

In the novel *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, we find a riveting account of a girl sent to live with a foster family in Nazi Germany, prior to the start of World War II. As the war erupts throughout the nation, we are able to see Liesel develop a special relationship with her foster father Hans. Hans teaches Liesel how to read and devotes every night to reading with her when she wakes up from nightmares. When the war efforts in Germany begin to pick up, a young Jewish man named Max comes to live with the family. As the family struggles to keep the secret of hiding Max in their home and deal with the difficulties of the war, Liesel's love for reading devotes her to literature and writing help her through this problematic time.

*The Book Thief* is told through a first person viewpoint, with Death being the "person." Death is the narrator and commentator throughout the story, and tells of how he interacts with Liesel and the German population throughout the course of the story. Death provides us with his opinions and insight during the story, including his thoughts about the human population. Zusak also adds in a bit of comedy to lighten the "Grimm reaper" stereotype. Death is quoted as saying, "A SMALL PIECE OF TRUTH: I do not carry a sickle or a scythe. I only wear a hooded black robe when it's cold. And I don't have those skill-like features you seem to enjoy pinning on me from a distance." This helps to take some of the "edge" off of Death, and helps readers to envision a portrait other than the typical one we have so long associated with it. Foreshadowing is also used in this book, as Death would enlighten readers about upcoming events or deaths throughout the novel, "The bombs were coming – and so was I."

Author Markus Zusak has a very distinct style of writing that is used throughout his novel. Chapters vary greatly in length, with some as short as two pages, and others were as long as twenty-two pages. Zusak also breaks up the book into eleven different "parts," which encompass eight or nine chapters each. Sentences also show a great variety in their length. These sentences are often spread apart across the pages. Some sentences contain a single word, while others carry on into complex statements or ideas. Another unique feature of Zusak's writing is his use of "asides" in this novel. These are written by Death to give the reader further insight into the details and descriptions of the book. These "asides" are written in bold font, and are interspersed between paragraphs throughout the entire novel. Details that Death includes in these additions include, vocabulary translations, announcements, conversations or thoughts of characters, letters written by a character, and updates about the progress of the war. This additional information allows the reader to "see" more than what is being described in the story.

The setting for the story is given an exact location; to help readers situate themselves in Nazi dominated Germany. Hans, Rosa, and Liesel live at 33 Himmel Street, Molching, Germany. Zusak goes into great detail describing the

neighborhood, "A PHOTO OF HIMMEL STREET: The buildings appear to be glued together, mostly small houses and apartment blocks that look nervous. There is murky snow spread out like carpet. There is concrete, empty hat-stand trees, and gray air." Readers are able to arrive with Liesel to her new home, and fully immerse themselves in the experience, just as she is. There is also a specific time period in which the book is set. It follows the progression of World War II, with Liesel's arrival to Himmel Street in January 1939. The story continues through the war, and we see her family perish on October 2, 1943. Readers are able to feel the trials and tribulations of a young girl living in a war-ridden country.

The film production of "The Book Thief" by director Brian Percival displays a great deal of fidelity towards the novel *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. Like any book-turned-film, there are differences and disparities found between the two types of media. To begin, Liesel's background and arrival in Molching in the film follows precisely as Zusak portrays in the book. However, when she arrives in the film, she refuses to speak to her new mother and father for a great deal of time. Mama referred to her multiple times as a "mute." In the novel, it does mention that she does not bathe for nearly two weeks, but does not that she would not speak. I believe that director Brian Percival added this portion in to express Liesel's isolation that she felt after losing her brother and being given up by her mother. It conveys an issue of uncertainty, abandonment, and reluctance.

Another disparity that I noticed between the book and the film is the presence of violence. Zusak relates how Liesel knew to be afraid of her mother's wooden spoons and the teacher at school when they reprimanded Liesel for bad behavior. He also relates how Rudy got in a scuffle with his former Hitler Youth leader, for not following the rules set forth by the organization. Additionally, there are occurrences in the book where Nazi soldiers whip Liesel and her Papa while they are watching the Jews march down the street. These episodes in the book provide the reader with a harsh reality of what life was like back in the 1940's in Germany. Yet while we read about these events in the novel, they are all excluded from the film. Percival does not use multiple instances of violence in the film. While there is a scene of Liesel getting thrown down while looking for Max while the Jews walk down the road, she is not beaten. When omitting these events, the film is instead able to focus on the heroic actions of others, rather than the consequences suffered for wrong choices.

