

8



Book burning, now and then



### 1. What do you know about book burning?

- ◆ Have you ever read a book or an article about that?
- ◆ Have you ever seen people burning books?
- ◆ Why do people burn books? Give some possible reasons/ occasions.



- ### 2. Watch an extract from the film "The Book Thief" on YouTube (the book burning scene) and talk about the feelings aroused.



IN DER MITTE DIESES PLATZES  
VERBRANNTEN AM 10. MAI 1933  
NATIONALSOZIALISTISCHE STU-  
DENTEN DIE WERKE HUNDERTER  
FREIER SCHRIFTSTELLER, PUBLI-  
ZISTEN, PHILOSOPHEN UND WIS-  
SENSCHAFTLER.



3. In pairs, do the following task: one of you reads the following text about the film and the other one reads the text about the book. When you are ready, complete the tables together, combining information from the texts you have read. Partners report to class.

## The Book Thief (2013)



**The Book Thief** is a 2013 World War II drama film directed by Brian Percival, starring Geoffrey Rush, Emily Watson, and Sophie Nélisse. The film is based on the 2005 novel *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak and adapted by Michael Petroni. The film is about a young girl living with her adoptive German family during the Nazi era. Taught to read by her kind-hearted foster father, the girl begins "borrowing" books and sharing them with the Jewish refugee being sheltered by her foster parents in their home. The film features a musical score by Oscar-winning composer John Williams.

### Plot

In February 1938, a voice representing Death tells about how the young Liesel Meminger has piqued his interest. In one of the opening scenes, Liesel is travelling with her mother and younger brother on a train. On the way, her brother dies and is buried next to the tracks. Liesel steals her first book, titled *The Grave Digger's Handbook*, when it falls out of the gravedigger's pocket. Liesel is then brought to her new home in Munich, where she meets her new foster parents Rosa Hubermann and Hans Hubermann. Rudy

Steiner, a boy who lives next door, accompanies her on her first day of school. When the teacher asks Liesel to write her name on the chalkboard, she is only able to write three Xs, revealing to her classmates that she is unable to write. She is taunted by her schoolmates who chant "dummkopf" ("dunce") at her. One of the boys, Franz Deutscher, challenges her to read just one word to which Liesel responds by beating him up. She impresses Rudy, and they become fast friends. When Hans, her foster father, realizes that Liesel cannot read, he begins to teach her, using the book that she took from the graveside, and a giant chalkboard. Liesel becomes captivated with reading anything she can.

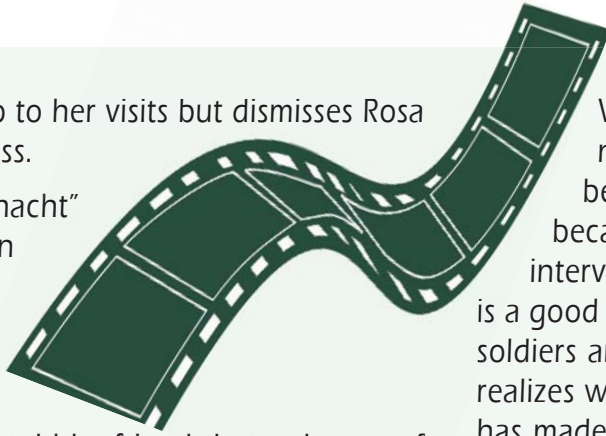
Liesel and Rudy become members of the Hitler Youth movement. While at a Nazi book burning ceremony, Liesel and Rudy are harassed into throwing books onto the bonfire by Franz, but Liesel is upset to see the books being burned. When the bonfire ends and everyone leaves, Liesel is still there and she grabs a book that has not been burned. She is seen by Ilsa Hermann, wife of the Burgermeister (mayor). When Rosa asks Liesel to take the laundry to the mayor's spacious, gated house, she realizes that the woman who saw her taking the book is the mayor's wife. Much to her surprise, Ilsa takes her into their library and tells Liesel she can come by anytime and read as much as she'd like. One day Liesel is found reading by the mayor who not

only puts a stop to her visits but dismisses Rosa as their laundress.

During "Kristallnacht" (Night of Broken Glass), Max Vandenburg and his mother, who

are Jewish, are told by friend that only one of them can escape, and Max's mother forces him to go. Max's father had saved Hans' life in World War I, and hence he goes to the Hubermanns' house where Rosa and Hans give him shelter. Max initially stays in Liesel's room while recovering from his trip, and they begin to become friends over their mutual hatred of Hitler. World War II begins, initially making most of the children in Liesel's neighbourhood very happy. Max is moved to the basement so that he can move around more, but it is cold and Max becomes dangerously ill. Liesel helps Max recover by reading to him books "borrowed" from the mayor's library with every spare moment.

One day while "borrowing" a book from the mayor's home, Liesel is followed by Rudy. He discovers the secret of Max, whose name he reads on a journal Max gave to Liesel for Christmas. Rudy guesses that her family is hiding someone, and he swears to never tell anyone. Franz overhears Rudy's last words of keeping it a secret and violently pushes Rudy to reveal the secret. Rudy throws the journal into the river to keep it away from Franz. After Franz leaves, Rudy plunges into the icy river to rescue the journal, and Liesel realizes that she can truly trust him. Soon, a local party member comes by to check the Hubermanns' basement, and they have to hide Max.



