews. Ilsa Hermann's books also symbolize the complicated nature of this theme. First she offers Liesel her books, but then when Liesel gets angry that Ilsa fired her mother, Liesel steals the same books she was offered before. She keeps stealing books until she realizes that Ilsa is actually giving them to her by letting Liesel steal them. Traditional ideas of property are useless in such a setting, and the characters must act according to their own moral compass.



## COLOR, BEAUTY, AND UGLINESS

When he takes a soul, Death remembers the color of the sky to distract himself from his grim work. He begins the story with the colors of his three meetings with Liesel, the book thief – white, black, and red – and combines these to form the Nazi flag, which hangs over the story like the colors of the sky. Later Liesel acts similarly to Death in describing the sky to Max when he is trapped inside.

Death sees the full spectrum of colors in the sky, which he connects to beauty and ugliness, and the extremes of humanity. He cannot decide if mankind is truly good or evil, beautiful or ugly, and in the end he finally accepts that it can be both at once. The book **Mein Kampf** represents this self-contradictory nature. It is a book of ultimate hatred and ugliness, but Max paints over it and makes a beautiful story about his friendship with Liesel. By the novel's end Liesel begins to see the spectrum of humanity as well, just as she so uniquely described to sky the Max. When Death finally takes her in her old age, he wants to explain the beauty and ugliness of people to Liesel, but then he realizes that she already knows.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## THE ACCORDION

Hans Hubermann's accordion represents hope,

safety, and creativity for Liesel. When she starts to read to the people of Himmel Street during the air raids, she feels like reading out loud is her version of playing the accordion. The accordion means music in spite of war, and entertainment and creativity in the face of suffering and death.



## MEIN KAMPF

For Hans himself, the accordion is a symbol of his debt to Erik Vandenburg, the Jewish man who saved his life. The accordion then becomes the link between the Hubermanns and Max Vandenburg, and a symbol of Hans's strength of character that allows him to take Max in. When Hans leaves for the war, the accordion comes to symbolize Hans himself, as Rosa silently wears it at night without playing a note.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Alfred A. Knopf edition of *The Book Thief* published in 2007.

### Prologue: The Flag Quotes

☝☝ Yes, often, I am reminded of her, and in one of my vast array of pockets, I have kept her story to retell. It is one of the small legion I carry, each one extraordinary in its own right. Each one an attempt – an immense leap of an attempt – to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker), Liesel Meminger

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 14-15

#### Explanation and Analysis

In this unusual prologue, we're introduced to Death, ostensibly the storyteller behind the book we're about to read. Death isn't the fearsome, chilling figure we might expect--instead, he's thoughtful and oddly human. Death isn't so much an executioner as a historian; his job is to remember and try to relate to the people he's witnessed dying. The book we're about to read, we're told, is about a young woman whose story somehow proves that human existence is "worth it."

What does it mean for existence to be "worth it," especially if it must end in death? The protagonist of this novel will try to find meaning in her life, even as the threat of death--not just death, but annihilation by the Nazis--becomes stronger and stronger. Death seems to admire the people who try hardest to fight him, or whose stories prove that life is

valuable even in the face of its inevitable end.

### Part 1: Growing Up a Saumensch Quotes

☝☝ All told, she owned fourteen books, but she saw her story as being made up predominantly of ten of them. Of those ten, six were stolen, one showed up at the kitchen table, two were made for her by a hidden Jew, and one was delivered by a soft, yellow-dressed afternoon.

When she came to write her story, she would wonder exactly when the books and the words started to mean not just something, but everything.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker), Liesel Meminger, Max Vandenburg

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 30

#### Explanation and Analysis

Death continues to narrate the story, foreshadowing many of the key events in the novel. The protagonist, Liesel, is a lover of books and words in general, and has come to find language a matter of life and death--words mean "everything" to her.

The story we're about to hear, Death suggests, isn't just about the life of Liesel. It's also about how Liesel comes to recognize that books and words are central to her existence. Furthermore, the passage complicates the question of who, exactly, is telling this story. Death seems to be the narrator, but here it's suggested that Liesel ends up writing her own story--has she assumed the guise of death in order to tell the story of her own life?

### Part 1: The Other Side of Sandpaper Quotes

☝☝ 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.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker), Liesel Meminger

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 66

#### Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, we meet Liesel as she first embarks on a long career of reading. Liesel has just witnessed the death of her brother; soon afterwards, she finds a book called *The Grave Digger's Handbook*, which she shows to her adopted father, Hans. Hans will go on to teach Liesel how to read books of all kinds, but here Liesel feels her first powerful desire to learn how to read.

Why the urgency of learning to read? The fact that Liesel feels such a desire after her brother's death (and after she's sent to live with new parents) suggests that Liesel sees reading as a way of understanding the mysteries of life: even if she can't control her own destiny, she can at least understand books. Furthermore, the proximity of death (grave-digging) and literature suggests that literature might represent a way to cheat or transcend death--one of the key ideas of the novel.

## Part 1: The Smell of Friendship Quotes

☝️ Papa would say a word and the girl would have to spell it aloud and then paint it on the wall, as long as she got it right. After a month, the wall was recoated. A fresh cement page.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker), Liesel Meminger, Hans Hubermann

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 72

### Explanation and Analysis

In this idyllic scene, Liesel learns how to read in whatever ways her circumstances allow. In the basement, her adopted father, Hans, shows her how to paint words onto a wall. The beauty of Liesel's lessons is that whenever she runs out of space on the wall Hans can re-coat the wall with paint, allowing Liesel to begin again.

The wall is an interesting symbol, suggesting that Liesel embraces reading because it allows for a "fresh start." Liesel is a young girl, but she's already had a tough life, full of death and tragedy. By mastering the art of reading, she learns how to reinvent herself with the help of writing.

## Part 1: The Heavyweight Champion of the School-Yard Quotes

☝️ The day of the announcement, Papa was lucky enough to have some work. On his way home, he picked up a discarded newspaper... and slipped it beneath his shirt. By the time he made it home and removed it, his sweat had drawn the ink onto his skin. The paper landed on the table, but the news was stapled to his chest. A tattoo...

"What does it say?" Liesel asked him...

"Hitler takes Poland," he answered, and Hans Hubermann slumped into a chair.

**Related Characters:** Death, Liesel Meminger, Hans Hubermann (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 74

### Explanation and Analysis

Here the characters first get word that Hitler has invaded Poland. Hans is terrified by this news--but what's equally important is the manner in which he receives it. Hans reads a newspaper story about Hitler's invasion, and he carries it with him for so long that the words print themselves on his body. The image of words tattooed onto a man's body prophesies the Holocaust, during which Jews were forcibly tattooed with their registration numbers. The message is clear enough: Hitler's victory in Poland foreshadowed his even more terrifying "victories" over the Jews in Europe. Furthermore, the passage underscores the power of language--not for the last time, words have a physical presence as well as a metaphorical one.

## Part 2: A Girl Made of Darkness Quotes

☝️ You see, people may tell you that Nazi Germany was built on anti-Semitism, a somewhat overzealous leader, and a nation of hate-fed bigots, but it would all have come to nothing had the Germans not loved one particular activity:

To burn.

The Germans loved to burn things. Shops, synagogues, Reichstags, houses, personal items, slain people, and of course, books.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 84

**Explanation and Analysis**

As Death narrates the story of Liesel's life, his narration becomes more sober and adult. Liesel is growing up in the time of Hitler and the Nazis, and Death often comments on the horrors of the Holocaust. For now, though, Death makes a series of comments about *why*, exactly, the Nazis were so successful in Germany. Death's explanation is that the Nazis appealed to an innate desire in the German population--the desire to burn things.

What's so innate about the desire to burn? Perhaps burning is meant to represent the destructive impulse in all human beings: all humans have the potential to destroy, and to enjoy their own acts of destruction. It's not just the Germans who love to burn things, then--it's all humanity.

**Part 2: 100 Percent Pure German Sweat Quotes**

☝ Although something inside told her that this was a crime – after all, her three books were the most precious items she owned – she was compelled to see the thing lit. She couldn't help it. I guess humans like to watch a little destruction. Sand castles, houses of cards, that's where they begin. Their great skill is their capacity to escalate.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker), Liesel Meminger

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 109

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this scene, Liesel and the other people in her community participate in a book-burning. Book burnings were a fixture of early Fascist politics in Germany: Hitler commended the German people for destroying so-called "subversive" literature by Jews and communists. Disturbingly, everybody in the chapter--including Liesel--seems to be enjoying the book-burning.

The passage ties in with Death's earlier comments about humanity's natural propensity for destruction. Ironically, Death is the calm, peaceful character in this novel, and humans are the volatile, often brutal ones. Liesel loves to read, and she has a lot of respect for language--and yet even Liesel has the destructive "spark" inside her: she's a human being.

**Part 3: The Mayor's Library Quotes**

☝ 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.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker), Liesel Meminger

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 134

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this important passage, the mayor's wife introduces Liesel to her library--a place where hundreds of books are displayed on the wall in all their glory. Liesel has seen plenty of books before, but she's never seen so many in one place, other than at book burnings. Here, books are celebrated for their beauty and wisdom--the library is like a church, comforting Liesel in a time of need.

The fact that Liesel is so appreciative of the mayor's wife's library suggests that, in spite of her potential for destructive impulses (as noted by Death previously), she's a gentle, wise person. Liesel knows how to respect beauty, and she understands the importance of protecting words and stories of all kinds.

**Part 3: The Struggler, Continued Quotes**

☝ For most of the journey, he made his way through the book, trying never to look up. The words lolled about in his mouth as he read them. Strangely, as he turned the pages and progressed through the chapters, it was only two words he ever tasted. *Mein Kampf*. My struggle – The title, over and over again, as the train prattled on, from one German town to the next. *Mein Kampf*. Of all the things to save him.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker), Max Vandenburg

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 160

**Explanation and Analysis**

In one of the most darkly humorous passages in the novel, Max Vandenburg, a young Jewish man, escapes from the Nazis by carrying around a copy of *Mein Kampf*. *Mein Kampf* was Hitler's most famous book--a long, rambling story about his economic and political theories, which was practically required reading for Nazis during the 1930s. Max's friend Walter has arranged for Max to receive train tickets and keys, hidden inside a copy of Hitler's book. Death stops to note the beautiful irony here: Hitler's writings, in which he condemns the Jews in the most withering terms, are being used to save a Jew's life.

The passage is a great, literal example of the power of language and books. Even if *Mein Kampf* itself is an evil, racist book, Death suggests that the fact that it is a book, in and of itself, has helped rescue Max from Nazi persecution. In the novel, books--even *Mein Kampf*--are powerful things, to be used for either good or evil.

## Part 4: A Short History of the Jewish Fist Fighter Quotes

☝☝ With the rest of them, he stood around the bed and watched the man die -- a safe merge, from life to death. The light in the window was gray and orange...

"When death captures me," the boy vowed, "he will feel my fist on his face."

**Related Characters:** Death, Max Vandenburg (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 189

### Explanation and Analysis

In this flashback scene, Death describes Max watching his own uncle die a slow, painful death. The scene is tragic, because Max's uncle is in so much pain, and seems to think of death as a relief, not a punishment. And yet Max doesn't agree: he vows that when he dies, he'll fight bravely, right up to the end.

Peculiarly, Death isn't insulted by Max's words--on the contrary, he seems to respect Max for valuing life so highly, to the point where he'd be willing to punch Death in the face. Death knows that he's inescapable, yet he likes it when human beings stand up for themselves--he's like a teacher who gives the highest grades to the students who aren't scared to say they disagree with him. Here Death also shows his typical penchant for noting colors as people are dying.

## Part 4: Pages from the Basement Quotes

☝☝ During that week, Max had cut out a collection of pages from *Mein Kampf* and painted over them in white... When they were all dry, the hard part began... he formulated the words in his head till he could recount them without error. Only then, on the paper that had bubbled and humped under the stress of drying paint, did he begin to write the story.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker), Max Vandenburg

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 223

### Explanation and Analysis

Max takes his copy of *Mein Kampf* and paints over the pages, rewriting it with a new, gentler set of words. He paints over the pages of the book--much like Liesel and Hans painting over the walls they'd covered in words--and then he proceeds to write his own story.

The message here is clear: Max is dealing with a horrible, hateful book by Adolf Hitler, and yet he uses the power of language to cancel out Hitler's words and replace them with something better. Language gives Max incredible power: he "defeats" hateful speech, albeit within the confines of one copy of *Mein Kampf*. Max's victory, then, is small but important: he proves that Hitler isn't a God; he's just a man, whose hateful words can be replaced with beauty and art.

## Part 5: The Gambler (A Seven-Sided Die) Quotes

☝☝ Liesel, however, did not buckle. She sprayed her words directly into the woman's eyes.

"You and your husband. Sitting up here." Now she became spiteful. More spiteful and evil than she thought herself capable.

The injury of words.

Yes, the brutality of words.

**Related Characters:** Death, Liesel Meminger (speaker), Ilsa Hermann

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 262

### Explanation and Analysis

Things have gotten rough for Liesel's family. They run a laundry service, but in the hardships of the war, most of

their customers have abandoned them. Now, the family's final customer, the Hermann family, has canceled as well: Liesel's family has no source of income left. Liesel's sudden spitefulness here seems somewhat unjustified, as Ilsa continues to treat Liesel kindly and invites her to keep visiting her library, and even gives her another book--but Liesel is overcome with anger when she compares the Mayor's circumstances to her own.

The scene reminds us that words are by no means a tool for good--on the contrary, one can use words for all sorts of purposes, good and bad (as we've often been reminded through the symbol of *Mein Kampf*). Liesel allows her emotions to run away with her here, using her words to criticize Ilsa and hurt Ilsa deeply.

## Part 5: The Whistler and the Shoes Quotes

☝☝ He laughed. "Good night, book thief."

It was the first time Liesel had been branded with her title, and she couldn't hide the fact that she liked it very much. As we're both aware, she'd stolen books previously, but in late October 1941, it became official. That night, Liesel Meminger truly became the book thief.

**Related Characters:** Death, Rudy Steiner (speaker), Liesel Meminger

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 292

### Explanation and Analysis

Rudy is by now well aware that Liesel steals books from Ilsa's library. He seems to understand that Liesel steals these books because of her love for literature, and because she wants to prove to herself that she's adult enough to take matters into her own hands, whether or not Ilsa Hermann allows her in the library.

The passage is interesting because it suggests that words become most "real" when two people share them. Ilsa had already stolen several books, but strangely, it's not until Rudy gives her the title "Book Thief" that she begins to think of herself as one.

## Part 5: The Floating Book (Part II) Quotes

☝☝ In truth, I think he was afraid. Rudy Steiner was scared of the book thief's kiss. He must have longed for it so much. He must have loved her so incredibly hard. So hard that he would never ask for her lips again and would go to his grave without them.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker), Rudy Steiner

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 303

### Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Rudy Steiner does something recklessly brave: after Viktor Chemmel throws Liesel's book into the cold water of the river, Rudy jumps in and saves it from destruction. After achieving his goal, Rudy asks Liesel for a kiss. As he's done so many times before, it's here that Death notes the truth: Rudy loves Liesel desperately, to the point that he is frightened that she might kiss him back.

Death doesn't give many details about the seemingly contradictory nature of this sentiment--instead, he encourages us to respect Rudy's feelings, even if we can't understand them entirely. Rudy is an almost noble character because of the sacrifices he's willing to make for Liesel (he risks his life and ends up in cold water here, after all). Rudy is brave but also nervous--the juxtaposition of Rudy's brave decision to jump into the river and his fear of Liesel's kiss makes us understand how deeply he must love her.

## Part 6: Death's Diary: The Parisians Quotes

☝☝ Please believe me when I tell you that I picked up each soul that day as if it were newly born. I even kissed a few weary, poisoned cheeks. I listened to their last, gasping cries. Their vanishing words... I watched the sky as it turned from silver to gray to the color of rain. Even the clouds were trying to get away.

Sometimes I imagined how everything looked above those clouds, knowing without question that the sun was blond, and the endless atmosphere was a giant blue eye.

They were French, they were Jews, and they were you.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 350

### Explanation and Analysis

In this poignant passage, Death describes the devastation of the Holocaust. In the face of so much violence and horror, Death maintains that he is gentle with his victims as he leads them away from their lives--it's as if they've suffered so much in life that death is a sweet relief.

The passage further underscores the paradox of Death the character. Death is actually the kindest and most reasonable character in the novel--a stark reminder of the terrors of the Holocaust, which far overshadow the terrors of dying. Death further asserts his status as a wise, perceptive character when he claims that the Holocaust victims were "you"--which is to say, they were human beings, the same as we the readers.

As usual, Death takes note of the colors of the sky as he carries away human souls, but here his imagery is especially significant. The sun is "blond" and the sky is a "giant blue eye"--ominous symbols for the racist "Aryan ideal" of Hitler and the Nazis.

## Part 7: The Sky Stealer Quotes

☝☝ She didn't dare look up, but she could feel their frightened eyes hanging on to her as she hauled the words in and breathed them out. A voice played the notes inside her. This, it said, is your accordion.  
The sound of the turning page carved them in half.  
Liesel read on.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker), Liesel Meminger

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 381

### Explanation and Analysis

During an air raid, the people of Himmel Street are gathered underground in the air raid shelter. In the frightened silence, Liesel reads a book aloud to comfort the people around her--just like Hans would play his accordion to comfort Liesel herself. Liesel has grown a great deal over the course of the novel: when we first met her, she was frightened and just beginning to learn how to read--now, though, she's mastered the art of reading, and by the same token, she's learned how to take care of herself and others.

The passage confirms the relationship between literature and wisdom. Learning to read isn't just a useful skill--it's a way for human beings to take control over their own lives and maintain a sense of peace and calm. Literature has a function similar to that of music: it calms people in their times of need--here, for instance, it calms others during the threat of a bombing.

## Part 7: The Long Walk to Dachau Quotes

☝☝ Just give him five more minutes and he would surely fall into the German gutter and die. They would all let him, and they would all watch.

Then, one human.

Hans Hubermann...

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.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker), Hans Hubermann

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 393

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hans sees a huge group of Jews being led off to their deaths in concentration camps. Hans is amazed that the other Germans watching the horrific spectacle don't do anything to comfort or console the Jews. Almost without realizing it, Hans offers an elderly Jewish man some bread.