There are certain stereotypes that are also portrayed in both the film and book. The distinction between rich and poor runs rampant throughout both the book and the film. Heinz and Ilsa Hermann are revered as they live in their grand estate at 8 Grande Strasse. They have marvelous luxuries such as cars, fine clothes, and an entire library of books that are not accessible to the lower class.

While the residents of Himmel Street are starving and scraping by on mere “odd-jobs” as they become available, it appears that the Hermann’s do not have to sacrifice much at all. The Hermann’s are depicted as a superior set of residents, while those on Himmel Street are pitied. At the end of the story, there is salvation for Liesel in both the film and the book. As the Hermann’s discover Liesel on the decimated Himmel Street after the bombings, the Hermann’s arrive and take on the responsibility of being her caretakers.

As a director, I believe that Brian Percival created a piece of work that serves as an example of how a book can be interpreted into a full-length feature film. Each director decides what themes and messages they would like to promote in the film, and which they would like to exclude. Percival created a film that kept Zukas original intentions in tact, while removing some of the violence and altercations that were found within the novel. He works as a “new author” to create a story showing authenticity, with a setting reflecting Germany in the 1940’s, linguistic accents used by the characters, and date and location information that appear across the bottom of the screen. The stereotype of the division of wealth that is displayed in the book is also translated to the screen. As viewers, we still get a sense of what wartime Germany was like, the undesirable conditions that were found on Himmel Street, and the trials and tribulations that Liesel has to overcome throughout her young life.

Prior to this course, I do not believe that I would have read *The Book Thief* with such rigor and delight. Though I have long been an enthusiast of young adult literature, I have not always been the greatest at examining the details and writing techniques found within the literature while reading. Though I enjoy reading as a pastime, I was not actually “reading” into the stories with great depth. I would have interpreted the tale as one that focused on a young girl in Germany during World War II, but would have likely missed out on several aspects of this writing. Through analyzing literature in this class, such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer’s Stone*, we were able to experience examining underlying messages, stereotypes, themes that are incorporated into children’s literature. This class has been invaluable to me for helping to shape my thinking about the messages that are being portrayed in children’s literature, and how we will use that literature in our own classrooms.

Also, when viewing the film, I would have likely been annoyed at how the film did not project each of the events and occurrences from the novel written by Markus Zusak. This course has taught me that directors have their own vision of what a film will encompass from the book it is based on. For me, films are no longer judged by whether they show fidelity to the book, but rather, films are seen as an interpretation of a book. As George Bluestone elaborates, “A filmmaker is an independent artist, not a translator for an established author, but a new author in his own right.” When a director creates a film based on a book,

they are able to decide what they would like to embellish, add in, and what to omit from their storyline. While I used to enjoy films that showed a great fidelity to the books they are based on, this class has taught me that a director, as a new author, can create magnificent stories.

A critical realization came to me when viewing the film "Where the Wild Things Are," directed by Spike Jonze. Being familiar with the picture book and its brevity, I was intrigued about how a film could be inspired by such a piece of literature. Jonze was able to create a full-length feature film out of a short, sparsely narrated picture book. The lack of dialogue and specific direction for the story allowed Jonze to create an elaborate interpretation of the story, based on his understanding of the storybook. The film features the same characters, and a few of the same props and events as the story, but takes viewers on a journey unlike any other explored in the picture book. In this sense, Jonze becomes an author of his own. He creates a piece of work that is exclusive to him and his visions as a director.

We have also been able to explore different versions of films (by different directors) that are based on the same piece of writing. This included both "Charlotte's Web," "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." Each director takes their visions of the book, along with advancements in technology and multimedia to create a spectacular display for the audience. As a class, we were provided with the opportunity to view the two "Charlotte's Web" films and discuss the characteristics we saw in each with our classmates. This activity taught me that just as each film director "reads" a book differently, we as audience members "read" films differently as well. Our discussion groups shared our reactions and insights to the same set of films, and were able to see how each viewer's personal preferences influence how they interpret a film.

Lastly, we have explored the creation of a "blockbuster" through exploring the Harry Potter phenomenon and reading articles reflecting on the mass marketing of films by Joel Taxel and Philip Nel. Through exploring aspects of "Pottermania" independently and reporting our findings, we were able to explore the vast Internet resources and information available for Harry Potter fans. This also spurred the exploration of mass marketing and the commodities available on the market for Potter lovers. This merchandise is still found in stores across the globe, and continues to generate a profit for filmmakers. It is with great delight that I can aver that *The Book Thief* has not been propelled into a commercialized entity. Prior to reading the book, I had no idea that it had been translated into a feature film. Aggressive advertising and commercialization are not part of every piece of children's literature that gets turned into film, but it is a common place for corporations like Disney.

