DEATH ‘S ROLE AS NARRATOR

1. Changes our views on the situation – a device to rejig our perceptions on a number of issues.
2. **Death being a “character**” and a sympathetic figure, with comments about himself. ”I am not the cause, I am the result” makes us re-look at death itself.
3. It makes us shift from a fearing to an accepting attitude. We have to see the truth of our situation not search for a scapegoat/ try to blame someone else.
4. It is an unusual device so maintains our interest.
5. **Narrative Viewpoint –** first person

moving to third person when Death is talking about the other characters

……… so a mix of both personal and omniscient voices.

This has the effect of allowing us to see with a broader view than a normal first person narrator.

1. **Trustworthy narrator** We believe what death says because he is not human and seems to control his emotions so we trust his impartiality This has the effect of making the matter of fact statements about the bodies and the effects of war more horrifying. It ironically makes us more emotional about prejudice and “the ugly of human nature”
2. **Foreshadowing** **–** the action/events are strongly hinted at – DEATH TELLS US OUTRIGHT. E.g. “I saw the book thief three times”; “The last time I saw her...everything was too late.” Builds our expectations, helps us focus upon what we are reading, we read actively – predict what/when, makes it safer for us by making us aware of what would happen-is this because otherwise the novel would just be too upsetting? Or is it to suggest the inevitability of the process of living and dying ?
3. **Narrative Asides** **–** where Death steps outside the narrative to comment on some aspect of it: E.g.” The thought process of Hans Hubermann”. This technique builds our understanding of characters, themes, human behaviour.
4. Shmoop notes

**First Person (Limited)**

1. *The Book Thief* is narrated by an extremely overworked being who identifies himself as Death. Some readers love Death as a narrator; others not so much. We tend to think it's an interesting choice. Markus Zusak needed a narrator who could provide Liesel's point of view, but also provide information that Liesel, as a young girl in a relatively isolated town, wouldn't know about. He needed a narrator who could provide snapshots of the World War II outside of Himmel Street. Zusak could have just used a third-person narrator, but by using Death the author is able to offer a unique perspective on all the death and dying occurring during this historical period.  
     
   Now, Death is not omniscient – he doesn't know and see everything that's going on in the world. He's gets his information just like we do – from his personal experiences and from what he reads and hears about from others. In this story, much of what Death relates to us falls into the second category. His chief source for the story he's telling is *The Book Thief*, the book Liesel writes about her life. [*He appears omniscient at times because he flicks between past and present and has the power to be in many places at many different historical points in time=my comment]*  
   But, for Liesel's story to make sense to us, Death needs to tell us about what's going on in other parts of Germany, Poland, and Russia during World War II, to provide us with details Liesel would have no way of knowing at the time she's writing her book. Dying is one of the main things going on. He interweaves this larger context with the story of Liesel and the people she loves and loses.  
     
   What Zusak had to say about why he chose Death as the narrator for *The Book Thief*:  
     
   *Well, I thought I'm writing a book about war, and there's that old adage that war and death are best friends, but once you start with that idea, then I thought, well, what if it's not quite like that? Then I thought what if death is more like thinking, well, war is like the boss at your shoulder, constantly wanting more, wanting more, wanting more, and then that gave me the idea that Death is weary, he's fatigued, and he's haunted by what he sees humans do to each other because he's on hand for all of our great miseries*. ([source](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5318749))  
     
   **Now what do you think? Was Death a good choice for the role of narrator? What would the book have been like if it was narrated by a third-person narrator? Or by Liesel?**

Enotes teacher discussion

[anthonda49](http://www.enotes.com/people/anthonda49)

As I read this book, I came to feel sorry for Death. The way it describes the tenderness with which he retrieves the souls of the dead, especially young innocents, made me view Death in a different way. His overwork during the bombing was also poignant. Did anyone else feel this way? Do you think this is part of what the author intended?