What does Hans's action accomplish? It doesn't save the Jewish man--he's whipped brutally and then, presumably, sent back to the camp (and Hans himself is whipped as well). And yet Hans's generosity reminds the Jewish man that he's not an animal, but a human being. In this way, Hans's actions are enormously valuable: they undermine the program of the Holocaust by treating Jews like ordinary people, not the hideous scapegoats Hitler wanted them to be.

## Part 8: The Hidden Sketchbook Quotes

☝☝ Yes, the *Führer* decided that he would rule the world with words. "I will never fire a gun," he devised. "I will not have to."

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 445

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're introduced to Adolf Hitler, or rather a fictionalized version of him, as presented by Death (who is retelling a story Max has written for Liesel). In the story, Max emphasizes that Adolf Hitler's great power was the

power of language: long before he became the *Fuhrer*, he decided that he'd never fire a gun, preferring to use words like bullets. Sure enough, Hitler used his oratorical might to inspire Nazis and others to fight *for* him.

There's nothing inherently good or evil about language--it's just a "neutral multiplier" of the speaker's intentions. A good person like Liesel can use words to extend her goodness to other people--but by the same token, an evil man like Hitler can, and did, use language to extend his evil ideas and cause real harm.

☝ The best word shakers were the ones who understood the true power of words. They were the ones who could climb the highest. One such word shaker was a small, skinny girl. She was renowned as the best word shaker of her region because she knew how powerless a person could be WITHOUT words. That's why she could climb higher than anyone else. She had desire. She was hungry for them.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker), Liesel Meminger

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 446

### Explanation and Analysis

This section comes from Max's sketchbook, which he has left behind for Liesel, and which Death now summarizes for us. A word shaker, in Max's story, is a person who uses the power of language, either for good or for evil (Hitler is the first one mentioned in the story). The girl in this passage--clearly Liesel herself--is adept at using language to help other people, precisely because she remembers a time when she didn't know how to use language at all (at the beginning of the novel, she couldn't read).

Liesel's power to do good is directly tied to her linguistic abilities. She feels a sincere desire to extend her aid to others--even if they're Jews or other so-called "undesirables." As we've already seen, Liesel knows how to use books and words to provide comfort and support to other people.

## Part 9: The Snows of Stalingrad Quotes

☝☝ The brother shivers.  
The woman weeps.  
And the girl goes on reading, for that's why she's there, and it feels good to be good for something in the aftermath of the snows of Stalingrad.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker), Michael Holtzapfel, Frau Holtzapfel

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 471

### Explanation and Analysis

In this moving chapter, Liesel goes to read for Frau Holtzapfel and her son Michael, who's recently returned from Stalingrad. Stalingrad was the site of one of the longest and most wretched battles of World War II, during which hundreds of thousands of Russian and German soldiers died in the fighting and the cold. Michael has returned from Stalingrad alive but severely injured, and his brother had his legs blown off and died. In the face of this tragedy, Liesel goes on reading to Michael and his mother. Death explains that Liesel continues to read because it feels good to be *doingsomething*, particularly something positive for others, when surrounded by so much horror. By reading, even during the saddest hours of World War II, Liesel asserts the power of language--but also the power of optimism and cooperation. In doing so, she brings happiness, or at least a measure of comfort, to the Holtzapfels; a powerful reminder of the good that language can do when placed in the right hands.

☝☝ The human heart is a line, whereas my own is a circle, and I have the endless ability to be in the right place at the right time. The consequence of this is that I'm always finding humans at their best and worst. I see their ugly and their beauty, and I wonder how the same thing can be both. Still, they have one thing I envy. Humans, if nothing else, have the good sense to die.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 491

### Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Liesel and Rudy see a dying pilot who's crash-landed. Rudy and Liesel treat the pilot with kindness--they can't save his life, but they give him a gift (a teddy bear) before he goes away with Death. Death is amazed by what he's just witnessed: humans are capable of incredible acts of war and destruction, and yet they're also clearly capable of immense acts of selflessness and kindness.

As he's stated before, Death can't wrap his head around the contradictions of the human spirit. As the novel reaches an

end, and Liesel becomes more mature, Death becomes less of an authority figure, gracefully yielding his place to humanity. Death closes with a paradoxical comment--he envies humans for their ability to die. Death brings closure and (presumably) peace to all humans, but no one is there to bring those things to Death himself. Perhaps the point is that humans, precisely because they're mortal, have such desperate, volatile natures, able to do both good and evil. Death, who is immortal, can never entirely understand what humans do.

## Part 10: The Ninety-Eighth Day Quotes

☝ It was explained to me that in the end, Michael Holtzapfel was worn down not by his damaged hand or any other injury, but by the guilt of living.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker), Michael Holtzapfel

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 503

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Michael Holtzapfel hangs himself. Michael has survived the horrors of the Battle of Stalingrad, but he suffers from a serious case of survivor's guilt. He can't stand being alive when so many other men he knows (particularly his own brother) have died--and as a result, he ends his life.

Michael is unique among the characters in the novel. While many suffer from guilt, only Michael gives in and takes his own life--just another example of how the horrors of war come in many forms. Michael's suicide reminds us of the importance of facing death with bravery and conviction, as Max and Liesel have thought about. While some consider suicide an "easy way out" or a cowardly action, one could also argue that Michael, too, is facing death on his own terms.

## Part 10: Ilsa Hermann's Little Black Book Quotes

☝ *The sun stirs the earth. Around and around, it stirs us, like stew...*

On Munich Street, she remembered the events of the previous week there. She saw the Jews coming down the road, their streams and numbers and pain. She decided there was a word missing from her quote.

The world is an *ugly* stew, she thought.

It's so ugly I can't stand it.

**Related Characters:** Death, Liesel Meminger (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 519

### Explanation and Analysis

As World War II and the Holocaust go on, Liesel becomes increasingly disillusioned with the human race. She sees everything that humans are capable of: the murders that they commit, the innocent people they torture, etc. Liesel isn't sure how to comprehend so much brutality. In the end, she thinks of a book she read, in which the author described the world as a stew. Liesel amends the text and describes the world as an "ugly" stew--a horrible mishmash of ugliness and evil.

Liesel has a way with words, and in her time of emotional crisis, words again allow her to make sense of the world--even if this just means describing it in all its horror. Liesel seems to be losing her faith in humanity, and therefore her faith in life--a faith that's previously led to her to provide comfort to the lonely and suffering.

☝ She tore a page from the book and ripped it in half. Then a chapter.

Soon, there was nothing but scraps of words littered between her legs and all around her. The words. Why did they have to exist? Without them, there wouldn't be any of this. Without words, the *Führer* was nothing... What good were the words?

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker), Liesel Meminger

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 521

### Explanation and Analysis

There's no reason why words have to be good--and in this passage, Liesel realizes the truth about words in the most disillusioning way imaginable. At the height of World War II, Liesel sees the evil that words have wrought everywhere around her. Even Hitler, she knows, used words to manipulate people into enacting his evil ideas. Words, she concludes, are too dangerous to be worth it--they end up hurting people more than they help people.

It's a mark of how depressed and resentful Liesel has become that she's about to turn her back on books--the very things that have given her so much pleasure and joy in life. In her misery, Liesel (perhaps understandably) forgets

about all the good that books are capable of achieving--the people they're capable of inspiring and the lives they're capable of improving, including Liesel's own.

## Epilogue: The Handover Man Quotes

☝ 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 explain that I am constantly overestimating and underestimating the human race – that rarely do I ever simply *estimate* it. I wanted to ask her how the same thing could be so ugly and so glorious, and its words and stories so damning and brilliant.

**Related Characters:** Death (speaker), Liesel Meminger

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 550

**Explanation and Analysis**

As the novel ends, Death confronts the same paradoxes that he and the other characters have been confronting throughout the novel. How is it possible, he wonders, that human beings are capable of incredible evil, but also incredible acts of selflessness and kindness? While Death doesn't provide an answer to his question, he decides to simply accept this reality for what it is (to just "estimate" it): it's possible in the same sense that it's possible for words to be used for moral and immoral purposes. A word is nothing by itself--just a sound, or a few scratches on a piece of paper. But when words are moved around and manipulated for a cause, they can achieve anything, right or wrong. The same is true of human beings. Human nature is a complex thing, neither entirely good or bad, ugly or beautiful. Death, despite his immortality, is still fascinated and perplexed by these contradictions. It's because Death fails to understand humanity that he continues to study humans closely--especially humans like Liesel who embrace the power of life and language in all its ambiguity.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PROLOGUE: DEATH AND CHOCOLATE

The narrator, Death, explains that he has a fair and sympathetic nature, and he carries away souls as gently as he can. He tries to notice colors before he takes away a human soul – usually the colors of the sky. His favorite is a chocolate-colored sky, but he notices thousands of shades over the course of even an hour, while most humans only notice the sky at dawn and dusk. Death tries to distract himself from his work by paying attention to the colors, as he can never take a break from his job.

Death explains that it is the humans that survive – that are left behind when others they know die – that affect him the most, and that the story he is about to tell features "one of those perpetual survivors." Death vaguely introduces the elements of the story, which includes a girl, words, an accordionist, Germans, a Jewish fist fighter, and thievery. He reveals that he has seen "the book thief" three times.

## PROLOGUE: BESIDE THE RAILWAY LINE

Death associates his first encounter with the book thief with the color white. The scene occurs next to a train track, and everything is covered in snow. There is a mother, a girl, and the corpse of a little boy outside in the snow, next to a stopped train. Two angry guards make them carry the body back onto the train and keep going.

Death explains that he made a mistake and allowed himself to become interested in the girl. When the family leaves the train Death takes away the boy's soul, but then he hesitates and watches the book thief (the little girl), whose tears are frozen to her face.

*The revelation of Death as narrator immediately introduces the fantastical into the story. This is not a traditionally morbid Death, but one with a complex visual sense and remorse for his grim work. Here he introduces the theme of color and beauty, which will connect to the idea of art offering a distraction from or method of processing suffering and death.*



*The theme of death and surviving will become important – Death as narrator is a constant reminder of the looming fate of all the characters, but the human desire for life will create the tension of the story. Death introduces the narrative in an unconventional manner.*



*Death outlines the story before he begins to tell it – there is a lot of foreshadowing in the novel, which resonates with looming Death himself. This also creates a different kind of suspense for the reader, as they wonder not about what happens but rather how the scene arrives to the foreshadowed conclusion.*



*This scene establishes the "specialness" of the book thief, as Death takes an immediate interest in her. The introduction of the scene with "whiteness" begins the theme of associating moments with colors.*



## PROLOGUE: THE ECLIPSE

Death associates the next scene with the color black. It is night, and there is a crashed plane with a pilot inside. A boy appears with a tool box, followed by the book thief. The boy pulls out a teddy bear and places it next to the pilot's body. Death takes the pilot's soul and then a crowd starts to gather around the smoking plane. A shadow seems to pass over like an eclipse. Death explains that this sometimes happens when a human dies, and that he has seen millions of eclipses.

*More foreshadowing, but no explanation of who the characters are or how the story arrived at such a strange scene. The reader then has this to look forward to, and another moment around which Death will structure the story. Everything feels inevitable, like death itself.*



## PROLOGUE: THE FLAG

Death thinks of the color red for his last encounter with the book thief. Bombs have fallen on a town and the streets are bloody and the sky is red. Ash falls like burning snow. The book thief crouches next to a pile of rubble, holding a book. Death watches as she drops the book and starts to scream. Then the scene changes – the book gets thrown away when the wreckage is cleaned up, but Death rescues it from a garbage truck.

*The historical setting of the book (Nazi Germany, during World War II) and this foreshadowed scene assure the reader that tragedy is surely coming. The interesting part will be how the characters arrive there. A first book is introduced. Books as objects will be very important.*



Death associates the book thief with a full spectrum of colors, but mostly with the colors of the three times he saw her: white, black, and red. Death draws them coming together to form an image of the Nazi flag. Death has a few stories that he keeps because they help him believe that human lives are worth living. The story of the book thief is one of these.

*A sort of thesis for the novel – if it is inevitable that everyone will die eventually, then why keep trying and hoping? Death keeps stories that prove the value of human existence – it is the power of language and art that helps him keep believing. The Nazi flag will hang over the story's action like the colors of the sky.*



## PART 1: ARRIVAL ON HIMMEL STREET

Death returns to the first, "white" scene of the train in the snow. A woman is taking her children (one girl and one boy) to be handed over to foster parents. On the train the little boy, whose name is Werner, coughs intensely and suddenly dies. Death appears and sees that no one has noticed except for the girl, Werner's older sister, whose name is Liesel Meminger.

*The narrative begins more traditionally now, but the reader already has more knowledge than the characters. Zusak uses this kind of dramatic irony often – especially comparing Death's situational knowledge with that of the protagonist, nine-year-old Liesel. The story begins with a death.*



Liesel had been asleep and dreaming about the Führer, Adolf Hitler, giving a speech with words that "glowed in the light." Liesel greets him like a friend, but then she wakes up and sees Death as he takes her brother's soul. The train stops and Liesel and her mother carry Werner's body outside into the snow, but then the guards make them get back on the train. The guards drop the family off at the next township.

*Hitler is introduced as a master of words. He has not yet become an antagonist to Liesel, but the reader knows what is coming. The story starts dramatically, and it is clear something is very wrong in this family, but Death gives no details yet.*



Two days later two gravediggers bury Werner as Liesel and her mother watch. The younger gravedigger accidentally drops a book from his coat pocket into the snow. After the ceremony Liesel starts to dig frantically through the snow for her brother, still in shock that he is dead. Her fingers start to bleed and her mother drags her away. Once she calms down Liesel sees the little black book, and she takes it. She and her mother leave the cemetery.

Death continues to narrate, though he is no longer an eyewitness. Liesel and her mother board a train to Munich, where Liesel is going to be handed over to foster parents because her mother cannot provide for her anymore. Death is amazed that the woman could experience something so horrible as the death of her child and still keep on living.

They arrive in Munich and Liesel's mother has to explain to the authorities why Werner isn't there. She says goodbye to Liesel and Liesel is taken to a town called Molching, on the outskirts of Munich. Liesel has her first car ride as the foster care lady takes her to Himmel Street, where her new family, the Hubermans, live. "Himmel" means "heaven" in German. Death muses over the irony of this, as Himmel Street is in a poor, shabby part of town.

They arrive at Himmel Street and the Hubermans appear. Hans Hubermann is tall and Rosa Hubermann is short and round with an angry face. Liesel refuses to leave the car. People on the street start to gather around until Rosa curses at them. Hans smokes a cigarette quietly and finally persuades Liesel to come inside.

Liesel carries in her suitcase, which contains the book that she took from the cemetery, the first conquest in her career as "book thief." The book is called *The Grave Digger's Handbook: A Twelve-Step Guide to Grave-Digging Success*.

## PART 1: GROWING UP A SAUMENSCH

Death mentions a few details about characters and events that will come up later in the story, and he wonders when was the exact time that books and words became so important to Liesel. She will steal six books in her "career," and have four other important books given to her.

*Liesel's first book stealing, though she doesn't know how to read yet. Her illiteracy is a form of powerlessness, as the story reveals later. This scene establishes the importance of books as objects, even apart from the words within them. The morbid, dramatic opening scene continues – Liesel has a lot to deal with already.*



*Death establishes himself as an omniscient narrator even apart from the scenes he has witnessed. Death begins his musings on the inherent contradictions of humans. The greatest mystery for him seems to be how they can keep on living in the face of despair.*



*Molching is a fictional town. Death's musing on the name "Himmel Street" will begin a recurring theme of introducing and defining German words outside of the narrative. This serves as another reminder of the overarching theme of the power of words. Things look bleak for Liesel's beginnings.*



*The introduction of two main characters. From the start Rosa is seen as loud and angry, while Hans immediately knows the right thing to do or say to win Liesel's trust. His quiet strength will be a positive force in Liesel's life.*



*The book's title seems ironic considering the narrator and opening scene. It is also the title of this section of the novel – which is in many ways about Liesel dealing with her brother's death.*



*More foreshadowing and outlining of the story before it takes place. Death admits explicitly here that the power of words will be an important theme, though Liesel has not discovered it yet.*



Liesel is undernourished and cold when she arrives at Himmel street. She has lived in cramped boardinghouses her whole life, and the only thing she can remember about her father is the word "Communist." Liesel wonders why her mother has left her behind. She knows that her mother is always sick and has no money, but being abandoned doesn't feel like salvation.

Rosa Hubermann makes the biggest initial impact on Liesel because of her cursing. Rosa yells at Liesel (and Hans) for everything, and calls them *saumensch* or *saukerl* (filthy pig). At first Liesel refuses to bathe or get into bed, and Rosa keeps swearing at her.

Hans intervenes quietly and spends a long time teaching Liesel how to roll a cigarette, which puts her more at ease. Death gives a few facts about Hans: he is a house painter, plays the **accordion**, and has already survived World War I. To most people he doesn't seem noticeable or important, but Liesel sees that there is something special about him. He has kind, silvery eyes.

Death then describes Rosa: she does washing and ironing for a few wealthy families, is a bad cook, and aggravates everyone. She loves Liesel but shows her love in strange, abusive ways. When Liesel finally takes a bath Rosa hugs her violently. She asks Liesel to call them Mama and Papa, but still curses whenever she speaks. Liesel already feels comfortable enough around Hans to think of him as "Papa."

## PART 1: THE WOMAN WITH THE IRON FIST

Liesel start having nightmares every night about her dead brother. She wakes up screaming and Hans comes in and sits with her. After a few weeks he holds her, and Liesel comes to trust him through his gentleness and the fact that he never leaves when she needs him. Some nights he plays the **accordion** for her, which cheers her up, but the noise annoys Rosa. For Liesel, the accordion comes to symbolize safety.

Liesel feels like *The Grave Digger's Handbook* is her last link to her brother and mother. She cannot read, but the book as an object is still important to her because of this connection, and she keeps it hidden under her bed. She feels very alone. The Hubermanns have two children, Hans Junior and Trudy, but they are both older and live elsewhere.

