

The Book Thief



This is the opening chapter of *The Book Thief* by Marcus Zusak, which was written in 2005. It is set in Nazi Germany in World War II, and is narrated by Death.

First the colours.

Then the humans.

That's usually how I see things.

Or at least, how I try.

HERE IS A SMALL FACT

5

You are going to die.

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

10

REACTION TO THE AFOREMENTIONED FACT

Does this worry you?

I urge you - don't be afraid.

I'm nothing if not fair.

15

Of course, an introduction.

A beginning.

Where are my manners?

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

20

At that moment, you will be lying there (I rarely find people standing up). You will be caked in your own body. There might be a discovery; a scream will dribble down the air. The only sound I'll hear after that will be my own breathing, and the sound of the smell, of my footsteps. The question is, what colour will everything be at that moment when I come for you? What will the sky be saying? 25

Personally, I like a chocolate-coloured sky. Dark, dark chocolate. People say it suits me. I do, however, try to enjoy every colour I see – the whole spectrum. A billion or so flavours, none of them quite the same, and a sky to slowly suck on. It takes the edge off the stress. It helps me relax. 30

A SMALL THEORY

People observe the colours of a day only at its beginnings and ends, but to me it's quite clear that a day merges through a multitude of shades and intonations, with each passing moment. A single hour can consist of thousands of different colours. Waxy yellows, cloud-spat blues. In my line of work, I make it a point to notice them. 35

As I've suggested, my one saving grace is distraction. It keeps me sane. It helps me cope, considering the length of time I've been performing this job. The trouble is, who could ever replace me? Who could step in while I take a break, in your stock-standard resort-style holiday destination, whether it be tropical or of the ski-trip variety? The answer, of course, is nobody, which has prompted me to make a conscious, deliberate decision – to make distraction my holiday. Needless to say, I holiday in increments. In colours. 40 45

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

Which brings me to my next point.

It's the leftover humans. 50

The survivors.

They're the ones I can't stand to look at, although on many occasions, I still fail. I deliberately seek out the colours to keep my mind off them, but now and then, I witness the ones who are left behind, crumbling amongst the jigsaw puzzle of realisation, despair and surprise. They have punctured hearts. They have beaten lungs. 55

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

60

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

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

65

I saw the book thief three times.

