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Exploring Historical Young Adult Fiction: A Study of the Representation of Historical Elements in the Novel and Film Adaptation of *The Book Thief*

Master's thesis in Language Studies with Teacher Education

Supervisor: Eli Løfaldli

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Department of Language and Literature



NTNU

Kunnskap for ei betre verd

Abstract

This is a study of the historical elements in Markus Zusak's novel *The Book Thief*. The novel contains several references to and descriptions of important historical events during World War II and of the Holocaust. Regardless of Zusak's spoken intentions regarding the book not being classified as either young adult fiction or adult fiction, its young protagonist, illustrations, and easy language indicates that the novel is written for young adults, and it is in that light that the novel is analysed in this thesis. In addition to the novel, the film adaptation will be used to supplement the analysis. The claim of this thesis is that *The Book Thief* portrays descriptions of and references to historical events by separating them from the plot with pieces of information centred and written in bold in addition to integrating them into the plot. By doing so, the novel provides the readers with enough historical context so that the novel can be understood regardless of its young readers. It also makes the historical elements understandable to everyone. It is not necessary to have much prior knowledge of World War II and the Holocaust to grasp the full story of the novel, however some degree of prior knowledge is useful in discovering hidden meanings in between the lines of the text. Visual aspects through illustrations are also used to provide the readers with historical elements and will be included in the analysis. By including the film adaptation when studying the plot's visual aspects, one discovers that the combination of literary elements and visual elements create an extra dimension to the novel, in terms of historical value.

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It has been a journey of a stressful semester, but I have finally reached its end destination. My first, and most probably my last, master's thesis is completed. This also means that I have reached the end of my degree in language studies with teacher education.

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Introduction

A book serves multiple functions and creates an endless number of possibilities. It can be used as entertainment. It can provide people with hope in desperate times. It can be a tool used to spread knowledge, and it can be used as inspiration for a film script. The possibilities a book creates are endless. This thesis focuses on one specific book that reaches into several of these functions and possibilities: *The Book Thief*, a novel written by Markus Zusak and published by Picador in 2005. The novel follows the life of teenage girl Liesel living with her adoptive parents in the fictional city of Molching in Germany during World War II. In an interview with Random House Kids on YouTube, Zusak tells the interviewer that people often ask how to categorise his novel. He answers by saying that he “didn’t sit down to write a good young adult book or a good adult book. I really tried to write someone’s favourite book” (2009, 2.43-2.52). Nevertheless, many have chosen to categorise his novel as a young adult fiction because of its young protagonist, its simple language, and the sparing of horrific details, and it will also be treated as a young adult fiction in this thesis for the same reasons.

In the same interview, Zusak reveals his motivation for writing the novel. He tells a story that he was told by his mother about an old man who could not keep up with the rest of the people as they are being forced to march down the streets by Nazi soldiers. A teenage boy goes into his house to get a piece of bread to give to the man. The old man is so grateful that he drops down on his knees, grabbing the boy by his ankles to thank him. Shortly after, a soldier comes and rips the bread away and starts whipping the old man. The soldier also chases the young boy down the street, beats him to the ground, and whips him as well. That was the story that inspired the novel, according to Zusak. He continues by saying that:

On one hand you’ve got pure beauty which is the boy giving the bread and on the other you’ve got pure destruction, which is the, you know, soldier doing what he did, and you bring those two things together you’ve got humans and what we’re capable of. And so, I heard stories like that, stories of my dad not wanting to go to Hitler Youth and people who didn’t want to hang their flags in their windows, and I thought, I’m going to write about those people.

(Random House Kids, 2009, 0.00-1.37)

This quote is a testimony to Zusak’s motivation to write this story. A similar story to this one is included in the novel, and therefore he fulfils his motivation for writing the novel. Books can,

according to M. P. Machet, “help to give children insight into the feelings of people at that time. They can help children develop a deeper respect for human decency by providing credible models of heroism and dignity who transcended the evil of the Nazis” (2014, p. 114). The effect this novel may have on young adults’ reading is a matter that will be discussed further in Chapter One.

Vandana Saxena states that there is “an acute awareness that the generic form of the young adult fiction might fail to do justice to the complexities of the Holocaust narratives” (2019, p. 157). *The Book Thief* addresses historical issues related to World War II, Germany under the Nazi regime, and the Holocaust. Important historical events such as the outbreak of World War II, the Kristallnacht, the Battle of Stalingrad, and the antisemitic attitudes in Germany are integrated in the novel’s plot. Also, the daily life of people living in Germany during World War II play a huge role in the novel. The daily lives of the novel’s protagonist, the young girl Liesel, and her friends consisting of school, playing football, and participating in Hitler Youth gatherings are presented to us through the narrator, Death. How these historical elements are presented and described and their effect on the story will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter One.

The novel was adapted to the film screen, directed by Brian Percival, and first published by Fox 2000 Pictures in 2013. The film follows the same overall story as the novel, with Liesel as the protagonist. In the film adaptation, some of the historical references are either excluded or portrayed differently. Illustrations of central historical events are either not shown at all, or briefly mentioned. Then again, the descriptions of daily life as a Hitler Youth are more detailed. The historical elements included in the film adaptation and how the portrayal differs from the novel will be used to supplement the analysis of the novel in both Chapter One and Two.

The novel is illustrated by Trudy White. The illustrations are black and white, and they are spread throughout the novel. At some time, they appear in a seemingly random order, while other illustrations are integrated in the novel’s plot acting as illustrations from the characters themselves. The historical element that is the primary focus of this thesis is also present in these illustrations. Drawings of the Nazi emblem and of Adolf Hitler are clear evidence to this. These visual expressions will be further discussed in Chapter Two in relation to the representation of historical elements. The visualisation of the historical elements in the film adaptation are also addressed in this chapter.

The possibility the novel has as a teaching object in schools is briefly mentioned in Chapter One. Despite its 538 pages, the novel is an easy read and is thus a novel that many pupils will manage to read. The plot, with its different layers of information, provides for

scaffolding by the teacher to ensure that everyone gains from the reading, including the pupils with less prior knowledge of the historical elements.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the representation of historical elements in literature aimed at young readers, with the primary focus on *The Book Thief*. These historical elements are given through the novel's narration. By doing so, the novel provides the readers with enough historical context that the novel can be understood regardless of its young readers, and the historical elements are understandable to everyone. Thus, the aim is to study the effect the inclusion of the historical elements in the novel has on the young readers, in addition to exploring how important the amount of prior knowledge in the readers is in grasping the full historical value of the novel. The film adaptation of *The Book Thief* is used supplementary to help achieve this goal but will not be analysed in full detail as the primary focus in this thesis lay on historical literature aimed at young readers. As the novel is treated as young adult fiction in this thesis, a short description of the concept of historical literature for young adults is addressed later in the introduction. The introduction further introduces historical films as a genre. A summary of *The Book Thief's* plot is provided at the beginning of Chapter One, in addition to a brief introduction of the film adaptation. What follows is a study of the representation of historical elements in the novel, supplemented with elements from the film adaptation. The novel consists of several descriptions and references to historical events that occurred during World War II. Concepts like schema theory and prosthetic memory are used in this regard. *The Book Thief's* narrator, Death, will be addressed in greater detail. This part investigates how the readers are narrated through the novel and what the narrator achieves with the doubleness of his narration. Also, the measures necessary when writing a trauma narrative are discussed. Further in Chapter One, different historical events and how they are portrayed in the novel is studied. The descriptions of and references to historical events in the novel are portrayed in different ways by the author, both through centred, bold pieces separated from the text and by integrating them in the plot of the text. By adding these descriptions of and references to historical events, *The Book Thief* becomes a piece of fictional literature that can be used not only as an historical element but also a didactic element. The next part of the chapter focuses on the representation of the Hitler Youth as an historical element both in *The Book Thief* and the film adaptation, followed by a discussion on how the German treatment of the Jews is portrayed in the novel, and how the portrayal of these events needs to be specially considered by the author. Chapter Two deals with the visual expressions focusing mainly on the novel's illustrations. However, some of the visual expressions present in the film adaptation are also mentioned and discussed. *The Book Thief's* illustrations portray historical references such as

the Swastika or Adolf Hitler which become a shift in the traditional reading of the novel. A conclusion and suggestions on further research on the field is provided at the end of this thesis.

Historical Young Adult Fiction and Film

To discuss these central aspects regarding representation of historical elements in *The Book Thief*, it is necessary to provide some theoretical context. First, the genre discussed in this thesis is young adult fiction, and more specifically young adult fiction situated in Nazi Germany during World War II and the Holocaust. According to Lydia Kokkola, “the last two decades have seen an upsurge in attempts to make the Holocaust comprehensible to young people through novels, picture books and auto/biographies” (2003, p. 1). Hamida Bosmajian claims that “the construction of the child or adolescent in narratives for young readers about Nazism and the Holocaust began after 1960” (2002, p. xiv). Writing for a younger audience can be difficult. There are certain aspects that the author needs to keep in mind while writing. Bosmajian continues:

Representation of Nazism and the Holocaust in narratives for young readers officially intends to reinforce the imperatives of “lest we forget” and “never again,” but the subtext of such narratives conceals an often private agenda, namely that the author is more at ease writing for young readers whose critical awareness and imagination are limited.