*"Communist" is another important word that Death emphasizes. There is more dramatic irony here, as Liesel has no idea what has become of her parents, but based on historical knowledge of Hitler's and the Nazi's persecution of Communists implies that they have been arrested or killed.*



*Rosa's curse words will repeat throughout the story – they are first used as insults, but will later become signs of familiarity and even affection. More evidence of how the same words can be used for contradictory purposes.*



*Hans again knows the right thing to do to put Liesel at ease. The accordion is introduced, which will become an important symbol. Liesel has a mature empathy and immediately sees the "importance" in Hans, but she cannot yet turn that wisdom towards herself.*



*Rosa becomes less threatening and more of a complex character, and her curses already seem less ominous. "Mama" and "Papa" are significant words, implying that Liesel must move on from her old family and start a new life.*



*Hans and his accordion quickly become symbols of safety and goodness. Her nightmares show that Liesel clearly has not processed her brother's death yet, but she does not think as often about it during the day. Her intuition about Hans and Rosa does not apply to herself yet.*



*The book as an object is an important symbol for Liesel already. The books that Liesel steals (or is given) which divide up the novel's parts are not important because of their contents (which are hardly mentioned) but because they are unique physical symbols of the power of language.*



At school Liesel is put with much younger children because she can't read or write. There are no books in the Hubermann home, and neither Rosa nor Hans are very good at reading.

In February Liesel turns ten, and the Hubermanns give her a secondhand doll. She also has to enroll in the Hitler Youth (Band of German Girls), where they are taught to march and "heil Hitler" (salute Hitler) properly.

Hans often leaves in the evenings to go play his accordion at a pub. His disappearance makes Liesel uneasy, but he always returns in time to save her from her nightmares.

Rosa constantly argues and curses, even when there is no one to argue with. Sometimes Liesel goes with her to pick up the washing from the wealthy parts of town. Rosa insults all her customers behind their backs. When they reach the mayor's house, Rosa makes Liesel go get the clothes. The mayor's wife answers the door without speaking, and she seems strange and unhappy. Rosa tells Liesel that the mayor's wife sits inside freezing all day, and won't even light a fire.

When she isn't disparaging her employers, Rosa likes to complain about her husband. She washes and irons the clothes in the kitchen, arguing the whole time. Their neighbor, Frau Holtzapfel, spits on their door whenever she walks past because of some old feud with Rosa. Liesel has to clean the spit off every night, and sometimes she lingers afterward to look at the stars.

## PART 1: THE KISS (A CHILDHOOD DECISION MAKER)

Death introduces some of the other characters that live on Himmel Street: the Nazi-supporting Frau Diller, twitchy Tommy Müller, and the vulgar Pfiffikus. Everyone on the street is generally poor. Next door is the Steiner family whose son Rudy is obsessed with the American athlete Jesse Owens. He is to become Liesel's best friend.

Liesel goes out into the street where the neighborhood kids are playing soccer. Liesel has to play goalie (the goal is two trashcans) because she is new. Rudy (who is the best player) gets a penalty kick against Liesel, but she blocks it. He hits her with a snowball and she curses at him with Rosa's favorite word, "saukerl!"

*Liesel's illiteracy is first emphasized as a negative here, and a kind of powerlessness in the world of school.*



*More facts that seem innocuous to the characters but are ominous to the reader, who is aware of the great evils Hitler caused and represented.*



*Liesel already derives most of her comfort from Hans's presence. More scenes that create the feeling of a routine in the Hubermann household.*



*The mayor's wife will become an important figure later, but here she is introduced only as especially strange and mysterious. Rosa has plenty of words to go around, and "saukerl" and "saumensch" quickly become part of the familiar language of Liesel's world.*



*More development of daily life on Himmel Street. Frau Holtzapfel will also become a more complex figure later, but Death does not foreshadow everything. The scene of Liesel looking at the stars implies that she is a poetic soul among prosaic surroundings.*



*Death introduces characters and in some sense reveals what will happen to them (especially Rudy) but Zusak still manages to keep the plot moving along. He is still mostly setting the scene of a typical German neighborhood, albeit as the Nazi's are consolidating power in the background.*



*Liesel has already picked up Rosa's words, and these curses and a love/hate kind of exchange (starting with a snowball to the face) will come to define Liesel and Rudy's relationship.*



Death gives some facts about Rudy: he is blond, blue-eyed, and always hungry. People think he is crazy because of "The Jesse Owens Incident," which will be explained later. Rudy seems destined to be Liesel's best friend. He starts to walk to school with her and tell her about the people of Himmel Street, especially Frau Diller, who owns a shop where if you don't "heil Hitler" when you enter, she won't serve you. Rudy and Liesel walk past Rudy's father's shop (he is a tailor) and the Jewish ghetto, which has many broken windows and doors painted with the Star of David.

Rudy starts to spend time with Liesel at school too, and Death implies that he is already in love with her. One day the two children taunt Pfiffikus (who is called that because he likes to whistle), and Pfiffikus curses obscenely at both of them as they run away. Afterwards Rudy challenges Liesel to race, and proposes that he gets to kiss her if he wins. She is confused, but she wants to stop being goalie in soccer if she wins. They run and slip in the mud but the race is a draw. Rudy still wants his kiss, but Liesel refuses and doesn't mind still playing goalie. She promises to herself to never kiss Rudy. She is more worried about her muddy clothes, which Rosa berates her for.

## PART 1: THE JESSE OWENS INCIDENT

Death begins to tell the story of the "Jesse Owens Incident," which occurred before Liesel's arrival on Himmel Street, in 1936, during the Olympics that took place in Hitler's Germany. Everyone in Germany was amazed at the great African-American athlete Jesse Owens, but Rudy had a special fascination with him. One night Rudy snuck out and covered himself completely in charcoal, trying to look like Jesse Owens. Then he raced back and forth on a field until a crowd gathered around him. Finally his father, Alex Steiner, took him away by the ear and pulled him home.

Death explains the politics of Alex Steiner, who is a member of the Nazi Party but does not hate Jews – he is most concerned with doing what's best for his family. Alex tries to explain to Rudy that he shouldn't want to be like black or Jewish people; he should be pleased with his blue eyes and blond hair. He tells Rudy not to paint himself black again, or else he'll be taken away.

## PART 1: THE OTHER SIDE OF SANDPAPER

Death then describes a similarly defining incident for Liesel. One day in May there is a big parade of the Nazi Party, and everyone stands on the street and watches. Death explains that most people support the Nazis at this time, but Hans Hubermann does not.

*Here Rudy acts as an assistant to Death in describing the inhabitants of Himmel Street and setting the scene. The tone suddenly turns ominous as they pass the Jewish ghetto, but again it is a kind of situational irony – the reader associates Jewishness with tragedy at this time and place in history, but the characters do not yet know what is coming.*



*Death's narrative style is curious and not usually concerned with building mystery – he states from the start that Rudy is in love with Liesel. Like all his foreshadowing, this knowledge then colors the reader's understanding of the character and the novel. Rudy's first request for a kiss from Liesel, which will become a recurring motif, and resonates with idea of stealing and giving – Liesel has this thing Rudy wants, but she refuses to give it to him.*



*The narrative jumps around freely, here into the recent past. With this disjointed style Zusak never lets the reader forget the language of his novel, which is another reminder of the theme of words. Some historical background: the black American athlete Jesse Owens' triumphs at the Berlin Olympic Games stood in opposition to Hitler's "Aryan ideal," as the Nazis saw black people as "subhuman." But Owens was clearly superior to all the German athletes.*



*More ominous history creeping into the innocent world of childhood. Much of the novel involves looking at the average German's side of World War II and the Holocaust. Condemning or sympathizing with the different characters connects to Death struggling with the beauty and evil in humanity.*



*Hans is again presented as a positive figure, but his very humanity will create problems for him under Hitler's regime. In this society the idea of criminality and goodness will be turned upside down.*



That night Liesel wakes up screaming as usual, but this time she realizes she has wet the bed too. Hans kindly takes off the sheets and then sees *The Grave Digger's Handbook* under the mattress. Liesel did not even know what it was called, but she says she wants to learn to read it. Hans decides to teach her. Death remarks on how lucky it was that Hans found the book first instead of Rosa, and how he will end up teaching Liesel more than school does.

*Death remarks on how fortuitous this accident is, and it will indeed begin the overarching plot and theme of the novel. Liesel is already attached to her book as a link to her mother and brother, but now she wants to explore it further. She is also motivated to read by her shame at being put with the young kids in school.*



They start learning that same night. First Hans admits that he is not a very good reader, and he asks where Liesel got the book, but he doesn't mind that she took it. He starts to read and realizes the text is difficult and morbid, but Liesel insists she must start with *The Grave Digger's Handbook*. At first she pretends to know more than she does, but Hans soon realizes she cannot read at all.

*There is nothing too dramatic in Liesel's first reading lessons, though Death foreshadows how important books and words will become to her later. The fact that she is learning from this book which is already special to her implies that reading itself will become something vital.*



They start over and Hans writes out the alphabet on the back of some sandpaper. Liesel practices, and gets stuck on "S" until she thinks of *saumensch*. Hans draws a stick figure of Liesel, which Death recreates. They say goodnight and Liesel lies awake, thinking of words.

*"Saumensch" returns in a different form yet again. Words often take on physical form in the novel – in the form of books, of course, but here also on the back of sandpaper, a gritty material thing.*



## PART 1: THE SMELL OF FRIENDSHIP

Hans and Liesel continue their lessons every night after Liesel wakes up from her nightmares. One day Hans wants to take Liesel somewhere, but first he has to placate Rosa by offering to deliver the washing for her. After the delivery Hans takes Liesel to a wooden bridge over the Amper River, where they practice reading and Hans plays the **accordion**. Liesel doesn't yet realize that the accordion has its own story for her Papa, but for now she enjoys the music.

*The Amper River will become a symbol of happiness and natural beauty in an ugly world. Here appear more positive associations with reading, Hans, and the accordion for Liesel. Zusak avoids getting overly tragic in the story by interspersing the grimness with these periods of peace and happiness.*



Liesel and Hans practice by the Amper River when the weather is good, and otherwise in the basement. When they run out of sandpaper Hans has Liesel paint words on the basement wall. After their lessons they both smell like cigarettes and kerosene (from their lamp), which Liesel thinks of as the smell of friendship.

*Words take on physical form again here as they paint them on the basement wall. The basement also becomes a safe, happy place for Liesel, which she will later associate with Max as well.*



## PART 1: THE HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION OF THE SCHOOL-YARD

In the fall of 1939, World War II begins with the German invasion of Poland. Hans picks up a newspaper with the announcement and slips it under his shirt. By the end of the day the letters are tattooed against the skin by his sweat. Hans doesn't feel very patriotic about the announcement though.

*More words taking physical form here. The outside world begins to encroach on Himmel Street now, and World War II is set in motion. Again the reader knows more of what is coming than the characters.*



Soon afterward Liesel starts school again. She is moved up to her proper age level, but she is still bad at reading and gets quite a few *watschens* ("good hidings") for misbehavior. She gets farther along in *The Grave Digger's Handbook* and thinks she is learning well with Hans.

*Liesel is still a troubled girl at this point, dealing with the loss of her family and her own lack of education. Her own inability to read again holds her back and makes her angry.*



One day in November there is a reading test at school where all the students have to get up, one at a time, and read something out loud. The teacher, Sister Maria, tries to excuse Liesel from the test but Liesel insists that she wants to read. She gets up and opens the book, but she blanks on the words. Feeling useless and at the verge of tears, she starts quoting from *The Grave Digger's Handbook*. Sister Maria stops her and takes her into the hall for a *watschen*, while all the other children except Rudy laugh.

*Zusak avoids an easy, clean-cut story of redemption through language by including frustrating setbacks like this. Liesel cannot help associating her failure at reading with the other tragedies of her life. As Max will point out later, the fact that she knows how powerless a person can be without words will make her appreciate them all the more later.*



During their break a boy named Ludwig Schmeikl taunts Liesel and calls her an idiot. Liesel snaps and starts beating him up and cursing him with Rosa's curses. Then she turns to a boy named Tommy Müller and starts beating him up too just because he was smiling. Finally Liesel stops and declares, "I'm not stupid." When they go back inside she gets a huge *watschen* from Sister Maria, but no one laughs.

*At first Liesel is an angry outsider at school. She is clearly still repressing her grief for her brother, as her nightmares continue and her anger here injures even innocent bystanders like Tommy. Rosa's curses return as forms of abuse once more.*



On the way home with Rudy, Liesel is suddenly struck by despair and she crouches in a gutter, crying for her dead brother, her lost mother, and her own failure at reading. Rudy stays with her, even when it starts to rain. Finally they walk home.

*Even before the war starts, Liesel's world is bleak and full of random suffering. It is people who don't leave her (Hans and Rudy), and later books and stealing, that will give her a little control.*



## PART 2: A GIRL MADE OF DARKNESS

Death explains that this will be the story of the book thief's second crime, more than a year after she took *The Grave Digger's Handbook*. Death declares that Nazi Germany was built on the German love of burning things, and the many book burnings offered a perfect opportunity for someone predisposed to thievery. Looking back on it, Liesel will feel proud to have saved *The Shoulder Shrug* from the flames. But first Death has to tell the story of what led to the book burning.

*Death again outlines what is to come before he begins to narrate it. It is clear that political forces will take more prominence in this section, as a Nazi book-burning will be the setting for Liesel's second crime. Death offers a political commentary but again shows his distance from humanity – trying to understand human complexities by simplifying war to a love of burning.*



## PART 2: THE JOY OF CIGARETTES

By the end of 1939 Liesel is starting to feel at home on Himmel Street, and she loves Hans (her Papa now), Rudy (sometimes), and even Rosa. She starts to build a concept of achieving happiness, and part of it hinges on finishing *The Grave Digger's Handbook*.

*The inner world of a child can define happiness through such small things – this will be brutally juxtaposed with the horrors the adult world can inflict.*



One night Liesel and Hans stay up until dawn and finish the book at last. When they are done Hans points out the colors of the sky, which Death admires him for. Liesel finally reveals her brother's name, Werner, to Hans.

For the rest of her school term Liesel keeps her head down and practices her reading, and eventually Sister Maria's anger with her subsides. They have a Christmas break, and the Hubermann's children come home. Liesel doesn't expect any presents, but Hans gives her two books: *Faust the Dog* and *The Lighthouse*. She will read them many times over.

A few days after Christmas Liesel asks Hans and Rosa how they afforded two books, and they tell her that Hans traded his cigarette rations for them. Rosa complains that he never gets anything for her, and the next day Hans brings her some eggs. It is a time of happiness in the house, but it will be short-lived.

## PART 2: THE TOWN WALKER

One of Rosa's customers can't afford to employ her anymore because of war rationing, which infuriates Rosa. She decides to make Liesel deliver the washing from now on, as she is more pitiable-looking and harder to fire. Rosa instructs her (with much *saumensch-ing*) on the strict rules of the pick-up and delivery. Liesel comes to enjoy the work, and starts to notice the quirks of the customers. Most noticeable is Frau Hermann, the mayor's wife, who lives in a cold house and never says a word.

One day at school the children are supposed to write letters to each other, which gives Liesel the idea to write to her mother. Hans is visibly uncomfortable when she asks him about it, but Liesel chooses to ignore her own apprehensive feelings and sends a letter anyway. That night Liesel overhears Rosa and Hans discussing her mother, and how she has probably been taken away.

## PART 2: DEAD LETTERS

Liesel keeps searching the mailbox for a letter that will never come, and it makes Hans sad to watch her. She keeps writing letters, though only the first one was sent. Another of Rosa's customers quits her services, and Liesel receives no presents for her birthday that year. She decides to give herself a present and spend some of the washing money to send the rest of the letters to her mother.

*The completion of the book is a turning point for Liesel's growth. Many of the sympathetic characters share Death's love of the sky and noticing color at all times.*



*Books are now Liesel's most precious possessions. The household is poor and she doesn't have a lot of material things, so they become that much more important. These books will be less crucial than others, but they are still a sign of Hans's love.*



*Death often describes happy times and then undercuts them with grim foreshadowing. His very presence is a reminder that this story can only end in tragedy.*



*The seemingly distant war begins to encroach on the peaceful life of Himmel Street, beginning with economic cutbacks like this. The Hubermanns are already poor, so Rosa losing customers is a bad sign of things to come. Frau Hermann returns as a mysterious, silent figure – she is being built up to become more important later.*



*More situational irony as Liesel doesn't know (or doesn't want to know) what has happened to her mother, but the reader (and the Hubermanns, and Death) can imply from historical facts that she has been arrested or killed by the Nazis. Again Liesel chooses to repress her feelings.*



*Liesel's first discovery of writing as a form of dealing with suffering. The letters are ultimately useless and Liesel start to suspect this, but simply writing them is a way to deal with the immense losses she has already experienced.*



Liesel goes through with her plan. She admits what she has done to Rosa and gets a beating with a wooden spoon, but even worse is her sudden realization (while lying on the dusty floor) that she will never see her mother again. Liesel stays on the floor for a long time, despairing, and Rosa apologizes to her. After a while Hans comes home and plays the **accordion** for her. Liesel's only memory of that night is darkness. She finally starts to accept things the way they are, and can then prepare for them.

*Another cathartic moment for Liesel, as she finally accepts things as they really are. She is growing up and ordering the tragedies of her world rather than trying to suppress them. Rosa is an ambiguous figure again, violent but loving. Liesel gets more comfort from the accordion and Hans's presence.*



## PART 2: HITLER'S BIRTHDAY, 1940

Everyone in Molching is preparing to celebrate Hitler's birthday, where there will be parades and a book burning. Nazi Party members come by and ask if anyone has any material to donate to the fire. Everything gets gathered up to burn for Hitler's glory.

*The Nazis recognize the power of words as well – they understand that language that contradicts their propaganda is dangerous. Words take physical form again, as something that can burn.*



On the birthday, April 20, the Hubermanns can't find their Nazi flag at first, and Rosa fears that they will be taken away. Finally they find it and pin it up. Both the Hubermann children are at home for the event, and Death introduces them. Trudy is built like Rosa, and is mostly quiet. Hans Junior is a passionate Nazi who thinks his father represents an older, weaker Germany. Hans had been called "the Jew painter" because he was willing to paint over slurs on Jewish houses. Hans Junior asks if his father has joined the Party yet, but Hans says he hasn't been let in.

