**The Book Thief Setting**

Where It All Goes Down

**Molching, Germany during World War II**

Most of *The Book Thief* takes place in the small, and fictional, town of Molching, just outside of non-fictional Munich, Germany. Molching is on the way to the concentration camp [Dachau](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?ModuleId=10005214) (which the novel does not enter). Himmel Street, where the Hubermanns and Steiners live, is where much of the action takes place. "Himmel," Death informs us, translates to "heaven":   
  
*Whoever named Himmel Street has a healthy sense of irony. Not that it was a living hell. It wasn't. But it sure wasn't heaven, either.* (5.87)  
  
Yet, because of the acts of kindness occurring inside 33 Himmel Street, the Hubermann home, and because of the tenderness of Rudy and Liesel's friendship, there *is* something heavenly about Himmel Street.   
  
Other important action takes place on Munich Street, the main street in town. It is on Munich Street that Rudy is beaten by Franz Deutscher, the sadistic Hitler Youth leader, and it is on Munich Street that Liesel and Max are reunited when he's being made to march to Dachau. This is a clue that the city of Munich is very important to the setting of the story, and we'll talk about this city in a moment. First, here's a run through of some of the times and places covered in the novel.

**The Run Through**

The bulk of the novel takes place from 1939 to 1942. In January of 1939, Liesel comes to live with the Hubermanns on Himmel Street. The story traces her life over the next four years, up to the night Himmel Street is bombed and (almost) everyone she loves dies in their sleep. 1945 brings the end of Hitler, the end of the war, and the reunion of Max and Liesel. The epilogue takes us far into Liesel's future, to the time and place of her death in Sydney, Australia.  
  
The story of how Max's father, Erik Vandenburg saves Hans's life in 1916 takes us (briefly) to France during World War I. It explains *some* of why Hans takes Max in. In Max's life story (beginning with his birth in 1916 – the year his father dies) before coming to Himmel Street, we see (briefly) Max's hometown of Stuttgart. We return to Stuttgart and visit nearby Essen when Hans is conscripted into the "LSE – *Luftwaffe Sondereinheit –* Air Raid Special Unit" (65.2), or *Leichensammler Einheit* – Dead Body Collectors" (65.3), as punishment for giving bread to a Jewish man.  
  
The other places mentioned – Poland, Cologne, and Stalingrad – are shown in Death's diary. They are places where he's working overtime and thinks we need to know about. Stalingrad is important to our knowledge of World War II. As Death implies, Russia is still reeling from Joseph Stalin's "murder of his own people" (45.15) when Hitler invades Russia.  
  
Stalin is still in power when Hitler invades Stalingrad (named after guess-who), resulting in over 16 million civilian casualties ([source](http://www.pbs.org/behindcloseddoors/episode-2/ep2_battle_stalingrad.html)) on top of the soldiers on all sides and war-related deaths elsewhere in Russia. But, Russia with Stalin at the helm did manage to hold back the Nazis. In fact, the Russian victory at Stalingrad marked a turning point in the war. When minor character Michael Holtzapfel comes back from Stalingrad, missing three fingers and his brother, the "snows of Stalingrad" (72.69) come into the houses on Himmel Street.

**Munich, Germany**

*When a Jew shows up at your place of residence in the early hours of the morning, in the very birthplace of Nazism, you're likely to experience extreme levels of discomfort. Anxiety, disbelief, paranoia*. (33.4)  
  
*It happened in a small town of Hitler's heartland*. (80.1)  
  
It's easy to see that both of these quotes refer to Molching. It's obvious to readers there's lots of Nazi activity in Molching, but "birthplace of Nazism" and "Hitler's heartland"? Death is being a bit cryptic. Some research into the history of Nazism show that Death places these labels on Molching because it's close to the city of Munich. It's not at all hard to see Munich as "the birthplace of Nazism" and "Hitler's heartland." Here are a few reasons why:

1. Hitler (a native Austrian) moves to Munich in 1913.
2. The 1923 "Beer Hall Putsch," where Hitler, leading the Nazi party, tries to seize power of the German government by marching on a beer hall where government officials are gathered. The attempt fails and Hitler is jailed. (While in prison Hitler writes most of his book *Mein Kampf*, which we hear about so much in *The Book Thief*.)
3. Where does Hitler go when he gets out of jail? Munich.
4. When Hitler successfully takes power in 1933, Munich becomes the headquarters of the NSDAP. NSDAP stands for *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, or the National Socialist German Workers Party (Nazi Party).
5. Dachau, one of the first concentration camps, is established some ten miles from Munich in 1933 when Hitler takes power.

