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The Extent of Historical Accuracy in *The Book Thief*

Many popular stories and movies have been created based on the happenings in Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler's rule, but many do not contain the historical accuracy and insightful perspectives of which that is found in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. The novel is a New York Times bestseller, and in 2013 was made into a motion picture, gaining its popularity from its unique storyline and perspective. In *The Book Thief*, a teenage girl named Liesel Meminger starts a new life in a foster home with an elderly couple in the fictional town of Molching, Germany. Liesel quickly makes new friends and strives to help her parents as much as she can, such as hiding a Jewish man in their basement from Nazi officials. Liesel experiences many hardships throughout the book, including emotional stress, not being able to read, and witnessing the mistreatment of Jews ordered by Hitler himself. Most certainly, *The Book Thief* presents historically accurate depictions of actual historic events that occurred in Germany during World War II. However, there are certain occurrences in the book that have happened in Germany, but are not in the right historical time bracket. Despite this, what makes *The Book Thief* so inspiring and thought provoking is the perspective of which it is told from. Instead of being a typical historical fiction novel, the novel is narrated by the persona of "death" and from Liesel Meminger, who sees the world through an innocent lens. Many children during this time may have shared the same thoughts and experiences as Liesel, whether or not they were targeted by Nazi officials. The extent to which *The Book Thief* accurately depicts historical

events in Germany during World War II can be found in multiple instances in the book, however some events are inaccurate due to the time in which they take place in the novel, but despite this provides an insightful perspective from a young German girl and what her thoughts were during the Holocaust.

First and foremost, the most accurate aspect of *The Book Thief* is the mistreatment that is given to Jews over the years since Liesel arrives in Molching. In fact, in the first couple days after Liesel arrives, she and her new friend Rudy Steiner walk to school together and see a street that is labelled by the Nazis as a Jewish street that was not to be entered. Liesel describes the street as:

“It was a place nobody wanted to stay and look at, but almost everyone did. Shaped like a long, broken arm, the road contained several houses with lacerated windows and bruised walls. The Star of David was painted on their doors. These houses were almost like lepers. At the very least, they were infected sores on the injured German territory. ‘Schiller Strasse,’ Rudy said. ‘The road of yellow stars.’ (Zusak 51)

Historically speaking, this passage is correct, as Jewish people in Germany were targeted as soon as Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. He blamed the Jews for Germany’s problems. As of early March 1933, he ordered the SA, the Sturmabteilung, or the Assault Division, to turn customers away from Jewish shops. The SA also marked all Jewish shops with the yellow Star of David or had the word “Juden” written on the windows. (Radway 44). This is what Liesel witnessed on the houses that she was walking past in the quote. Furthermore, a significant character in *The Book Thief* was a young Jew named Max, who escaped from the Nazis, and found shelter at Liesel’s home. “Death” narrates how Max was a victim to Nazi violence, explaining: “Then came November 9. Kristallnacht. The night of broken glass. It was the very

incident that destroyed so many of his [Max's] fellow Jews..." (Zusak 192). On November 9th 1938, Kristallnacht, or The Night of Broken Glass in English, was a deliberate attack against Jewish homes and businesses that resulted in the arrest of up to 30 000 Jewish men, and transferred them to local prisons in Dachau, Buchenwald, and other concentration camps. That night, ninety one Jews died from the violence that had taken place at the hands of the SA soldiers. (Kristallnacht). However, Hitler did not just target Jews to create his godly image to the German people. He also created educational groups for Nazi propaganda, such as the Hitler Youth, and the BDM, the *Bund Deutsche Mädel*, or the League of German Girls. The BDM was established to make "girls fit enough to be strong mothers... It was the intention of the BDM to reinforce the role of women as housewife and mother." (Radway 56). In *The Book Thief*, Liesel was a member of the BDM, to which "death" narrates: "Ten years old meant Hitler Youth. Hitler Youth meant a small brown uniform. Being female, Liesel was enrolled into what was called the BDM... 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." (Zusak 40). This aspect of the novel is particularly true, since membership for the BDM was made compulsory for eligible girls aged ten to eighteen in 1939, and aimed to further train girls for domestic life, future career goals in the arts, and for child rearing. (The League of German Girls). Overall, *The Book Thief* accurately presents historically correct events such as the discrimination of the Jewish people in vandalising and exclusion. The novel also accurately depicts the happenings surrounding Kristallnacht, and its aftermath. Along with these points, the Hitler Youth, specifically the BDM, was accurately displayed and contains historically correct points.

