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Bringing Death (Among Other Things) To Life

The story of Liesel Meminger and the others around 33 Himmel Street is one of an interesting perspective. The author, Markus Zusak, uses Death as the narrator of Liesel’s adventures and struggles. Zusak’s use of the unlikely storyteller provides a new look at life in Germany during World War II. Through descriptive observations and narratives, Death becomes a character in the eventful life of young Liesel.

From the first sentence of the book, Death shows a breadth of emotion and opinion that does not go along with the common notion of what death is. The narrator is nothing like what many imagine when they hear the word; Death even laughs at the image of the scythe. Considering that he is Death, he is quite a lively and human-like character.

Throughout the story, Death often interjects with little thoughts, notes, or facts. This unusual practice adds to his persona, and it makes for reading that is very similar to the way that one might think. That is important in making Death seem like a character that is amongst the living. His presence is (for the most part) unknown, yet he is there watching. When it is time for him to do his job, he does so, avoiding those that are not his concern. Much like in Max’s book, he is The Standover Man. However, he stands over everyone.

The books in the story, including The Standover Man, are all important to Liesel and her growth. As the story progresses, Liesel develops the ability to read, with the assistance of Hans Hubermann. Together, they tackle the challenge of new words and stories. That struggle is a representation of Liesel’s life. The death of her brother and having to leave her mother troubles Liesel. When her nightmares begin, she and Hans take them on together. With him, she works to overcome the common childhood task of reading, and in the process, they help ease Liesel’s pains.

One of the most prominent features of The Book Thief lies not in the plot or characters, but in the way in which it is written. Markus Zusak’s strong use of language and description makes a story that can be both vibrant and chilling. The “conversation of bullets” (175) and the breath of the accordion (38) are just two instances where Zusak uses personification that adds to the storytelling. He also describes the sky as a “devastating, home-cooked red” soup (13). Zusak’s powerful imagery brings to life objects and things that one does not usually associate with such animation. It lends an interesting perspective, which adds to Death’s narration.

When Death is not speaking his own thoughts, he tells about Liesel and hers. There are countless stories about World War II and the Holocaust, but seeing it through the eyes of a child is different. Even though it has been done in many books and movies, such as Night and The Boy in the Striped Pajamas, all individuals have their own opinions, and children seem to have the most. There are times when it is blatantly obvious that Liesel is a young, innocent child, but as she grows, it is clear that she begins to see everything in a new way. The introduction of Jewish Max Vandenburg makes the situation very real for her. Until that point, she was somewhat oblivious to what was going on around her. One of her funnier, childlike observations comes while delivering Max his food. Liesel notes, “No one’s urine smells as good as your own.” (210).

Through a girl and her mysterious watchman, Markus Zusak has written quite a unique story. The innovative perspective provides glimpses of everyday occurrences in a new light. In such a dark period of history, he has brought life to the idea of death, which is perhaps the greatest irony of all.