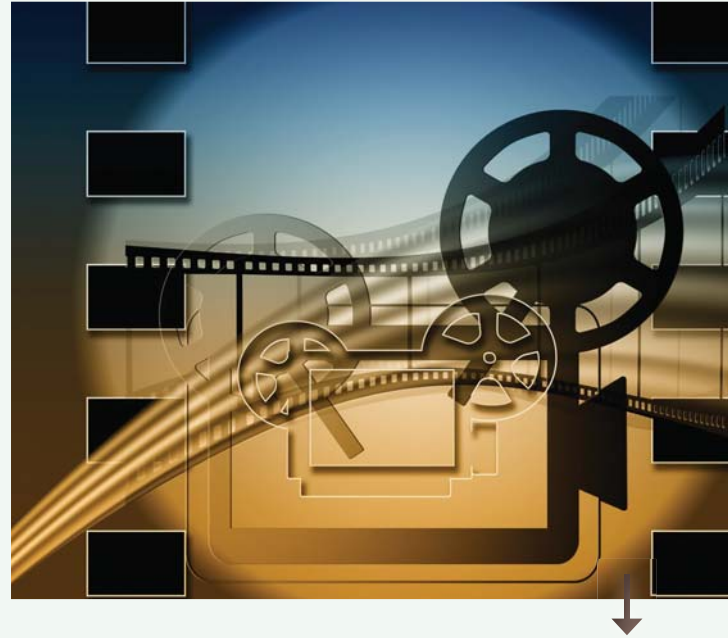
While working, Hans sees a neighbour and friend named Lehman being taken away by the police because he is a Jew. Hans tries to intervene, telling the officer that Lehman is a good man, but Hans's name is taken by the soldiers and he is thrown to the ground. Hans realizes what a mistake he has made, since this has made his family visible. He tells the family, and Max realises he must leave in order to protect them. Hans then receives a telegram that he has been conscripted into the army and must leave immediately.

On the way home from school, Liesel believes she has seen Max in a line of Jews being forcibly marched through town, and she begins screaming his name, running through the line. She is thrown to the sidewalk twice by German soldiers and finally relents when Rosa picks her up and takes her home.

Hans returns home after being injured, and the family is reunited only for a short time. One night the city is bombed by accident, and the air raid sirens fail to go off. Hans, Rosa, and Rudy's family are killed in the blast. Liesel was spared from the bombing because she fell asleep in the basement while writing in the journal given to her by Max. She sees her foster family on the ground, dead, she cries and hugs them. Neighbours bring Rudy out of his house, barely alive. He begins to tell Liesel that he loves her, but he dies before he can finish the sentence. During this scene, Death is heard speaking again about how he received the souls of the dead. Liesel passes out, and one of the soldiers carries her to a stretcher. When she wakes up, she sees a book among the rubble and picks it up. She then sees the mayor and Ilsa drive up.

With Ilsa being the only friend she has left, Liesel runs up to her and hugs her.

Two years later, after Germany has fallen to the Allies, Liesel is working in the tailor shop owned by Rudy's father. Max enters. Overjoyed by his survival and return, she runs to hug him. The final scene is Death speaking again about Liesel's life and her death at the age of 90, mentioning her husband, children, and grandchildren, as we look over her modern day Manhattan Upper East Side apartment with pictures of her past and a portrait of her, upon which the camera lingers. The narrator does not state whom she married but implies that she became a writer.



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Book\\_Thief\\_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Book_Thief_(film)) (adapted text)



**The Book Thief** is a 2005 historical novel by Australian author Markus Zusak and is his most popular work. Published in 2005, *The Book Thief* became an international bestseller and was translated into several languages. It was adapted into a 2013 feature film of the same name.

## Plot

After the death of Liesel's young brother on a train to Molching, Liesel arrives at the home of her new foster parents, Hans and Rosa Hubermann, distraught and withdrawn. During her time there, she is exposed to the horrors of the Nazi regime, caught between the innocence

of childhood and the maturity demanded by her destructive surroundings. As the political situation in Germany deteriorates, her foster parents harbor a Jewish fist fighter named Max Vandenburg. Hans, who has developed a close relationship with Liesel, teaches her to read, first in her bedroom, then in the basement. Recognizing the power of writing and sharing the written word, Liesel not only begins to steal books that the Nazi party is looking to destroy, but also writes her own story, and shares the power of language with Max.

## Characters

**Liesel Meminger.** The protagonist of the story is an adopted girl on the verge of adolescence, with blonde hair that is "a close enough brand of German blonde" and a "smile that is starving" when she shows it. Her eyes, however, are

brown. She is fostered by the Hubermanns after her biological father "abandons" their family, her brother dies, and her mother is forced to send her to a foster home due to her political belief (communism), which is forbidden at the time. Liesel is the "book thief" referred to in the title. Liesel is fascinated by the power of words, as shown in the quotation, "I have hated the words and I have loved them." She steals books from snow, fire, and the mayor's wife.

**Hans Hubermann (Papa).** Liesel's foster father and husband of Rosa, Hans is a former German soldier during World War I, accordion player, and painter. He develops a close and loving relationship with Liesel, and becomes a main source of strength and support for her throughout the novel. He, like Liesel, doesn't have much experience with reading. Together, the two help each other with reading and write all the words they learn on a wall in the basement with his cans of white paint. He helps Max because Max's father helped him in the past.

**Rosa Hubermann (Mama).** Liesel's sharp-tongued, often abrasive, foster mother, she has a "wardrobe" build and a displeased face, brown-grey tightly-cinched hair often tied up in a bun, and "chlorinated" eyes. Despite her temper, she is a loving wife to Hans and mother to Liesel. To supplement the household income, she does washing and ironing for five of the wealthier households in Molching.

**Rudy Steiner.** Liesel's neighbour, Rudy, has bony legs, blue eyes, lemon-colored hair and a penchant for getting in the middle of situations when he shouldn't. Despite having the appearance of an archetypal German, he does not directly support the Nazis. As a member of

a relatively poor household with six children, Rudy is habitually hungry. He is known throughout the neighbourhood because of the "Jesse Owens incident", in which he colored himself black with coal one night and ran one hundred meters at the local sports field. He is academically and athletically gifted, which attracts the attention of Nazi Party officials, leading to an attempted recruitment. His lack of support for the Nazi party becomes problematic as the story progresses. Rudy becomes Liesel's best friend, and eventually falls in love with her, always trying to get a kiss out of her...

**Max Vandenburg.** A Jewish fist-fighter who takes refuge from the Nazi regime in the Hubermann's basement. He is the son of a WWI German soldier who fought alongside Hans Hubermann, and the two developed a close friendship during the war. He has brown, feather-like hair and swampy brown eyes. During the Nazi reign of terror, Hans agrees to shelter Max and hide him from the Nazi party. During his stay at the Hubermanns' house, Max befriends Liesel, because of their shared affinity for words. He writes two books for her and presents her with a sketchbook that contains his life story, which helps Liesel to develop as a writer and reader, which, in turn, saves her life from the bombs.