So, as you can see a lot of Nazi activity was definitely centered around Munich, which makes the nearby town a pretty good setting for a novel exploring the effects of Nazism.   
  
Zusak has a few things to say on the matter as well:  
  
*I […] hope that readers of any age will see another side of Nazi Germany […]. I wanted them to see people who were unwilling to fly the Nazi flag and the boys and girls who thought the Hitler Youth was boring and ridiculous. If nothing else, there's another side that lives beneath the propaganda reels that are still so effective decades later. Those were the pockets I was interested in*. (Source: Zusak, Markus. "A Reader's Guide" found in *The Book Thief*. )

**Laws and Propaganda of Nazi Germany**

Laws and propaganda are important aspects of *The Book Thief*'s setting in Nazi Germany. The laws and the propaganda set the mood of the times, and a sick mood it was, as the novel shows us. Before the war, Nazis passed laws to effectively legalize the crimes they were committing and the crimes the intended to commit. From 1933 (when the Nazi Party took power) to 1939 (when the war began), the Nazis issued thousands of laws restricting every aspect of Jewish life ([source](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?ModuleId=10005681)).  
  
The novel alludes to many of these laws and restrictions, such as Jews being required to wear yellow stars and otherwise identify themselves as Jewish. Jews were barred from government jobs, from being teachers, from attending school, from practicing their professions, from joining the military, from admission to hospitals, and from living among non-Jewish people. The Nuremburg Laws stripped Jewish people of their German citizenship and their right to vote, yet barred them from leaving the country. Laws authorized the confiscation of all Jewish property, the arrest, detention and torture of Jews in concentration camps, and, ultimately, the large scale murder of Jewish people.  
  
As we discuss in the theme "Language and Communication," Hitler and the Nazi Party used mass communication technology – radio, film, and print material – to involve the German people in carrying out the Holocaust. In this propaganda, Jews and other groups were spoken of in dehumanizing terms, referred to as vermin, cockroaches, as "a world plague," and represented as dangerous to society.  
  
Nazi propaganda is also heavy on the euphemism. A euphemism is "an inoffensive or indirect expression that is substituted for one that is considered offensive or too harsh" ([source](http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=euphemism)). Nazis used words like "cleansing," "evacuation," "resettlement," "special treatment," and "extermination" to refer to the murder of Jewish people ([source](http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/ww2era.htm#Antisem)). The [US Holocaust Memorial Museum's Propaganda site](http://www.ushmm.org/propaganda/) and the [German Propaganda Archive](http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/) are loaded with visual material, writings, speeches, a wide range of Nazi propaganda. Check it out these resources deeper look at the world Liesel is living in.

**Basements**

There are two basements in the novel, both on Himmel Street. One is in the Hubermann house, and the other in the house of the Fielders. On a practical level, both basements are places to hide, stressing the culture of fear and hiding afflicting everybody in Germany. Jewish people, like Max, if they are 'lucky,' are hiding from the Nazis in basements. German citizens, like the residents of Himmel Street, are hiding from the Allies' air raids. The basements are cold, uncomfortable and cramped. Life in the basement is uncertain. Each breath might be your last. There is a fine line between safety and danger in these basements.  
  
But, something special, something besides hiding, fear, and temporary safety is going on in these two basements. The basement is where Liesel and Max forge their friendship, where Liesel learns to read, where Max writes his books, where Rosa, Hans, and Liesel have their snowball fight. There is love in the Hubermanns' basement. Similarly, in the Fielders' basement/bomb shelter, Liesel realizes that she can use her love of reading to provide much needed comfort to those around her. In the Fielders' basement, she becomes "the word shaker," when she begins reading to her friends and neighbors. Later, in the days leading up to the bombing of Himmel Street, the basement becomes a seat of creativity for Liesel as she writes her life story, as it was for Max when he wrote *The Word Shaker*.  
  
