

LBRIS

We know
books

and has an ending that will almost certainly move you to tears' *The Word*

'Both gripping and touching, a work that kept me up late into the night feverishly reading the last 300 pages'
Cleveland Plain-Dealer

'Zusak's novel is a highwire act of inventiveness and emotional suppleness' *The Australian*

'Brutality and beauty are everywhere. "Death" is also. An original, moving, beautifully written book' *Age*

'A life-affirming book of enduring wit, and immensely readable' *Weekend Australian*

'Zusak has a wonderfully fresh, felicitous style . . . ingenuous and endearing' *Canberra Times*

'A poignant, clever and moving book from an amazing talent in Australian literature' *Sunday Telegraph, Australia*

'Zusak's punchy, pictorial prose gives the narrative the simplicity and directness of a comic book – or graphic novel – without diminishing its emotional impact' *West Australian*

MARKUS ZUSAK

THE BOOK THIEF

With illustrations by Trudy White



BLACK SWAN

DEATH AND CHOCOLATE

First the colours.

Then the humans.

That's usually how I see things.

Or at least, how I try.

HERE IS A SMALL FACT

You are going to die.

I am in all truthfulness attempting 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.

REACTION TO THE AFOREMENTIONED FACT

Does this worry you?

I urge you – don't be afraid.

I'm nothing if not fair.

Of course, an introduction.

A beginning.

Where are my manners?

I could introduce myself properly, but it's not really necessary. You will know me well enough and soon enough, depending on a diverse range of variables. It suffices to say that at some point in time, I will be standing over you, as genially as possible. Your soul will be in my arms. A colour will be perched on my shoulder. I will carry you gently away.

At that moment, you will be lying there (I rarely find people standing up). You will be caked in your own body. There might be a discovery; a scream will dribble down the air. The only sound I'll hear after that will be my own breathing, and the sound of the smell, of my footsteps.

The question is, what colour will everything be at that moment when I come for you? What will the sky be saying?

Personally, I like a chocolate-coloured sky. Dark, dark chocolate. People say it suits me. I do, however, try to enjoy every colour I see – the whole spectrum. A billion or so flavours, none of them quite the same, and a sky to slowly suck on. It takes the edge off the stress. It helps me relax.

A SMALL THEORY

People observe the colours of a day only at its beginnings and ends, but to me it's quite clear that a day merges through a multitude of shades and intonations, with each passing moment. A single *hour* can consist of thousands of different colours. Waxy yellows, cloud-spat blues. Murky darknesses. In my line of work, I make it a point to notice them.

As I've suggested, my one saving grace is distraction. It keeps me sane. It helps me cope, considering the length of time I've been performing this job. The trouble is, who could ever replace me? Who could step in while I take a break in your stock-standard resort-style holiday destination, whether it be tropical or of the ski-trip variety? The answer, of course,

is nobody, which has prompted me to make a conscious, deliberate decision – to make distraction my holiday. Needless to say, I holiday in increments. In colours.

Still, it's possible that you might be asking, Why does he even need a holiday? What does he need distraction *from*?

Which brings me to my next point.

It's the leftover humans.

The survivors.

They're the ones I can't stand to look at, although on many occasions, I still fail. I deliberately seek out the colours to keep my mind off them, but now and then, I witness the ones who are left behind, crumbling amongst the jigsaw puzzle of realisation, despair and surprise. They have punctured hearts. They have beaten lungs.

Which in turn brings me to the subject I am telling you about tonight, or today, or whatever the hour and colour. It's the story of one of those perpetual survivors – an expert at being left behind.

It's just a small story really, about, amongst other things:

- a girl
- some words
- an accordionist
- some fanatical Germans
- a Jewish fist-fighter
- and quite a lot of thievery.

I saw the book thief three times.

BESIDE THE RAILWAY LINE

First up is something white. Of the blinding kind.

Some of you are most likely thinking that white is not really a colour and all of that tired sort of nonsense. Well I'm here to tell you that it is. White is without question a colour, and personally, I don't think you want to argue.

A REASSURING ANNOUNCEMENT

Please, be calm, despite that previous threat.

I am all bluster –

I am not violent. I am not malicious.

I am a result.

Yes, it was white.