*Again Hans's kindness and humanity is seen as a crime in Nazi society. He helps his neighbor against acts of hatred, and because of this is spurned by the ruling Party. Hans Junior is shown as the kind of German that buys into Hitler's beliefs and toes the party line. It is all the more ominous to see these beliefs in a real human, the child of such a kind man as Hans.*



Hans Junior and Hans start to argue, and Hans Junior calls Liesel's books "trash" – she should be reading **Mein Kampf** instead. Hans Junior keeps arguing and finally calls his father a coward and storms out. Death explains that he will later die fighting the Soviets at Stalingrad. In the house everyone is shocked and quiet, and Hans wonders if he is actually a coward. Liesel puts on her Hitler Youth uniform to get ready for the bonfire.

*Books begin to take on another importance here – Liesel is unwittingly being subversive just by reading things that aren't Nazi propaganda. Hans is accused of being a coward, but it is clear that he is actually the brave one for resisting the Nazi beliefs of the majority. Mein Kampf, Hitler's autobiography, is mentioned for the first time.*



## PART 2: 100 PERCENT PURE GERMAN SWEAT

Liesel marches with the rest of the youth and can't help feeling proud. Everything goes smoothly except for Tommy Müller, who crashes into the boy in front of him. After the marching, the children disperse to get ready for the bonfire. It gets cold and people joke about warming themselves up by burning the "trash." Carts wheel in the material and make a huge pile. Liesel feels that the burning is wrong, because her books are so precious to her, but she can't help wanting to see some destruction – like most humans.

*Tommy's physical disabilities will come up again later. This book burning gives a glimpse into how an entire nation could be swept up in such hateful ideas – there is a natural mob mentality for humans, and a fascination with the spectacle of destruction. Even Liesel, who loves books more than anything, can't help wanting to see them burn when it is made into such an event.*



A man on a podium salutes Hitler and then gives a speech about the evils of Communists and Jews. When Liesel hears this she realizes why her family has been destroyed, and she feels sick. She tries to escape the crowd but then the man lights the pile on fire, and everyone cheers as the words start to burn.

*Liesel discovers that it was Nazi ideology is what tore her family apart. She starts to connect Hitler with the tragedies in her life. She has no concept of what Communism or Judaism is, but she understands hate and suffering.*



Ludwig Schmeickl finds Liesel and helps her through the crowd. He has broken his ankle in the confusion and pushing, and his expression is like a hurt animal. Finally they find a resting place, and they apologize to each other for their fight in the school-yard.

*Liesel apologizing to Ludwig and forgiving him is a mature act that shows she is learning from Hans's example. In the midst of such an inhuman event as a book burning, this is a small moment of compassion.*



## PART 2: THE GATES OF THIEVERY

Liesel waits on the steps of a church watching the book-burning die down to ash, until Hans arrives and asks what's wrong. Liesel has been deducing that the *Führer* is the source of all her problems. She asks Hans plainly if her mother was a Communist, and if Hitler took her away. Hans cannot deny it, and then Liesel states that she hates Hitler.

*For Liesel (and later Max) Hitler becomes the personal face of all the injustices of war and hatred. Liesel connects the dots and realizes how she feels – this hatred for Hitler is naive now, but it will become a deeper force later, inspiring her small acts of revenge.*



Hans wants to hug her for this, but instead he slaps Liesel in the face and makes her promise to never say such a thing again, especially in public. Then he makes her practice her "Heil Hitlers" for a while. Liesel feels terrible, but her time for thievery has almost arrived.

*A moment defining the important difference between inner life and public life – Liesel can hate Hitler in private, but she must love him in public or else risk danger to herself and her family. Hans realizes the danger in her words, and must slap Liesel to make her understand as well.*



## PART 2: BOOK OF FIRE

Hans and Liesel start to walk home, but they are stopped by a man who asks Hans if he has joined the Nazis yet. Liesel walks over and examines the ashes of the bonfire, which officials are shoveling away. At the bottom of the pile are three books that survived the blaze. The shovelers move away and Liesel rushes in. She grabs a blue book from the ashes. Someone yells and Liesel fears she has been discovered, but it is only the mayor coming to burn whatever survived.

*Liesel doesn't understand the true consequences of her actions, but here she shows that she is willing to risk her safety for a book. Books have become that precious to her, almost like characters – but she also does this as her first subversive act against Hitler and the forces that destroyed her family.*



Liesel slips the book under her uniform and it starts to warm her chest. Then she realizes that the mayor's wife saw everything, and she curses to herself. Hans and Liesel finally leave, and the book, which is called *The Shoulder Shrug*, burns against her skin.

*The book almost seems to have agency as it burns Liesel's chest – more emphasis on the physicality of language. The illegal book under the Hitler Youth uniform is symbolic of what Hans was trying to explain – they must maintain their humanity in secret, but publicly support Hitler.*



### PART 3: THE WAY HOME

On the way back to Himmel street the burning book becomes too painful and Liesel has to take it out from under her uniform. Hans is shocked to see it, but he promises not to tell Rosa if Liesel will keep this book, and anything else Hans requests, a secret. Liesel thinks he is only mad at her stealing, but Hans is thinking about the consequences of such actions with the Nazis.

A few days later Hans trades some cigarettes for a copy of **Mein Kampf**, the book written by Hitler. He overhears the party members discussing him, and how he will never be allowed to join the Nazis. Hans feels pleased with his plan, which will unfold later, and involves using *Mein Kampf* as a sort of shield.

*Hans reinforces the idea of keeping a secret private life separate from her public persona. Liesel does not yet grasp the political consequences of her actions – she is still thinking of parental punishment, but Hans sees how the worlds overlap, and that Liesel's books could be dangerous for her and for them.*



*Hans gets his idea from both his son and Liesel. This physical copy of Hitler's book will become an important symbol later, but for now it represents a foil to those books so precious to Liesel.*



### PART 3: THE MAYOR'S LIBRARY

Liesel worries about delivering the washing to the mayor's wife, and wonders what kind of punishment she will receive for stealing. At first she pretends that no one is home at the mayor's house, but Rosa makes her go back. Rudy accompanies Liesel, confused at her hesitation. Finally she knocks, dreading what is to come, but Frau Hermann appears and silently pays her, as if nothing had changed. Liesel is relieved, and thinks that maybe Frau Hermann didn't see her stealing after all (though Death assures the reader this is not the case).

The next time Liesel goes without Rudy, though, and Frau Hermann makes her wait. Then she returns with a stack of books, and Liesel is suddenly terrified, but she can't help following the mayor's wife into the house. Frau Hermann leads her to a huge library. Liesel is ecstatic at the beauty of seeing so many books at once. She asks Frau Hermann if she can enter, and Frau Hermann nods, still unspeaking. Liesel happily touches the books, one by one, feeling their magic through the spines. She notices that the window is open, letting in the cold, but she doesn't close it. Frau Hermann smiles at her.

Liesel takes the washing and leaves, but then feels guilty and rude for not thanking Frau Hermann. She returns and the mayor answers the door, terrifying Liesel, but then Frau Hermann appears behind him, and Liesel thanks her. Liesel leaves, still smiling.

*Liesel childishly tries to avoid punishment, not understanding the potential implications of her actions. Frau Hermann continues to be a mystifying figure. The reader shares Liesel's relief at escaping punishment for now, but Death again undercuts the happiness with a foreboding future.*



*This is one of Liesel's most important moments. Before this, Liesel has only seen books as random objects to be stolen or given, but now she sees this special luxury of having hundreds of books all organized and safe. She immediately goes to touch them, again associating their physicality with the language within them. This library will become like Hans's presence to Liesel – a safe place, but also a place of expanding horizons and imagination.*



*Liesel's conscience begins to interject itself into her actions – she is learning from Hans to do the right thing, even when it is the hard thing.*



### PART 3: ENTER THE STRUGGLER

Death changes the setting of the story to a storage room in Stuttgart, Germany. There is a Jew named Max sitting on his suitcase in the dark, hiding for days and starving. Finally a door opens and a man gives Max a book with an identity card in it and some bread, fat, and carrots. Max eats the food slowly and keeps waiting, miserable.

*The scene suddenly changes vastly, putting Liesel's world in perspective. She has experienced much loss and suffering, but she still has a good life compared to Jewish people in Nazi Germany, who are now in danger of death at all times.*



### PART 3: THE ATTRIBUTES OF SUMMER

Liesel and Hans start to make their way through *The Shoulder Shrug*, which has a Jew as a protagonist. Liesel also returns to the mayor's library. She won't let Rudy walk with her, and they curse at each other (which Death says is a sign of their love). In the mayor's library Liesel gets to sit on the floor and read whatever she wants, while Frau Hermann sits silently by the cold window.

*Rosa's curse words have lost their abusive roots and are now a sign of affection between Liesel and Rudy. The library becomes Liesel's haven, just like books themselves shelter and protect her from the grief and suffering of life. Even as the novel expands (to Stuttgart and Max) Liesel's education grows.*



Summer progresses and the library becomes more comfortable to read in as it isn't so cold. One day Liesel sees a boy's name, Johann Hermann, written in one of the books. Frau Hermann finally speaks and says he was her son, who died during World War I. Death reveals that since her son died, Ilsa Hermann has made herself suffer by enduring the weather at all times, which is why she leaves the window open. Liesel awkwardly apologizes for her loss, and then leaves, pitying Ilsa. Liesel can't help returning to the library though, as she is falling in love with the power of words.

*Part of the knowledge Liesel gains in the library involves Ilsa Hermann herself. Ilsa's grief explains her strange behavior earlier—Ilsa's suffering is of a kind that Liesel can understand. The two bond through this kind of grief, combined with their love of books. Ironically they almost never speak to each other, though they are surrounded by words. It is also ironic that Liesel is falling in love with language in a time and place famous for suppressing words.*



Liesel keeps playing soccer on Himmel Street and Tommy Müller finally stops being afraid of her. Liesel and Rudy start stealing together as well – the war rations are low (all they have is pea soup) and Rudy is always hungry, so they try to join a group of thieves led by a boy named Arthur Berg. Arthur is impressed by Rudy's Jesse Owens exploit and Liesel's school-yard fighting, so he lets them join up.

*More stealing begins, and again it feels (to the reader at least) like subversion – all the food is going to Hitler's war, but there are still growing children who need to eat. Liesel clearly isn't bothered by stealing, but she is still figuring out her inner moral compass in such a perverse society.*



Their first adventure is stealing apples from an orchard surrounded by barbed wire. They are successful, and Liesel eats so many apples that she throws up later at dinnertime. Rosa is furious, but Liesel has the happiness of a full stomach.

*Again Liesel can find childlike happiness in small things. She and Rudy become partners in crime for the first time, and they enjoy the stealing.*



### PART 3: THE ARYAN SHOPKEEPER

One day in August Rudy and Liesel find a coin on the ground, and they take it to Frau Diller's shop. She makes them *heil* Hitler, and then mockingly gives them one piece of candy. At first they are disappointed, but they take turns sucking on it, and that day they feel like life is wonderful.

*Frau Diller is seemingly defined by her devotion to Hitler. The children don't understand the implications of this yet, but the reader does. More happiness found in little pleasures.*



### PART 3: THE STRUGGLER, CONTINUED

The story returns to Max Vandenburg, the Jew, but now he is on a train for Munich, and holding a copy of **Mein Kampf**. His friend Walter Krugler had gotten him the book with the train tickets and a key inside. Max cut his hair and left. On the train he sweats and worries the whole time, and he reads *Mein Kampf* to avoid suspicion, recognizing the irony that Hitler's book should be the book to save him.

*The great irony of Max's escape is that Mein Kampf, the book that fanned the flames of anti-Semitism in Germany, should be the thing to save him. With it he can pretend to be a "real" German, presumably also anti-Semitic. Max's stress and danger are contrasted with Liesel's currently carefree life.*



### PART 3: TRICKSTERS

Rosa loses another customer, and Liesel and Rudy go on a few more stealing exploits with their gang. One day the two decide to ambush a boy named Otto Sturm, who delivers food to the already well-fed Catholic priests. They pour some water on the road to freeze in the place where he rides his bike, and Otto comes by and falls spectacularly. Rudy and Liesel make off with his basket of fine foods, and they deliver some to Arthur Berg's gang. Afterwards they return the basket to the Sturm farm, and Rudy and Liesel feel bad but not overly remorseful.

*Liesel and Rudy both feel bad after playing this trick because of Otto Sturm's fall – they aren't bothered by stealing food from those who have too much (the priests), but causing harm to another person crosses the line. In this way Liesel is figuring out her own morality outside of society's accepted rules. When war and racism are the social norm, she must figure out right and wrong for herself.*



Liesel and Rudy go stealing again with Arthur Berg's gang, but this time Rudy gets stuck on the barbed wire and escapes the angry farmer just in time. The next time they see Arthur Berg he gives them a bag of chestnuts. Rudy and Liesel each eat one and then sell the rest, and they take the money to triumphantly purchase candy from Frau Diller.

*Their guilty consciences make them give up tricks like this one with Otto Sturm and return to less ambiguous thieving. Liesel and Rudy have a small victory against the Nazi shopkeeper. They are pleased by the candy, but also by overcoming Frau Diller's mockery.*



### PART 3: THE STRUGGLER, CONCLUDED

Max gets off the train and finds his way nervously to Himmel Street by night, holding his suitcase and **Mein Kampf**. He feels guilty for inflicting the danger of his presence on the Hubermanns, but he has no other options. He takes the key from his pocket and braces himself to enter.

*The two narratives collide here at Himmel Street. Max's guilt for putting the Hubermanns in danger – guilt for wanting to live, essentially – echoes the survivor's guilt of many of the characters.*



## PART 4: THE ACCORDIONIST (THE SECRET LIFE OF HANS HUBERMANN)

Max stands in the kitchen and asks Hans if he still plays the **accordion**. Then Death brings the story back to World War I, when Hans was fighting in France. He became friends with a Jewish man named Erik Vandenburg, who taught him to play the accordion. One day the sergeant asks for someone who can write well (to write letters for the captain), and Erik volunteers Hans, knowing that the rest of them will be going into battle. In this way Erik saves his life, as all the other men in Hans's company die that day, including Erik himself.

Hans kept Erik's **accordion**, as it was too heavy to be sent home. After the war he came to Erik's wife (and young son) and offered his help if she should ever need it. He wanted to return the accordion but she insisted he keep it. Hans left his name and address if she needed a free apartment-painting, but he never expected to see them again.

Time progressed and the Nazi party grew popular, but Hans refused to join because of his debt to Erik Vandenburg. He began to lose customers because he wasn't a party member, so finally he submitted his application. That same day he offered to paint over the words "Jewish filth" on the door of a Jewish man whose shop had been trashed. Hans kept his promise, and then returned to the office and retracted his application to the Nazis. He was then placed on the waiting list, but was generally left alone because of his skill at painting and playing the **accordion**. Then one day Hans was on his way to a painting job when a man named Walter Krugler approached him and asked if he still played the accordion, and if he would keep his promise to the Vandenburgs.

*Hans's backstory shows how much has changed in Germany since World War I – at that time Erik, a Jew, fought and died for his country like any other soldier, but at this point under the Third Reich Jews are seen as enemies or subhuman. Hans's actual story again shows the randomness of fate, which Death often points out – why one person should die instead of another. It is also an example of writing and language saving Hans's life.*



*Hans clearly owes a huge debt to Erik, but he had no way of repaying it at the time. This also gives the backstory of the accordion – for Liesel it is a symbol of comfort and happiness, but for Hans it is a symbol of his debt to Erik Vandenburg.*



*Simply by remembering his debt to Erik and therefore refusing to persecute Jewish people, Hans has become subversive under the new regime. This is another sign of how the morality of Nazi Germany has been turned upside down – refusing to take away another person's basic humanity is seen as criminal activity. Hans painting over words of abuse is another instance of the physicality of language, but also subverting hateful words through actions of kindness.*



## PART 4: A GOOD GIRL

The story returns to the present, and Hans accepts Max Vandenburg, closing the curtains and checking for witnesses. Max crouches down, overcome with gratitude, and then Liesel appears. Hans reassures Max that she is "a good girl," and sends Liesel to bed, where she stays awake listening.

*Hans proves himself again as a man who keeps his promises and retains his moral sense even in the face of great danger. He also respects Liesel enough to know that she can make the same sacrifice.*



## PART 4: A SHORT HISTORY OF THE JEWISH FIST FIGHTER

The story goes back in time again to tell Max's life story. When he was boy he loved to fistfight. He fought with his cousins growing up, and had his first real fight when he was eleven. When he was thirteen Max watched his uncle die of a stomach disease, and he was disappointed by how submissive he seemed. Max vowed to fight till the end, which Death can't help admiring.

*Death respects Max because of his foolish courage, and perhaps because he believes so strongly that life is better than death. This image of a young fighter is contrasted with the present-day Max, who is starved and broken by persecution and fear.*



Max fought a kid named Walter Krugler several times, and he remembers those matches the best. When they turned seventeen they stopped fighting and became friends, and they worked together at an engineering factory until Max was fired for being Jewish. One night (*Kristallnacht*, "the night of broken glass") mobs swept through and smashed Jewish homes and businesses. Walter entered the Vandenburg home dressed as a Nazi, and told Max he had to leave at once if he didn't want to be taken away. Max said goodbye to his family and left, tortured with guilt.

For the next two years Max hid in an empty storeroom where Walter had once worked. He found out his family had been taken away, and he despaired but still clung to life. One day Walter offered to find Hans Hubermann and ask him for help, and he returned with Hans's acceptance and some money. It was Hans who sent him the map, train tickets, and **Mein Kampf**. When Walter was sent away to Poland, Max had to go to Molching and trust in Hans. Back in the present, Rosa appears and sees Max.