Now, basements are *under* houses, right? Creativity and artistic expression are often believed to come from the *sub*conscious, that place *under* the surface of our conscious thoughts. In addition to the practical uses of the basements in the story, Zusak seems to be drawing on that symbolic meaning of the basement as well. Basements are being used to help draw the mood of the story, but also to highlight the creativity of characters like Liesel and Max. There is also a bitter irony here. Liesel and Max are creative, loving people *in spite* of their circumstances, not because of them. They did not need to be locked in a basement to do creative work. At the same time, deep suffering and knowing they could die at any moment adds urgency and power to their work. We can celebrate that, while acknowledging that it would be better if they weren't in the positions they are in.

Cliffs notes

[Next](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/literature/the-book-thief/character-list-analysis/liesel-meminger.html)

The majority of the novel takes place in the fictional town of Molching, Germany, near Munich, between 1939 and 1943. Death narrates the story of Liesel Meminger, beginning when she is nine years old and suffering from the death of her brother and separation from her mother. Liesel goes to live with Hans and Rosa Hubermann at 33 Himmel Street in Molching. When Liesel arrives, she can't read and is made fun of in school. She realizes how powerless she is without words, and so Hans, a painter and accordion player, teaches her how to read during midnight lessons in the basement, reading from the book Liesel took from her brother's burial: *The Grave Digger's Handbook*. During Liesel's early days with the Hubermanns, she has nightmares and Hans sits with her through the night. With his gentle demeanor and his accordion playing, Hans gains Liesel's trust as she grows close to him and comes to associate his presence with safety. She becomes very good friends with Rudy Steiner, the Hubermanns' neighbor. Rudy is constantly trying to get Liesel to kiss him, but she always refuses.

For a while, Himmel Street is a happy place for Liesel. She helps Rosa collect the washing from different wealthy inhabitants of Molching. One house, in particular, catches her attention: 8 Grande Strasse, the home of the mayor and his wife, Ilsa Hermann.

The Nazi Party's presence becomes increasingly apparent in Molching. In addition to the destruction of Jewish shops and yellow stars that have already been painted on door fronts and windows, Liesel and Rudy are required to join the Band of German Girls and Hitler Youth, respectively. To celebrate the *Führer*'s birthday, the people of Molching gather for a bonfire during which they burn enemy propaganda, including books. Liesel sees one book that survives the fire and hides it under her shirt. She's beginning to realize that Hitler is responsible for her brother's death and her mother's absence, and she hates him for it. Ilsa Hermann sees Liesel take the book and decides to share her own love of books with Liesel by inviting her into her library. To Liesel, the library is the most beautiful sight she's ever seen.

Meanwhile, Max Vandenburg, a Jew, is hiding in a storage closet in Stuttgart and receiving help from his friend Walter Kugler. Walter has been in touch with Hans and asks if Hans is willing to keep the promise he made to Max's mother after World War I. It was Erik Vandenburg, Max's father, who saved Hans's life during World War I and taught Hans to play the accordion. Hans promised Frau Vandenburg that if she ever needed something, she could contact him. Hans agrees to hide Max in his basement and sends the key to his house inside the front cover of *Mein Kampf*, a book written by Hitler. In an ironic twist, it is this book that holds the key to Max's life.

After Max arrives at 33 Himmel Street, Liesel is curious about the man in her basement but also somewhat afraid of him. She begins to realize that they have much in common. They both have nightmares, they both are fist-fighters, and they both have lost their families. They also share the same view of Hans Hubermann, namely that he and his accordion are sources of safety. Liesel does the best she can to bring the outside world to Max, describing the weather to him, bringing him snow, and delivering presents to the foot of his bed when he falls ill. She continues to play with Rudy and go to school, all while keeping Max a secret and listening to his stories about his past at night. Max, too, loves stories and shares these with Liesel.