(2002, p. xvii)

In Markus Zusak’s case, he claims that he did not intentionally write the novel as a young adult novel. Still, whether they were intentional or not, he manages to use techniques that make people perceive his novel as a young adult fiction. In terms of the “lest we forget” and “never again”, Zusak includes some parts of the tragic parts of history. The inclusion of the death marches is especially interesting. These marches are not as known to the public as other aspects of the Holocaust, thus Zusak sheds light on aspects that may be forgotten. This part will be further discussed in the analysis.

Another important aspect when writing an historical novel is the focus on historical accuracy. When reading historical fiction, the reader must always keep in mind that some parts of history may be adjusted to fit the fiction’s plot. In terms of historical literature on the Holocaust, Machet claims that:

Although historical accuracy in terms of the Holocaust can be a difficult issue as so much of the history is too horrific to portray accurately in books intended for children, if the Holocaust is not to be trivialised it is essential that the facts are presented as accurately as possible within these constraints. It must also be taken into account that children have limited knowledge and experience of an event like the Holocaust. They cannot compare representations with other representations they have encountered or recognise fine shades of meaning, nuances or moral gradations.

(2014, p. 115)

Ultimately, this means that when writing historical fiction for children the accuracy of the historical elements the author chooses to include must be well considered. It must spare the children of the worst but avoid ignoring important details that may be seen as a trivialization of history. Such a horrific part of history as the Holocaust demands special consideration by the author. Balancing these two seemingly contradictory considerations is a challenge for authors of literature for children or young adults. Kokkola claims that “Holocaust literature for children can be conceived as having a greater moral obligation to be historically accurate than historical fiction dealing with less catastrophic events” (2003, p. 3). This indicates that when writing about catastrophic events such as the Holocaust, the consequences of retelling something inaccurately can contribute to making an already terrible situation more terrible. A popular fiction that contains several inaccurate aspects can ultimately spread this misinformation quickly. Jonathan Cohen points to the fact that because of the many who denies the brutality of the Holocaust, “there are greater pressures on [authors] to be historically accurate and to avoid any form of writing which might encourage or enable young readers to deny the historical evidence (2001, p. 2).

As the film adaptation of *The Book Thief* is categorised as an historical film, this genre must also be addressed in short. Cui, Wang & Raney claim that historical fiction films “are artistic and creative interpretations of real events” and continue by stating that “although historical fiction movies portray real events and figures, they portray a fictionalized history, with actual events and people possibly exaggerated, distorted, or overly simplified through the writing and production process” (2017, p. 2743). Historical fiction films have become very popular in recent years. When making historical fiction films, there are other things that need to be on the filmmaker’s mind than what the author of a historical fiction novel is concerned with. However, the focus on historical accuracy is important in each case. Cui, Wang & Raney further claim that historical fiction films “are artistic and creative interpretations of real events”

and continue by stating that “although historical fiction movies portray real events and figures, they portray a fictionalized history, with actual events and people possibly exaggerated, distorted, or overly simplified through the writing and production process” (2017, p. 2743). The film adaptation of *The Book Thief* is an historical film. Its plot is situated in Nazi Germany during World War II and portrays historical events in a fictional format. The story of the characters is not directly derived from actual events. Instead, the legacy of the people living during the years of war lives on through a fictional story based on testimonies from the time.

Chapter 1: Exploring the Historical Elements in *The Book Thief*

The Book Thief

The Book Thief (2005) is situated in Nazi Germany from a few years before and during World War II and is narrated by Death. This is made clear at the very beginning of the book as the narrator claims that it is not necessary for him to introduce himself properly since people will know him soon enough as their time comes and he “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” (Zusak, 2005, p. 14). The readers follow the protagonist Liesel Meminger in her years towards adolescence. Liesel’s father abandons his family to save them from Nazi persecution as he is a communist, and eventually her mother is forced to give Liesel away due to poor economy and health. Liesel ends up with Hans and Rosa Hubermann in the fictional city Molching. Here she joins the life of the Hubermanns, starts a new school, and makes new friends such as Rudy Steiner. She also participates in normal activities such as playing football and attending the weekly Hitler Youth meetings. Liesel is illiterate when arriving at Molching, but she has managed to get her hands on a book. This book she has yet to understand, but with the help of Hans Hubermann she uses the book to learn words, and with this her love for and fascination with books begins to develop. The daily life of the Hubermanns changes drastically when Max Vandenburg suddenly appears on their doorstep. Hans served in the military during World War I together with Max’s father. Max’s father once saved Hans’ life during their time together in the military, and for that Hans is forever grateful. Thus, Hans promised Max’s father that he would always be in debt to him and that he would help his family if ever necessary. Max and his family are Jews, and during the Kristallnacht, Max is forced to leave his family to go in hiding from the Nazis. When Max arrives at the Hubermann house at Himmel Street in Molching, Hans, without hesitation, invites Max to stay with him and his family and provides shelter for him. Max and Liesel end up building a close relationship, as Max can be seen as a placeholder for Liesel’s brother Walter, who were supposed to join her at the Hubermanns, but who died in the hands of their mother on the trip towards Molching.

The plot of the novel details the lives of Liesel, Max, the Hubermanns, and the rest of the residents of Himmel Street during World War II. Death narrates the reader through the plot. This choice of narrator is unusual. Making Death the narrator helps the readers connect to him on a more personal level. Death as an abstract element becomes embodied and personalised by choosing him as the narrator. As such, Death becomes less scary and dramatic. As narrator, Death provides the reader with details of both the war and the daily life of Liesel and the people

living at Himmel Street. The readers follow them through the outbreak of the war, the persecution of Jews, and the air raids forcing them to hide in bomb shelters in basements. The readers also learn about the life of German children during the war years and how the regime of the Nazi officials was for the German people. When following the plot, the readers simultaneously follow the chronology of the war, especially in Germany, and to some degree also in the rest of Europe. Some elements of the Holocaust are also included in the plot, but in what follows, the main emphasis will be on how the novel deals with the historical elements and the daily life of Germans during the war.

Film Adaptation of *The Book Thief*

As mentioned, the film adaptation of *The Book Thief*, first published in 2013 and directed by Brian Percival, follows the same plot as the novel. The chronology of the story is also identical. As the novel, the film starts off by Death introducing the fact that everyone will die at one point. The camera is up in the skies floating almost like a flying bird with a deep, male voice speaking. The man tries to introduce himself: “I guess I should introduce myself properly. But then again, you’ll meet me soon enough. Not before your time, of course. I make it a policy to avoid the living” (Percival, 2013, 0.01.27-0.01.39). The quote together with the camera position and the look of the scene implies that the narrator of this scene is Death. The opening scene ends as the focus shifts towards a train where Liesel and her biological family are present. Death’s narration is more present in the novel than in the film. Like the novel, the film adaptation portrays the lives of the people of Himmel Street, including their professional and personal experiences. The event where Max Vandenburg arrives at the doorstep of the Hubermann house to seek rescue is also portrayed in the film adaptation. Interestingly, the film spends less time on each character than the novel does. Characters like Hans and Rosa Hubermann’s children are also totally removed from this film script. With the amount of time available in a film, it is natural to exclude some characters when writing a film script. A novel has more time and space to spend on each character and can do justice to all of them, contradicting a film adaptation that must decide which characters are most crucial for retelling the story in a different format. As in the novel, some references to historical events are portrayed in the film adaptation. In this thesis, the primary focus will lay on these historical elements of the film adaptation as a supplement to the analysis of the historical elements in the novel. The literary elements in the novel combined with the visual elements in the film adaptation create an additional layer to the story, one that is interesting to discuss further when studying the historical elements in the novel.