I have used all of these aspects and criteria when examining *The Book Thief* novel and film. I am now able to pick up on themes, messages, and stereotypes that are portrayed on the screen, as well as in written stories. I now understand the challenge that awaits film directors as they embark on interpreting (not necessarily “translating”) a book that they would like to make into a film production. Though I believe that director Brian Percival did an exceptional job of translating the book and its events into the film, and creating his own version of the story, there are likely readers out there that would not agree. The personal preferences of the audience and their ideas of “quality” vary for each viewer. Everyone picks up on small nuances that are found throughout the film, and interprets the presence (or lack of) certain characteristics like music or lighting. Discussions with peers and personal reflections have helped me to investigate and broaden my knowledge in this area.

When choosing *The Book Thief* novel and film for our final project, it was originally due to personal interest. I have always been fascinated with stories from World War II, as my grandpa was enlisted in the Air Force at the time. I love to explore the different viewpoints and experiences of both soldiers and civilians. However, this book is much different than other pieces of World War II writing that I have encountered as an educator. Most literature that I have come across is either written from the viewpoint of an American citizen during the war, or of Jewish Germans and their maltreatment in concentration camps. *The Book Thief* takes on a different persona, as it is written about a German citizen who is not Jewish, but has to deal with the war on her home front. Though Liesel is not Jewish, her life is greatly altered by one that her family is hiding in their home. It shows how not just the Jews suffered during the war, but elaborates on sacrifices made by the nation and individual families as a whole.

As I think about what I would want students to notice and learn from this novel and film, it would be my goal as an educator to get the students to experience what life was like for citizens in Germany during World War II. The tragedy that strikes home, whether it was loved ones going to war, air raid sirens going off in the middle of the night, leaving all of your possessions behind, or even how some Germans may not have supported Hitler’s agenda. This book provides an excellent historical narrative for what experiences young children had to endure during Hitler’s reign. It would be interesting to use this novel alongside *The Diary of Ann Frank*, so that students could compare the Nazi Germany experience between both a German civilian, and a Jewish citizen. It could lead to a greater understanding of the experience in Germany as a whole.

As an educator, I would also like students to experience how this novel promotes the message of “showing strength during times of adversity.” As the novel opens, we see a young girl who is struggling with the recent death of her brother, the abandonment of her mother, and the adjustment to life with a foster

family. Liesel shows great courage in the presence of adversity. In her young life, Liesel also faces watching her father leave for war, companionship and desertion by Max Vandenburg, and the death of her entire family and Rudy, and the destruction of her entire street. While she sought the help of role models such as Hans, Ilsa Hermann, Rudy, Max. Yet through all of her trials, and her far extending support system, what may have shown her the most were the possession of books and the diversion of reading. Liesel took to literature and writing as her distraction to all of the devastation that plagued her life. While she could have easily become downtrodden and depressed with the events of her life, she rose above the challenge and continued on throughout the tragedy.

Another focal point of this novel and film could be a study of author Markus Zusak's style of writing. Zusak is able to make a story come to life in a way that I have not previously seen before. His use of Death as a narrator throughout the novel, adding in "asides" to relate information to readers not previously allotted in the storyline, and the variation in both sentence and chapter length all contribute to his unique style. So often students see the same types of standard, formal writing in novels. This novel however is written with almost a poetical sense about it, frequently pausing, describing, elaborating, and foreshadowing. I find Zusak's writing to be brilliant, engaging, and well utilized. It can be used to show diversity in writing and how each author has their own distinctive style of telling a story.

One aversion that I have towards using this novel in the classroom is some of the inappropriate language that is found in the book. Though it is not meant to be offensive to readers, the language that is used between characters in their dialogue is not suitable for all audiences. I grew up in a very conservative school district, which leads me to believe that some parents may not favor this book being used for instructional purposes due to the presence of some inappropriate language. With that being said, I personally think that this book would be suitable for high school age students, as they learn about life in Germany during World War II. The writing style promoted by Zusak would also fit a high school audience. Students should have a firm understanding of typical sentence structure and grammar before introducing an approach that diverts from the norm.