Max also understands the power of words. For Liesel's birthday, he paints over the pages of *Mein Kampf* and makes a book for Liesel called *The Standover Man*. It is the story of his life, how he had to leave his family, about his journey to the Hubermanns, and about Liesel, who has become his friend and watches over him. In addition to his nightmares, Max also starts having daydreams about boxing the *Führer*, but Hitler always uses his words to incite the crowd and turn the people against Max.

Because most of the people on Himmel Street are struggling for money, Rosa Hubermann loses her washing jobs, including the one for Ilsa Hermann. Meanwhile, Liesel and Rudy join a gang of youths who steal apples and potatoes from farmers. One night, Liesel takes Rudy to the mayor's house and earns her title of book thief when she sneaks in through the window and takes *The Whistler* from Ilsa Hermann's library.

The summer of 1942 is primarily a happy time for Liesel. She spends it mostly with Hans as he blackens the windows for homes and shops in Molching in preparation for air raids. He tells her stories and plays his accordion, and at one home they even share a glass of champagne with the residents. Rudy continues training for the Hitler Youth carnival where he hopes to win four gold medals like Jesse Owens in the 1936 Olympics. He wins three, but he gets disqualified from the fourth race, which, he says, he does on purpose.

On another late-night visit to Ilsa Hermann's house, Liesel and Rudy take the *Duden Dictionary and Thesaurus*, which appears to have been placed by the window as a gift. Liesel finds a letter inside from Frau Hermann, saying that Liesel is welcome to come in the front door, too.

Shortly after these somewhat lighthearted days, the air raids begin. Liesel and her family, along with Rudy and his family, take shelter in the Fiedlers' basement because they've been told their basement is not deep enough to protect them from the bombings. They must leave Max behind. On one occasion in the Fiedlers' basement, Liesel begins to read from *The Whistler*. Everyone gathers around her and the words calm them as they calm Liesel. Those in the basement stay even after the all-clear signal has been given to hear the end of the chapter. Liesel realizes that books are her accordion.

Parades of Jews come through Molching on their way to Dachau. Liesel sees their suffering, and Hans tries to help one of them. Because of Hans's actions, they must send Max away because Hans is afraid the Gestapo will come to search their house. The Gestapo never comes for him, though; instead, they come for Rudy to offer him a place in a special school. The Steiners refuse. Eventually, both Hans and Alex Steiner are punished for their actions. Hans is sent to serve with the LSE, an air raid unit, in Stuttgart, and Alex goes to Vienna, Austria, to serve at an army hospital. Himmel Street becomes a very forlorn place.

Rosa gives Liesel a book called *The Word Shaker*, which Max made for her. It contains many of Max's stories, thoughts, and sketches. The fable about the word shaker catches Liesel's attention. In it, Max describes a girl who is able to use words like some of Hitler's most skilled word shakers, but she uses her words to help her friend and remove small bits of hate from a forest dominated by cruelty. Her words are for good, not for evil.

Meanwhile, Hans Hubermann avoids a fatal accident while on an LSE truck. Reinhold Zucker, who holds a grudge against Hans because of a card game loss, takes Hans's usual seat on the truck and dies in the accident. Hans gets a broken leg and is sent home.

In 1943, the Jews continue to march through Molching, and Liesel always looks for Max. One day, she sees him and runs to him, but a Nazi soldier tosses her from the parade. She gets up and enters the parade again, reciting words from *The Word Shaker*. She is whipped, and Rudy has to hold her down to keep her from going back for more punishment. Afterward, Liesel finally tells Rudy about Max Vandenburg.

Liesel returns to Frau Hermann's library and becomes angry with the words, how they can fill her up, but can also bring so much hate to so many people. She tears the pages from a book and then writes a note to Frau Hermann to apologize and say that she won't come back. Three days later, Ilsa Hermann shows up at Liesel's front door and gives her a black journal so that she can write the words of her own story.

Then, in October 1943, bombs fall on Himmel Street while everyone sleeps. Liesel, though, sits in the basement writing her story in her journal. She survives. When she emerges from the basement, she finds the bodies of those she loves — her Mama and Papa, as well as Rudy, whom she kisses on the lips. She is taken away by air raid officers, and it is at this moment that Death finds and takes her book, *The Book Thief*. This is how he knows her story.