[mrs-campbell](http://www.enotes.com/people/mrs-campbell)

Traditionally, we think of death as this horrific, unmerciful, frightening creature in all black with his sharpened scythe come to "reap" the souls of men.  Reaping implies he gets the profit from it, takes delight in it, and that death is some sort of morbid harvest for him.  So, Zusak painting Death the way that he did, as a well-rounded, full character that sees and feels in a spectrum of colour and emotion, is definitely a departure from our traditional notions of death, and it had to be purposeful.

I too enjoyed Zusak's portrayal as death, and found his emotional reaction to having to take lives, and so many of them at times, very poignant.  I feel that is a more gentle and even realistic portrayal of the sadness and tragedy that occurs with death, especially when it is on such a large scale as occurred in WWII.  It was a much more sensitive treatment of death.  I am grateful that he put so much thought into it, and gave such a unique perspective to death, which was, and still is today, such a difficult part of all of our lives.

[accessteacher](http://www.enotes.com/people/accessteacher)

Yes - Death is so often depicted as a very different character, and I think part of the success of this excellent novel is the different way that Death is portrayed. It helps us view and think of this horrific period of history in such a different way, which I think is always refreshing, especially considering the vast amount of literature based in this particular context. This is an exceptional book because it provides a new angle on this period of history and makes us as readers think differently - can't be a bad thing!

[amy-lepore](http://www.enotes.com/people/amy-lepore) As a literature teacher, I must say that yes, the author's choice of words, voice, and personality of Death was every bit intentional.  It was too well crafted, too precise, and too detailed a picture of an almost grandfatherly character to be an accident.

[cetaylorplfd](http://www.enotes.com/people/cetaylorplfd)

I also agree that the personality of Death was intentional.  I think the voice of Death was also meant to cast a tone on setting of the story and to highlight a sense of sorrow that "nature" has for so many killed so senselessly.  I was also immediately drawn into Liesel's story because Death took notice of her--she must be pretty interesting if a being as important (and busy) as Death stopped to consider her story.

[lmetcalf](http://www.enotes.com/people/lmetcalf)

The book is set in a time period where death is an omnipresent concern and every day the characters are faced with the potential death of themselves, their loved ones, and the anonymous faces in  the streets.  That Death, as a character/narrator, is personally connected to the dying is reassuring and uplifting -- especially in a place like Nazi Germany, but I kind of felt like the idea made deaths in other books, movies,  and real-life, a little less awful.

##### **Examples**

“I travelled the globe as always, handing souls to the conveyer belt of eternity.”  (Death, p23)

“I do not carry a sickle or scythe. I only wear a hooded black robe when it’s cold.  And I don’t have those skull-like facial features you seem to enjoy pinning on me

from a distance.”  (Death, p329)

“Five hundred souls. I carried them in my fingers like suitcases. Or I’d throw them over my shoulder.” (Death, p359)

“This time, his voice like a fist, freshly banged on the table. (p136)

“The soft spoken words fell off the side of the bed, emptying onto the floor like powder. (p67)

“Everything was so desperately noisy in the dark when he was alone. Each time he moved, there was the sound of a crease. He felt like a man in a paper suit.”

(p152)

“When the train pulled into the Bahnhof in Munich, the passengers slid out as if from a torn package. (p25)

Q: How did you decide to make Death the narrator of the book?

A:  With great difﬁculty! I thought, “Here’s a book set during war. Everyone says war and death are best friends.” Death is ever-present during war, so here was the perfect choice to narrate The Book Thief. At ﬁrst, though, Death was too mean. He was supercilious, and enjoying his work too much. He’d say extremely creepy things and delight in all the souls he was picking up . . . and the book wasn’t working. So I went to a ﬁrst-person narration, a simple third-person narration . . . and six months later I came back to Death—but this time, Death was to be exhausted from his eternal existence and his job. He was to be afraid of humans—because, after all, he was there to see the obliteration we’ve perpetrated on each other throughout the ages—and he would now be telling this story to prove to himself that humans are actually worth it.

