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The Function of Metafiction in *The Book Thief*: Tension, Self-Reflexivity, and the Critical Reader

Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* is a young-adult, fiction novel set in World War II Germany. The novel is narrated by Death and centres on the child protagonist, Liesel Memminger and her foster family the Hubermanns. In the midst of war, Liesel learns how to read—anything from “The Grave Digger’s Handbook” to banned literature on its way to be burned. But to complicate things the Hubermanns have hidden a Jewish man, Max Vandenburg, in their basement. *The Book Thief* draws on its experimental format in order to remove the reader from the comfort of traditional fictional structures. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* defines metafiction as “a kind of fiction that openly draws attention to its own fictional status” (“metafiction”). In contrast, traditional fiction is unaware of its fictional status. The narrator often does not directly address or involve the reader and the narrative does not advertise its fictional status. As a work of metafiction, Zusak's *The Book Thief* frequently draws attention to its literary status through the use of direct address, *mise-en-abyme*, or “an internal reduplication of a literary work or part of a work” (Baldick), and the removal of conventional expectations regarding narration and content. However, the limitations of children's literature determine how much discomfort and unfamiliarity the reader is exposed to. The limitations of *The Book Thief* come across in the novel's soothing representation of books and the authority of the narrator over the reader. While Zusak's novel uses these techniques to remove the discomfort of metafiction, he also momentarily takes away that comfort to jostle the reader

and inspire a closer examination of the novel. Zusak also uses *mise-en-abyme*, or a literary work within a literary work, to draw attention to the agency of the “teller and listener” dynamic of the characters (Moss 80). In *The Book Thief*, the primary characters’ agency is often associated with their ability to tell their own stories; this aspect is most notably reinforced through the *mise-en-abyme* insertions. Often the stories the characters tell are their only expression of power in the novel. Liesel is a child and has little say in how her life is run. Similarly, Max similarly has no power as a Jewish man living in hiding. Through these insertions, characters demonstrate their own limited power as authors, which place them in the role of teller. By extension, readers of the novel are delegated to the listener role, meaning that they have no agency within the story. *Mise-en-abyme* also plays with point of view, as each story establishes a character reading the inserted story; meaning that readers assume that character’s point of view. The overall effect of the novel’s tension between metafictional authority and the self-aware reader elevates the novel’s content to a higher level of meaning for the reader because it directly involves them in the narrative and encourages a closer examination of the novel’s content.

Through the unconventional narration, Zusak establishes metafictional grounding for the story. In doing so, Zusak creates a sense of trust between the reader and the narrator’s authority, which placates the reader’s potential discomfort regarding the novel’s unconventional format. The presence of this authority figure, in turn, censors the violence of the novel’s Holocaust content. Instead of establishing setting or characters, as traditional narratives often do, the prologue introduces readers to Death’s narrative voice. Death begins: “first the colours. Then the humans. That’s usually how I see things. Or at least, how I try” (Zusak 3). The unusual introduction plays with narrative convention, essentially telling the reader

no expositional information apart from Death's colour preferences. Death's narrative voice then moves to directly address the reader by stating "here is a Small Fact: you are going to die" (3). By having Death address "you", Zusak directly involves the reader in the text and establishes reader-narrator confidentiality. Death becomes the reader's guide throughout the novel and provides a centre for the reader to gravitate toward while they navigate the novel's metafictional format. However, this metafictional technique has its limitations in children's literature.

In Joe Sutliff Sanders's article "The Critical Reader in Children's Metafiction" he argues that metafiction which portrays a child's relationship to their books limits the subversive effect of metafiction due to the creation of a "comfortable authority in whose wisdom the reader is told to rest" (Sanders 351). Any subversion and discomfort metafiction may create is negated by the safety of the relationship between children and their books. The depiction of a child's "safe" relationship with their books "papers over any discomfort by promising that books are safe, that they are to be trusted" (351). In *The Book Thief*, readers are entrusted to the authority of the narrator, and are assured of the safety of books through the portrayal of Liesel's comforting relationship with them. As the comforting authority figure, Death's job is to soften the horrors of the Holocaust content. The section entitled "The Long Walk to Dachau" exemplifies Death's comforting narration in the line "They were going to Dachau, to concentrate" (Zusak 388). Readers are not given any details as to what "concentrating" entails. To concentrate suggests focus but a reader who is familiar with Holocaust history knows that Death hints at the concentration camps imprisoning Jewish prisoners. In this way, Death protects the young reader from the violence and misery of concentration camps, referring to Dachau in a manner that hints at but does not fully describe the interior workings of the camp. Similarly, Death comforts readers

throughout the novel by breaking the linear plot structure, which warns readers of the impending bombing of Liesel's home on Himmel Street. This forewarning of imminent destruction attempts to protect the reader by revealing characters' deaths. However, the emotional weight of these warnings is not felt until the bombing of Himmel Street occurs within the novel and readers experience it with Liesel.

As much as Death provides comfort for the reader, Zusak also removes the sense of security established by narration with Death's ambiguous conclusion of the novel: "I am haunted by humans" (Zusak 550). The line is a textual interjection in bold typeface addressed directly to the reader. The final statement does not offer a comforting conclusion to the story or a didactic lesson for the reader. Readers can interpret the conclusion according to their attitude toward Death, which encourages a closer analysis of their relationship to the comforting authority figure. Furthermore, while Liesel's relationship with her books creates safety and reassurance for both her and the reader, Zusak removes the promise of safety in the final portion of the novel where Liesel's life with the Hubermanns, including her amassed collection of books, is destroyed in a bombing raid. The shortcomings of metafiction are comforting for the reader, who is sheltered from the violent events of the novel by the narrator's reassuring direct addresses and the promise that books are safe. Zusak engages in the comforting authority and the promise of safety, only to remove them, pulling the proverbial safety blanket away from the child.