Ilsa Hermann and the mayor collect Liesel from the police station and take her home with them. Alex Steiner is relieved of duty after he hears about the bombings and finds Liesel. She tells him about Rudy, about kissing him. They spend a lot of time together, going for walks and hiking to Dachau after its liberation. She spends a lot of time with Alex in his shop, and one day, in 1945, Max Vandenburg shows up. They have a reunion mixed with much happiness and great sadness.

Death ends the story by telling us about Liesel Meminger's death, how she lived a long life in Sydney with her husband, three children, and many grandchildren. When Death goes to collect her, he sets her down so they can walk together for a while. He shows her *The Book Thief* and wants to ask her so many questions about humans. He cannot understand them, how they can contain so much lightness and darkness. He doesn't ask these things, though. All he can tell her is that humans haunt him.

BLOG POST

# Tag Archive: The Book Thief  [Kate's Book Blog](http://katelovesbooks.wordpress.com/)

[**How Death Tells a Story…THE BOOK THIEF by Markus Zusak**](http://katelovesbooks.wordpress.com/2010/08/02/how-death-tells-a-story-the-book-thief-by-markus-zusak/)

[](http://katelovesbooks.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/book-thief.jpg)

In THE BOOK THIEF by Markus Zusak, the writing style is almost literary.  I knew this was a holocaust story and I knew that it was categorized as young adult so I was a little bit surprised.  But as I read on, I think I understood what Mr. Zusak was doing.  Again, this is about the point of view character.  Death.  By filling the prose with figures of speech, Mr. Zusak manages to maintain a surreal, water-color feel around the book.  Even though the setting is based on historical Germany, even though there’s nothing supernatural about the story, there’s still a dreamlike quality, thanks to the writing style.  Consider this bit of storytelling from Death’s point of view:

The last time I saw her was red.  The sky was like soup, boiling and stirring.  In some places, it was burned.  There were black crumbs, and pepper, streaked across the redness.

Earlier kids had been playing hopscotch there, on the street that looked like oil-stained pages.  When I arrived, I could still hear the echoes.  The feet tapping the road.  The children-voices laughing, and the smiles like salt, but decaying fast.

What an image!  A red soup sky!  What does it mean?  I have no idea but I have a strong mental picture of something I’ve never seen. And since I’ve already confessed that my mind’s eye needs glasses, giving me a great visual is quite an accomplishment.  And smiles like salt.  Not sweet.  Easily dissolving.  So few words but with a ton of meaning.

At the end of my edition of THE BOOK THIEF, there’s “A conversation with Markus Zusak”.  In it, he states that he likes the idea that every page of a book can have a gem on it.  If he doesn’t manage to do just that, he comes pretty close.  Some of my favorites?

* …the minutes soaked by.
* Frau Diller was a sharp-edged woman….
* If they killed him tonight, at least he would die alive.
* His eyes were the color of agony….

As you can see, Mr. Zusak uses words in a way that *almost* makes literal sense.  You can imagine the “color of agony” even if agony isn’t a color.  You can sense how minutes might “soak by” even if they aren’t liquid.  We’ve all known someone who was “sharp-edged”.  They are surprising turns of phrase, but they work nonetheless.

I also think that Death’s voice is a preview of the adult Liesel.  Her story covers her life from age nine to fourteen.  During this time she learns how to read and write.  It would be hard to have a literary style from Liesel’s point of view because she is still building her vocabulary.  However, about halfway through the book, the Jewish boy living in her basement asks about the weather.  Liesel answers:

The sky is blue today, Max, and there is a big, long cloud, and it’s stretched out, like a rope.  At the end of it, the sun is like a yellow hole….

There’s a literary bent in the way Liesel thinks that’s very similar to Death’s.  And lest you think that Markus Zusak only has one voice, the dialog is a whole other animal.  It’s earthy (to be kind).  There’s much swearing and name-calling in German.  Kids sound like kids.  Adults sound like adults.  It’s only through the Death narration that we get this delicious literary quality that I enjoyed so much.

