

The Merit of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner : Tang Lok Yee

Name of School : Diocesan Girls' School

Book Title : *The Book Thief*

Author : Markus Zusak

Publisher : Alfred A. Knopf

This book is centered on the story of Liesel Meminger who struggles through the Second World War without her parents. The plot follows her arrival at her new foster home in Molching, Germany, and how she makes new friends, hides a Jew named Max Vandenburg and finds warmth in the darkness of war. Liesel also develops a passion for reading, which spurs her to steal books later in the novel.

Liesel is forced to leave her home because her father

is a communist who is prosecuted by the Nazis. Her mother is unable to take care of her, so she ends up in Molching, a small town. Although she suffers unimaginable hardship as a young orphan, she does not lose hope or vigor for life. Liesel later discovers her love for reading and writing, which brings her immense joy because it liberates her imagination in a period of political oppression. Her resilience and passion for life is very inspirational as it encourages us to dare to dream and develop tenacity in the face of adversity.

Liesel's foster parents are the Hubermanns, whose personalities are polar opposites. Hans, her foster father, is a gentle accordionist who encourages her to read which also leads to her subsequent interest in writing. Rosa is Liesel's acerbic foster mother who does the washing for wealthier families in Molching in order to make a living. While Hans and Liesel grow close quickly, Rosa prefers tough love, calling Liesel names and using

colorful language. Despite this, the three of them become a close-knit family, and later hide a Jew, Max Vandenburg, in their home. Their ability to build firm bonds and trust one another during such an arduous time is very heartwarming.

Apart from family, Liesel makes new friends in Molching. Rudy, Liesel's neighbor, first greets her with a snowball thrown at her face during a football game. Despite their rather rocky beginning, they grow to become best friends and Rudy even falls in love with Liesel. I especially appreciate the way the author depicts the theme of friendship through Liesel and Rudy. The two become steadfast friends, and Rudy even accompanies Liesel on her trips to steal books from the mayor's wife.

An interesting literary technique employed by this book is how it is narrated in part by Death. Through the

comments made by Death, it seems less cold and unfeeling as commonly portrayed in war. It says “I am haunted by humans” at the end of the novel after Liesel’s death, revealing how although death is an inevitable part of a person’s journey on earth, Death is unused to the many emotions and experiences that people go through during their lifetime. Death’s inability to comprehend the complexity of human beings makes it seem less callous because this removes some of the fear we associate with it. It is not as omnipotent as conventionally thought. This is shown by how it occasionally makes side remarks in the book such as “this is the last time she ever saw her brother” and “explanation of the abbreviation: it stood for Bund Deutscher Mädchen -- band of German Girls”. The two above side remarks are conflicting in nature, the former being a shocking statement and the latter being a straightforward elaboration on the meaning of an abbreviation. Death uses the same neutral tone to deliver these two opposite pieces of information, showing how it

truly does not understand human nature. I find this rather thought-provoking as it provides a new perspective about death. Indeed, Death does take people away when their time has come, and appears to be rather cold and ruthless as a result. However, I do not think Death is inherently cruel; the truth is that everyone's time is limited and one day will have to face Death. Through the delivery of such comments by Death in the book, Death appears to be less callous and seems more than an abstract concept.

Additionally, we can see the inner emotions of all the characters through the omniscient perspective of Death. This allows themes of mortality and love to be conveyed. Death is present literally and figuratively in the book, not only because it is the narrator, but also because the story is set during the Second World War, a time in which bloodshed and violence were ubiquitous. There is physical death as well as moral death of the characters, where they lose their values of life and morality as they

become numb and desensitized to not only the inhumane treatment of Jews, but also the general loss of lives during the war. The theme of love and warmth is also delivered through the omniscient point of view, as we can see the inner feelings characters hide from each other. For instance, Rudy hides his love for Liesel so as to remain friends with her. Rosa also hides her care and affection for her husband and Liesel behind her insulting language, when in reality we can see her love for them through her selfless actions. The theme of love is also apparent when the Hubermanns conceal Max in their home, and put themselves in great peril. Despite jeopardizing their own safety, they choose to protect a stranger who needs their help. This show of decency and sympathy during a time of distrust and fear is particularly moving as it celebrates the beauty of humanity.

In conclusion, the bittersweet plot and intriguing delivery make *The Book Thief* a compelling read. I

highly recommend this book to those who wish for some
food for thought.