Historical Facts

Throughout the novel, the readers are presented with historical facts. These facts are most frequently narrated by Death and used as context for the novel's plot with descriptions and references to historical events. This is done by frequently adding pieces of information about World War II disguised in Death's narration. This way, descriptions of historical information become a part of the plot. Thus, the elements needed to connect the fictional story with the historical events of the time are present. Cui, Wang & Raney refer to research that states that "schema theory contends that our existing knowledge helps us better understand new knowledge" and continue by saying that "when audiences watch a historical narrative, they rely on their existing cognitive schema to understand the story and predict its development" (2017, p. 2744). By including these historical facts in the plot, the readers are provided with some of the tools necessary to grasp the full extent of the story. Also, knowing that many of *The Book Thief's* readers are young, it is plausible to think that not everyone reading the novel has been provided with the knowledge of what happened in Germany during World War II prior to reading the novel. Kokkola claims that "when readers read a novel about the Holocaust, their understanding will be built upon a mixture of what appears in the text and their previous knowledge" (2003, p. 168). By adding the references to historical facts in the novel, the readers get the correct context regardless of their prior knowledge, and they are forced to use this mixture of what appears in the text and previous knowledge in their understanding of the novel. Saxena states that "young adult Holocaust fiction is complicit in the creation of such prosthetic memories for the generations that have no direct access to the memories and historical trauma of the Second World War" (2019, p. 161). The prosthetic memories she refers to here are part of a concept defined by Alison Landsberg, and she defines the concept as memories which are "not strictly derived from a person's lived experience" (2004, p. 25). This way, *The Book Thief* can be a gateway into greater knowledge of World War II and Nazi Germany, where the readers can create memories based on someone else's story. Some of the descriptions of and references to historical facts included in *The Book Thief* are not as distinct as others. These facts lay hidden in the text, demanding an amount of prior knowledge to catch this meaning. To grasp the content of these types of historical facts, the readers must catch the hidden meaning placed between the lines and interpret the words of the narrator. Discovering this meaning can be done in collaboration with an adult or teacher reading the novel together with the young readers.

The significance of having Death be the narrator is inescapable. Jenni Adams describes Death as "a potentially disturbing figure who nevertheless functions to mediate the harsh realities of the novel's subject matter, enabling Zusak to accommodate the conflicting

expectations surrounding Holocaust literature aimed at children and young adults” (2010, p. 223). Adams further points to a doubleness in Death’s narration, claiming that Death is “a figure which serves simultaneously to confront the adolescent reader with the fact of death (in both an abstract and a historically located sense) and to offer protection from the most unsettling implications of this fact” (2010, p. 223). On one hand, Death provides the readers with harsh details of people dying in the war and people get a sense of him not being affected by all the work he must do. On the other hand, signs of compassion for the protagonist are evident in the narrator. Somehow, Liesel has managed to get under his skin. Moreover, with the amount of people dying during World War II, it can be easier for the young readers to get their head around that horrific fact by personalising Death and giving him characteristics. Then again, this personalising of Death may also remove the solemnity and importance of these historical elements. The author must then find the fine line between personality and solemnity.

In the novel, Death seems to have a clear overview of all the historical events occurring throughout Europe. This increases his position as a reliable narrator. He contains so much information about the disasters going on in Europe during the war, which indicates that he has seen much. Yet, the fact that he spends so much time on the young protagonist in Germany seems unlikely. With everything that is happening, it seems strange that he has time to pay much attention to what is happening in Liesel’s and the people of Himmel Street’s life. Still, knowing that he focuses a great deal on Liesel tells us that this story is an important one to share. The fact that he pays so much attention to her creates a perception of him having control of what Liesel does and how her mind works. The relation between Death and the name of Liesel’s street, Himmel, meaning heaven in German, is also interesting. For many, the goal when dying is to get to heaven. Death is how you get there, and there exists a tension when dying to find out whether you end up in heaven, hell, or none of the above. As Liesel is already living in Himmel Street, one can argue that she is already in heaven. This also explains Death’s obsession with the people of Himmel Street. Having this in mind, it makes sense for Death to know much about Liesel, again making him more reliable as a narrator. Débora Almeida De Oliveira and Sandra Sirangelo Maggio made an interesting point in their article on focalization in *The Book Thief*:

The limitation of perception is not bound only to internal characters that would have a restricted impression of the events. The effect of the frequent shift between internal and external focalization present in *The Book Thief* produces an impression of reliability,

since Death would possess an omniscient power that would allow him to perceive what characters feel as well as what they cannot know, such as important events to come.

(De Oliveira & Maggio, 2017, p. 136)

Several examples of the latter are found in the novel, as Death on multiple occasions provides the readers with elements of foreshadowing. Especially the point in the novel where he reveals that Rudy Steiner dies at the end of the novel is crucial in this context. Death himself explains the foreshadowing like this:

Of course, I'm being rude. I'm spoiling the ending, not only of the entire book, but of this particular piece of it. I have given you two events in advance, because I don't have much interest in building mystery. Mystery bores me. It chores me. I know what happens and so do you. It's the machinations that wheel us there that aggravate, perplex, interest, and astound me.

(Zusak, 2005, p. 247)

Here, Death explains that there is no point in building mystery because both he and the readers know what will happen. To some degree, one can argue that this is correct. Many of the readers of this novel know that when reading a novel on World War II and the Holocaust, the chance of the characters dying is definitely present. His focus is rather on the machinery that got us there. With this statement, Zusak tells the readers what he aims to achieve when writing this novel. There exists an assumption that many of his readers have a prior knowledge of historical events that occurred during World War II, evident in the author's choice of words in the narrator. Zusak himself describes some of his motivation to writing the novel in an interview with *The Guardian* like this:

And it is that simplistic quality – of good and evil – that appealed to Zusak. “One is the beauty of the old man and the boy. Then you've got the pure evil of that regime in what happens with the soldier. You bring those two things together and you've got exactly what humans are capable of.

(Sebag-Montefiore, 2018)

Nevertheless, many of the events being described in the plot add up with what occurred during World War II. These descriptions of historical information are provided by Death through his

narration. In this way, the readers are provided with some of the context needed to understand the situation of the plot. However, it is important to note that Death does not describe all the historical events that took place during the war. This can lead to the readers getting different perceptions of the story based on their prior knowledge of World War II. The readers' knowledge base has an impact on whether the full picture of the story can be understood or not. The inclusion of these historical elements are crucial in grasping the full extent of the story. If you do not have the prior knowledge necessary to interpret the historical facts, you miss out on some of the novel's layers. It is possible to read the novel without any prior knowledge, and still make perfect sense of the story, but by having that extra knowledge in advance, *The Book Thief* gets an extra dimension where all the details you need to grasp its full picture are in place. Manli Peng and Yan Hua claim that "Zusak resorts to trauma narratives to elicit people's collective memories about the war and make them empathize with Liesel. Literally, trauma narratives mean to narrate a traumatic event" (2020, p. 786). It is also clear that the novel's characters have less knowledge of what is going on in the world than the readers get through the narration, or what they know prior to reading the novel. The full picture is to some degree provided to the readers through Death's narration, but by having some amount of prior knowledge of these pieces with historical information it is easier to understand and put into context, than what it would have been without this knowledge in advance. Bosmajian claims that:

The author who chooses to write for children about serious matters avoids (to a far greater extent than writers of adult narratives) the critical gaze of the adult reader, for children do not interpret the text and adults generally eschew the reading of children's literature. As a result, children's literature is a medium that spares both the author and the child reader as the official text of the story sublimates and disguises a personally or socially complicated subtext.

(2002, p. xiv)

One can argue that Zusak may have intentionally spared the children of having to read between the lines to understand the plot. Still, it is possible to absorb hidden details and meaning in the novel. By doing so, it is possible for a young reader that have much historical knowledge to also notice these details, but the readers who do not manage to find these details between the lines will not be oblivious to the plot, nevertheless. It is also plausible that a young reader might read the novel with an adult. Zusak has, by creating these hidden details in between the lines,

made it possible for adults to also engage with the novel, making the novel a versatile work of fiction. It can also spark a discussion between the adult and the young reader. A discussion like this can provide the young reader with insights and reflections that may have been missed in their own reading, which increases the historical value.

Important Historical Events

Some key historical events of World War II are included in the novel, such as the previously mentioned Kristallnacht and the Battle of Stalingrad, along with the Nuremberg Laws, and others. Descriptions of these specific events are included together with several small informative facts integrated in the story's plot. For instance, Zusak explains the Nuremberg Laws like this: "the Nuremberg Laws came in, forbidding Jews to have German citizenship, and Germans and Jews to intermarry" (2005, p. 194). By adding this information, he sets the context for the readers. A person who has not yet learned about World War II can to some extent easily understand the base of the incidents occurring in the story. They can use the historical elements included to understand some of the elements they fail to understand without this historical context. If Zusak only mentioned the Nuremberg Laws without explaining what they meant for the Jewish population, the reader might fail to understand this historical element in the story. By explaining what it is he ensures that each reader of the novel can notice the details he provides in the novel. Still, there is no guarantee that all readers will be able to connect these elements and get access to all the details, but the tools necessary to get there are certainly present. Then, Zusak further expands on the description of the Nuremberg Laws by including some facts about historical night of the Kristallnacht:

Then came November 9. Kristallnacht. The night of broken glass. It was the very incident that destroyed so many of his fellow Jews, but it proved to be Max Vandenburg's moment of escape. He was twenty-two. Many Jewish establishments were being surgically smashed and looted when there was a clutter of knuckles on the apartment door.