So, that’s THE BOOK THIEF by Markus Zusak.  I enjoyed this book.  There’s so much to discuss I could probably write another week worth of posts about it.  But I won’t; I’ll move on to something else and leave you to enjoy this gem on your own.

**Setting In The Book Thief**

Setting refers to the frame for the events of the novel –provides unity

* It involves the time (period, background to the period), places (the physical locations), social and economic conditions, attitudes, beliefs, atmosphere and social organisation
* The setting can wield a powerful influence in the novel –shapes the action, suggests and reinforces themes, adds symbolism, affects characters in terms of their attitudes and responses

The premise the writer employs is set out neatly by the New York Times reviewer, John Green.”Indeed, everything is upside down in Zusak’s Nazi Germany. Sounds are tasted, visions are heard, death has a heart, the strong do not survive, and your best chance of living may be a concentration camp. The entrophy of this world is near complete.”

This entrophy is revealed through the novel through

* the symbolism of colours
* the original and  evocative prose/ poetry  of the narrative,
* the portrayal of Nazi Germany as a dystopia (nightmare society)disintegrating under the totalitarianism of Hitler. We see this ironic imploding of the Third Reich through the portrayal of Molching, a small town outside Munich and what happens to its citizens.

Symbolism of colours

In the prologue the narrator, Death, states  “First the colours. Then the humans. That’s how I usually see things.”…“I holiday in increments.  In colours” to give  “distraction” from “the left over humans. The survivors.”

**White**

He introduces “white. Of the blinding kind.” Much of the action takes place in winter “It felt as though the whole globe was dressed in white. Like it had pulled it on, the way you pull on a jumper. Next to the train line, footprints were shunken to their shins. Trees wore blankets of ice.” “I studied the blinding white-snow sky who stood at the window of the moving train”

NB Zusak uses personification throughout in his descriptions –in this upside down world, the landscape and things have more humanity than people. The personification also  makes the descriptions accessible as we as readers can picture the ideas easily if on a one to one personal scale.We also know that Death is telling us the story that Liesel wrote in her book The Book Thief so the descriptions have her evidence of her personal voice also.

Eg her descriptions of the sky and clouds that she tells Max *quote here*

-the first incident is about Liesel’s brother’s death on a train in transit to a better home. He has died from the cold and starvation, a victim of the poverty that the enemies of the state are inevitably forced into.  Liesel herself is “frost-stricken. Her mouth jittered.”

-there is a white out –no difference between earth and sky, people have lost their judgement, blinded by Hitler’s propaganda which is driving out all perceived enemies from within –even the children of suspected Communists as we find out Leisel and Werner to be.

-later the catastrophic Battle of Stalingrad is described by the colour white which becomes synonymous for suffering and death. *Quote from pp499 -501.*

**Red**

Again introduced in the Prologue where the narrator foreshadows the end of the story. “The last time I saw her was red. The sky was like soup,boling and stirring. In some places it was burnt. There were black crumbs, and pepper, streaked amongst the redness.”

-we see the catastrophic results of the war in red, especially linked to suffering, bloodshed of both soldiers and civilians. It is almost apocryphal –like the end of the world. “Blood streamed till it was dried on the road, and bodies were stuck there, like driftwood after the flood….”for hours, the sky remained a devastating, home-cooked red. Snowflakes of ash fell so lovelily you were tempted to stretch out your tongue to taste them. Only they would have scorched your lips. They would have cooked your mouth.”

-it describes the absolute destruction of Germany in the towns and also at the Eastern front “The sky was white but deteriorating fast. As always, it was becoming an enormous drop sheet. Blood was seeping through and in patches, the clouds were dirty like footprints in melting snow.”

-“hot snowflakes would shower to the ground”

“the sun stirs the earth. Round and round, it sirs us, like stew.”

“She did not know where she was running, for Himmel Street no longer existed. Everything was new and apocalyptic. Why was the sky red? How could it be snowing? And why did the snowflakes burn her arms?”

**Black**

“They fall on top of each other. The scribbled signature black, onto the blinding global white onto the thick soupy red.”

Hitler’s words of hatred and the indoctrination of Nazism into the minds of the people are the cause of the evil. Novel explores the link and the importance of words.