**Ilsa Hermann.** The wife of the mayor of Molching who employs Rosa Hubermann. She entered depression after the death of her only son in the Great War. Ilsa allows Liesel to visit and read books in her personal library. She also gives Liesel a little black book, which leads Liesel to write her own story, "The Book Thief".

**Werner Meminger.** Liesel's little brother, who died suddenly on the train with his mother, while being transported to their foster parents.

**Liesel's Mother.** Liesel's mother is only mentioned in the story a few times. Liesel's father was taken away by the Nazi's prior to the novel starting because he was a Communist, and the reasons her mother – Paula Meminger

– was taking both her children to foster care was to save them from Nazi persecution. Liesel's mother met the same fate as her father, but Liesel eventually realizes her mother gave her away to protect her.



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Book\\_Thief](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Book_Thief) (adapted text)



<http://hipwallpaper.com/the-book-thief-backgrounds/>

*The story*

Broader message  
of the novel/film

Point of view:  
who narrates the story?  
Is it a good choice?  
What is the implication?

Context of the story:  
setting / place - time  
period

Basic characters  
of the story  
(name, appearance,  
personality, significance)

Significant events /  
actions in the plot

Basic ideas conveyed

Conflict - opposition  
displayed

Your personal reaction  
to the story - feelings



## Character analysis

Name ( <i>choose one of the characters</i> )	
Appearance/ physical attributes	
Personality traits	
Background	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Conflicts he/she experiences</li><li>▪ Struggles he/she encounters</li><li>▪ How he/she overcomes them</li></ul>	
Actions / behaviours	
Motivation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ reasons for acting the way he/she acts - for making the choices he/she makes</li><li>▪ how they act (wisely - impulsively - ethically etc)</li></ul>	
Relationships with other characters	
Significance of role in the story	

4. Form groups and discuss about the following issues. Then report to the class.

- ◆ Which perspective did you like most - the book's or the film's? Why?
- ◆ Which description did you find more complete? Why?
- ◆ What are the main differences between the two perspectives? Which aspects does each perspective focus on and why?
- ◆ Why do you think Death is used as the narrator of the story?
- ◆ "Reading" has a central role in the story. What do you think its connotation is? What does it symbolise? Note down at least three words to show what "reading" symbolises in the context of the story.





5. Read the following text and discuss about it in class. Does it support the views and conclusions shared in the previous activities?

## Themes in the story

**Mortality.** The book is introduced by the character/narrator Death, which underlines that mortality is very present in the lives of each character. Throughout the novel, the deaths of prominent characters reaffirm the presence of mortality. Because the novel takes place during World War II, death and genocide are nearly omnipresent in the novel.

Death is presented in a manner that is less distant and threatening. Because Death narrates and explains the reasons behind each character's destruction, as well as explains how he feels that he must take the life of each character, Death is given a sense of care rather than fear. At one point, Death states "even death has a heart," which reaffirms that there is a care present in the concept of death and dying.

**Language, reading and writing.** These three things act as symbols of freedom and expression throughout the story. As symbolic elements, they provide liberation and identity to the characters who are able to wield their power. They also provide a framework for Liesel's coming of age. In the beginning of the novel, she obtains a book at her brother's funeral, one that she is unable to read. As the story progresses, she slowly learns how to read and write because of the tutelage of her foster father Hans. At the end of the story, her character arc is heavily defined by her ability to read and write. The development of her literacy mirrors her physical growth and strength developing over the course of the story. Language, reading, and writing also serve as social markers. The wealthy citizens in the story

are often portrayed as owning their own libraries and being literate, while the poor characters are illiterate and do not own any books.

The Nazi burning of books is also represented in the novel. Symbolically, Liesel's continuous rescue of the books the Nazis burn represents her reclaiming freedom and fight against being controlled by the Nazis.

**Love.** In the midst of the damage that war, death, and loss have caused Liesel and the other characters in the book, love is seen as an agent of change and freedom. Liesel overcomes her traumas by learning to love and be loved by her foster family and her friends. In the beginning of the novel, Liesel is traumatized not only by the death of her brother and her separation from her only family, but also as a result of the larger issues regarding war-torn Germany and the destruction by the Nazi party. As Liesel's foster father Hans develops a relationship with her, healing and growth are a direct result. This pattern is reflected in the relational dynamic between the Hubermann family and Max. In the midst of governmental policies that reflect on who is worthy of love and acceptance, the Hubermanns' relationship with Max defies the Nazi regime. Further, the love that Max and Liesel develop through their friendship creates a strong contrast to the hate that is the backdrop of the story.

The theme of love also intertwines with the themes of identity and language/reading because all of these themes have the purpose of providing freedom and power in the midst of chaos and control.



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Book\\_Thief](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Book_Thief)



6. Watch again the extract from the film “The Book Thief” on YouTube (the book burning scene). Compare the book burning scene with the corresponding chapter of the book below.



- How different/ similar are they?
- How effective is the screen adaptation of this part of the book?
- Do you possibly feel that something is missing?

### 100 PERCENT PURE GERMAN SWEAT

“Shouldn’t you be getting ready, Liesel?” Don’t you have a bonfire to go to?”

“Yes, Papa.”

The book thief went and changed into her Hitler Youth uniform, and half an hour later, they left, walking to the BDM headquarters. From there, the children would be taken to the town square in their groups.

Speeches would be made.

A fire would be lit.

A book would be stolen.

\* \* \*

People lined the streets as the youth of Germany marched toward the town hall and the square. On quite a few occasions Liesel forgot about her mother and any other problem of which she currently held ownership. There was a swell in her chest as the people clapped them on. Some kids waved to their parents, but only briefly—it was an explicit instruction that they march straight and don’t look or wave to the crowd.

When Rudy’s group came into the square and was instructed to halt, there was a discrepancy. Tommy Müller. The rest of the regiment stopped marching and Tommy plowed directly into the boy in front of him.



“Dummkopf!” the boy spat before turning around.

“I’m sorry,” said Tommy, arms held apologetically out. His face tripped over itself. “I couldn’t hear.”

It was only a small moment, but it was also a preview of troubles to come. For Tommy. For Rudy.