(Zusak, 2005, p. 195)

Alan E. Steinweis defines the Kristallnacht in his book, *Kristallnacht 1938*, saying that it was the night where the Nazis "killed dozens of Jews and physically abused many more. As the riots raged, the police rounded up tens of thousands of Jewish men and shipped them to the concentration camps at Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen" (2009, p. 1). Here, Steinweis

is more detailed and includes more brutal incidents than what Zusak does in his novel, naturally, because Zusak has written a fictional novel while Steinweis has written a factual book with a primary focus on this specific historical event. Thus, it appears that Zusak has decided to spare the readers some of the worst details. His main plot does not revolve around the Kristallnacht, and therefore it is only necessary to briefly mention the event and describe for the readers the details essential for the plot. After all, the Kristallnacht was a night that signalled a shift in many Jews' lives and the same goes for the fictional Max Vandenburg. The Kristallnacht is an important event in his life and by that it is essential for the readers to have some knowledge of it. After all, that night what that ultimately led Max to go find Hans Hubermann and hide from the Nazis with his family.

Zusak has also included facts concerning the war that are not directly related to the plot of the story. By doing so he creates an extra dimension to the story. He adds the tools necessary for the readers to connect the incidents occurring in Germany with what was happening elsewhere in the war. This is shown in these two examples:

SOME FACTS ABOUT STALINGRAD

- 1. In 1942 and early '43, in that city, the sky was bleached bed-sheet white each morning.**
- 2. All day long, as I carried the souls across it, that sheet was splashed with blood, until it was full and bulging to the earth.**
- 3. In the evening, it would be wrung out and bleached again, ready for the next dawn.**
- 4. And that was when the fighting was only during the day.**

(Zusak, 2005, p. 110)

It was Russia, January 5 1943, and just another icy day. Out amongst the city and snow, there were dead Russians and Germans everywhere. Those who remained were firing into the blank pages in front of them. Three languages interwove. The Russian, the bullets, the German.

(Zusak, 2005, p. 461)

The examples show how readers are provided with descriptions of and references to historical events. The events do not occur in Molching where the story is situated but describes events from the war in Russia. These facts are not crucial to the plot of the story, but they play a role in describing how daily life in Germany was affected by the war. Those who have knowledge on several details of the last years of the war know that the grip of the war shifted in the last years and the momentum was lost by Germany. As the war progresses, soldiers die, and they need to be replaced. This can be one of the explanations why Alex Steiner and Hans Hubermann were forced to join the German military forces later in the novel. However, the film does not include descriptions of these historical events. Here, the focus is solely on the daily life of the people of Molching. The only time the viewers are presented with a different place than Molching is when Max's home is shown and when Hans Hubermann serves in the air raid patrols.

These two examples also show the different ways Zusak presents the information in the novel. The first one, when he adds information in the format of a list, stands out. This is a direct citation of how the quote is formatted in the novel, meaning that the quote literally stands out with its bold font and capitalised heading, in addition to the centred text. There are several examples of this throughout the novel, all narrated by Death and not a part of the dialogue. Separating these parts from the body of the novel leaves the impression that these parts are important to note and that they contrast with the rest of the text in some way. These centred parts create a break in the story making it more manageable. The novel is quite massive with its 538 pages, and a measure like this by the author makes the novel easier to read. It also makes it easier for the reader to go back to look at the facts presented if they have missed or forgotten anything. After all, it is easier to skim the novel looking for a bold, centred piece than to skim through 500 pages of text written in the same format.

In the novel, it is almost always the narrator who provides the details on the war. He checks in from time to time in the plot and provides the readers with some sort of status update of how the war is developing. And naturally, with Death as narrator, the focus in these updates lies on the people that struggle and fight to stay alive. A telling example of this is seen in this passage:

AN ABRIDGED ROLLCALL FOR 1942

- 1. The desperate Jews – their spirits
in my lap as we sat on the roof,
next to the steaming chimneys.**

- 2. The Russian soldiers: taking only small amounts of ammunition, relying on the fallen for the rest of it.**
- 3. The soaked bodies on a French coast, beached on the shingle and sand.**

(Zusak, 2005, p. 308)

It is notable that no war updates are included in the plot of the story. Although the flow of information decreases during war combined with censorship from the Nazi regime, it would be natural for some information to pass through to the German people and for this to be represented in the novel. However, it is not unusual to spare the children from this sort of information. *The Book Thief* is written from a child's perspective and that makes it plausible for this information to not be present in these environments. Instead, Death is the provider of this information. The information could have been provided through dialogue between the adults, but by separating the historical information from the plot of the story, the details in the historical information stand out in a more distinct way and demarcates what is distinctly factual in a work of fiction.

Sheila Renshaw has interviewed several people who were children during World War II and published them in the book, *Voices of the Second World War: A Child's Perspective* (2017). Among others, she describes the two German girls, Hilde and Hildegard. They testify their experiences of the war. This portrayal of the amount of information existing in the children of Molching also matches with what Hildegard tells in her interview: "All through the war the wireless would report on how successful the raids on London had been and how well our brave soldiers were doing. No bad news was ever reported" (Renshaw, 2017, p. 32). One similarity between the novel and the witness descriptions is that they come from a child's point of view. Although the novel is not narrated by Liesel, the plot of the story is situated around Liesel and her everyday life. It is then natural for Zusak to exclude the historical facts from the actual plot, and rather give this information in the form previously discussed, narrated by Death, and separated from the narrative itself. As the interview shows, children naturally knew less of what was going on in the war than the adults. All the German people did most likely not get the full picture regardless of age, but the children are often spared of the worst details. As observed above, Zusak provides the readers with historical context, but excludes the most terrible details. This many authors deliberately do, as Bosmajian writes:

The author who chooses to write for children about serious matters avoids (to a far greater extent than writers of adult narratives) the critical gaze of the adult reader, for children do not interpret the text and adults generally eschew the reading of children's literature. As a result, children's literature is a medium that spares both the author and the child reader as the official text of the story sublimates and disguises a personally or socially complicated subtext.

(2002, p. xiv)

In addition to these concrete historical events, descriptions of air raids are commonly included. There are several occasions where the people at Himmel Street must turn to the basements used as bomb shelters when the air raids start. This part of the story tells a great deal about the daily life in Germany during World War II, and especially towards the end of the war: "Later, in '42 and '43, it was. When air raids started, they always needed to rush down the street to a better shelter" (Zusak, 2005, p. 39) The descriptions of air raids in the story reflect what Hilde and Hildebrand refer to in their interviews. Hildebrand explains her memory of the bombing like this: "We were bombed by the British at night and the Americans by day. The cellar was the only safe place to be" (Renshaw, 2017, p. 30). The narrative concerning the fictional characters thus resembles the stories of people who experienced air raids, and this is one of the ways in which the novel relays knowledge of history.

In *The Book Thief*, the local members of the Party at one point investigate every basement in the city to find out if some of the basements are sufficient as bomb shelters. The novel and the film differ slightly in the portrayal of this part of the story. However, one essential thing is alike: Liesel hears from Rudy while playing football with her friends that there are people who search the basements to examine their reliability. She deliberately gets herself hurt to have an excuse for finishing the game and go home. One of the Nazi soldiers sees that she gets injured and offers to take her home, but that would ruin the opportunity to warn Hans and Rosa about the basement searches. But the bright young girl is clever enough to get Rudy to go get Hans so that he can bring her home instead of the Nazi soldier (Zusak, 2005, pp. 337-340). This is the part where the scene is changed in the film adaptation. In the adaptation, the Nazi soldier offering to help Liesel is not present, and she finds her way home alone. When arriving at her house she immediately warns Hans and Rosa, and Hans rushes down the basement to find some way to hide Max. A short while after, the Party member arrives on their doorstep. Both the film and the novel portray this aspect of the story as intense and dramatic. In the novel, there is this moment where Max is hiding under the stairs holding a pair of scissors in his hands

as the Party member is walking around skimming the basement. Rosa, Hans, and Liesel are sitting upstairs at their kitchen table waiting as the man walks around the basement. After finishing his inspection, the Party member comes up and his only conclusion is that the basement is too shallow to be a bomb shelter (Zusak, 2005, p. 343). In the film, Hans and Rosa follow the Nazi official downstairs to the basement. After Liesel's warning, Hans has been downstairs in the basement and managed to hide Max under a Nazi flag. The Party member walks right past Max as he lies under the flag, and suspects nothing. The same conclusion is drawn in the film as in the novel; the basement is not sufficient as a bomb shelter (Percival, 2013, 01.19.18-1.23.40). This is a statement that proves to be wrong as Liesel is downstairs in the basement when the unannounced bomb raid towards Molching starts and she is the only person in the family to survive. However, it is interesting how different this scene is portrayed in text and on screen. Both are nerve-wracking and intense. In the novel, the readers get a longer and more detailed view of the scene. The suspense is drawn out and the tension is kept for a longer period of time. The novel also portrays the events as dramatic, the inclusion of several details and dialogue builds up to a climax at the end, when the Party member inspects the basement. One of the elements giving the film its excitement is portrayed through an intense music that creates a dramatic effect. This effect is created with less dialogue and reaches its goal quicker. The basement scene in the film is a thrilling and breath-taking moment. When watching it, one anxiously hopes that Max is not found by the Party member. The film scene is made in a more thrilling dramaturgical manner, which is natural in the film format. There is less time and space available to build up tension and excitement, as a novel allows for more details and suspense for a longer period of time than what a film can do. As Brian McFarlane says, "there is no film equivalent for the word" (2007, p. 23). The film must, according to him, "draw on a battery of semiotically charged tools" (2007, p. 23).

