




THE BOOK THIEF

MARKUS ZUSAK

A KNOPF  BOOK

THE BOOK THIEF

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For Elisabeth and Helmut Zusak,
with love and admiration

PROLOGUE

a mountain range of rubble

in which our narrator introduces:
himself the colors and the book thief

DEATH AND CHOCOLATE

First the colors.

Then the humans.

Thats 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 thats only the As. Just dont ask me to be nice. Nice has nothing to do with me.

**REACTION TO THE
AFOREMENTIONED FACT
Does this worry you?
I urge you dont be afraid.
Im nothing if not fair.**

Of course, an introduction.

A beginning.

Where are my manners?

I could introduce myself properly, but its 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 color 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 Ill hear after that will be my own breathing, and the sound of the smell, of my footsteps.

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

Personally, I like a chocolate-colored sky. Dark, dark chocolate. People say it suits me. I do, however, try to enjoy every color I see the whole spectrum. A billion or so flavors, 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 colors of a day only at its beginnings and ends, but to me its 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 colors. Waxy yellows, cloud-spat blues. Murky darknesses. In my line of work, I make it a point to notice them.

As Ive been alluding to, 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 vacation 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 vacation. Needless to say, I vacation in increments. In colors.

Still, it's possible that you might be asking, why does he even need a vacation? 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 colors to keep my mind off them, but now and then, I witness the ones who are left behind, crumbling among the jigsaw puzzle of realization, 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 color. It's the story of one of those perpetual survivors—an expert at being left behind.

It's just a small story really, about, among 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 color and all of that tired sort of nonsense. Well, Im here to tell you that it is. White is without question a color, and personally, I dont think you want to argue with me.

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 sweater. Next to the train line, footprints were sunken to their shins. Trees wore blankets of ice.

As you might expect, someone had died.

They couldnt just leave him on the ground. For now, it wasnt 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 one 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 cant 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 ones 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 over the snow. Well carry all three of them back on if we have to. Well notify the next stop.*

As for me, I had already made the most elementary of mistakes. I cant explain to you the severity of my self-disappointment. Originally, Id 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 buckledI 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. Im surprised the guards didnt notice me as they walked by. The world was sagging now, under the weight of all that snow.

Perhaps ten meters 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 thieves 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 toolbox. 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 recognized her.

She was panting.