At the end of the marching, the Hitler Youth divisions were allowed to disperse. It would have been near impossible to keep them all together as the bonfire burned in their eyes and excited them. Together, they cried one united “heil Hitler” and were free to wander. Liesel looked for Rudy, but once the crowd of children scattered, she was caught inside a mess of uniforms and high-pitched words. Kids calling out to other kids.

By four-thirty, the air had cooled considerably. People joked that they needed warming up. “That’s all this trash is good for anyway.”

Carts were used to wheel it all in. It was dumped in the middle of the town square and doused with something sweet. Books and paper and other material would slide or tumble down, only to be thrown back onto the pile. From further away, it looked like something volcanic. Or something grotesque and alien that had somehow landed miraculously in the middle of town and needed to be snuffed out, and fast.

The applied smell leaned toward the crowd, who were kept at a good distance. There were well in excess of a thousand people, on the ground, on the town hall steps, on the rooftops that surrounded the square.

When Liesel tried to make her way through, a crackling sound prompted her to think that the fire had already begun. It hadn’t. The sound was kinetic humans, flowing, charging up.

They’ve started without me!

Although something inside told her that this was a crime—after all, her three books were the most precious items she owned—she was

compelled to see the thing lit. She couldn’t help it. I guess humans like to watch a little destruction. Sand castles, houses of cards, that’s where they begin. Their great skill is their capacity to escalate.

The thought of missing it was eased when she found a gap in the bodies and was able to see the mound of guilt, still intact. It was prodded and splashed, even spat on. It reminded her of an unpopular child, forlorn and bewildered, powerless to alter its fate. No one liked it. Head down. Hands in pockets. Forever. Amen.

Bits and pieces continued falling to its sides as Liesel hunted for Rudy. Where is that Saukerl?

When she looked up, the sky was crouching.

A horizon of Nazi flags and uniforms rose upward, crippling her view every time she attempted to see over a smaller child’s head. It was pointless. The crowd was itself. There was no swaying it, squeezing through, or reasoning with it. You breathed with it and you sang its songs. You waited for its fire.

Silence was requested by a man on a podium. His uniform was shiny brown. The iron was practically still on it. The silence began.

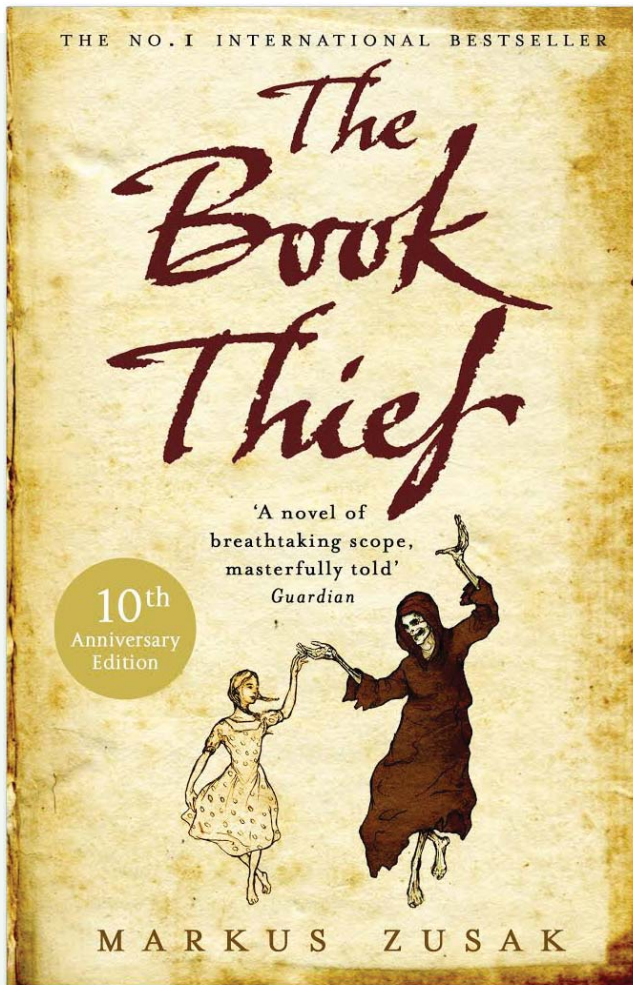
His first words: “Heil Hitler!”

His first action: the salute to the Führer.

“Today is a beautiful day,” he continued. “Not only is it our great leader’s birthday—but we also stop our enemies once again. We stop them reaching into our minds...”

Liesel still attempted to fight her way through.

“We put an end to the disease that has been spread through Germany for the last twenty years, if not more!” He was performing now what is called a Schreierei—a consummate exhibition of passionate shouting—warning the



crowd to be watchful, to be vigilant, to seek out and destroy the evil machinations plotting to infect the mother-land with its deplorable ways. "The immoral! The Kommunisten!" That word again. That old word. Dark rooms. Suit-wearing men. "Die Juden—the Jews!"

Halfway through the speech, Liesel surrendered. As the word communist seized her, the remainder of the Nazi recital swept by, either side, lost somewhere in the German feet around her. Waterfalls of words. A girl treading water. She thought it again. Kommunisten.

Up until now, at the BDM, they had been told that Germany was the superior race, but no one else in particular had been mentioned. Of course, everyone knew about the Jews, as they were the

main offender in regard to violating the German ideal. Not once, however, had the communists been mentioned until today, regardless of the fact that people of such political creed were also to be punished.

She had to get out.

In front of her, a head with parted blond hair and pigtails sat absolutely still on its shoulders. Staring into it, Liesel revisited those dark rooms of her past and her mother answering questions made up of one word.

She saw it all so clearly.

Her starving mother, her missing father. Kommunisten.

Her dead brother.

"And now we say goodbye to this trash, this poison."

Just before Liesel Meminger pivoted with nausea to exit the crowd, the shiny, brown-shirted creature walked from the podium. He received a torch from an accomplice and lit the mound, which dwarfed him in all its culpability. "Heil Hitler!"

The audience: "Heil Hitler!"