The film includes less historical information than in the novel. The viewers learn that war has broken out in Europe, but there is no update on how the war is developing. This information is given through a scene where the children of Molching are running around in the streets cheering for war (Percival, 2013, 0.51.07). When being given less historical context, the viewers must then have a bigger amount of prior knowledge to fully grasp the film to its full extent. At one point, Death's voicing in the film tells the viewers that the "bombs were coming thicker now" followed by a text telling us that the plot is now situated in November 1942 (Percival, 2013, 1.43.57). The scene starts with the same perspective as when Death is introduced at the very beginning of the film, up in the sky, which makes it evident that it is Death who speaks again. This ultimately culminates in a scene where the people of Molching

are sitting in one of the basements used as shelter during an air raid. Here children and youth have come together seeking rescue. People are crying and seem scared, but they find comfort in entertaining each other. With the scene ending in the basement shelter the message that the bombs were coming thicker is emphasised to a greater degree with the inclusion of what occurs as the bombs drop. While seeing the people in the basement, sounds of bombs dropping is present in the background, which allows the viewers to see the full picture.

The Hitler Youth

The novel contains several references to the Hitler Youth. According to H. W. Koch's book on the Hitler Youth, *The Hitler Youth: Origins and development 1922-1945*, "'youth' as a social group, in Germany and elsewhere, was not an organized body or a force in its own right until the end of the nineteenth century" (2000, p. 3). However, as P. D. Stachura states in his article, "it was not until Adolf Hitler took the initiative in establishing the Hitler-Jugend (HJ) as the official youth organization of his party (NSDAP) that there was any semblance of cohesion in this sphere of the party's activity" (1973, p. 155). He continues by saying that "the overriding purpose of the HJ was to attract the political support of young Germans for National-Socialism" (1973, p. 155). When the Hitler Youth is introduced in the novel it is by way of a short informative passage:

Ten years old meant Hitler Youth. Hitler Youth meant a small brown uniform. Being female, Liesel was enrolled into the junior division of what was called the BDM.

EXPLANATION OF THE ABBREVIATION

**It stood for Bund Deutscher Mädchen –
United German Girls.**

(Zusak, 2005, p. 46)

The readers of the novel get to come along Liesel and her friends as they participate in weekly Hitler Youth meetings and events. They do not always seem eager to go to these meetings, but as any other child of this age, this is normal behaviour. Including Liesel and Rudy's involvement with the Hitler Youth in the novel is crucial for retaining a sense of historical accuracy. Being a part of the Hitler Youth was mandatory and it was seen as the third formative and most crucial context for the young (Bosmajian, 2002, p. 10). Leaving out such a crucial part of German children's lives during the time would directly damage the plausibility of the

story. It is impossible to portray the life of a German child during World War II without adding the element of the Hitler Youth. Again, it is beneficial to return to Hilde and Hildegard's descriptions of their experience as former members of the Hitler Youth. Much of what they mention in their interview correlates with the reality Zusak portrays in fictional form in his novel. They both mention that they had to join the Hitler Youth at the age of ten and that this was mandatory.

However, there is one key element of the Hitler Youth's activities that is not included in either the novel or the film version of *The Book Thief*. According to Hilde, they "went hiking, walking and camping in the forests and woods. In the evenings, after supper, we gathered round a campfire and sang traditional and patriotic songs" (Renshaw, 2017, p. 25). Some of these activities are described in the novel, but not the full extent of it. The activities of the Hitler Youth are described as such: "The first thing they did there was make sure your "heil Hitler" was working properly. Then you were taught to march straight, roll bandages, and sew up clothes. You were also taken hiking and on other such activities" (Zusak, 2005, p. 47). The hiking is mentioned, but the social activities related to these hiking trips are not included. By not including this social part of the trip, the full extent of such organised trips disappears. Of course, it is difficult to include a total picture of the life of the Hitler Youth's without making the entire novel revolve around this topic. Still, it is evident that Death as a narrator knows much about the story's protagonist, Liesel. By not including this part of the activity the readers get a sense of it not being of importance for Liesel, thus its importance to the plot decreases.

Another aspect described by the former Hitler Youth members is, however, included in the novel: "We were encouraged to take part in sports, as this helped develop a healthy body and mind. There were also many other activities we could take part in" (Renshaw, 2017, p. 25). This aspect of the Hitler Youth reflects characteristics of Rudy Steiner. He is an excellent runner. This talent is spotted at a race by one of the Nazi officials. He wants to bring Rudy to a Nazi training camp. This shows how in Germany at the time, the backdrop for the interest in sports and athletic ability made the Nazi officials see potential in the Hitler Youth and that they used it to spot promising potential for the German army. Thomas Kühne writes that "a broad range of paramilitary organizations, including the Hitler Youth (...), aimed at making sure that no [Aryan boy] fell through the cracks of the school of manliness" (2018, p. 402). However, Rudy's father, Alex Steiner, does not find it in him to let his son go. This ultimately ends up with Alex Steiner being drafted into the army himself. Rudy seems to be what the Nazis categorised as an "ideal Aryan" with blue eyes, blond hair, and good physical form. Kühne states that "the ideal man, embodied by the soldier, was tough and aggressive, in control of his

body, mind, and psyche” (2018, p. 390). Knowing the characteristics of Rudy Steiner, it is no surprise that he was a prime target for the Nazis. At the same time the person Rudy looks up to the most is not Hitler but Jesse Owens, an African American olympic athlete who won a gold medal in front of Hitler in the 1936 Berlin olympics. At one point, Rudy has painted himself in mud to look like Jesse Owens. With this painted mud, he sprints seemingly alone at the track field. After reaching the finish line, an old man approaches Rudy, clearly upset with his public displays of affection for Jesse Owens. The man drags Rudy home to his father. Alex Steiner is a member of the NSDAP., and is threatened with expulsion of the Party because of this incident (Percival, 2013, 0.23.04-0.24.02). Ultimately, these scenes portray what happened to people who opposed the regime in Germany. Being thrown out of the party could lead to Alex getting fewer customers and less income. If Rudy had been noticed by someone more highstanding or by a Nazi official, the consequences could have been far worse.

Bosmajian claims that “youth became the vanguard of the German revolution and formed a uniquely German movement that was romantic and always political” (2002, p. 7). Koch claims that according to Hitler:

The state’s primary education task for the welfare of the German race was to instil a racial consciousness into every boy and girl. This and this alone would ensure that the child would become a valuable member of the national community.

(2000, p. 162)

What is interesting here is that Liesel and Rudy are to some degree the opposition to this ideal. As a communist child, Liesel is not the ideal Hitler Youth. She also sympathises with the Jews and her father is not even a member of the NSDAP. Rudy on the other hand is, as previously mentioned, seemingly the ideal Aryan, but finds more joy in running and playing football. At the same time, the contrasted character of Franz Deutscher, the sadistic leader of Rudy’s Hitler Youth group, who checks all the boxes of what is expected of a young German boy in Nazi Germany, is included. Deutscher means a German person, which as the novel points out is “the ultimate name for the ultimate teenage Nazi” (Zusak, 2005, p. 270). By adding such a character as Franz Deutscher, a clear division between the ideal Aryan Nazi teenager and the oppositional sympathetic and caring characters as Liesel and Rudy is created. This way, the diversity of the German people during World War II is shown. This division is not included in the film, at least not to such a degree as in the novel. Franz Deutscher is barely visual in the film. Fittingly, the only scene where he stands out to the audience is in the scene where he rides on his bike in the

streets, followed by many children, cheerfully shouting that war has broken loose in Europe (Percival, 2013, 0.51.07).