Anna Leach   
posted 20 March 2007

**The narrator of *The Book Thief* is Death. Death has found a book written in 1943 by a young German girl called Liesel; it is autobiographical, and recounts her experiences living with foster parents in a town near Munich. In the prologue, her real parents - 'Kommuniste' - are taken away, and her little brother dies. Liesel's book is called 'The Book Thief' and Death is reading it to us.**

On the first page, Death introduces himself and talks about death: 'I am in all truthfulness trying to be cheerful about this whole topic, though most people find themselves hindered in believing me, no matter my protestations. Please, trust me. I most definitely can be cheerful. I can be amiable. Agreeable. Affable. And that's only the As. Just don't ask me to be nice. Nice has nothing to do with me.'

Markus Zusak's Death is an odd prose stylist: mixing a kind of calculated clumsiness with fresh surprising turns of phrase. Zusak previously wrote children's literature and there is a flavour, in this narratorial voice, of Zusak's fellow 'young adult' author Terry Pratchett, the runaway publishing success. Just when there's a break in the main narrative, and we're looking for the sublime or the tragic, we get this the jokey, affected verbose conversationalist, a character very much from children's literature. Pratchett has his own characterisation of Death - a lugubrious 'skeleton doing his job' called Mort, hounded by jokes about scythes - Zusak's Death has more in common with him than with the black void or endless sleep.

So, occasionally there will be something like this passage, when Death fills us in on background historical detail. Here he talks about the year 1942 and its resultant carnage: 'Forget the scythe, God damn it, I needed a broom or a mop. And I needed a holiday.' (p329) or, faced with the homeless clamouring after him: 'At times I wish I could say something like "Don't you see I've already got enough on my plate?" But I never do. I complain internally as I go about my work and some years, the souls and bodies don't add up, they multiply.' (p330)

Out of context, this could almost be 'Genocide for Schoolchildren'. We're used to hearing about the Second World War in the hushed reverent tones of history books, or as the raw genuine voice of a survivor narrative. So the grumbly sub-comic voice of this non-existent person is strange and perhaps even patronising. Death's own word for what he does is 'distraction'. 'My one saving grace is distraction. It keeps me sane,' he tells us (p5). So, perhaps we should consider it as distraction.

Death and, for the Western World, the Holocaust in particular, is a negation of words: silent and indescribable. George Steiner claimed that after the Holocaust there could be no more tragedy: it was an event so awful that it killed the possibility for expression. So for Zusak to give a voice, especially such a distinctive and whimsical voice, to the quintessential concept of nothingness, is essentially a nice surprise.

The book's story is a brutal one of loss and pain, as people that Liesel loves are threatened and die. However, in *The Book Thief* this human narrative is countered by a redemptive sub-story in which words grow in strength and meaning, to the extent where they become a compensation for the sufferings of the battered central character. Maybe it's a postmodern idea, but there is an expectation today that literature should explore the limitations of language and probe around the failure of words, so it is unusual to find a bold claim for their strength.

Liesel steals books as a means of recouping her losses. And then she writes her own book. Each of the ten parts to Liesel's story is named after one of the books she has read. Words protect her and structure her own story. And that is important for Zusak, who said in an interview with the website [Bookpage](http://www.bookpage.com/0603bp/markus_zusak.html), 'We are our stories.'

Perhaps Death performs a similar function in relation to us. As our narrator he wraps his asides and chatty introductions and 'helpful' interjections around the painful narrative so that he doesn't just distract himself, he also distracts us. He distracts us from a history we know all too well, as tales of Nazi Germany are quintessential myths of the Western World's twentieth century. And this distraction is a kindness because it is a form of protection.

In a few pages at the centre of the book, Max, a Jew on the run, makes a book for Liesel. There's no paper so he makes the book by taking pages of *Mein Kampf* and painting over them with white paint, then paints over the white paint with his new story. Attractively reproduced as illustrations in Zusak's book, we see Max's words and paintings, but we can also make out the words of Hitler's tract, in English, lying underneath but only partly effaced. Like the effect of this over-painting, Death's story overlays this historical background we know so well. It covers it up, spares us from the worst of it, and transforms it into something else.