A collection of men walked from a platform and surrounded the heap, igniting it, much to the approval of everyone. Voices climbed over shoulders and the smell of pure German sweat struggled at first, then poured out. It rounded corner after corner, till they were all swimming in it. The words, the sweat. And smiling. Let's not forget the smiling.

Many jocular comments followed, as did another onslaught of "heil Hitlering." You know, it actually makes me wonder if anyone ever lost an eye or injured a hand or wrist with all of that. You'd only need to be facing the wrong way at the wrong time or stand marginally too

close to another person. Perhaps people did get injured. Personally, I can only tell you that no one died from it, or at least, not physically. There was, of course, the matter of forty million people I picked up by the time the whole thing was finished, but that's getting all metaphoric. Allow me to return us to the fire.

The orange flames waved at the crowd as paper and print dissolved inside them. Burning words were torn from their sentences.

On the other side, beyond the blurry heat, it was possible to see the brownshirts and swastikas joining hands. You didn't see people. Only uniforms and signs.

Birds above did laps.

They circled, somehow attracted to the glow—until they came too close to the heat. Or was it the humans? Certainly, the heat was nothing.

In her attempt to escape, a voice found her.  
"Liesel!"

It made its way through and she recognized it. It was not Rudy, but she knew that voice.

She twisted free and found the face attached to it. Oh, no. Ludwig Schmeikl. He did not, as she expected, sneer or joke or make any conversation at all. All he was able to do was pull her toward him and motion to his ankle. It had been crushed among the excitement and was bleeding dark and ominous through his sock. His face wore a helpless expression beneath his tangled blond hair. An animal. Not a deer in lights. Nothing so typical or specific. He was just an animal, hurt among the melee of its own kind, soon to be trampled by it.

Somehow, she helped him up and dragged him toward the back. Fresh air.

They staggered to the steps at the side of the church. There was some room there and they rested, both relieved.

Breath collapsed from Schmeikl's mouth. It slipped down, over his throat. He managed to speak. Sitting down, he held his ankle and found Liesel Meminger's face. "Thanks," he said, to her mouth rather than her eyes. More slabs of breath. "And . . ." They both watched images of school-yard antics, followed by a school-yard beating. "I'm sorry—for, you know."

Liesel heard it again.

Kommunisten.

She chose, however, to focus on Ludwig Schmeikl. "Me too."

They both concentrated on breathing then, for there was nothing more to do or say. Their business had come to an end.

The blood enlarged on Ludwig Schmeikl's ankle.

A single word leaned against the girl.

To their left, flames and burning books were cheered like heroes.

She remained on the steps, waiting for Papa, watching the stray ash and the corpse of collected books. Everything was sad. Orange and red embers looked like rejected candy, and most of the crowd had vanished. She'd seen Frau Diller leave (very satisfied) and Pfiffikus (white hair, a Nazi uniform, the same dilapidated shoes, and a triumphant whistle). Now there was nothing but cleaning up, and soon, no one would even imagine it had happened.

But you could smell it.

An extract from the book *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. London: Transworld Publishers, 2007, pp. 113-120

Film poster: <http://www.imdb.com> Book cover: <http://www.amazon.com>



7. Did you know that book burnings took place in Greece, too? Read the extract from the novel *Wildcat Under Glass*, by Greek author Alki Zei, that talks about book burning during the dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas. You may also watch an extract from the television adaptation of Alki Zei's novel (TV series directed by Petros Lykas and produced by ET-1 in 1990 - <http://archive.ert.gr/66831/> 8th episode: 9:40 - 18:30)



<http://www.auth.gr/news/articles/17710>

- Compare the two burnings as depicted in Zei's novel and Percival's film.
- Describe the heroes' feelings and discuss the ways the novel and the film present the book burning ritual.

### Alki Zei, "The Harmful Books"

The Harmful Books, Myrto's Stiff Neck and the Silliness of Silliness

Grandfather was perfectly right when he said that all we ever had was holidays. One day, not long after that, we had sat through only two classes, when, at recess, Mr Karanasis made us gather in the schoolyard and told us to form a line.

"You will not be going to your classrooms", he announced. "Instead, I am going to take you to the town square where the entire school will learn a great and important lesson".

"Do you think he's going to take us on one of those 'Know-your-Community' walks?" I asked Alexis.

"Something else is going on", he answered. "The upper classes are going too. They're too big for that."

When we reached the square, everything was very confusing. Right in the middle, just where the column stood with the marble lion on it, a huge bonfire was blazing. A little beyond it, on a platform, stood the Mayor, Amstradam Pikipikiram, Pipitsa's father and the Bishop in his vestments. People stood all around the bonfire, mostly children in groups from the schools. We couldn't figure out what was going on.

Soon two men arrived lugging enormous sacks on their shoulders. They shoved people aside to get through. When they got close to the fire, they emptied their sacks onto it. It was books!

"What are they doing?" Alexis asked a boy who was standing next to us.

"They are burning the harmful books", he told us.



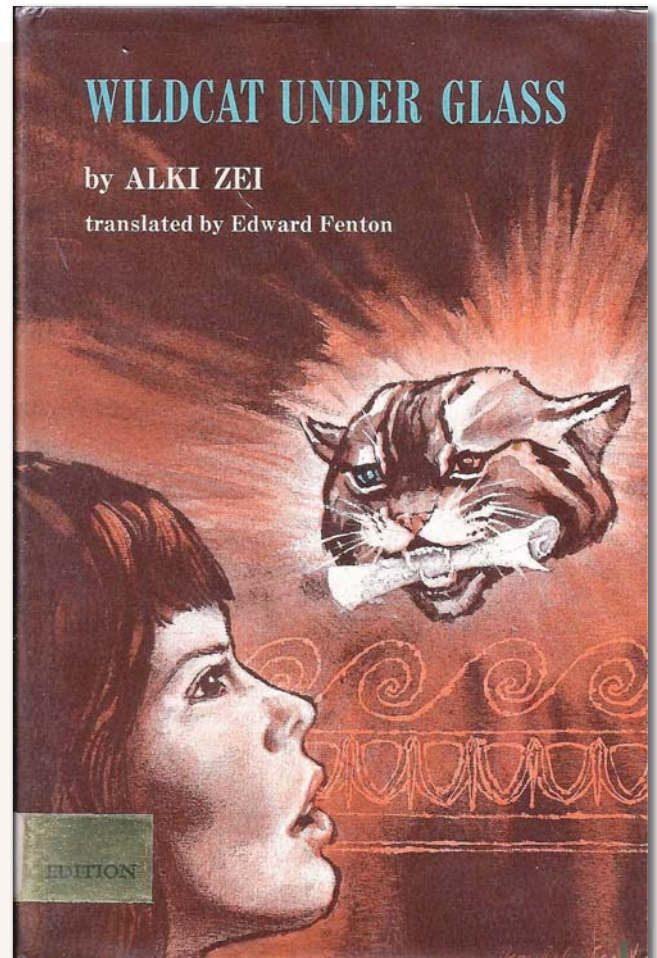
"Let's go nearer and watch", Alexis said.