Despite not including all the youth characters from the novel, a clear illustration of what being a part of the Hitler Youth looked like is included. Especially the scene where the children stand together singing in a choir wearing their uniform is an impactful image (Percival, 2013, 0.18.24). What makes it so impactful is the combination of the children standing there looking completely alike and the lyrics of the nationalistic song. It is something striking with seeing children proudly singing Nazi propaganda. There are also several examples of the children wearing their uniforms at important events and days for the country, like Hitler's birthday. Bosmajian explains that "Hitler was the role model for all Hitler Youths. His lifestory was required reading written as hagiography or condensed into prefaces in Hitler Youth handbooks" (2002, p. 8). The children's participation in the Hitler Youth is much more emphasised in the film than in the novel. The visualisation of the uniforms and the fact that everyone looks exactly alike adds a more impactful image. The same impact is not achieved when reading about a choir singing nationalistic German songs as when listening to the strong sound of approximately 50 members of the Hitler Youth's singing their hearts out, looking identical.

However, when watching it on screen, the viewers lose the ability to create their own image of the situation. If the adolescents reading *The Book Thief* have no knowledge of what being a member of the Hitler Youth looked like they get the chance to imagine for themselves how it was. It would be useful to let them see how the Hitler Youths looked like afterwards and then it is possible to create a discussion around how the image changed after seeing the reality. This can create an extra dimension to the novel's content and would especially be useful in a teaching situation. In such a situation, it would be possible to allow the pupils who had some historical knowledge of the Hitler Youth prior to reading the novel or watching the film, to share their knowledge with their peers and help create a mutual understanding of the concept. A possibility could be to first have the pupils how the daily life of a member of the Hitler Youth looked like followed by a factual representation of it. Still, a fictional film based on a fiction novel will probably not be sufficient alone in this understanding. However, a combination of the novel and the film to spark the children's interest, in addition to a documentary piece to help tie up loose ends would certainly be an interesting teaching arrangement.

What ultimately separates the film and the novel in their representation of the Hitler Youth is the effect of seeing versus imagining the scenes. While the novel refers briefly to several different aspects of being a part of the Hitler Youth, the film focuses on less aspects of the Hitler Youth daily life, but the parts that are being portrayed is done so to a larger extent.

For people watching the film or reading the novel without having any historical context of the Hitler Youth in advance, the film creates a better understanding than the novel. Here, the viewers may notice the similarity in the uniforms of the Hitler Youth and other Nazi uniforms and see that these two groups have a connection. However, the novel explains what the Hitler Youth is, something the film never does. In the film, the Hitler Youth are portrayed without telling the viewers that it is the Hitler Youth they are watching. Viewers with knowledge of Germany during World War II will immediately make the connection and realise what is being portrayed, while a person with no prior knowledge is left wondering what the children are a part of.

Hitler Youth is not the only contemporary organisation that is mentioned in the novel. The adult organisation National Socialist German Workers' Party (German: Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, NSDAP) is also mentioned. By including the adult organisation as well, the readers learn that not merely the children participated in organised social activities. However, not all characters in the novel are members of the NSDAP, more on this later in this chapter. Nevertheless, by focusing on the youth organisation in addition to NSDAP, young readers get the chance to compare their own lives with the lives of children during the war. This adds a layer of recognition in the readers, as the readers are provided with the story of a life that they relate to but also far from their own reality. Both Liesel and Rudy are members of the group, and a membership is clearly expected by the society. The meetings with the Hitler Youth become a big part of the everyday life of the children and it is the only organised activity mentioned that Liesel is a part of. All these aspects of Liesel's life contribute to the readers' opportunity to identify with the protagonist. Cohen defines identification in novel and film like this:

When reading a novel or watching a film or a television program, audience members often become absorbed in the plot and identify with the characters portrayed. Unlike the more distanced mode of reception—that of spectatorship—identification is a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them.

(2001, p. 245)

With all the details and information on Liesel's life given to the reader all the elements necessary for connecting with the protagonist are present. Cohen further points to research that "contrasted film and literary novels and argued that, compared with the novel, films tend to

favor the spectator role because of their visual nature, whereas novels and short stories are equally hospitable to both spectatorship and identification” (2001, p. 257). This is fitting in terms of *The Book Thief*. The novel presents more details on Liesel’s life, and the readers also get to follow her friends more closely, while the film has a narrower focus on just Liesel and Rudy. The film also provides less insight in Liesel’s thoughts. In the novel, Death narrates these thoughts to the readers, while he is less present in the film. In the film, body language and face expressions tell us how Liesel is feeling, but that is not sufficient in telling everything that goes on inside Liesel’s head.

The Treatment of Jews in Germany

Like many other World War II-novels, *The Book Thief* contains elements referring to Jews and the Holocaust. According to Dan Cohn-Sherbok, “the Third Reich's system of murder squads, concentration camps and killing centres eliminated nearly 6 million Jews” (1990, p. 277). Although the Holocaust is not the main theme of this novel, it is difficult to write a novel situated in Nazi Germany without including some elements of the persecution of the Jews. The story about Liesel Meminger and the Hubermanns is not an exception. They were put in a difficult position when Max Vandenburg, a young Jewish man, knocked on the door. As Michelle Abate describes, Max Has experienced hardships since Hitler became the leader of Germany: “He has lost his job, been forcibly separated from his family, and seen Jewish homes looted and businesses destroyed” (2016, p. 53). After the Kristallnacht and the intensifying of the persecution of the Jews he was forced to run, and he has now arrived at Himmel Street to seek help from Hans Hubermann, who immediately helps him. Based on his characteristics presented in the novel, one assumes that Hans is the type of person that reaches out to everyone in need, and that he does not support the German regime of the time. The novel focuses a great deal on the fact that Hans Hubermann is not a part of the Nazi Party or the NSDAP. He has a long and thoughtful reason for that:

THE THOUGHT PROCESS OF HANS HUBERMANN

He was not well-educated or political, but if nothing else, he was a man who appreciated fairness. A Jew had once saved his life and he couldn’t forget that. He couldn’t join a party that antagonised people in such a way.

Also, much like Alex Steiner, some of his most loyal customers were Jewish. Like many of the Jews believed, he didn't think the hatred could last, and it was a conscious decision not to follow Hitler. On many levels, it was a disastrous one.

(Zusak, 2005, pp. 183-184)

The novel describes the entire process connected to Hans' decision to join the Party. Hans suffers financially by not being a part of the Party. He gets fewer painting jobs and struggles to earn money. The novel does not explicitly mention this, but it is thinkable that the loss of his Jewish customers plays a role in this decrease in income. This is a detail that may not be noticed by people who do not know how the Jews were being sent off to concentration camps and death camps. This creates an extra dimension for the readers in the know, who contains this extra knowledge. Children who have not yet learned about the Holocaust may fail to notice this detail or at least not understand why Hans has lost customers and income. The novel mentions this aspect to some degree as it later says that: "as the years passed by, the Jews were being terrorised at random throughout the country" (Zusak, 2005, p. 184). This ultimately leads to Hans shamefully applying for a membership. Here, the removal of the Jews from the daily life of Himmel Street leads to Hans being forced to join the Party to be able to make a living and earn the money necessary to take care of his family. The film, on the other hand, gives less attention to Hans' association with the Party. If the viewers of the film have not read the novel prior to watching it, they will only learn that he is not a member of the Party, and that Rosa Hubermann would have to work less if he just joined the party when the officer comes to investigate his basement as a possible bomb shelter (Percival, 2013, 1.23.22). So as the novel focuses on the whole process of whether to join the Party or not, the film excludes this part completely. Adding such a dilemma would add extra focus on Hans Hubermann and in that way remove time available for focusing on Liesel or other aspects of the film. However, Hans' wish to help Jews is also present in the film, illustrating a sense of resentment towards the Nazi regime in a more discrete manner than what the process of joining the Party or not would do. By doing so, the film creates room for interpreting Hans' intentions and motives instead of describing them as in the novel.

Max Vandenburg stays in hiding in the Hubermann family's basement. According to Marion A. Kaplan, "most Jews who hid did so after the official notices of deportations ceased

and the arbitrary roundups of Jews began in late 1942” (1998, p. 202). She also claims that “hiding may have been somewhat easier for women than men, but it was extremely dangerous and nearly impossible for all Jews. They lived in dread, fearful for their own safety and that of the people who hid them” (1998, p. 201). If this is true in Max’s case, it is not made clear in the novel. It is likely that Max has felt some of these emotions, but the details of them are then spared from the readers. This may be because Max has not expressed this fear and anxiety towards Liesel, due to her young age. By sparing Liesel of these details, the readers are also spared as the elements provided to the readers are given through Liesel’s point of view. Nevertheless, this is not the first time Hans Hubermann has attempted to help Jewish people. He once repainted the door of a Jewish shop that had been vandalised (Zusak, 2005, p. 108). In general, he is portrayed as a person who sympathises with Jews. As such, it is somewhat odd that the Nazi officials are not more suspicious and cautious of his actions. A man that has a history with helping other Jews and shows reluctance to the Party might end up on some sort of watchlist. Yet, it is not until he openly helps one of the Jews marching through the city that he feels that it is too dangerous for Max to hide in his basement.