It felt as though the whole globe was dressed in snow. Like it had pulled it on, the way you pull on a jumper. Next to the train line, footprints were sunken to their shins. Trees wore blankets of ice.

As you might expect, someone had died.

They couldn't just leave him on the ground. For now it wasn't such a problem, but very soon, the track ahead would be cleared and the train would need to move on.

There were two guards.

There was a mother and her daughter.

One corpse.

The mother, the girl and the corpse remained stubborn and silent.

'Well, what else do you want me to do?'

The guards were tall and short. The tall one always spoke first, though he was not in charge. He looked at the smaller, rounder one. The one with the juicy red face.

'Well,' was the response, 'we can't just leave them like this, can we?'

The tall one was losing patience. 'Why not?'

And the smaller one damn near exploded. He looked up at the tall one's chin and cried, '*Spinnst du?* Are you stupid!?' The abhorrence on his cheeks was growing thicker by the moment. His skin widened. 'Come on,' he said, traipsing through the snow. 'We'll carry all three of them back on if we have to. We'll notify the next stop.'

As for me, I had already made the most elementary of mistakes. I can't explain to you the severity of my self-disappointment. Originally, I'd done everything right:

I studied the blinding, white-snow sky who stood at the window of the moving train. I practically *inhaled* it, but still, I wavered. I buckled – I became interested. In the girl. Curiosity got the better of me, and I resigned myself to stay as long as my schedule allowed, and I watched.

Twenty-three minutes later, when the train was stopped, I climbed out with them.

A small soul was in my arms.

I stood a little to the right.

The dynamic train guard duo made their way back to the mother, the girl and the small male corpse. I clearly remember that my breath was loud that day. I'm surprised the guards didn't notice me as they walked by. The world was sagging now, under the weight of all that snow.

Perhaps ten metres to my left, the pale, empty-stomached girl was standing, frost-stricken.

Her mouth jittered.

Her cold arms were folded.

Tears were frozen to the book thief's face.

THE ECLIPSE

Next is a signature black, to show the poles of my versatility, if you like. It was the darkest moment before the dawn.

This time I had come for a man of perhaps twenty-four years of age. It was a beautiful thing in some ways. The plane was still coughing. Smoke was leaking from both its lungs.

When it crashed, three deep gashes were made in the earth. Its wings were now sawn-off arms. No more flapping. Not for this metallic little bird.

SOME OTHER SMALL FACTS

Sometimes I arrive too early.

I rush,

and some people cling longer
to life than expected.

After a small collection of minutes, the smoke exhausted itself. There was nothing left to give.

A boy arrived first, with cluttered breath and what appeared to be a toolkit. With great trepidation, he approached the cockpit and watched the pilot, gauging if he was alive, at which point, he still was. The book thief arrived perhaps thirty seconds later.

Years had passed, but I recognised her.

She was panting.

* * *

From the toolkit, the boy took out, of all things, a teddy bear.

He reached in through the torn windscreen and placed it on the pilot's chest. The smiling bear sat huddled amongst the crowded wreckage of the man and the blood. A few minutes later, I took my chance. The time was right.

I walked in, loosened his soul and carried it gently out.

All that was left was the body, the dwindling smell of smoke, and the smiling teddy bear.

As the crowd arrived in full, things, of course, had changed. The horizon was beginning to charcoal. What was left of the blackness above was nothing now but a scribble, and disappearing fast.

The man, in comparison, was the colour of bone. Skeleton-coloured skin. A ruffled uniform. His eyes were cold and brown – like coffee stains – and the last scrawl from above formed what, to me, appeared an odd, yet familiar, shape. A signature.

The crowd did what crowds do.

As I made my way through, each person stood and played with the quietness of it. It was a small concoction of disjointed hand movements, muffled sentences, and mute, self-conscious turns.

When I glanced back at the plane, the pilot's open mouth appeared to be smiling.

A final dirty joke.

Another human punchline.

He remained shrouded amongst his uniform as the greying light arm-wrestled the sky. As with many of the others, when I began my journey away, there seemed a quick shadow again, a final moment of eclipse – the recognition of another soul gone.

You see, to me, for just a moment, despite all of the colours that touch and grapple with what I see in this world, I will often catch an eclipse when a human dies.

I've seen millions of them.

I've seen more eclipses than I care to remember.