Mr Karanasis climbed up onto the platform and started to deliver a lecture. He talked about the harmful and dreadful books that poison the soul and make man criminal.

We wriggled through the crowd and got close to the bonfire. You would have thought it was St. John's Eve, when the children light bonfires to burn the May Day wreaths and jump over them. The children from the upper classes were taking running leaps now. It was curious how the books burned. At first, when the pages caught fire, the book opened as through some invisible hand had touched it. Then, as it burned, it looked like a flower closing its petals. Soon the fire died down and the primary-school children could jump over it.

But the men reappeared with their sacks and emptied them. The flames rose higher and higher. The children shrieked. Hoopla! Who can leap highest? At the moment, while a sack was being dumped out,, some of the books landed right at our feet. I started to kick one of them toward the fire. And then I stopped. I had seen that book somewhere before. It had a black binding with gold letters on the cover. I flipped the cover open with the toe of my shoe and then I was sure. It was one of Grand – father's Ancients. Grandfather had written his signature in purple ink in all his books. I knew it at once, thick and broad, on the flyleaf. Grandfather never let anybody touch his books. How had his Ancient gotten here, ready to fall into the fire? I stopped and picked it up. For a moment I held it in my hand.

"Well, throw it!" Alexis whispered to me. He grabbed the book from my grasp and flung it into the fire. "Can't you see they're watching you?"



The cover of the 1968 edition of the English Translation of Alki Zei's book (published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston)

I grew confused. From the platform, Mr Karanasis and Pikipikiram were looking in my direction and saying something. I glanced around me. I could see children yelling and even grown-ups, too and leaping over the fire. Most of the people, however, just stood there silently, their lips pressed together. I scanned their faces one by one certain that I would find a man with his hat brim pulled down so that it nearly hid his eyes and with a thick mustache, like a brush.

Then, without even knowing why I was doing it, I started to push my way past the other children in order to back out of the ever-

tightening circle which was drawing Alexis and me, standing in the front row as we were, ever closer to the bonfire. Alexis was behind me. We stood a little way beyond the crowd and caught our breath. In the air above our heads bits of charred paper flew about like bats.

"You should have seen the look Mr Karanasis gave you when you bent over to pick up that book!" Alexis said.

When the fire went out and they didn't have any more books to throw on it, the crowd began to break up. Mr Karanasis said that it was too late for us to go back to school and dismissed us. Alexis and I set off for home, I don't know why, but I had not yet told him that the book I had stopped to pick up was one of Grandfather's Ancients. When we were out of the square, I noticed Grandfather standing near the wall of a house. Alexis' father stood beside him. They did not know each other. They stood almost back to back, not speaking. Grandfather was poking with his cane at the burned paper which filled the street and the sidewalk. Alexis and I ran toward them.

"Grandfather, one of your Ancients got into the fire!" I said.

Grandfather nodded his head. "I know".

Alexis' father turned around in surprise.

"Well, Melissa, introduce me to your grandfather".

"Grandfather, this is Alexis' father ---"

The two of them were shaking hands even before I could finish.

"Did they take some of your books?" Alexis' father asked in a low voice.

"They came this morning with their sacks", my grandfather replied.

Glancing around him, Alexis' father said, "They took my manuscripts as well".

[...]

When we returned home, Grandfather took me into his study. On the shelves the empty holes gaped where the missing books had stood.

"What you saw today, Melissa, is something you must never forget as long as you live. And after I am dead I want the places where the books were, to remain empty, just to remind you".

That's what my grandfather said. And for the first time in my life, from the time I was born, I suppose, I saw him sit with his back hunched and not straight up, as he always had.



Adapted extract from the novel *Wildcat Under Glass*, translated by Edward Fenton (pp. 138-143, 1968 edition, published in New York by Holt, Rinehart and Winston).



8. Read the following text about the “Book Burning Memorial” which is located in Berlin. You can also watch the documentary “Monument Walk Berlin, Book Burning Memorial” on YouTube (with english subtitles).

Before you read or watch, look at the pictures below and discuss:

- ◆ What do you think the impact of such a memorial on visitors is?
- ◆ Looking at the photo of students burning books in 1933 (on page 135), what do you think the impact of this ritual on German citizens of the time was?
- ◆ What do you think the reactions of the burnt books’ authors were?
- ◆ Do you think it is worth building a monument for “book burning”?

### The “sunken library”

When you stroll across Bebelplatz in Berlin’s Mitte district, you often come across people staring at the same spot on the ground. When you get closer, you see a glass plate set in the paving stones, and below it an underground room with empty bookshelves.

The memorial shows what is missing. Underground, almost out of sight, no books, empty white shelves, directly under Bebelplatz. What was lost and burnt were the books by those who the Nazis ostracized and persecuted, who had to leave the country and whose stories were no longer allowed to be told.

In the middle of this square on 10 May 1933, Nazi students burnt the works of hundreds of independent authors, journalists, philosophers and academics.

### The Memorial

The memorial entitled “Library” is located between the State Opera, St Hedwig’s Cathedral and buildings of the Humboldt University. It was designed by Israeli artist Micha Ullman.