Both the film and the novel show how Jews, towards the end of World War II, were being forced to march through the streets and transported either from freedom to captivity or between different concentration camps. Yehuda Bauer explains that during these death marches the prisoners were “forced to march on foot, driven relentlessly and senselessly through the snow-covered countryside, beaten and starved, anyone lagging behind being shot without mercy” (1983, p. 1). The inclusion of these death marches is interesting. Bauer claims that the death marches “as far as public opinion in the west went, were not forgotten, because they were never remembered” (1983, p. 15). She further states that there is minimal research on this field. What is important to note in this case is the date of the article. There may have been an increased focus on the subject in later years, but during my research for this thesis I struggled to find much research on the field. This fact makes Zusak’s inclusion of these marches interesting. It is possible to think that everyone who reads about this in the novel, or watches it in the film, has no prior knowledge of these death marches. *The Book Thief* can in that case be the starting point for learning more about these marches. By adding an historical fact that is not commonly known, the subject can get more attention and by that the novel can contribute to an increased focus on the field.

Interestingly, contradicting the novel, the film excludes Max from these marches. Also, the film shows the marches only once, while the novel describes them on several occasions. By doing so, the novel shows that this was a reoccurring event in the lives of the people living in

Molching. By removing Max from the march, the scene becomes less personal. Naturally, it is terrible to watch the people marching, clearly in need of food and better care, but if Max had been one of these people the effect of watching it would be even more impactful and even worse to witness. In the novel, Liesel runs towards Max as he marches. This scene would have been very emotional to watch on screen. What the film on the other hand includes is Liesel and Hans helping some of the participants of the march. Hans ends up being punished for this. He is accepted, not voluntarily, as a member of the party, forced to enrol in the army, and is eventually sent to be a part of the LSE which was an air raid special unit. As it said in his letter telling him that he was drafted into the army; “A member of the party would be happy to play a role in the war effort, it concluded. If he wasn’t, there would certainly be consequences” (Zusak, 2005, p. 411). This incident from the death marches resembles the story Markus Zusak referred to in his previously mentioned interview with Random House Kids on YouTube. Here, the intentions Zusak had for writing the novel, to tell the story of the people opposing the regime and supporting the oppressed groups, is very much present.

Chapter 2: Visual Expressions in *The Book Thief*

The Book Thief contains illustrations made by Trudy White, and they have a significant role in the novel. It is both integrated in the plot and illustrated in the actual novel. Not only are the illustrations used to present historical information, but it also adds a break in the text. Especially the pages with the illustrations from Max's story in the middle of the novel creates a shift in the process of reading. Again, the novel is quite long with its 538 pages and the inclusion of the break in the middle with these illustrations makes it easier to read. However, the illustrations are not bright and happy; the illustration of two people standing on a pile of bodies, stating that it is a lovely day with the swastika inserted in the sun, will probably engender a sense of discomfort (Zusak, 2005, p. 282). Especially those who know the history of the Holocaust will understand to a greater extent what this is meant to illustrate, and as something that resembles the horrible images from the Nazi persecution of the Jews. In some ways, these illustrations can be seen as another tool given to the readers to fully understand the complexity of the plot. The inclusion of the swastika quite early in the novel is also a telling example of this (Zusak, 2005, p. 24). Here, readers are given the three different pieces of the Nazi emblem, the red square, the white circle, and the swastika, followed by a written description on how these three pieces should be pieced together. Together these pieces make up the Nazi emblem. Some of the readers may not put the pieces together completely correctly in their head. Still, they have an image in their head that resembles the correct image to such a degree that when seeing it later in the novel might spark an interest and a vigilance towards this piece, indicating that this aspect is important to the story. It is also a symbol that many have some sort of relationship towards regardless of how much knowledge they have concerning Nazism and World War II. It is possible that not every reader of the book knows exactly what the symbol indicates and what it stands for, but the fact that many have seen it before makes the inclusion of it in the novel something that the readers will notice because it is something that they remember seeing somewhere else.

Markus Zusak integrates some of the illustrations in the story by writing them into the plot. This is done primarily by using Max and his drawing. Max takes his copy of *Mein Kampf*, which was used to bring him information about his escape from his hometown to the Hubermanns, and paints over the pages with white paint to create blank pages that he can use himself. The fact that Hans Hubermann is a painter and that he has been given fewer and fewer jobs after the war broke out is presented in the novel. Thus, it is noteworthy that Max chooses to paint over a book he originally possesses instead of using a clear notebook or a sheet of paper.

However, knowing how tight the economy in the Hubermann household is at this time, it is natural that they do not have access to or the ability to buy new notebooks for Max. Also, by painting over the words in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Max can regain control over the book's message. This message is not given to the readers, the only information presented is that it is a book written by Hitler himself. Jenni Adams writes in her article that:

Hitler's words are still visible in places through the paint, with the effect that the antisemitic tract is both hidden by the fable and exposed within it, the story both confronting and protecting its young reader, Liesel, from the ugly truth about Germany.
(2010, p. 225)

Max makes this story about Liesel and for Liesel. She has learned how to read by reading books with Hans and Max. This has made it possible for her to read both the original content of *Mein Kampf*, but also to be exposed to the new world presented to her in the book by Max. Marcus Zusak said in the previously mentioned interview with *The Guardian* that "it took about five or six years [for me to realise] the book is about the idea that Hitler destroyed through words and propaganda. And this is the story of a girl who is stealing those words back" (Sebag-Montefiore, 2018). By letting Max paint over the words of Hitler with Liesel's story, not only does he change the words of Hitler, but he shifts the focus over to the new generation and the hope of change in the future.

In Max Vandenburg's illustrations in the novel, he has drawn himself as something that resembles a rat, while everyone else is drawn as a human being. It is a common fact that the Nazis referred to the Jews as rats, as David Livingstone Smith describes it, "to the Nazis, all the Jews, Gypsies, and the others were rats: dangerous, disease-carrying rats" (2011, p. 15). The narrator also uses the word rat to describe Max: "The Jewish rat, back to his hole" (Zusak, 2005, p. 218). Later in the novel, in relation to the death marches to Dachau, Liesel hears the Nazi soldiers speaking about the Jewish prisoners asking themselves; "when was the last time we took these rats for some fresh air?" (Zusak, 2005, p. 385). The word rat is often used as a condescending word, and Max must have been called a rat quite often to let the word be indicative of him as a person. Another reason for choosing to portray himself as a rat can be that he wants to take ownership over this word, similar as to what he did with the book *Mein Kampf*, and by that removing the power of the word when being exposed to it.

In addition to the novel being illustrated in the form of drawings and illustrations, colours work as a way of illustrating and visualising the content of the novel. Death focuses a

great deal on colours in his narration. Colours are elements that everyone can relate to regardless of prior knowledge. The example with the three different pieces of the Nazi emblem is not only drawn in the novel, but colours are also used to describe each element. By adding the colours in addition to the illustrated symbols the readers have all the elements they need to put the pieces together in a correct manner. It is also interesting what the quote stating that “a star the colour of mustard was smeared to the door” tells us about the author’s use of colours (Zusak, 2005, p. 185). Again, colours help to spark the memory of people who contain prior historical knowledge. What is important to note is that it is possible for everyone to make up this described illustration in their head and come up with the correct one, because of the detailed description of it. However, not all references to colours are easily interpreted. Some are more vaguely presented and used as metaphors rather than descriptions. At one point in the novel, Death asks the reader “what colour will everything be at that moment when I come for you?” (Zusak, 2005, p. 14). This quote is presented early in the novel, indicating from the start that the readers should pay close attention to the colours when reading the novel. He also says that “the day was grey, the colour of Europe” (Zusak, 2005, p. 34). Grey is often used to describe a rainy day, but that does not mean that it is raining in all of Europe. Grey is a colour intermediate white and black, white in this case can indicate peace while black can be an indication of disaster. Ultimately, the use of colours allows the readers to interpret the meaning of these colours using their own perceptions. Later in the novel, Death says that “for me, the sky was the colour of Jews” (Zusak, 2005, p. 346). Here, which colour Death is thinking of is not mentioned, causing the readers to reflect to a greater extent what Death means by this. People with knowledge of the persecution of Jews during the war understand that this colour is not a bright and positive one, but rather dark and tragic. However, how the sky is looking is up to the readers to decide. Then, there are also the illustrations that do not explicitly mention which colour Death is referring to, but that uses an object with this colour to help describe which colour the readers should think of; “the man, in comparison, was the colour of bone. Skeleton-coloured skin. A ruffled uniform. His eyes were cold and brown—like coffee stains” (Zusak, 2005, p. 20). This example also shows how both the colour and a description of something of this colour is included. With this special focus on colours, it is interesting that Markus Zusak decided to make Hans Hubermann a painter. This means that he is used to different colours, which Death notices, and he describes Hans like this: “It’s hard not to like a man who not only notices the colours, but speaks them” (Zusak, 2005, p. 91)

The film adaptation also portrays a visualisation of historical elements. Combining the literary elements in the novel with the visual elements of the film adaptation adds an additional

layer to the plot. This creates the possibility to first read about historical events, make up a version of the events in your head, and then watch the film to see how the filmmakers have interpreted and portrayed the events. If one then additionally checks the accuracy of this recapping of events with factual sources, the possible historical value and learning outcome is high.