Despite *The Book Thief*'s accuracy to historical events, some events portrayed in the novel are inaccurate. For example, there is a book burning event in the novel which Liesel attends with

her BDM group one night as a way to commemorate Germany and celebrate Hitler's birthday. Liesel explains watching a man who makes a speech before the book burning, who tells the crowd: "Today is a beautiful day... Not only is it our great leader's birthday – but we also stop our enemies once again. We stop them from reaching in our minds..... We put an end to the disease that has been spread through Germany for the last twenty years, if not more!" (Zusak 110). Most certainly the man was speaking about how outside information, from books specifically, could spread and harm Germans because of their un-German approach to subjects found in literature. This event took place publicly to represent an element of censorship and usually proceeded from a cultural, political or religious opposition to the materials that were being burned (Book Burning). Indeed, Germany performed book burnings in this fashion. However, the only Nazi book burnings that are recorded took place in the spring of 1933, while in *The Book Thief*, the book burning took place around 1940. The event in the novel would have been historically incorrect, as Nazi book burnings took place earlier in time. Another point that is inaccurate in *The Book Thief* is the fictional town of Molching, Germany that receives multiple bomb threats and towards the end of the novel. The bombs are dropped in the town by German enemies, according to the novel. The town of Molching is thoroughly destroyed, as Liesel explains "...but on that night, October 7... The shells of wreckage cantered down, and hours later, when the strange, unkempt silence settled itself in Molching, the local LSE could hear something." (Zusak 498). However, historically speaking, on October 7 1943, there are records of bombs that were dropped by allied forces in Stuttgart Germany. *The Book Thief* was based on the real city of Munich, Germany, as Zusak in an interview states that he did research and travelled to Munich to base *The Book Thief* on. (Zusak, 562). However, Munich was not bombed in the fall of 1943. Another point is that Stuttgart and Molching are about 189

kilometres away from each other, so the possibility that they were reasonably close is not correct. To sum up, the book burning event indeed occurred in Nazi Germany, but not in the later date that was mentioned in the novel. The Molching bombings that concluded *The Book Thief* are also historically incorrect, as the real life city of Munich was not attacked by allied forces at that time. In historical terms, these points and others in *The Book Thief* are incorrect, but nonetheless create an atmosphere in the novel that would have been experienced by many Germans during World War II.

Lastly, perspectives in *The Book Thief* are interesting and compelling because of their unique nature. *The Book Thief* is narrated by "death" and the novel follows the life of Liesel and expresses her thoughts and feelings towards what was happening in Germany during World War II. For example, a firsthand account of Nazi Germany is explained in by Simone Liebster in her autobiography. Simone was a young girl that would have been Liesel's age in *The Book Thief*. Simone was a young girl who conformed to Catholicism, but was targeted by the Nazis since her mother grew up as a Jehovah Witness. Being a part of a minority group at the time, Simone explains her experiences with her fellow classmates at school, saying they shouted: "'Heathen, you're a heathen! You don't go to church anymore. You're a Communist!' 'I am not' I shouted. 'I'm a Christian!.. another group of children confronted me. Some of the boys circled around me, calling me a dirty Jew.'" (Liebster 11). Similarly, Liesel had discriminative experiences soon after she arrived in Molching. The neighbourhood kids taunted her at first for being a "communist" and later went to school illiterate, as explained in the book: "Although it was state-run, there was a heavy Catholic influence, and Liesel was Lutheran....humiliatingly, she was cast down with the younger kids..." (Zusak 39). Both Liesel and Simone had similar experiences with dealing with discrimination for being apart of a religious, political and intellectual