*This again shows how drastically German society changed over the course of a few years, and the tragedy of average citizens suddenly being treated like monsters or criminals. Max choosing to escape and survive instead of to stay and be arrested with his family is another instance of survivor's guilt – Max is tortured simply by his desire to keep living, when others he loves have died.*



*Hans's earlier idea – when he purchased Mein Kampf from the Nazi office – is finally explained, and the two backstories come together. Max's suffering comes not only from fear for his own life, but also guilt for putting others in danger simply by existing alongside them. This is truly a society with corrupted morals – it is a crime just to keep a Jew alive.*



## PART 4: THE WRATH OF ROSA

Liesel is awakened by Rosa's voice, and she expects her to launch into a tirade, but Liesel comes out and is shocked to see Rosa feeding Max her pea soup. She looks serious, but is pleased that he is enjoying her food. Max vomits from eating too much and Rosa cleans it up. They all sit down and Liesel watches from the hallway, wondering at her foster parents.

*Rosa surprises Liesel (and the reader) again by accepting Max fully into the home, feeding him and never questioning whether he is welcome or not. Liesel realizes these are special people – the minority in such a time.*



## PART 4: LIESEL'S LECTURE

Death emphasizes the danger of the situation in the Hubermann household now. Max sleeps in Liesel's room, in the empty bed once intended for Werner. The next day the Hubermanns keep Liesel home from school, and Hans leads her to the basement, where he tells her the story of Erik Vandenburg, and explains who Max is, and reminds Liesel of her promise the night of the book-burning. He insists she must keep Max a secret from everyone.

*From the start Max symbolically replaces Werner as Liesel's brother-figure. Again Hans must make Liesel understand the broader implication of her actions. In such a situation she has to grow up fast – a childish mistake could lead to all of them being arrested. The sense of danger is very high now.*



Hans lists what will happen if Liesel mentions Max to anyone, and he tries to be harsh to make sure she understands: Hans will burn Liesel's books and then he and Rosa will be taken away forever. Liesel cries, but she understands the gravity of the situation.

*Just like on the night he slapped her, Hans must be cruel for Liesel's own good. It is telling that part of the potential horrible punishment is burning her books – Liesel's most precious possessions.*



## PART 4: THE SLEEPER

Max sleeps for three days straight, and Liesel watches him. Sometimes in his sleep he says the names of his family members, Walter, and Hitler. Liesel is standing over him when Max finally wakes up, and he takes her arm, looking confused and desperate.

*Just like Liesel, Max arrives in the Hubermann house full of nightmares. This is an immediate connection between the two of them, but for now Liesel is wary and afraid of the stranger.*



## PART 4: THE SWAPPING OF NIGHTMARES

Max sleeps in the cold basement after that, and is embarrassed that he slept in Liesel's room. He feels that he deserves only table scraps, but Rosa promises to feed him, and they make him a bed in the basement hidden behind some paint cans and drop sheets. Max feels guilty for imposing his dangerous presence on them, but he can't help his own will to live, so he stays.

*Again Max feels guilty just for existing, and wants to be as little trouble as possible to the family. He is able to understand his own feelings of guilt and the danger he has brought to the Hubermanns, but he can't help wanting to keep living.*



The Hubermanns make Liesel visit the basement, and she nervously starts to ask if **Mein Kampf** is a good book, but then leaves. She overhears her foster parents saying that everything has to stay exactly the same as before, or else it will look suspicious. Liesel is most shocked by Rosa and how good she is at dealing with such a crisis. Another customer cancels, but Liesel keeps hanging out with Rudy and reading in mayor's library. She is especially drawn to one book called *The Whistler*, which is about a murderer.

*Other than the nightmares, Liesel's connection to Max stems from the fact that he has a book. Liesel doesn't know about *Mein Kampf* or its significance – she just wants to talk about books. The mayor's library becomes an even more important shelter now that Liesel's home life has become so suspenseful.*



One night Hans wants to start up their reading practice of *The Shoulder Shrug* again, but Liesel is nervous about going into the basement. They finally go down, and Hans sees that Max is freezing and emaciated. He makes Max come upstairs and take a hot bath. The Hubermanns decide that Max will sleep upstairs and then return to the basement during the day, and they start to form a routine. Christmas arrives and Trudy comes home, but they don't tell her about Max and she doesn't notice anything.

*Liesel warms up slowly, but eventually accepts Max's presence. This acceptance is assisted by her reading lessons in the basement – along with Liesel's questions about *Mein Kampf*, their relationship already centers around books and words. Max joins the family just like Liesel did. This is another example of stealing and giving – the Hubermanns's kindness is criminal.*



One night Max overhears Liesel telling Hans that Max's hair is "like feathers." Later she asks about **Mein Kampf**, and Max tells the story of how it saved his life. He begins to tell his story, piece by piece, over the course of many nights. Hans tells Max that Liesel is also a good reader and fist fighter, and then Hans plays the **accordion** for the first time in months.

*Liesel's unwittingly poetic words mark a turning point in her friendship with Max and will inspire him later. Their closeness grows as Max talks about his book (and the irony that *Mein Kampf* should save a Jew's life) and his past – words of friendship.*



Hans tells Liesel that Max has nightmares like she does, and one night Liesel gets out of bed and they trade stories: Liesel dreams about Werner, and Max dreams about leaving his family behind. After that Liesel tells Hans she can deal with her nightmares alone. Liesel starts to recognize that the world inside the house and outside of it are very different.

*Much of Liesel's growth comes from understanding that others suffer like she does, and sharing that suffering through language and art. Liesel begins to understand the double life necessary for one to maintain one's moral humanity in Nazi Germany.*



In February of 1941 Liesel turns twelve, and the Hubermanns give her a book called *The Mud Men*. Max apologizes that he doesn't have a present for her. Liesel hugs Hans and Rosa, and then embraces Max for the first time.

*The idea of giving is expanded here – Liesel gets a physical gift (a book, of course) but she gives a much more important gift to Max – kindly human contact, and a symbol of acceptance into the family.*



## PART 4: PAGES FROM THE BASEMENT

For a week the Hubermanns keep Liesel from going to the basement by giving her chores or making excuses. During that time Max cuts out some pages from **Mein Kampf** and paints them white. When they dry he writes a story called *The Standover Man* for Liesel, inspired by her words about his hair like feathers.

*Max's copy of Mein Kampf becomes an important symbol here – an example of words of hatred being overcome by words of love, and art overcoming suffering. Hitler's story is replaced by Max's – he is just as important.*



*The Standover Man* has both words and pictures, and Death recreates it exactly in the text. In his book Max is a bird, the story is about all the people that have stood over him during his life, ending with Liesel watching him sleep, and then the two trading dreams and becoming friends. The last page is a picture of the basement, with the words painted on the wall next to a framed picture of Max the bird embracing Liesel.

*Zusak adds another unconventional element here by recreating the drawings and handwriting of the story – another reminder of the physicality of the words on the pages themselves. Max as a bird shows how he is transformed in the eyes of a friend into something more beautiful.*



Max enters silently one early morning and delivers the book as a late birthday present. Liesel wakes up later and reads it, and thinks about the words of **Mein Kampf** suffocating underneath Max's story. She goes downstairs to thank Max, but he is asleep. She sits with him and puts her hand on his shoulder.

*Liesel imagines Hitler's words as personified beings, gagging under Max's creative, compassionate story. Liesel now assumes Hans's role of staying with someone through their troubled sleep.*



## PART 5: THE FLOATING BOOK (PART 1)

Death describes a future scene with Rudy, where he is diving into the cold Amper River to fetch a book, and then standing in the water, asking Liesel for a kiss. Death then reveals Rudy's death, which will take place two years later among piles of rubble.

*This seems to give away the ending, but it also is a reminder that death awaits everyone – even so, the reader's knowledge of Rudy's death makes his part in the rest of the novel seem more tragic.*



## PART 5: THE GAMBLER (A SEVEN-SIDED DIE)

Death apologizes for spoiling the ending, but he says he has little interest in mystery. Now he needs to explain how that book (*The Whistler*) ended up in that river. He divides the chapter into sections headed by the numbers on a special die (1-7), which represents the gamble inherent in hiding a Jew in Nazi Germany.

*Zusak uses another unorthodox storytelling device in this chapter by drawing out the sides of the die. This symbol of gambling emphasizes the risky crime the Hubermanns have committed by hiding Max – similar to but much more dire than the suspense Liesel feels when she steals a book.*



The scene returns to the present, and Max is getting a haircut. Rosa and Hans argue about who will do it, but Max asks Liesel. She cuts his "feathery" hair and burns the evidence.

*Even a seemingly everyday event like getting a haircut is potentially dangerous, if any evidence of Max's presence leaves the house.*



Later Liesel is in the mayor's library and she imagines confessing to Ilsa Hermann that there is a Jew in her basement. Ilsa offers her *The Whistler* again but Liesel refuses. On the way home she searches trashcans for newspapers with empty crosswords for Max. Liesel sits in the basement and reads while Max does the crosswords. They rarely speak, but they feel united by their love of words.

*Like with Frau Hermann, Liesel builds her relationship with Max around books and language. Also like Frau Hermann, this relationship involves little actual talking – most of the words occur on a page, and the friendship is made up of actions more than conversation.*



One day Liesel rushes into the house, boasting about the goals she scored in soccer, and then she goes down to the basement to tell Max. He asks her to describe the weather as well, and Liesel describes the sky in unintentionally poetic language. On the wall Max paints a picture of the sun and two stick figures, and underneath he writes Liesel's words.

*Liesel acts like Death here, capturing the colors of the sky with poetic words, and Max acts like Death in drawing out images of the words. This is one of Death's examples of the beauty of humanity.*



Max has nothing but time and it seems a punishment just to stay alive. He starts exercising again, and then begins fantasizing about having a boxing match with Hitler. The crowd all supports the *Führer*, and they mock Max for being Jewish. The two start to fight, and at first Max lets Hitler beat on him. Then he gets up and punches Hitler on the moustache. Hitler stands, turns to the crowd, and gives a speech asking them to climb into the ring with him, as the Jewish enemy has corrupted everything. The whole country of Germany climbs into the ring and beats on Max. Last comes Liesel, and she hands him a crossword.

*Another example of Hitler using words to gain power and incite hatred, even in Max's imagination. Hitler again becomes the personal face of evil and suffering. The daydream is symbolic of Max's plight – his own countrymen have turned against him, and he is alone in a nation that is his homeland but now also hates him. His only comfort is Liesel – her friendship and her words.*



One day Liesel come downstairs and Max is doing push-ups. He tells her about his new daydream, and say he is training to fight Hitler. Liesel asks who wins the fight in Max's dream, and Max says that he does. Later Max rips out the rest of **Mein Kampf** and starts painting it white with Liesel, Hans, and Rosa, so he can start a new book. It will be called *The Word Shaker*.

*Max's exercises and daydreams keep his spirit alive even in such hopeless conditions. The fights take place only in his mind, and he is only destroying Hitler's book, not Hitler himself, but it is these small actions that allow him to justify his existence to himself.*



Death reveals that the die they have been rolling is actually seven-sided, and this last side is unlucky. In June of 1941, Germany invades the Soviet Union, and Liesel and Max see the mayor in the newspaper telling people to prepare for hard times. The next time Liesel is in the mayor's library, Ilsa Hermann is especially insistent that she take *The Whistler*, which Liesel finally accepts. Then Ilsa gives her a letter for Rosa, and Liesel realizes their last customer has canceled. She feels hurt and betrayed, even though Ilsa apologizes to her and says she can come back and read whenever she wants. Ilsa shepherds Liesel outside and shuts the door.

*Frau Hermann is Rosa's last customer, so from an economic standpoint her cancellation is devastating. The Hubermanns were already poor before the war, and now they have an extra mouth to feed with Max. But for Liesel, this feels like more of a personal betrayal – she sees the wealth of the Hermanns compared to her own family's situation, but also Frau Hermann has represented a safe and comforting place for her that is now being take away.*



Liesel sits on the mayor's steps and reads the letter, getting very angry at the mayor and his wife. She starts to walk home, but then turns around and bangs on the mayor's door. Ilsa answers and Liesel yells at her, spitefully bringing up Ilsa's dead son and the mayor's wealth. She imagines her own dead brother standing next to her. Liesel throws down *The Whistler*, and then sees the damage her words have made on Ilsa's face. Ilsa backs away slowly and Liesel leaves, crumpling up the letter and throwing it at the door.

*Liesel now takes the words she has learned and uses them for spiteful purposes – to cause suffering to Frau Hermann for her perceived betrayal. The Whistler becomes important as an object here, as Liesel rejects Ilsa's pity even in the form of a book. It is ironic that Liesel sees Werner appear even as she mocks Ilsa for never getting over her son's death.*



When she gets home Liesel feels guilty and pretends that Frau Hermann fired her because she insulted her, but Rosa doesn't believe her. Liesel then goes downstairs and asks Max to teach her to do push-ups. That night when Liesel reads with Hans she tells him that she thinks she is going to hell, but Hans assures her that she isn't.

*Liesel again feels guilty for harming someone else, though she doesn't yet have the courage to apologize here. In this exchange she has learned some of Hitler's art – using words as weapons.*



## PART 5: RUDY'S YOUTH

Meanwhile Rudy has been going to Hitler Youth meetings, which haven't worked out well. His problems are the hearing-impaired Tommy Müller and the tyrannical Youth leader, Franz Deutscher. Tommy keeps messing up the precise marching lines because he can't hear the commands, and Deutscher mocks him for it. Rudy stands up for Tommy and then Deutscher makes them both do laps and push-ups on a muddy field. Later they tell Liesel about it and Tommy tries to apologize to Rudy. Rudy asks Liesel for a kiss, but she refuses again, despite his pitiable state. Later Liesel will realize that it was these kinds of days that fed their desire for stealing.

*Rudy is developing his own ethical code at the same time Liesel is. Rudy has a naturally tempestuous nature, but he shows he will stand up for a weaker person (Tommy) even to the point of putting himself at risk. Franz Deutscher appears as a cruel, unsympathetic child with power. Like Hitler, Deutscher uses his power, small though it is, to cause suffering to those weaker than himself.*



## PART 5: THE LOSERS

Liesel and Rudy return to apple-thieving, but the old gang has a rich, charismatic new leader named Viktor Chemmel. He mocks the two but allows them in the group. Liesel and Rudy immediately dislike the tyrannical Viktor, and when Rudy complains about the slim pickings, Viktor chokes him. Rudy and Liesel leave the gang, but as they walk away Rudy spits at Viktor's feet, and Viktor swears revenge.

*Like Franz Deutscher, Viktor Chemmel is another unsympathetic young character who abuses power. The fun and seemingly innocent apple-stealing has changed now into something more ominous – another example of how someone like Hitler could rise to power through charisma.*



## PART 5: SKETCHES

That summer is productive for Max, as he begins to write and sketch and has lots of ideas. He intended to write his own story, but then he starts making random sketches that feel real to him. He intends to give this new book to Liesel when she is older.

*Besides his hatred of Hitler, Max also keeps up his spirit by making art – his sketches are grim and unconventional, but are a way of processing his grief and creating something greater than himself.*



One day Liesel comes downstairs and finds Max asleep, and she looks at two pages of his book. Death recreates a picture of Hitler "conducting" a crowd in song with the *heil* salute, and a picture of a swastika sun shining down on a mountain of bodies. Liesel is frightened by what she sees, and Max wakes up.

*Max's visual sense seems to coincide with Death's, especially with regards to the Nazi sun – the sky connecting to the tragic earth. Max translates horror into satire through his art.*



## PART 5: THE WHISTLER AND THE SHOES

Max, Liesel, and Rudy continue their respective activities into the fall, but change comes when Franz Deutscher makes Rudy do push-ups in a manure-covered field. Rudy comes home filthy and tells Liesel he needs "a win" – they need to steal something. At first they don't have any ideas, but then Liesel decides to take Rudy to the mayor's house to get revenge for them firing Rosa. Liesel expects the window to be open, but it is closed that day.

*Their experiences up to now have led both Rudy and Liesel to consider thievery as a positive act – to them it means taking control of some small part of their mad, uncontrollable worlds. Stealing is not a crime to them as much as an act of self-empowerment.*



On their fifth visit the window is open, and Liesel decides to go in. Rudy thinks they are trying to steal food, but Liesel secretly just wants *The Whistler*. Stealing it feels more like earning it than having Frau Hermann give it to her out of pity. Liesel decides she will go in alone, and she gives Rudy her shoes. Rudy reminds her to get food, but Liesel hardly listens.

*Liesel wants to steal the book that Frau Hermann had offered to her, because stealing it feels more like "earning" it. Liesel feels like a charity case if Ilsa gives her the book out of pity, but stealing it involves Liesel giving herself agency.*



Liesel goes through the window and looks for *The Whistler*. Rudy sees a light go on in the house and warns her, and Liesel grabs *The Whistler* and runs. They run around a corner and pause, and Rudy is confused by the book, but he immediately senses that Liesel never intended to steal any food. Liesel then realizes that Rudy left her shoes by the house. Rudy curses himself and goes back to fetch them. He returns after a while, and halfheartedly asks for a kiss, which Liesel refuses as usual.

*Here Liesel fully assumes the role of the book thief. She doesn't seem to feel a special bitterness toward Frau Hermann anymore, but instead wants *The Whistler* to prove something to herself. Rudy leaving Liesel's shoe behind is his first instance of leaving something behind when he intends to be stealing something instead – this will happen again.*



On their way home Liesel describes *The Whistler* and defends Rosa when Rudy implies she might get angry at Liesel. They reminisce about their times with Arthur Berg, and when they say goodnight Rudy calls Liesel "book thief." She likes the title and takes it as her own.

*It is important that Liesel thinks of herself as "the book thief" now, as she will act (subconsciously or not) to fill this role from now on – words are important, and Death takes this title to describe Liesel as well.*



## PART 5: THREE ACTS OF STUPIDITY BY RUDY STEINER

Death lists the three stupid acts and then goes on to describe them. The first involves Rudy stealing a potato from a grocer's, but he steals the largest potato so several people in line have been watching it, and they see him do it. The grocer becomes enraged and threatens to call the police until Rudy enlists one of his schoolteachers (who is also in line) to exaggerate how big and poor Rudy's family is. The grocer kicks Rudy out and he feels like a failure once more.

*This chapter describes smaller, comic instances of Rudy's unluckiness. Now that the reader knows of his ultimate demise, however, these little moments seem all the more tragic. Rudy fails again at stealing something – and he had been trying to steal to cheer himself up from his failures at Hitler Youth.*



Rudy's second mistake begins with him taunting Franz Deutscher at a Hitler Youth meeting, as Rudy pretends to not know Hitler's birthday. A few days later Rudy sees Deutscher walking on Munich Street and Rudy throws a rock at him. Liesel is there too, and she has to watch Deutscher and some other older boys beat up Rudy. Deutscher then takes out his pocketknife and cuts off Rudy's hair, reciting Hitler's birthday as he does.