*The sunken library by night.*

<http://www.memorialmuseums.org/eng/staettens/view/1417/Book-Burning-Memorial#>

The initiative to build a memorial to the book burnings came about in the Berlin Senate shortly after German reunification. It consists of a two-by-two metre large space below ground level on Bebelplatz, which can be viewed through a glass top. The walls are painted white, while empty book shelves symbolise the cultural loss caused by the National Socialist dictatorship. Symbolically, the underground

bookshelves have space for around 20,000 books, as a reminder of the 20,000 books that went up in flames here on 10 May 1933 at the behest of the Nazis. The library memorial was unveiled on 20 March 1995.

Two bronze plates also set in the ground contain information and an inscription with the warning:

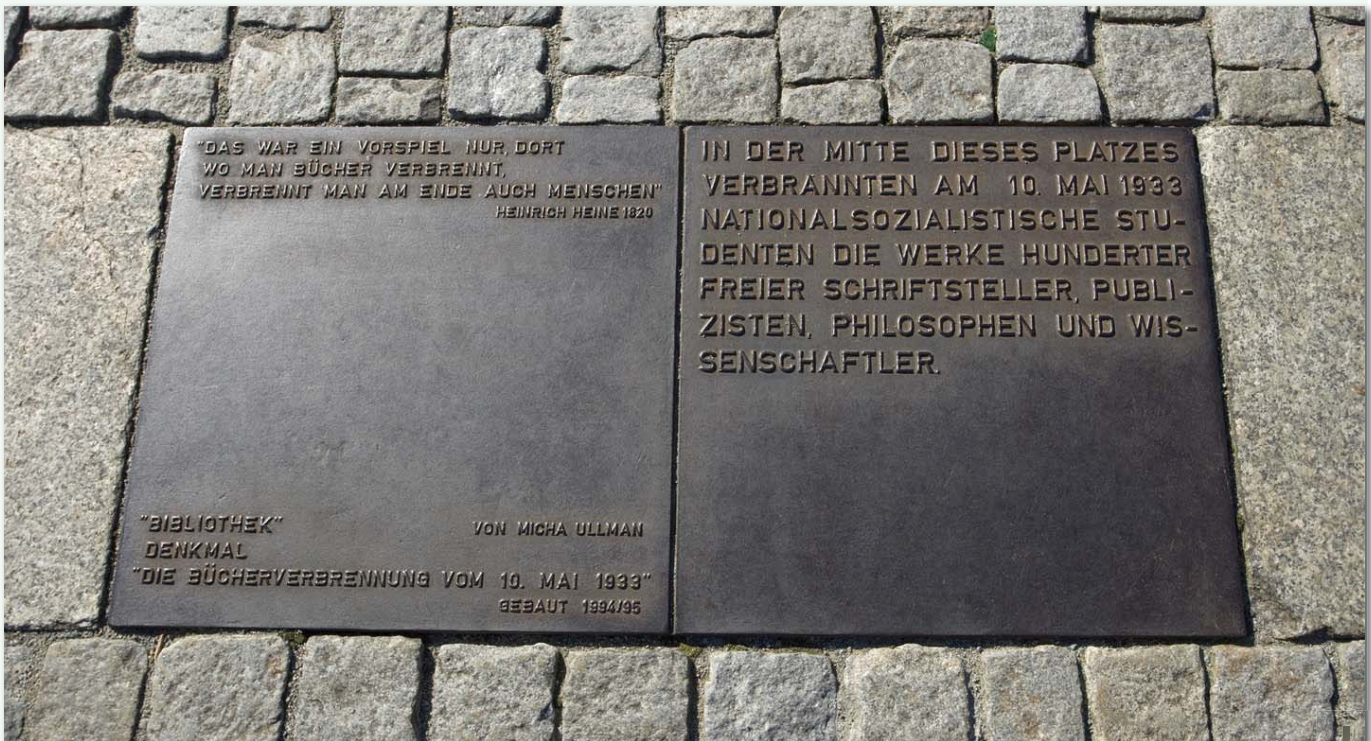
That was but a prelude;  
where they burn books,  
they will ultimately burn people as well.

Heinrich Heine, 1820



*Visitors at the Book Burning Memorial.*

<http://www.memorialmuseums.org/eng/staettens/view/1417/Book-Burning-Memorial#>



*Heinrich Heine's quotation at the memorial.*

<http://www.visitberlin.de/en/book-burning-memorial-bebelplatz>

## The book burning

The book burning was organized by the German Student Association (Deutsche Studentenschaft, DSt), an association of all student councils at German universities. From 1931 on, the German Student Association was increasingly under the influence of the National Socialist German Students' Association (Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund, NSDStB) and the NSDAP. The book burning of May 10, 1933, was



Berlin, 1933, Students during the book burning on Opernplatz, Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-14598, k.A.

<http://www.memorialmuseums.org/eng/staettens/view/1417/Book-Burning-Memorial#>

the peak of the "Action against the Un-German Spirit", which began on April 12, 1933. In flyers and in the press the students called for purging German writing of the "Jewish subversive spirit" and demanded of their colleagues that they denounce "inept" university teachers and students as well as "cleanse" university and institute libraries of the pilloried literature. The high point and finale of the action was the book burning, which simultaneously took place in 22 German university cities. A torchlight procession passed through Berlin on the evening of May 10, leading from the

student house in Oranienburger Straße to Opernplatz, on which a large pile of wood had been set up. Joseph Goebbels, Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, gave a fiery speech to the crowd on Opernplatz. Similar ceremonies took place in other cities – following a "fire oath", the students threw books onto the bonfire reciting the respective author's name. The works of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Heinrich Mann, Erich Maria Remarque, Kurt Tucholsky, Anna Seghers, Alfred Döblin, Heinrich Heine and many other authors were burned. The stock exchange gazette of the German bookselling trade later published a list of a total of 131 authors whose books had to be removed from all book stores and libraries. Most of them were prohibited until the collapse of the National Socialist regime.

## Victims

Many poets and authors living in the German Reich felt compelled to leave the country following the burning of their books on May 10, 1933. Many of them saw their situation as



The book burning in Berlin (1933)

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1933-may-10-berlin-book-burning.JPG>

hopeless and committed suicide. Many of the authors who did not emigrate were persecuted by the SS and the Gestapo, murdered or chose to take their lives too: for instance, Erich Mühsam was murdered by members of the SS in the Oranienburg concentration camp in 1934. Jewish author Gertrud Kolmar was deported to Auschwitz in 1943 after having conducted

forced labour in Berlin for many years. Publicist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Carl von Ossietzky died in a hospital in Berlin in 1938 following several years at the Esterwegen concentration camp. Walter Benjamin, Ernst Toller, Stefan Zweig, Kurt Tucholsky, Egon Friedell and many others committed suicide.