minority. Liesel and Simone also had other things in common, such as the content and information that was being taught to them in. Liesel in *The Book Thief* explains “At the BDM, they had been told that Germany was the superior race...Of course, everyone knew about the Jews, as they were the main offenders in regard to violating the German ideal.” (Zusak 110-111). Simone was taught likewise: “We were taught that the Aryan race had fought to become superior, leaving the others far behind... We were to preserve it [Germany] by keeping it free from the Untermenschen (subhumans). They could weaken our superiority, the purity of our race... the German race was on top and the Untermenschen, comprising of Jews, Poles, Russians and Africans at the bottom.” (Liebster 26). Certainly, ideals were the same and the concepts that were taught to children were taught in the same fashion. *The Book Thief* was historically accurate to what Simone learned in her school. Furthermore, another firsthand experience from Robert Dietz, a man who grew up in Germany and served in the German army during World War II explains: “My father became depressed about the treatment of the Jews in our community... my father was reprimanded by his fellow colleagues for continuing to buy his meat from a Jewish butcher...Father was told that, by continuing to buy from a Jew, he was undermining the Führer program and his fight against the ‘Jewish disease.’” (Dietz 36). Very similarly, in *The Book Thief*, Liesel’s foster father, Hans Hubermann, who “death” narrates: “[Hans] was a man who appreciated fairness. A Jew once saved his life and he couldn’t forget that. He couldn’t join a party that antagonized people in such a way... 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.” (Zusak 180). Both Dietz’s father and Liesel’s father abandoned social norms and lived their lives without discrimination or hatred for the Jewish people. Overall, the novel is written in such a way that many Holocaust survivors and historians can take in

account the reality and setting from when the novel takes place. For example, both Simone Liebster and Robert Dietz had similar experiences to that of which is found in *The Book Thief*, and possibly there are many more first hand accounts that *The Book Thief* can relate to. In sum, *The Book Thief* effortlessly provides relatable instances to real world experiences and events that had occurred in Germany during World War II.

In conclusion, *The Book Thief* accurately depicts some of the Holocaust's most horrible occurrences and methods of discrimination of Jews. The Nazis efforts to segregate the Jewish population in city centers is displayed in *The Book Thief*, when Liesel witnesses the vandalism that was on Jewish family homes and businesses. Kristallnacht was also mentioned in *The Book Thief*, as Max lost many of his Jewish friends to the Nazi attacks. These two events were in fact true, as many Jewish people were targeted by the Nazis who visibly labelled them for everyone to see. The BDM was also another factual aspect of *The Book Thief*, as Liesel and many children like her living in Germany during World War II would have been a part of Hitler Youth or the BDM, depending on their gender. Despite these historically accurate facts, some points in *The Book Thief* were untrue, such as the date of when the book burning took place in the novel. Another untrue point that was made in *The Book Thief* was the date of the bomb dropping that concluded the novel. There were no allied forces bombing the city of Munich, the real city Molching was based on at the time it was bombed in the novel. However, what made the novel more historically correct, was the relatable perspective of who the novel was told from. Many firsthand accounts were similar to experiences that characters had in *The Book Thief*. First hand accounts from Simone Liebster and Robert Dietz can be found in *The Book Thief*. This displays that *The Book Thief* has been accurately recited and contains events and scenarios that would have been experienced by Germany's people during the Holocaust. In historical terms, *The Book*

Thief has accurately depicted true events that had taken place in Nazi Germany, however some aspects of the book are historically incorrect, but all this aside, the novel has delivered an insightful reading experience that can be relatable to many first hand experiences during World War II. [2009 words]