*Rudy has an unfocused anger at the world's injustices just like Liesel (beating up Ludwig Schmeikl) or Max (boxing), and he also lashes out foolishly with it. Rudy is just masochistically tormenting his tormenter, but he is being politically subversive at the same time by mocking Hitler and the Hitler Youth.*



Rudy's last mistake is skipping the Hitler Youth meetings altogether. After a few more weeks of having to endure Franz Deutscher, he and Tommy Müller stop going. When Rudy's parents find out, they threaten and beg him but he still won't go. They finally convince Rudy to join a different division where they build model airplanes. This third mistake actually ends up working out better for Rudy, as he likes his new group.

*Again Rudy's youthful angst is unwittingly political in nature, which his parents understand – his failure to attend Hitler Youth could lead them to being fined or arrested. One of the great ironies of Rudy's character is that he seems like the "ideal German" – blonde, blue-eyed, and a great scholar and athlete, but he hates Hitler Youth and the Nazi mentality.*



## PART 5: THE FLOATING BOOK (PART II)

One day in December Rudy and Liesel (who is carrying *The Whistler*) take a back way to avoid Franz Deutscher, and instead they run into Viktor Chemmel and his gang on a bridge. Viktor takes *The Whistler* from Liesel, and he pretends he is in the Olympics and throws the book into the river. Rudy and Liesel run off in pursuit of the book, and Rudy jumps in when he sees it. He grabs the book and feels that at last he has achieved a victory, so he lingers in the freezing water. He asks Liesel for a kiss, but Death thinks he is also afraid of her kiss because he loves her so much. Death says he will die without ever getting his kiss.

*Rudy finally gets his victory in rescuing the book – a sort of giving and stealing all in one moment – and can't help savoring it. Death again brings up and emphasizes the tragedy of Rudy's story, and his doomed, frustrated love for Liesel. It is clear that Rudy is one of Zusak's favorite characters. This unique physical copy of the book is much more important to Liesel than its contents, so Viktor Chemmel's act seems that much more cruel.*



## PART 6: DEATH'S DIARY: 1942

Death describes himself a little; he doesn't carry a scythe, or wear a black robe unless it's cold, and he looks like any person. 1942 is a very busy year for him, and he needs a vacation. There are so many humans to collect and colors to see. War is not Death's best friend, as the saying goes, but more like a demanding boss. When he remembers that year he likes to think of a little beauty as well, though, so he returns to the book thief's story.

*Again Zusak expands the point of view to see the total impact of the war – Death is working overtime now. Death reminds the reader that he is telling this story to remind himself of the beauty and value in human life. Zusak has said that it was the saying "War and death are best friends" that inspired him to use Death as a narrator for the novel.*



## PART 6: THE SNOWMAN

On Christmas Eve Liesel brings down handfuls of snow for Max to taste. Then she gathers more and builds a snowman in the basement. Everyone has a brief time of pure joy, and then they fall asleep. Max starts to get sick after that, however, and he can't seem to ever get warm. By mid-February he collapses and hits his head on the **accordion** case. Rosa and Hans carry him to Liesel's room and put him to bed. Liesel is worried and depressed, and she visits Max many times during the night. In the morning she brings his sketchbook, but he still won't wake up. Liesel feels guilty for making the snowman, which probably made him sick, and she begs him not to die.

*Liesel finds more ways to create happiness with little things and beautiful moments. This is another respite between the tragedy that keeps the story from growing too grim. When Max gets sick, the reality of his dangerous presence comes to the fore again – he has become like a part of the family, but the fact is that they are all in constant danger while he is there, and now he doesn't even have the ability to leave or escape on his own.*



## PART 6: THIRTEEN PRESENTS

Liesel sits and talks to Max, but he keeps sleeping for days. Death visits Himmel Street, but he doesn't take Max's struggling soul, and he doesn't see Liesel. Max opens his eyes twice but both times falls back into his coma. Liesel starts to read *The Whistler* to him. Finally Rosa makes Liesel go out and play soccer to take a break. The ball gets punctured, though, and Liesel has the idea to bring it back to Max.

*Just like she will in the bomb shelter later, Liesel uses her books and her words as a gift here, to try and comfort Max in his sickness. This is an example of using language for positive purposes – to build up and inspire, rather than to abuse and control as Hitler does.*



From then on Liesel keeps bringing Max little presents from the outside world. They are small and seemingly insignificant, like a ribbon, a stone, or a feather. One day she writes down a description of a cloud for him. She brings him a maple leaf, and on that day decides to finish reading Max the dramatic, morbid ending of *The Whistler*. He still doesn't wake up, and Rosa hugs Liesel as she cries.

*These small gifts are the kind of beauty that Death sees as the value in humanity. In describing the cloud, Liesel again acts like Death – noticing natural beauty in order to distract from or transcend suffering. Liesel continues to use her words as a gift and to develop her creative voice.*



## PART 6: FRESH AIR, AN OLD NIGHTMARE, AND WHAT TO DO WITH A JEWISH CORPSE

One day Rudy and Liesel are by the Amper River when Liesel decides she wants to steal another book from the mayor's house. They ride their bikes around the block a few times, waiting for Ilsa Hermann to leave the kitchen. Rudy finally decides to give up (he is only interested in stealing food) but Liesel is determined to get a book. She climbs through the window and takes a book called *The Dream Carrier*, as the title makes her think of her own nightmares and Max's. Liesel and Rudy ride away on their bikes, and Death implies that Ilsa left the window open on purpose, hoping that Liesel would return.

*Stealing books has become a method for Liesel's self-empowerment, but she also picks the books to order her own story in some way – *The Whistler* reminded her of *Pfiffikus*, and now *The Dream Carrier* reminds her of her own nightmares. Death creates more situational irony by revealing to the reader what Liesel doesn't know – Ilsa is aware of the book stealing, and she is purposefully allowing it to continue.*



Liesel starts reading the new book to Max. After the coma has lasted a month everyone in the house is at a breaking point, and they have to discuss what to do with Max's body if he dies. His sickness means there is more food for the rest of them, but no one mentions this. That night Liesel has her same dream of her dead brother on the train, but this time Werner's face is replaced with Max's. She wonders if this is an omen of Max's death, or if Max has replaced her brother.

*The Hubermanns start to feel the strain of their sacrifice in hiding Max, but the reality is that they have a little more food while he is asleep. But even if he dies Max is still a danger to them, as they have no way to discreetly dispose of his body. Max in his unconscious state assumes the role of Liesel's brother once more.*



Eight days later Rosa finds Liesel at school, pretending that she's mad at her for losing her brush. Rosa takes her into the hall and yells at her for a while, and then whispers that Max has woken up. Liesel sits back down, overjoyed. She comes home and Max thanks her for her presents, and for reading to him. He says he is afraid of falling asleep again. That afternoon and night Liesel reads *The Dream Carrier* out loud to him, and nudges him awake when he falls asleep. Max sleeps in Liesel's bed a few more days, and then returns to the basement. Liesel is happy, but Death knows that bombs are coming soon.

*Liesel continues to reassure both herself and Max by reading out loud, and also to strengthen her own voice – she has grown so much since she failed her reading test at school. Rosa again proves that she has a heart of gold under her prickly exterior, and that the prickliness can be useful for keeping kindness a secret. Again Death undercuts Liesel's contentment with his foreknowledge of tragedy.*



## PART 6: DEATH'S DIARY: COLOGNE

Death describes the Allies' bombing of Cologne, Germany, and the five hundred souls he gathered up. The sky is yellow, and children try to find the empty fuel tanks from the planes. Death is weary from working, but he knows there is much more to come.

*Death interrupts with his experience of the mass deaths of the war. The color of the sky and the children making a game show the small moments of beauty that stand against a huge amount of suffering.*



## PART 6: THE VISITOR

Back in Molching, Liesel is playing soccer one day when Nazis arrive to check if each house's basement is suitable to be a bomb shelter. Liesel is terrified, and she crashes into another boy to have an excuse to go home. Rudy insists on helping her, so Liesel makes him fetch Hans. Liesel tells her Papa what happened and they return home.

*The relief of Max waking up is short-lived, as the Hubermanns are again reminded of the constant danger of their situation. This situation sets up a scene of traditional suspense – Death hasn't given away the ending yet.*



The Hubermanns are frantic trying to decide what to do with Max, and Hans decides to pretend nothing is unusual just as there is a knock on the door. They warn Max to hide, and the Nazi enters. He is very friendly and jokes with Liesel, and then checks the basement for three excruciating minutes. The man doesn't notice anything, and when he leaves everyone collapses with relief. Max was hiding under the stairs with a pair of scissors, and he apologizes to the family for putting them through such a trial.

*The double life the Hubermanns live is in full effect here, as the family jokes with the Nazi while Max hides secretly in the basement. They are reminded again that they are committing a crime, as they have "stolen" a Jew. The relief after the ordeal is over is another minute of happiness that offers Liesel (and her family, and the reader) a welcome reprieve.*



## PART 6: THE SCHMUNZELER

There is another knock at the door, but this time it's only Rudy checking on Liesel. He lingers at the door asking questions and makes Liesel nervous, but she tells him "everything's good" and he leaves.

*Liesel does indeed feel like everything is good now, but Death and the reader both know that terrible things are coming soon.*



## PART 6: DEATH'S DIARY: THE PARISIANS

Death describes the sky as "the color of Jews," and he sadly talks about the souls in the concentration camps. Death asks God for answers just like humans do, but he receives no response. He gently carries away the souls of some French Jews in Poland. He describes the sun as "blond" and the sky as "a giant blue eye."

*One of the most tragic chapters – all of nature seems transformed by the horrors of the Holocaust. The clouds are colored by the cremated victims, and the sun and sky (blonde and blue-eyed like Hitler's "master race") symbolize how Hitler and his ideas have infected everything.*



## PART 7: CHAMPAGNE AND ACCORDIONS

It is summer in 1942 and Molching prepares itself for an inevitable bombing. Hans Hubermann suddenly has lots of work, as people need their blinds painted black to block their lights from enemy bombers. There isn't a lot of black paint around, but Hans makes do and he works for cheap. When people can't pay, he lets them trade cigarettes or a cookie. Liesel goes with him, and Hans tells stories and plays the **accordion**. Liesel is happy during those days, and wishes they would never end. She especially likes the mixing of the paint, which Hans does with a champagne bottle.

*Ironically Liesel experiences her happiest times as the town prepares to be bombed, but she starts to realize that her contentment might be fleeting. Part of her growing maturity is being able to look past the emotions of the present – "everything's good" – to see that perhaps it isn't. She has her happiest times with Hans now, and he continues to prove himself as a positive example in Liesel's life.*



One day Hans asks a wealthy customer to pay for his painting services with champagne, as he wants Liesel to try it. Later she vows to never drink champagne again, as it could never taste as good as it did that day. It is the same with the **accordion** – sometimes Liesel wants to learn to play, but she knows she could never play like her Papa. This is the best period of Liesel's life, but Death warns that the bombers are coming.

*Liesel recognizes that her emotions make the champagne taste better, and she can see now that it will not always be like this. Death foreshadows the bombing again, reminding the reader of the final, "red" scene of his outline in the prologue.*



## PART 7: THE TRILOGY

While Liesel is working, Rudy trains for an upcoming Hitler Youth carnival. He wants to win gold medals in four racing events, just like Jesse Owens did in the 1936 Olympics. Rudy especially wants to show Franz Deutscher how good he is.

*Rudy again needs "a win" to prove to himself that he isn't a failure, just like Liesel now steals books to cheer herself up. In some ways Rudy also wants to be subversive in the way Jesse Owens was – to beat the Nazis at their own event.*



The carnival begins and Rudy wins the first race by a huge margin. Death points out that Rudy is now both talented at school and athletics. Rudy wins the next two races, but he gets disqualified from the fourth for false-starting. Afterwards he tells Liesel that he got himself disqualified on purpose, but he won't explain why. He lets her keep the medals, as he doesn't seem to care anymore.

That night Liesel tells Max about Rudy and then they both go back to their projects: Max to his sketchbook and Liesel to *The Dream Carrier*. After she finishes the book Death jumps ahead to her next stealing endeavor, as she is alone in the mayor's library. She takes a book called *A Song in the Dark*, mostly because it has a green cover. Then she goes off and reads it alone by the Amper River, feeling the pleasure of thievery.

A week later, Rudy brings Liesel back up to Grande Strasse (the mayor's street) and they see that there is a book propped up in the library window. Liesel feels it is a trap or a challenge, and she can't resist. She steals the book, which is called *The Complete Duden Dictionary and Thesaurus*, and then she and Rudy ride away on their bikes. Liesel can't help looking back, though, and she sees Ilsa Hermann standing in the window. Ilsa waves and Liesel waves back.

Liesel and Rudy stop at the bridge and open the book, and inside is a note for Liesel from Ilsa. It says that Ilsa knows Liesel has been stealing her books, and she is welcome to continue, but she hopes Liesel will come through the front door some day. The dictionary is to help her read her stolen books.

Liesel makes Rudy wait and she returns to the mayor's house. She tries to knock on the door, and even sees her dead brother next to her telling her to knock, but she can't bring herself to do it. She returns feeling happy but guilty, and wondering if she has somehow stolen her happiness.

## PART 7: THE SOUND OF SIRENS

Hans buys a radio to hear when the raids are coming, but one night in September they don't hear it until the air raid sirens come on. They have to go to a neighbor's large basement (the Fiedlers) and are forced to leave Max behind. The people of Himmel Street all gather there, each carrying their most precious possessions. Liesel watches the people who look the most afraid. After a while everyone is silent and still, and there is a palpable sense of fear in the room. Soon everyone starts holding hands.

*Death reminds the reader that Rudy is truly (and ironically) fulfilling the role of "German ideal" with his successes now. Just as Rudy doesn't explain his purposeful disqualification, neither does Death, but he implies that Rudy had already proved to both Franz Deutscher and himself that he could achieve his goals, so he didn't even need to race.*



*Liesel continues to gain a feeling of empowerment by stealing books one at a time. The titles of the books themselves also order her own story – *A Song in the Dark* sums up one of the themes of the novel and Liesel's greatest strength – finding moments of happiness and creativity in the midst of fear and suffering.*



*Liesel starts to realize that Ilsa Hermann knows she has been stealing books, but for now Liesel accepts this as a sort of challenge. Again thievery is a way of building herself up (as it is for Rudy, too), of having a distinct goal and achieving it despite risk and hardship. The Dictionary will be important for Death's later interjections into the narrative.*



*It is clear that Frau Hermann is still lonely for her dead son, and Liesel's presence in the library had been a comfort and joy to her. She wants Liesel to return, even if it means stealing a few books in the process.*



*Liesel feels guilty again – not for stealing, but for being afraid to apologize. She is once more starting to build her own moral code of what exactly is "criminal" and what isn't.*



*The war physically comes to Himmel Street with this first raid. All the characters are now gathered together, united by fear. Max's position as a second-class citizen is emphasized again, as he cannot come to the bomb shelter and so is in danger of dying alone in the basement.*



Death muses on the lives of these people, and wonders whether they deserve pity or deserve to die. He decides that he does pity them, but not as much as he pities the Jews in the concentration camps. Liesel herself is worried about Max, alone in the unsafe basement. Finally the sirens sound again, which means the bombing is over. The Hubermanns come home and find Max. He admits that during the raid he came upstairs and looked out the window, as he hadn't seen the outside world in twenty-two months. He says the stars burned his eyes. He and Liesel stay up all night, Liesel reading *A Song in the Dark* and Max sketching and writing.

*Death is able to give the bigger picture – these people are having hard times, but they at least have agency and aren't herded up to be slaughtered like animals. The horrors inflicted on the Jews seem much more pitiable to him than these Germans, who are at least free. Even the stars are too bright for Max after having lived in the basement for so long. He has been deprived of Death's one pleasure and distraction – looking at the sky.*



## PART 7: THE SKY STEALER

It turns out that the raid was only the sirens going off accidentally. The next raid a few days later, however, is real. The people of Himmel Street gather again, and this time there is even more tension in the Fiedlers' basement. Liesel starts to read *The Whistler* out loud to comfort herself, but soon everyone falls silent and starts listening to her. Liesel realizes that reading out loud is like having and playing her own **accordion**. Even after the sirens signal that the raid is over, people stay to hear the rest of the chapter, and they thank Liesel as they leave. Himmel street was not hit by any bombs.

*This is a very important moment for Liesel, and shows how much she has grown. The same girl who failed her reading test is now reading to a silent gathering of adults. She no longer needs Hans to comfort her with reading – now she is comforting others. This again shows the power of language and art to distract and inspire during hard times. Liesel gives the people in the shelter a reprieve from their fear with her words, just as Hans does with his music.*



The Hubermanns return home and Rosa proudly tells Max what Liesel did. At that moment Max conceives the idea for his next book, *The Word Shaker*. Liesel asks Max if he saw the sky during the raid, but Max says the only sky he had was the one painted on the basement wall.

*Rosa's heart shows through in her pride for Liesel's actions. Max is again associated with the sky and visual art, but he is someone trapped by a cruel society and kept from fully experiencing both.*



## PART 7: FRAU HOLTZAPFEL'S OFFER

A few days later Frau Holtzapfel, Rosa's enemy, knocks on the Hubermanns' door. She is as rude as ever, but she asks Liesel to finish reading *The Whistler* to her, as she liked what she heard in the shelter. Rosa haggles with her for payment (her coffee ration), but agrees. A few days later Liesel goes to Frau Holtzapfel's house next door. Frau Holtzapfel is rude and doesn't want any small talk, just reading. Liesel salutes Hitler as she leaves, knowing Frau Holtzapfel's two sons are fighting in Russia.