Zusak also uses the literary technique called *mise-en-abyme* to draw attention to the agency of the "listener and teller" dynamic within the novel (Moss 80), and to directly involve the reader in Liesel's point of view, thus creating greater empathy for her character. Anita Moss's article "Varieties of Children's Metafiction" focuses

on examples of children's literature that spotlight the "process of creating narrative" and the "narrative forms of ordinary life which are embedded throughout fiction" (79). Moss states that the "nature of narrative" often becomes the focal point in metafictional novels and stories, with "stories about the making of stories" being a major subject in children's metafiction (79). The "stories about stories" genre of metafiction applies to Zusak's *Book Thief*, which revolves mainly around Liesel writing about her life. Through examining children's metafictional novels, Moss also considers critical narrative theory. Moss notes "how characters function as both tellers and listeners" within their own stories (80). The "teller and listener" relationship Moss mentions appears in multiple ways throughout the narrative structure of *The Book Thief*. The fictional child-author Liesel Meminger writes the overall story of the novel and creates the source text that Death is reading. Ultimately, Liesel is the teller of her own story. Death, as narrator of Liesel's story, adds stylistic flairs and interjections to her original text. Death's narration of Liesel's story causes him to become both teller and listener for having read Liesel's story. The third level is the combination of these two versions of the story, making the reader into the listener. Within the overall structure of the novel, the difference between listener and teller is the agency of who is doing the telling of the tale. Liesel occupies the listener role until she becomes literate, allowing her to inhabit the teller role when she begins writing.

The most notable example of the multiple layers of the listener/teller dynamic of the novel are Max's stories, which appear as physical insertions into the book in the form of a *mise-en-abyme*. Max's two stories "The Word Shaker" and "The Standover Man" encapsulate the multilayered role of "teller and listener" by directly involving the reader in the "listening" aspect of the story. "The Standover Man" appears as a children's picture book portraying Max's life

up to where he meets Liesel. “The Word Shaker” is an illustrated fairytale that reflects the novel’s overall themes of the importance of words, as well as education as a means of empowering the individual. Max’s authorship places him in the teller role, which gives him a limited amount of agency. His limited agency is important as he is confined to the Hubermann’s basement and he is unable to physically change his situation. His agency and his ability to affect others derives from his authorship and he inspires Liesel to do the same. Readers are already in the listener role through Death’s direct narration, but the listener role becomes self-reflexive through the multiple levels of telling and listening in the *mise-en-abyme*. The novel achieves this self-reflexive listener role through the incorporation of Max’s stories as part of the narrative, which establishes that one of the characters, be it Death, Liesel, or Max, is reading the inserted story. For example, prefacing “The Word Shaker” is the line “[Liesel] turned the page” (Zusak 444). The next page is the first page of “The Word Shaker”, meaning that readers have assumed Liesel’s point of view by reading the story. Assuming Liesel’s point of view via the *mise-en-abyme* insertions allows readers to concretely indentify with Liesel, who is also reading the story, placing them into her role as the child-reader. Identifying with Liesel creates greater empathy for her struggle to read, and her triumph at not only reading well, but in writing her own story. The inserted stories also encourage a close examination of the reader’s own role as the listener of the story by virtue of the *mise-en-abyme*’s appearance in the novel. The novel creates multiple levels of reading, listening, and telling, which draws attention to the reader’s own listener status and lack of agency. This places them on the same level as both Max and Liesel, who are physically powerless to change their surroundings. While readers can interpret and understand events in the novel, they cannot change anything.

The Book Thief’s metafictional format ultimately

removes the familiarity of traditional fictional structure in order to connect the reader directly to the text. Through metafictional narration, Zusak creates a sense of trust between the reader and the narrator's authority, which pacifies the reader's potential discomfort with the novel's unconventional format. Death's narration serves to comfort and shelter the reader from the violence of the Holocaust content that the novel discusses through allusion, as the interiors of concentration camps are never described. By sheltering the reader, Zusak establishes a comforting authority figure for the novel and a sense of trust between reader and narrator. Zusak also depicts Liesel's relationship with her books as a retreat from the traumatic experiences of Liesel's life. This safe relationship between children and their books assures readers that books are safe, and soothes them from any discomfort metafiction may create. While these limitations of children's metafiction protect the reader, Zusak's temporary removal of them causes a greater emotional impact when both readers and Liesel lose the promise of safety of books. Zusak's removal of comfort also pertains to the ambiguous ending of the novel. Instead of partaking in a more conventional sense of closure, the ending of the novel is left open to the reader's interpretation.

The use of *mise-en-abyme* in the novel draws attention to the agency of the listener/teller dynamic, demonstrating both self-reflexive points of view and limited character agency. Max and Liesel's agency is portrayed through their roles as tellers of their own stories, giving them creative agency though they are both physically unable to change their situations. The *mise-en-abyme* insertions also create a self-reflexive level of reading, and cause readers to assume Liesel's point of view as a child-reader. Assuming Liesel's point of view creates a greater sense of empathy for her character and encourages a close reading of the reader's listener role within the narrative, which inspires a closer look at the multiple layers of narration and the reader's own



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lack of agency in the novel. Overall, the novel's metafictional format creates tension between metafictional authority and the reader. Readers are told to trust in the comforting limitations of *The Book Thief*, but they are also invited to explore the metafictional structure of the novel as they are directly involved in the story. This tension encourages a closer examination of the novel's content, as readers are pushed to examine what it means to be a listener and the agency that comes with telling.

Works Cited

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