

The Book Thief Blog

Words create meaning. Words can be manipulated. Words are powerful. They can take life and they can save life. Reading words creates family and community. And that is just what little Liesel Meminger demonstrates in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak.

The situation is this; Hitler has an agenda. He considers whole populations of people nuisances; he needs a way to get rid of the types of people in his way. He has to create fear and hatred in a large population to get the support he needs. How can he do this? He writes a book—words are powerful. He goes on tour speaking on the subject of his book—words are power.

Yeah, yeah, you already know this part—why is this relevant, you ask? Because the Liesel Meminger is living in the middle of Hitler's influence. His words are controlling large groups of people. Germany is at war with people who do not fit the prescribed model of a person. Jewish people are being rounded up and taken “to concentrate”, or Concentration camps. And a young Jewish man comes to live with the Hubermanns.

During this war that began from words, Liesel learns the power of words in a different way. She learns that words and reading create community and family, and they also have the power to save lives. “She was a girl. In Nazi Germany. How fitting that she was discovering the power of words” (147).

Liesel is an orphan. She comes to live with the Hubermanns and must call them Papa and Mama. She doesn't bond with them at first. She lost her brother to death and her real mother takes off. But at the site of her brother's burial she finds a book and hides it under her bed. She has regular nightmares and it is Hans Hubermann, Papa, who comforts her and it is Papa who finds the book. He teaches her to read and it is a nightly custom to read together after her nightmare. He even sells his precious cigarettes to get her books for Christmas. They became a family because of books and words.

Liesel makes friends with the mayor's wife, who is from a different social class than the Hubermanns. Ilsa Hermann witnessed Liesel's second theft. Instead of confronting the thief she invited Liesel into the home. Liesel's reaction was of panic, “She is going to take me inside, light the fireplace, and throw me in, books and all” (133). Instead she returned many times to read in the afternoon, to memorize words to learn later, and to sit with a lonely woman who had embraced her sorrow (146). Even after Liesel could no longer go to the house legitimately, Ilsa leaves a dictionary for her and it is Ilsa who takes her in after the bombing. What a connection made from words and reading!

Liesel even saves Max using words. When Max is sick, and at this point in the war, what were the Hubermanns going to do if a Jew died in their home? Liesel never gives up she reads to him and describes her activities to him. She reads entire books to him and even steals another book, just to read it to Max. And it works. He wakes up. Mama even comes to the school to tell her, “‘you told me to yell at you. You said they'd all believe it...He woke up, Liesel, he's awake.’ From her pocket, she pulled out the toy soldier with the scratched exterior. ‘He said to give you this. It was his favorite.’” (332). She saved a man and brought her mother to school to hug her, not bad for a bit of reading.

Liesel creates a community in the bomb shelter, too. She reads during the bombings and everyone feels some comfort because of it, “even Frau Holtzapfel, even Pfiffikus...--thanked her for the distraction” (387). It is because of her reading in the shelter that Frau Holtzapfel stops her grudge with the Hubermanns and asks Liesel to read to her in the evenings. They bargain and trade for her to do the “job” but it stops the animosity. Liesel is creating a community.

Even Death is attracted to her. He is drawn to her and watches her story for a long time. He picks up her book at the end and keeps it until she joins him. “I put her down and we walked along Anzac Avenue...and I pulled a dusty black book from my pocket” (549). He was haunted by her.

This young lady doesn't make as big of an impact on the world with her words as Hitler, but she makes life better for those in contact with her. These are lessons about words and reading that Death and the author would like us to remember.