*Frau Holtzapfel begins to become a more complex character, and her soldier sons are first introduced. Liesel is now able to provide something for her family, small though it is, which alleviates the helplessness she felt when the washing customers quit her services. And, again, Liesel's self-empowerment is associated with words, books, and her control of language.*



## PART 7: THE LONG WALK TO DACHAU

Three German trucks carrying Jews stop outside Molching, and the soldiers decide to march the Jews through town. Liesel is playing soccer when the kids hear the sound of shuffling feet approaching. An old lady yells "The Jews" from an upper window. Hans appears and tries to take Liesel away, but she is determined to stay and watch.

*Liesel shows her maturity again in wanting to look the situation in the face. This sets up a pivotal scene and an example of the cruelty of the Nazis, the passivity of much of the general populace, and the great goodness of people like Hans.*



The group of Jews passes down Munich Street, and Death sees them as a procession of death-colors. Each of them is starved and despairing. The people of Molching watch silently. There is one old Jewish man who keeps collapsing from exhaustion, but the soldiers make him continue. Almost unconsciously Hans takes a piece of bread from his paint cart, pushes through the crowd, and hands the bread to the old man. The old man falls to the ground and embraces Hans's legs, crying. A soldier soon appears and whips both the Jew and Hans. Hans hopes the old man will at least die feeling like he is a human, but Death is unsure if this is a positive thing or not.

*Most of the citizens passively watch this horrible scene, but Hans is compelled by his own humanity – it is almost childlike how he doesn't consider the consequences, but offers a small offering to show the old man that he is still a human, and valuable. Hans shows his courage here as well, as he takes a brutal whipping for his action. This scene especially shows the perverse morality of the Nazis – Hans displaying even a minimum of human kindness is a crime.*



Liesel and Rudy help up Hans. Most of the crowd calls him a "Jew lover" and they upturn his paint cart, but a few help him to safety. Hans is suddenly terrified that Max will be discovered because of his actions, and he despairs at what he has done.

*Most of the rest of the observers look cruel or cowardly in comparison to Hans. Hans now feels guilty for doing something good because of the danger such an action poses for his family and for Max – a sign that right and wrong have been upended.*



## PART 7: PEACE

That night Max flees the Hubermann house. He leaves Liesel a present hidden somewhere, and the family silently watches him walk away. Hans had arranged to meet Max by the Amper River in four days, but when Hans shows up Max isn't there. Instead he has left a note saying, "You've done enough."

*Hans's unnecessary guilt now makes him send Max away, as the family looks suspicious after Hans's actions. Max also gives in to his guilt and finally decides to remove his dangerous presence from the house, but risks his own life to do so.*



## PART 7: THE IDIOT AND THE COAT MEN

Death labels Hans as "the idiot," and describes him sitting at the kitchen table, waiting for the Gestapo. Liesel is in her room, praying for Max. When the Gestapo doesn't come, Hans is almost offended. He is remorseful for what he did, but Liesel assures him he did nothing wrong.

*The irony is emphasized again here – Hans torments himself with guilt over what was essentially a small act of basic decency. It is only in a supremely twisted society that such a thing could be so illegal and dangerous.*



The neighbors start to scorn Hans. Frau Diller spits at his feet and Frau Holtzapfel calls him "dirty Jew lover." Hans stands on the bridge and looks into the Amper River. He accuses himself of stupidity, and almost wants someone to come for him so he can be sure Max left for a good reason.

*The other residents of Himmel Street seem less sympathetic now, as they clearly have swallowed much of the Nazi propaganda. This serves to show how brave and unique the Hubermanns have been.*



Three weeks later two men in long coats come down Himmel Street, and Hans calls out to them, sure that they are coming for him. Instead the Gestapo walk past, to the Steiner house, and they ask for Rudy.

*Death shifts the scene to Rudy with a new source of tension. Death has already given away Rudy's ultimate end, but not how he reaches it, and so the arrival of the Gestapo looking for him creates a tension—perhaps they will take him away and kill him for his stealing...*



## PART 8: DOMINOS AND DARKNESS

Rudy sets up lines of dominoes with his siblings while his parents talk to the Gestapo in the next room. When he hears the voices get louder Rudy lights a candle and leans against the door, listening. He realizes the Gestapo are here to take him to an elite Nazi school because of his good grades and athletic skill. The Steiners are resistant, as they have heard of horrible hardships at such schools. Rudy stops listening and knocks down the dominoes.

After the Gestapo leave, the Steiner children come into the kitchen and ask what will happen to Rudy. Alex Steiner looks desperate and Death implies that he has refused to let them take his son. Death wonders what would have happened if Rudy had listened to the rest of the conversation in the kitchen. As it is, however, fate does not favor Rudy Steiner, and Death reveals that he will die.

*...but in fact the Gestapo arrive for just the opposite reason. Rudy has now been noticed as someone who seems to be an example of Hitler's "master race," even though the reader knows that Rudy hates and Nazis and Hitler. The dominoes are a symbol of the war, but also of how small actions can lead to huge consequences later – as with the conversation about to occur, and Rudy's fate.*



*Death again gives the reader some of his knowledge to heighten the irony and tragedy. It is revealed that Alex Steiner has unwittingly caused Rudy's death by refusing to send him away, but Death doesn't explain how this comes to pass. This builds suspense and resonates with the image of the dominoes.*



## PART 8: THE THOUGHT OF RUDY NAKED

Death describes Rudy's experience of a week before, when he was taken out of class and medically examined. He is with two other boys, and they are all nervous about taking off their clothes in front of the doctors. The nurse talks about creating an advanced race of Germans. After the examination the boys overhear the doctor talking about which ones will be accepted. The story jumps to the present, and Rudy describes his experience to Liesel. For a few days Liesel can't help thinking of Rudy being examined naked.

*The irony of this situation is that the boys are being evaluated to see if they fit the ideal of the "master race," but the evaluation itself makes them feel humiliated and small, not like proud Germans at all. This chapter introduces a more romantic element to Liesel and Rudy's relationship, as she keeps thinking of him naked. At the same time, the sterile, scientific tone recalls some of the medical horrors of the Nazis and their ideas of eugenics.*



## PART 8: PUNISHMENT

Death describes Germany's inevitable punishment of Hans Hubermann for helping a Jew. First it is only his conscience that suffers. After that, he is accepted to the Nazi Party, which seems like good news at first, except that two days later he gets a letter drafting him into the army. Rosa cries and Liesel feels sick as she reads the letter. Later Liesel describes the sky sadly to the nonexistent Max. The Steiners are also grieving next door, as Alex Steiner has been drafted as punishment for not letting Rudy go away to Nazi school.

*It has come slowly but inevitably, and now the war strikes these two families right in the heart. This is more fuel for Liesel's hatred of Hitler and the Nazis, and it will turn Rudy defiantly against the Party that wants to recruit him. Like Death and Max, Liesel distracts herself from her sorrow by looking at the sky and putting her vision into words.*



## PART 8: THE PROMISE KEEPER'S WIFE

The day before Hans leaves for the army he and Alex Steiner get drunk at a bar. Hans gets up and plays a sad song on the **accordion** and everyone cheers. The next morning he is passed out and Rosa has to dump cold water on him to wake him up. He leaves a few hours later, and as he says goodbye he calls Liesel "half a woman" and asks her to take care of Rosa and his accordion, and to keep reading in the raid shelter. He promises he'll play a song when he returns.

Alex Steiner leaves four days later, and both Rudy and Liesel are depressed. After a few days Rudy asks Liesel to follow him somewhere, and they start walking all the way out of Molching. Liesel thinks they are going to steal something, but Rudy says he is going to find Hitler and kill him. Liesel wants to go home, and they argue but finally end up walking back together. Liesel feels she is experiencing a line from *A Song in the Dark* that says, "my heart is so tired." As they return to Molching they walk past Alex Steiner's abandoned clothing shop, but they don't enter.

That night Liesel wakes up and sees Rosa sitting at the foot of the bed with Hans's **accordion** strapped to her chest. She just sits silently in the moonlight without touching any of the keys, and Liesel recognizes the beauty of the moment. A few minutes later Rosa is back in bed and snoring again.

*Hans leaving is an important moment in Liesel's growth, as now she must live without his constant moral example and comforting presence. It is important that his last request is for her to keep reading in the bomb shelters, as it is in those moments that she has been the most mature and giving – like Hans himself.*



*Rudy had been unknowingly subversive before just by idolizing Jesse Owens, but when Alex Steiner is drafted Rudy turns fully against the Nazis and Hitler. Like Max, Rudy makes Hitler the personal face of all his sufferings, and wants to cause him physical harm. In Rudy, Zusak is showing that even some Germans who seemed like "ideal Nazis" didn't necessarily support them.*



*This is a beautiful, silent moment that stays with both Liesel and the reader – an example of beauty in the midst of sorrow, and humanity at its best.*



## PART 8: THE COLLECTOR

Hans is not sent to fight but is instead assigned to the undesirable LSE (*Luftwaffe Sonderinheit* – Air Raid Special Unit) in Essen, Germany, which involves cleaning up wreckage, rescuing survivors, and disposing of bodies after air raids. The LSE rides around in a truck, cleaning up even when there are no bombings, and each man has his own seat in the truck.

Hans experiences his first air raid in November, and a burning building almost collapses on him. They put out fires for a while, but later an old man dies in Hans's arms. Next he trips over the body of a boy, and then finds the boy's mother looking for him. That night Hans writes a letter to Liesel and Rosa, but he gives no details and pretends everything is fine.

*Through Hans, the story is able to give more examples of the actual war outside Molching, though Hans is not assigned to fight. The emphasis on the assigned seats is part of Death's foreshadowing of a later accident.*



*The horror of the air raid prefigures what will later come to Himmel Street. Death and the reader know this, but none of the other characters do, which is another example of dramatic irony in the novel. Hans, meanwhile, uses the language of his letters to shelter his family from the war, to hide the horror of what is really happening, and perhaps to hide his own thoughts about it.*



## PART 8: THE BREAD EATERS

1942 comes to an end, and Liesel spends most of her time thinking of Hans, Max, and Alex Steiner. She keeps reading *The Whistler* to Frau Holtzapfel, who starts acting more friendly. Another parade of Jews passes and Liesel can't help looking for Max.

At the next parade of Jews, Rudy and Liesel ride their bikes ahead of it, scattering some bread in the road and then hiding in the trees to watch. Liesel notes the irony that hungry Rudy has gone from stealing bread to delivering it. The Jews approach and start to find the bread. Liesel comes closer to try and see if Max is there, but a soldier sees her. She and Rudy run away, but not before a soldier kicks Liesel and tells her she doesn't belong there.

*Liesel continues to mature by reading out loud to Frau Holtzapfel, and also by thinking of the positive role models in her life.*



*Liesel has clearly learned from Hans's example, and repeats his kind actions even with the risk of punishment. The fact that they hide to watch as if this were a game, however, shows that the children don't fully understand the consequences of their actions. Rudy shows his compassion once again – internally, he is nothing like a Nazi. He has matured from stealer to giver.*



## PART 8: THE HIDDEN SKETCHBOOK

There is another raid before Christmas, and everyone in the shelter listens as Liesel reads *The Whistler*. When Liesel and Rosa return home, Rosa cuts open a bedsheet and takes out Max's sketchbook. She says Max said to give it Liesel when she was ready, but that Liesel has always been ready. The cover of the book says *The Word Shaker: A Small Collection of Thoughts for Liesel Meminger*. Liesel reads it in the kitchen. Most of the first part is little sketches with captions, or thoughts and dreams, or memories of the Vandenburgs.

The second part of the book is an illustrated fable called *The Word Shaker*, and Death recreates the pages. The story begins with Hitler discovering the power of words, and then deciding to use words to rule the world. In the story, words grow like seeds, and soon Hitler grows huge forests that drop words into people's brains as they pass by on a conveyer belt. There are people who climb the trees and drop the words to the people below, and these people are called "word shakers."

There is one little girl who is a great word shaker because she knows the true power of words, and she is always hungry for them. One day she meets a man who is hated by his home country, and they become friends. When the man gets sick the word shaker lets a tear fall on his face. The tear becomes a seed, and the girl plants it and tends to it. Soon it becomes the tallest tree in the forest.

*Rosa shows again how proud she is of Liesel – she feels Liesel is mature enough to handle even the darkest of Max's thoughts. This is another important book for Liesel's life, and will condense many of the novel's themes. Once again, it is written over Hitler's words, an example of creative, compassionate language overcoming and undoing words of hatred and abuse.*



*Max's story is basically a condensation of the novel's overarching theme – the power of words for good or evil. Hitler decides to use words to rule the world, implying that they are more powerful than weapons, money, or influence. The forest of words that he plants is essentially the Nazi propaganda machine.*



*It is only the word shakers who live outside the propaganda system, as they understand the power of language. These could be artists and writers, but also people like Hitler – they can use the power of words for good or evil. It is Liesel's compassion that grows the tallest word-tree.*



One day Hitler arrives and demands that the tree be cut down. The word shaker climbs up the tree, and while she is there the soldiers' axes cannot damage it, even after hundreds of men try to cut it down. Seasons pass, and finally everyone gives up and leaves the word shaker alone, but she still won't come down.

*Max is saying that Liesel built an impenetrable shelter for both herself and Max through her words and her compassion, a haven that not even all of Hitler's armies could break into.*



One day a new axman appears, but instead of an ax he has a hammer, and a crowd gathers to make fun of him. He drives nails into the tree trunk and uses them to climb up to the top. The word shaker is sleeping, but the man wakes her up and she recognizes him as her friend. The two talk and look around at the forest and then they climb down together. As soon as their feet touch the ground the tree falls, destroying much of the forest. The man and the word shaker climb onto its fallen trunk and watch the rest of the crowd dispersing back into the woods. Liesel finishes the story and wonders where in those woods Max is now. She falls asleep and dreams of the tree.

*Max is the only one able to climb the tree, implying that Liesel let him into her refuge both physically and mentally, and he found safety from Hitler not only in her home but also in her words. They look around at the forest as they once discussed the weather and the outside world. The Book Thief is essentially about such moments as these – escaping and transcending suffering through art, and finding happiness in small moments of beauty and friendship.*



## PART 8: THE ANARCHIST'S SUIT COLLECTION

On Christmas Eve Liesel decides to give Rudy a present, so she goes with him and they break into Alex Steiner's shop. She picks out a suit for Rudy and has him try it on, but then trips over a mannequin. Concerned, Liesel bends over him and they almost kiss – Death wants them to kiss - but instead she helps him up and wishes him a Merry Christmas.

*Liesel's present involves the part of stealing that Rudy likes – empowering himself – but she also makes it seem like a gift from the absent Alex Steiner, rather than a desecration of his shop. Death reminds the reader again of the tragedy in Rudy and Liesel's childhood romance.*



## PART 9: THE NEXT TEMPTATION

Liesel and Rudy return to the mayor's house to steal a book, but this time Frau Hermann has left cookies on the desk. Liesel takes them, along with a book called *The Last Human Stranger*, but as she is climbing out the window Ilsa Hermann appears wearing a bathrobe with a swastika on it. Liesel suddenly realizes that the library must belong to Ilsa, not the mayor. She asks, and Ilsa says she used to read there with her son. She says Liesel has been the one who uses the room the most lately. Liesel leaves and she and Rudy share the cookies. Then they wonder what to do with the plate.

*Liesel knows she is just play-acting at stealing at this point, but it still feels more empowering to her than to have books given as gifts by the rich Ilsa. The knowledge that the library belongs to Ilsa alone, and not the mayor, makes it seem like even more of a safe haven – sort of like the tree in *The Word Shaker*. Again her book's title, *The Last Human Stranger*, seems to resonate with Liesel's life – this time with Hans being alone in his human kindness.*



## PART 9: THE CARDPLAYER

Meanwhile, Hans and the men of the LSE are playing cards outside Essen. Hans keeps winning, and a man named Reinhold Zucker gets mad and accuses him of cheating. Whenever Reinhold wins he gloats, but when Hans wins he shares the cigarettes he won with the other men. Reinhold despises him for his charity, and Death implies this will lead to Reinhold's end.

*A major theme of this section in the novel will be the randomness of fate, especially who lives and who dies in war. Here Death implies that Reinhold Zucker will be killed essentially because he is a bad loser at cards.*



## PART 9: THE SNOWS OF STALINGRAD

One day in January Liesel goes to read to Frau Holtzapfel, but her son Michael answers the door, wrapped in bloody bandages. He has been shot in the ribs and had three fingers blown off fighting in Stalingrad. Later he comes to greet the Hubermanns and during that visit tells that his brother, Robert, is dead. Michael sat with him in a hospital for his last days. Michael also said he heard that Hans Junior was in Russia as well, and still alive.

Liesel returns to Frau Holtzapfel's house to find her sitting in a state of shock. Death describes how her son, Robert, died by having his legs blown off and then suffering in a hospital. He recalls how Michael told Robert he would be going home soon just before Death took him. Liesel keeps reading while Frau Holtzapfel cries, as it feels good to be doing something in the face of such sadness.

*The theme of death continues with Michael Holtzapfel's return, and the fact that he randomly survived while his brother died. This will lead to more of the survivor's guilt that plagues so many characters in the novel.*



*The most poignant example yet of Liesel using her words and her books to comfort someone in the face of pain. Once again it seems that the world is huge and dark – this is a World War – and it is only through singing "songs in the dark" (like the title of Liesel's book) that hope and humanity can be maintained.*



## PART 9: THE AGELESS BROTHER

Liesel returns the cookie plate to Ilsa Hermann's front door, but she doesn't go inside. She imagines her brother, who is eternally six years old, approving of her action. That night Liesel lies awake and imagines her mother, Werner, Max, and Hans all in the room. The next morning she watches Rosa hold the **accordion** and pray for everyone's safe return.

*Liesel overcomes her particular fear of apologizing to Ilsa and does something Hans would have done. When she imagines Werner alongside both Hans and Max, it connects them to Werner as both her loved ones but also by implying that the latter two are in great danger and are lost to Liesel for now. Rosa also has been deeply affected, and clings to the accordion even though she can't play it as a symbol of safety.*



## PART 9: THE ACCIDENT

The scene returns to the LSE. One day Reinhold Zucker takes Hans's seat in the truck just to start a conflict, but Hans lets him keep it. A few minutes later the truck crashes and rolls over several times. Some of the men are injured and Hans breaks his leg, and Reinhold Zucker is killed. The men get out and survey the damage, and Hans realizes that he should have been the one killed instead of Reinhold. The sergeant likes Hans because he shared his cigarettes, so he lets him be sent back home to work in an office.