Adapted from texts on the websites:

*Information Portal to European Sites of Remembrance*

<http://www.memorialmuseums.org/eng/staettens/view/1417/Book-Burning-Memorial#>

*Visit Berlin*

<http://www.visitberlin.de/en/book-burning-memorial-bebelplatz>



*The book burning in Berlin (1933). The United States Holocaust Museum*

[http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media\\_ph.php?ModuleId=10005852&MediaId=3533](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_ph.php?ModuleId=10005852&MediaId=3533)

9. Now answer the questions below.

a. When was the memorial built and why?

.....  
.....

b. What is the message conveyed by the empty bookshelves?

.....  
.....

c. Which books were “lost and burned”?

.....  
.....

d. Why did the German Student Association of the time take part in such a ritual?

.....  
.....

e. What was the “Action against the Un-German Spirit”?

.....  
.....

f. What did the book burning “ritual” include?

.....  
.....

g. What was the impact of book burning on the authors of the books?

.....  
.....

h. What is your opinion of the inscription with Heinrich Heine’s words?

.....  
.....

10. Form groups and visit websites that present the history of the monument and the Nazi book burnings. Use the information to prepare a poster or a power point presentation in relation to the issue and present it to the class.



*Nazi Book burnings*

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazi\\_book\\_burnings#/media/File:Yad\\_Vashem\\_Books\\_burned\\_by\\_Nazis\\_by\\_David\\_Shankbone.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazi_book_burnings#/media/File:Yad_Vashem_Books_burned_by_Nazis_by_David_Shankbone.jpg)



11. Organize a debate about “students burning their books on the last day of school year”. The class will be divided in 2 groups: A “for” and B “against” book burning. You can search the internet for relevant information or stories in order to prepare your arguments for or against this “ritual”.

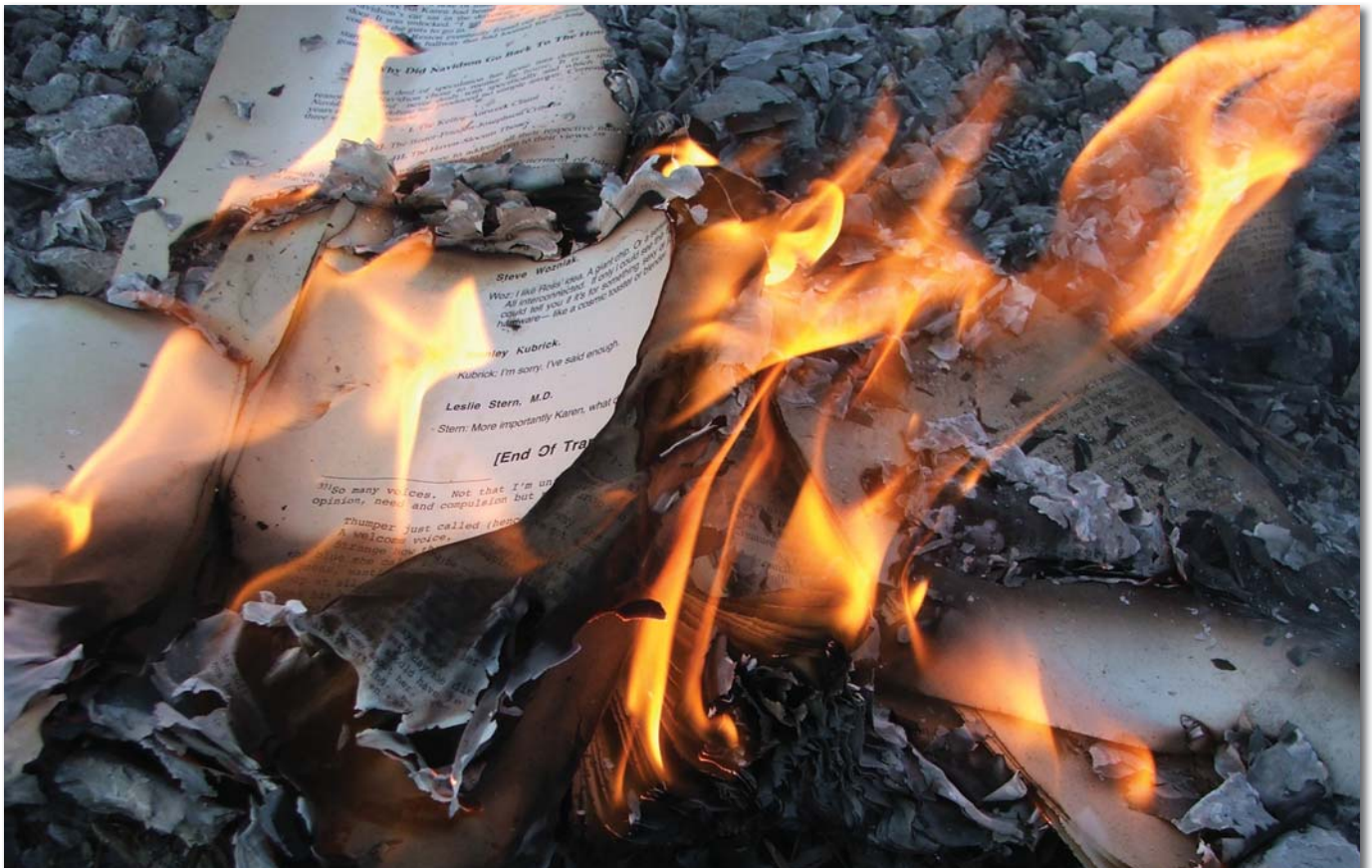


### Group A

Students believe that they should go on burning their textbooks because this ritual symbolises their freedom.

### Group A

Students believe that book burning symbolises censorship and should be avoided. They suggest alternative ways of celebrating the end of the school year.



# 8

# Book burning, now and then