Similarly, Liesel's foster father, Hans Hubermann, a painter by trade, paints over a racist slur on the house of his Jewish friend. The covering up is brave and significant. The painted-over abuse is a 'nothing' or blankness that has a strong positive value.

Death doesn't need to describe the gas chambers of Auschwitz to us in detail, we know what words can tell us about them. So the oblique partial reference is enough, we can see the words we know underneath Death's words:

For me the sky was the colour of Jews.   
When the bodies had finished scouring for gaps in the door, their souls rose up. Their fingernails had scratched at the wood and in some cases were nailed into it by the sheer force of desperation, and their spirits came towards me, up into my arms. We climbed out of those shower facilities, onto the roof and up, into eternity's certain breadth. (p272)

In a book about the power of words and a child learning to read, this sort of overlaying is akin to an accretion of meaning. When Hans teaches Liesel to read he paints words on the basement wall and then paints them over with new words as she goes on. In one sense, they are effaced, in another they build up, layer upon layer.

Overlaying is a stylistic device for Zusak as well. Certain images recur: so the same thing, at different stages of the book, comes to mean more and different things. Death tells us what happens at the end of *The Book Thief* several times, but the third and final time he tells it to us, it is much more powerful than at the beginning. Hans Huberman gives some bread to a Jew being marched through the town centre on his way to Dachau; later, Liesel and her friend Rudy give bread to another parade of Jews bound for the death camp. Rudy, Liesel's best friend and neighbour is introduced to us with an anecdote from his childhood where he blacks his face up and ran laps around the village green pretending to be Jesse Owens, the black American athlete who won four gold medals at Hitler's 1936 Olympics. Later, Rudy is forced to lie face down in manure by a sadistic Hitler Youth commander, then, coated in shit, to run punishment laps for arguing with the commander. Later again, Rudy runs in the Hitler Youth races and wins medals. Even on the simple level of description, there are elements of this overlaying: clouds on several occasions have dark beating hearts, and regularly people's eyes are described as being like coffee stains. This sort of almost Homeric repetition is a little like someone learning through repeating, and, of course, is partly what makes *The Book Thief* such a long book.

The book can be very intensely moving and beautiful, best when it is spare, as it is in the fleeting descriptions of the concentration camps. Are words really that important? Zusak mentions how important words were to the Nazi regime; true, of course, but it wasn't simply *Mein Kampf* and propaganda that brought the Nazis to power.

In a story in which we know from the prologue that most of the main characters die, that made me cry and made me scared. It seems wrong to claim the book is too gentle, but that's how I feel about it. The faith in language is perhaps what soothes over the harsh edges in the realities it describes. 'We are our stories' Zusak said, boldly, something which should force us to revaluate the fictions, individual and mass-produced, that we use to define ourselves now. But, part of me says, we are also more than our stories: we make them, we find them inadequate, we choose other ones.

Maybe Zusak, with his belief in the power of words, is the start of a move away from the postmodern obsession with deficiencies and gaps and the lack of faith in fiction, towards an assertion of the self-sufficiency of imaginative things to be in their own right. It is hard to tell whether this is something new or just convincing nostalgia, though reviewers have seen it as 'audacious' and 'ambitious'.

An interesting illustration of Markus Zusak's belief in books as precious objects comes in the simple physical presence of *The Book Thief* - a book that is proudly bookish in a comforting way. With illustrations, ten parts, named chapters, indentations, curlicues, and built-in chapter synopses that Dickens would been proud of, *The Book Thief* is a glory of publishing paraphernalia. Add to this a faux-weathered dust jacket and its chunky size, this book has an emphatic physical presence. A statement today where most of the words we read flash up on screens or come off cheap, disposable, easy to handle newspages or magazines. At a time where novels often pretend to be diaries or journalism or just 'real', maybe this is part of the return of solidity and self-assurance to the contemporary novel.