*The theme of chaotic fate continues. It seems random that Hans should live and Reinhold should die because of a feud at cards or a simple seat switch, but it fits with other situations in the novel, like Hans surviving World War I by writing letters, and Michael Holtzapfel living while his brother died. This is an extremely fortunate outcome for Hans, though.*



## PART 9: THE BITTER TASTE OF QUESTIONS

In February Liesel gets a letter from Hans describing his situation, and she and Rosa are ecstatic. Liesel tells the Steiners the news and they are also pleased, but Liesel can tell Rudy wonders why Hans Hubermann got so lucky and Alex Steiner didn't.

*The Hubermanns are the lucky ones at this roll of the die, and the Steiners are unlucky. Rudy must struggle to deal with this chaos, and find something to direct his frustration at.*

## PART 9: ONE TOOLBOX, ONE BLEEDER, ONE BEAR

Rudy's anger at the world keeps growing and he gathers a toolbox of things to help him in stealing. Liesel sees him leaving and catches up with him. She asks him about the teddy bear (which is in his toolbox) and Rudy says it is to comfort a child if one finds him stealing. They keep walking and Liesel realizes Rudy had intended to rob the mayor's house, but he has already lost his conviction. When they get to Gelb Strasse Rudy sits down and decides he is "better at leaving things behind than stealing them."

A few weeks later the air raid sirens go off again, and Michael Holtzapfel comes to the Hubermanns saying his mother won't leave the kitchen table. Rosa goes inside and curses at Frau Holtzapfel, but it does no good. Rosa and Michael are ready to get in the shelter, but Liesel stays to tell Frau Holtzapfel that she'll stop reading to her if she doesn't come. Then they all run to the bomb shelter, but Frau Holtzapfel stays behind.

In the shelter, Michael feels guilty for still wanting to live when his brother is dead and his mother wants to die. Suddenly Frau Holtzapfel appears and starts tending to Michael's bleeding hand. Liesel reads out loud throughout the long night.

When everyone emerges from the shelter, someone points out a crashed plane near the Amper River. Rudy runs towards it even as Death himself comes for the pilot. Liesel catches up with Rudy and they survey the fire, the wreckage, and the pilot, who is still barely alive. Liesel comes closer and she and Death recognize each other. Death is impressed that she looks at him and doesn't look away. Meanwhile Rudy climbs towards the dying pilot and places the teddy bear on his shoulder, and the pilot thanks him in English.

Death takes the pilot's soul and he sees the sky eclipse with the shape of a swastika. Death wonders how humans could be so beautiful and ugly both at the same time, but he still envies their ability to die.

## PART 9: HOMECOMING

In April Hans is discharged from the hospital. He comes home at night and everyone is overjoyed, and he tells Liesel and Rosa the details of his experience in the LSE. That night he sits with Liesel while she sleeps. Liesel enjoys three months of happiness then, but Death forebodes that it will not last.

*Rudy tries to cheer himself up by stealing again, hoping for another "win," but most of his attempted crimes fail because of his own natural compassion. Rudy doesn't want to hurt anyone except Hitler and the Nazis – he just wants to take some kind of control over the mad world he finds himself in. He now accepts his own giving nature and stops trying to make himself into a criminal.*



*Michael still wants to live, a fact that fills him with constant guilt, but it seems that Frau Holtzapfel no longer cares about surviving. She also puts everyone trying to help her in danger by staying out of the shelter. Liesel chooses her words carefully, trying to be like Hans – harsh for someone's greater good.*



*Michael's guilt increases even more here, as he can't understand why he still wants to live when his mother doesn't. Liesel again comforts everyone with a book.*



*Rudy obviously doesn't see the pilot as an enemy, which means that his anger regarding his father and the war is directed more at Hitler than at Germany's enemies. Rudy's basic compassion comes through again as he gives a gift to a dying man. Death appears, and the reader is reminded of the scene described in the prologue. Rudy delivering the bear is an example of one of those moments of beauty that justify human life to Death.*



*Death sees both the horror of war and the kindness of a child with a teddy bear at the same time, and he wonders at the contradictions in humans.*



*There is another respite from the grimness of war with this happy homecoming. Hans and Liesel have been favored by fate for now, but Death as usual warns of bad luck to come.*



**PART 10: THE END OF THE WORLD (PART I)**

Death gives another glimpse of the character's ultimate fates – Himmel Street will be bombed, and Death will come for Rudy, Rosa, Hans, Frau Holtzapfel, Frau Diller, and Tommy Müller, but not for Liesel. Liesel will survive because she is in the basement reading over her own life story. Later the local LSE will pull her from the wreckage and she will scream for her Papa, still clinging to the book that saved her life.

*Death describes the tragedy that awaits in more detail this time. The novel is almost over by now, so the suspense intensifies. Knowledge of the horrible ending makes the action leading up to it seem that much more tragic. Death implies that Liesel's life will literally be saved by a book.*

**PART 10: THE NINETY-EIGHTH DAY**

The story returns to the past leading up to the bombing – the Hubermanns enjoy ninety-seven days of contentment after Hans comes home. There are a few more parades of Jews, but Liesel does not see Max among them. On the ninety-eighth day, however, Michael Holtzapfel hangs himself. Death explains that he killed himself because he felt guilty for living. Michael leaves a suicide note asking his mother's forgiveness, and saying he will be with his brother Robert soon. The neighbors elect Hans to tell Frau Holtzapfel the news, and when she hears she lies down in the street and screams, and Hans sits with her.

*Many characters have dealt with survivor's guilt throughout the novel – Hans with his debt to Erik Vandenburg, Liesel with her nightmares of Werner, and Max with his guilt for leaving his family – but this guilt finally overcomes and destroys Michael Holtzapfel. He feels he doesn't deserve to survive, as his brother died only because of random chance, so why should Michael be rewarded when Robert was punished? And so Michael kills himself.*

**PART 10: THE WAR MAKER**

After the funeral for Michael Holtzapfel, Liesel reads *The Dream Carrier* to Frau Holtzapfel as usual. Death describes how busy he is with the Allies' bombing of Hamburg. Hitler is starting to lose the war, but he doesn't scale back the fighting or the murder of Jews.

*The war is starting to wind down, but the danger has only increased for the characters of the novel. By this point Death seems more and more weary of his work, and horrified at the terrible things humans do to each other.*

**PART 10: WAY OF THE WORDS**

There is another parade of Jews down Munich Street, and again Liesel looks for Max. This time she sees him, as he also searches the crowd for Liesel. Liesel feels her heart break and she steps out into the road, calling for Max. They find each other and Max tells her he was caught on his way to Stuttgart.

*In one way it is reassuring to know that Max is still alive, but tragic that the Nazis have captured him, and he has now become one of the suffering prisoners paraded to a concentration camp (where few survive).*



A soldier sees Liesel and drags her away from Max, throwing her to the ground. Liesel gets up and then returns from a different direction. She finds Max again and quotes *The Word Shaker* to him. The world seems to stop, and Max kisses Liesel's hand and looks up at the bright blue sky. Then he is whipped again until he falls to the ground, and the soldier whips Liesel several times. Rudy finds her and helps her away, while the rest of the crowd watches in shock.

*One of the novel's most beautiful moments – Liesel gives Max strength and comfort in his suffering by quoting his own words to him, words which describe a safe haven for the two friends in a tree made of compassionate language. Max also takes in the colors of the sky at this moment – once again there is beauty in the face of pain.*



Max is dragged on with the rest of the prisoners and Liesel tries to follow him again, but Rudy tackles her and pins her to the ground. She cries and punches him, but then they lay there together as the rest of the crowd disperses.

*Liesel's anger at the injustice of the world returns, and she still tries to physically lash out, just like Rudy wanting to kill Hitler or Max wanting to punch Death.*



## PART 10: CONFESSIONS

Liesel silently goes to the train station to wait for Hans to return from work. Rudy fetches Rosa and they all wait together. Hans returns and that night he plays the **accordion**, but the notes sound wrong. After that Liesel stays in bed for three days.

*Even the accordion sounds wrong now – the beauty seems false in the face of cruel fate. This is similar to Michael's survivor's guilt – why keep living when so many have died? Why try to make beauty when the world is so ugly?*



When she finally gets up, Liesel finds Rudy and tells him about Max after making him promise many times to keep it a secret. Then she shows Rudy a part in *The Word Shaker* about a boy with "hair the color of lemons." Liesel wants Rudy to kiss her then, and she realizes she has always loved him, but again nothing happens. Death says Rudy has a month to live.

*Another tragic, romantic moment between Liesel and Rudy. The knowledge of Rudy's looming death, and the fact that now both children realize they are in love, but they still will never kiss, makes these moments heartbreaking and poignant.*



## PART 10: ILSA HERMANN'S LITTLE BLACK BOOK

Liesel heads towards the mayor's house, hoping to steal something to cheer herself up. On the way she thinks of a quote from *The Last Human Stranger* about the earth as a stew, but Liesel thinks instead it should say "an ugly stew." She looks at the beautiful Amper River and thinks about the ugliness of humanity, and how it doesn't deserve such a river.

*Liesel's sorrow leads her back to the library, both as a safe haven and a place to empower herself by stealing. She now sees, like Death, the incredible ugliness of humanity as opposed to natural, visual beauty like the river (or the sky).*



Liesel climbs through the library window and sits on the floor. She thinks about all the horrors she has seen, and about Hitler, and she looks around at the beautiful books and hates them for making her happy. Overwhelmed by her sadness and anger, Liesel calls the books "lovely bastards" and starts ripping pages out and tearing them apart. She thinks about the words, and how they gave Hitler his power, and wonders what value they could have.

*Hitler again becomes the face of evil, and Hitler achieved power through his words – so Liesel suddenly both hates the words for helping Hitler and wants the words to comfort her in her suffering. Her destruction of the books mirrors the book-burning, where the Nazis recognized the power of language even as they destroyed it.*



After her outburst Liesel feels guilty, and she writes Frau Hermann an apologetic note mentioning that she "wanted to kill the words" and saying she won't come back. Liesel then bids farewell to the library by touching the titles of all the books, and she leaves.

*At this point Liesel views words like Death views humans – infuriating in their inherent contradictions, capable of both great beauty and ugliness, both suffering and healing.*



Three days later Ilsa Hermann shows up at the Hubermanns' door. She tells Liesel that she can write well, and gives her a little black notebook. Ilsa says that Liesel shouldn't punish herself like she did, but should perhaps try writing a book of her own. Liesel invites her in and they drink coffee together.

*Liesel doesn't find any resolution to her anger and sadness until this moment. She finally apologizes to Ilsa, and now, once Ilsa gives Liesel her own notebook in which to write, Liesel has the chance to make the words her own. She can empower herself not by stealing someone else's books, but by writing her own.*



Death explains that Ilsa has given Liesel not just a book, but a reason to see that words can also be used for good. There will be pain but also happiness in words and in writing, just like life. That night Liesel goes down to the basement and starts to write her own life story. The title is *The Book Thief: a small story by Liesel Meminger*.

*Just as Mein Kampf saved Max's life, The Book Thief will save Liesel's - but in two ways. Literally, it will keep her in the basement during the bombing, but metaphorically it offers her a reason to keep living, and a way to process her pain and heal herself and others.*



## PART 10: THE RIB-CAGE PLANES

That first night Liesel writes eleven pages, starting with her brother's death and finding *The Grave Digger's Handbook* in the snow. She falls asleep in the basement and Rosa finds her. Every night after that Liesel keeps writing. Sometimes she interjects the story with present actions, like describing Hans play the **accordion**, and how in some ways he is an accordion, breathing and moving and making music.

*The story begins to come full circle now, and all the foreshadowing starts to make sense. Liesel's writing has become like playing the accordion for her, and the instrument returns as a symbol of comfort and Hans's reassuring presence.*



Liesel is finished with her book by the time Death comes for Himmel Street, but she is still in the basement. Death wonders what she was doing when the first bombs fell, and he imagines her looking at the painted sky and words on the basement wall, or rereading the last lines of her own book - "I have hated the words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right."

*The last words of Liesel's book show that she has found some kind of resolution to her crisis in the mayor's library - through writing her own words, she has taken the beauty and ugliness of both language and humanity for her own, and tried to use the power of words for good.*



## PART 10: THE END OF THE WORLD (PART II)

The sirens start too late that night to warn of the air raid in time, and most of the residents of Himmel Street are sleeping when the bombs fall. Death describes how he takes the souls of Tommy Müller, Frau Holtzapfel, Frau Diller, the Fiedlers, Pffiffikus, and the Steiners. He especially grieves for Rudy, who seems especially tragic to Death. Then he comes for the Hubermanns, and Hans looks at him with his silvery eyes, unafraid. Rosa is still snoring, and Death reminds his audience of her huge, courageous heart. After the bombing Death lingers, and he sees the men of the LSE pull Liesel from the rubble.

*The tragic fates of most of the characters finally come to pass. The reader finally sees how it all occurs, and what leads up to all the vaguely foreshadowed events. Death offers another catalogue of characters as he takes their lives, and the randomness of life and death seems especially tragic. For Liesel, this means that nothing (besides Max, maybe) of her old life remains - Hans, Rosa, and Rudy made up her whole world.*



Liesel wanders around, confused because none of the buildings are there. She carries her book with her, looking for Hans and Rosa and Max. Then she sees the broken **accordion** and starts to accept reality. She sees Rudy's body, and she drops her book and runs to him. She tells him she loves him and kisses him on the lips, but he is already dead.

*Now the accordion comes to symbolize everything that Liesel has lost, and to act as a small representation of the tragedy of the bombing. It is significant that Liesel drops her book to go Rudy, but she is too late, and their first and last kiss is heartbreaking.*



Next Liesel finds Rosa and Hans, and she repeats out loud her best memories, and she truly breaks down at the sight of her Papa. She lays the **accordion** next to his body and imagines him standing and playing, and she thanks him for teaching her to read and saving her, and promises she'll never drink champagne again. The men from the LSE take her away then, and Death sees *The Book Thief* in the rubble. He rescues it as it is thrown into a garbage truck.

*Liesel is now totally alone, especially without Hans, and she must take the things he taught her – to make beauty and happiness out of little things, to be kind even in the face of suffering – and construct a new life for herself. The fallen book seems so small in the face of such destruction, but Death realizes that The Book Thief is worth saving, that its words are an answer to the destruction wrought by the Nazis and by war.*



## EPILOGUE: DEATH AND LIESEL

Death describes the world as a factory run by humans, and his job is to carry them away. He is very weary, so he will be as straightforward as possible with the rest of the story. He says Liesel died "yesterday," at an old age in Sydney, Australia. The sky was clear and blue. As she died she saw her husband, three children, and three grandchildren, but also Hans, Rosa, Werner, and Rudy.

*Death jumps ahead and reveals Liesel's ultimate fate – she has survived and thrived beyond the bombing, and brought new life into the world in the form of her children. She is given a clear, beautiful sky for her last day. Death clearly still respects her enough to recognize her.*



## EPILOGUE: WOOD IN THE AFTERNOON

The story returns to just after the bombing of Molching. Liesel was the only survivor of Himmel Street, and she is taken to the police clinging to Hans's **accordion**. Three hours later the mayor gets her in a car, and Liesel sits in the back with Frau Hermann. At the mayor's house, Liesel talks to herself often and eats little. She refuses to bathe for the funerals, as the ash from the bombings still connects her to the victims. Later she walks into the Amper River where Rudy rescued her book, saying another goodbye to her best friend.

*Liesel refusing to bathe and then walking into the river shows that she feels (like so many of the other characters) a responsibility to those who have died. She will remember and honor the beloved dead, but she must take Ilsa's advice and "not punish herself." Ilsa returns as a last friend and comforting presence, the embodiment of her own library.*



A few months later Liesel returns to Himmel Street to look for her books, but there is nothing but rubble. Alex Steiner returns home from the war and wishes he had sent Rudy away to the Nazi school. Liesel tells him about how she kissed Rudy's body.

*The irony that Alex had accidentally condemned Rudy to die by trying to save him is not lost on Death or Alex himself. The randomness of fate and war seems especially cruel. Yet in Liesel's story of kissing Rudy there is some love in his death as well, some sharing of love between the father and the girl who loved his son.*



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## EPILOGUE: MAX

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After the war, after Death has come for Hitler, Alex Steiner reopens his shop and Liesel starts to spend a lot of time with him and to work with him there. The two of them go to the Dachau concentration camp to look for Max, but the Americans now holding the camp won't let them in. Yet one day in October, 1945, Max comes to the shop and asks for Liesel. They embrace and fall weeping to the ground.

*More irony: Max survives – when Hans thought he had condemned him by sending him away – while Hans himself dies. This is a reversal of the situation with Hans and Erik Vandenburg in World War I. The lesson seems to be that people can never know the consequences of even their smallest actions, so it is best to act out of kindness.*



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## EPILOGUE: THE HANDOVER MAN

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Death resumes his musings. There are a few stories that he collects to distract himself from his work, and *The Book Thief* is one of these. When Death comes to Sydney to collect Liesel's soul, he takes a walk with her and shows her the book he save from Molching so long ago. Liesel is amazed, and she asks Death if he read it, and he says he read it many times. Liesel asks him if he understood it, but Death cannot answer. He wants to explain how mysterious he still finds humanity, especially that they could be both so good and evil, so beautiful and ugly, and their stories so "damning and brilliant" all at the same time, but he realizes that Liesel is already aware of all this. Instead Death states the only truth he knows to Liesel and the reader: "I am haunted by humans."

*In some ways Death "stole" The Book Thief from Liesel, and now he is returning it – but like Liesel with Ilsa's books, the very fact that he took it shows how important it is to him. Death's final statement shows that humans are still a mystery to him, and he cannot understand how they can contain such contradictions within themselves and in their words. The strongest example of this is the evil of the Nazis and the goodness of people like Hans who put themselves in danger to help others, but also the use of language by Hitler to foster cruelty and evil as compared to its use by Max or Liesel to create art, beauty, and love, to bring people together. The word "haunted" implies that Death is still troubled by human nature, but it is also ironic because "haunted" is how many humans feel about death. Death turns the feeling back onto humanity, making us examine our own mysterious potential for both good and evil.*



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