The film however does not feature inappropriate language and is suitable for classroom viewing, though it is again targeted for an older set of students, as it is rated PG-13. Bluestone's quote rings true in this film portrayal, as the film director did not simply "translate" the book into a live action movie. The film instead encompasses different values, and highlights some events, while omitting others. To me, the film version seems more "toned down" on the violence, language, and messages that are portrayed in the film. The fact that Liesel steals in the film is much more subdued than in the book, where she steals

fruit numerous times before breaking into the Hermann's to steal a number of books throughout the story. Film director Brian Percival does not promote the message that "stealing is okay," as it is commonly seen in the book. This film would also be an excellent addition to the study of Germany during World War II, and the treatment of Jewish citizens during this period.

Just as filmmakers decide what messages and themes they would like to promote, teachers are assigned the same responsibility. I consider this as I reflect on the amended quote by George Bluestone, "A teacher is an independent artist, not a translator, for an established author, but a new author in their own right." As educators, we are challenged to select the literature and materials that we help will best supplement our lessons and educational goals for our students. The literary materials we choose help us make our own independent collection. With this collection, educators do not simply "translate" what is being taught by the author, but instead look at what lies hidden within the words, to find the deeper messages and themes.

So often publishing companies create and distribute our curriculum manuals for various subjects. Districts then proscribe these manuals to teacher to use verbatim in their classroom instruction. These manuals however, may be out of date, or ineffective for a certain group of students. It is then our responsibility as educators to seek out different resources to best fit our students' needs. Some teachers create these materials from scratch, truly embracing the teacher as a "new author." Other educators are able to use materials and manipulate them to fit their instructional goals. This manipulation also places an educator as a "new author," in that revising a piece of work and making it their own are part of the literary writing process.

Before we can select the novels and films that we think will best suit our students' needs, we must immerse ourselves in the world of text and film. Educators need to spend time engaging themselves in various types of film and text in order to select the ones that we believe will best fit our students' educational goals. When given the chance, I so often find myself gravitating towards the same genre of reading. It is our job to explore titles that we may not be personally familiar with, immerse ourselves in the art of reading and extracting meanings, and then judge whether the book will work well with our curriculum. It is only through exploring and examining literature that we will be able to build a diverse collection that reflects a teacher as a "new author."

Once the pieces of literature are chosen, our next step as educators is to help our students extract the meaning from the text and films. As we earlier reflected on what we would like students to notice and learn about a piece of literature, it is our goals and desires for the students that come into focus. We formulate assignments, lesson plans, and assessments centered on not just the

“basic six” questions of who, what, where, when, why, and how, but instead make students dig in and investigate what is past the “surface level.” Comprehension questions should be used only to pick out details in the text, but instead used to translate what those details mean for the “bigger picture” in the book.

Many of the same activities that we used in this course can be translated to the elementary, middle, and high school classrooms. Activities such as, comparing two film versions based on the same piece of literature, comparing and contrasting the events found in the books and film, and even research papers based on films and the subsequent phenomenon’s created by the productions, can all be reflective, inquiry based activities that can be used in classrooms. The Common Core standards now have children creating meaning from text in a way never required before. There is a heavy focus on engaging with a variety of text, even at the Kindergarten level. Children need the experience of interacting with a text in ways that were once “non-conventional” to ensure their success throughout their educational career.

The use of film in a classroom can also serve as a powerful form of comprehension and communication. This past year, I would often read The Magic School Bus books to my kids about the subject area we were focusing on in science. When time allowed, I would also show them the film version of the title. The students were amazed at the similarities, as well as the differences between the books and the film. My Kindergarten students were able to recognize pictures or featured lines from the books that were present in the film. Yet, they often commented on how different the film was from the book. Even at the young age of five and six, my students were able to identify differences found between the book and film productions of children’s literature. At the time, I did not discuss or analyze the differences they found between the two types of media, but would like to add this to my teaching repertoire for the upcoming school year. It will be interesting to further explore the students’ interpretations with the two types of media.

This course has helped me to realize the importance of children’s literature and film in the classroom. While instructing, I would often incorporate literature into the lessons across the subject areas. Films were only used on special occasions, as I felt that administration might feel like they were not a valuable use of instructional time. However, this class has shown me how to incorporate both literature and film in engaging, meaningful ways. It requires going under the “surface” of both film and literature to really “read” into the meanings of both the book and the film. Each form of media contains their own unique messages, and carry different preferences and even stereotypes that are carried throughout. As individuals, we create our own meanings from text and film, and do not simply “translate” what is found in both film and text. It is



instead our task to interpret and extract the meaning, and consider what the overarching messages and themes are that are contained. As each reader interprets a story differently, it is beneficial to share and report our findings to others, and communicate our understanding with others who are familiar with the film and literature.