While the novel draws and use colours to illustrate the Nazi emblem, the film adaptation shows a big red banner with the swastika on it. The banner is first shown early in the film, in the scene where Liesel is arriving in Molching and is driven to Himmel Street and the Hubermanns (Percival, 2013, 0,11.36). The movement of “sieg heil”, the Nazi greeting, is also described in further detail in the film adaptation than in the novel. In the novel, it is said that figuring out if your “heil Hitler” is working properly is the first thing you learn when joining the Hitler Youth (Zusak, 2005, p. 46). Many might understand what the author is referring to straight away based on previous knowledge on the subject. However, for some, it might be the first they ever hear about this which makes it difficult to fully interpret the conventions that lay behind such movements. The film shows the movement on several occasions. The scene where Hitler’s birthday is celebrated in the town square of Molching is one example of this. Here, everyone present do the “sieg heil” (Percival, 2013, 0.29.03). This scene portrays a visualisation of the movement, in addition to the conventions stating that everyone must do it, regardless of their own wishes. It is possible to see in the eyes of Hans Hubermann that this is something he regrets to do, but that he is forced to do so. In the earlier mentioned scene where Rudy Steiner sprints alone at a track field, imagining himself as Jesse Owens, the film alternates between fictional footage of Rudy running and real footage of Jesse Owens from the 1936 Olympics. A short clip of a clearly unsatisfied Adolf Hitler is also included. This way, the film manages to show the audience why Rudy is covered in mud and by the look of Hitler’s face, one can tell that Jesse Owens is not the person to look up to as a German child during Hitler’s time as leader of the country. By that, the film explains the whole scene without using any explanatory text or voicing.

It can also be difficult to imagine how the death marches are played out based solely on the written descriptions in the novel. If one lacks a similar experience to reference the descriptions of the marches, it can be difficult to map out the event in their head. However, when watching it on the screen, dramatised and figural, the descriptions from the novel then make sense. In this case, the film adaptation of these written descriptions gets an extra dimension when being portrayed on screen. The last remark I would like to make in relation to this concerns around the film props and the film set. In the novel, the readers are provided with

little information regarding how the world looked like at the time. Aspects like how the house looks like, what clothes people wore, and how the cars look like is rarely described. This indicates that the notion of knowing how the contemporary society dressed like and lived like is assumed to be present in the readers. Naturally, to avoid being totally inaccurate, the film must provide more details and a more accurate representation of these contemporary aspects. Here, contemporary cars are used, and the entire film set is made out to look like a German city during the war years.

Conclusion

The Book Thief provides endless possibilities; its many descriptions and references to historical facts related to Germany during World War II and the Holocaust, combined with a young protagonist and its easy language, make it a work of historical young adult fiction. Its film adaptation presents these historical facts to the public in a different format. The novel presents historical elements with the use of multiple approaches, many of them addressed in this thesis. With the use of both words and illustrations, *The Book Thief* portrays both factual and fictional elements. What ultimately makes the novel sufficient as historical young adult fiction is the fact that it combines descriptions of historical facts with a fictional story that people can easily get attached to. The novel keeps the suspense throughout the entire piece regardless of foreshadowing that reveals the ending already at the middle of the novel. People who read the book with prior knowledge of how the war progresses keep their suspense despite this because they do not know how the novel's characters will fit into this history.

The inclusion of descriptions of concrete historical events such as the Battle of Stalingrad and the Kristallnacht provide the readers with historical context that can be used to understand the plot to its fullest. Including the young characters as members of the Hitler Youth contributes to increasing the novel's historical accuracy. Removing such a crucial element from the novel in the intention of sparing the children would have been damaging. The references to the Hitler Youth are not too traumatic for a young audience. Instead, this inclusion increases the historical value of the book. The treatment of the Jews in Germany is mentioned. Both negative attitudes and supportive attitudes are addressed through characters with different types of personalities, culminating in the opposites, Franz Deutscher and Liesel Meminger. By this, the diverse attitudes of the German people are represented.

Death's narration guides the readers through the descriptions of historical elements in the book. By making most of these descriptions in a bold, centred font the importance of these elements is visualised. It also makes it easier to go back and look for forgotten details, something a young reader with little patience might seek to do. Furthermore, Death becomes less scary and dramatic by having him as the narrator. It creates a personalisation and embodiment of something that many are afraid of and that many avoid speaking about. Thus, as World War II caused millions to die, it is extra interesting that the author seeks to make such a figure harmless.

With the help of visual expressions through illustrations, the novel's content avoids being too heavy, making it easier for young readers to get through all 538 pages. The

illustrations add to the historical elements with drawings as the swastika and of Hitler. The visual expressions are naturally important in the film adaptation as well. Especially the inclusion of authentic footage of Jesse Owens in the 1936 Olympics creates an extra historical dimension to the film. This combination of factual and fiction footage contributes to the film's historical value.

The possibility the novel has as a teaching object in schools is briefly mentioned in this thesis. A broader analysis of this use of the novel is interesting to investigate further, and with my experience as a teacher student, I personally believe that there is a lot to gain from using the novel as a gateway into historical knowledge regarding the life of adolescents living in Germany during World War II. As the protagonist is of such a young age, the chances of the pupils feeling some sort of relation towards Liesel and her friends must be high. The novel is, despite its many pages, an easy read and is thus a piece of fiction that many pupils will be able to get through, naturally some more easily than others. The different layers of information in the plot will also make it possible for the different levels of knowledge to be displayed and reviewed by the teacher. It is also possible for the teacher to scaffold the pupils, helping them discover hidden meanings in the words of Markus Zusak.

A broader comparative study of the film adaptation of *The Book Thief* is also an interesting theme to investigate further. There is much to analyse in the narrative grips and the film techniques used in the adaptation. Many scenes from the novel are not included in the adaptation, for instance Hans and Rosa Hubermann's two biological children. This thesis has touched upon some of the differences or similarities between the novel and the film, but far from everything is analysed, as the primary focus of this thesis lies mainly on the novel.

Ultimately, this thesis has studied the descriptions of and references to historical elements in *The Book Thief*. The inclusion of these historical elements through the novel's narration contribute to the novel's historical value. By including a factual representation of important historical events, the novel gets more suitable for its young readers, by providing every reader the possibility to grasp the story's full context regardless of the readers' amount of prior knowledge on the subject. The novel alone must not be used to gain information on the historical elements presented. When supplementing with the film adaptation, some of the elements missing to grasp the full historical context are presented. Still, the amount of historical information is not sufficient if the aim is to learn about the details of World War II and the Holocaust. However, it can be useful to use the pieces as a supplementary element where factual books or documentaries are combined with this novel and film adaptation.

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Relevance to Teaching

The novel I have chosen for this thesis is by many characterised as a young adult fiction. Often English teachers use young adult fiction in their teaching, and I think that *The Book Thief* contains some beneficial elements for the classroom. Its many references to and descriptions of historical facts, both integrated in the plot and listed in centred blocks, can be used as a starting point to or another way of gaining knowledge of Germany during World War II.

During my courses in English subject didactics, one of the things we focused on was the use of young adult fiction in the classroom. Here, we used three different pieces of young adult fiction, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015), *Refugee Boy* (2001), and *The Hate That U Give* (2017). What we experienced as we began our teaching practice was that these three novels were so frequently used in the Norwegian classrooms that some pupils got exposed to the same piece of fiction twice during their time in school, once in elementary school and the other in lower secondary school. A novel like *The Book Thief* is not as frequently used in Norwegian classrooms, and it may be useful for English teachers to get insight into the novel's themes. *The Book Thief* also addresses historical elements that make it possible to use in an interdisciplinary arrangement, something that is highly appreciated in the *Core curriculum – values and principles for primary and secondary education* which state that the “school shall facilitate for learning in the three interdisciplinary topics health and life skills, democracy and citizenship, and sustainable development.”¹

An interdisciplinary arrangement can in this case be in English and history. The pupils can then read the book with a critical view on the historical elements in the novel. Then, the historical accuracy can be reviewed where the pupils point to elements in the novel of both inaccurate and accurate portrayals. Ultimately, the possibilities are limitless.

¹Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (2017). *Core curriculum – values and principles for primary and secondary education*. Regulation laid down by Royal Decree. The Curriculum for the Knowledge Promotion 2020. <https://www.udir.no/lk20/overordnet-del/?lang=eng>

