
Buxtehuder Bulle



Speech in Honour

of

Markus Zusak

by

Bishop Maria Jepsen

for

The Book Thief

Buxtehude, April 16th , 2010

1

Liesel “checked that no one else was outside, then proceeded to take as many buckets and pots out as she could. She filled them with the mounds of snow and ice that blanketed the small strip of world that was Himmel Street. Once they were full, she brought them in and carried them down to the basement.”

This is how Markus Zusak describes the beginning of the “greatest Christmas ever. Little food. No presents. But there was a snowman in their basement.”

Even Rosa Hubermann started to help build it, swearing first, as she always did. “She even brought the buttons for the eyes and nose and some string for a snowman smile.” Then it was ready – the snowman – in the basement. “A midget,” Max said. A two-foot man of snow.

This scene is one of my reasons for liking *The Book Thief*. And I find it hard to forget the story of the white midget down in the basement.

This creation has to be good literature.

“We create figures and moments of time for people to remember, even years later. Very often they are just tiny fragments that set us thinking.” This is how the film director and author Thomas Vinterberg describes the task and work of writers. In this respect, Markus Zusak is a master of characterisation and fragmentation.

2

We humans are stock-pilers. We pile up stocks – of food – in refrigerators. Stocks in banks – money – and, if we’re lucky, we manage to collect a fair stock of friends.

We also have a store-cupboard: our heart or, rather, mind. Whether deliberately or not, we collect memories in it, and tales that help to give us a sense of direction. Most of these originate from our childhood. Then suddenly they flare up when things get hard. They start talking to us, showing us how to combat despondency, fear or loneliness.

In my case they are mostly biblical tales: the Tower of Babel, the lost sheep, the good women at Easter or the supplicating widow – and the evening hymn by Matthias Claudius, with its petition for a “sick neighbour” at the end.

And now Markus Zusak’s midget snowman has become part of this store.

At first sight, the tale of the snowman looks as if it’s just a nice little story. But, as anyone who has read the book knows, that’s not what it’s about. It is a sweet tale – and moving, even deeply moving – but it’s more than that. And this is what reflects Markus Zusak’s literary talent. It is supremely evident in what the Jew, Max Vandenburg, says to Liesel in the ice-cold basement: “Often I wish this would all be over, Liesel, but then somehow you do something like walk down the basement steps with a snowman in your hands.” It re-kindles his desire to live. Then Zusak goes a step further, precluding any sentimentality that might arise.

“That damn snowman” is damp and cold, and almost Max’s death, when he is in hiding in the basement in the days that follow. “Don’t die,” she whispers. “Please, Max, just don’t die.”

“He [Max] was the second snowman to be melting away before her eyes ... the colder he became, the more he melted.”

Can one ever forget a tale like that, told the way it is, without even an exclamation mark?

I could go on talking about scenes from the *The Book Thief*. But that is not why I'm here.

I don't know how Markus Zusak would react, but if I were the Minister for Cultural Affairs in this country, I would appoint him an honorary history teacher and permit him to teach whatever school grade he chose. The teacher up at the front would most likely be indignant at a young man from "down under" taking over his history class, but would soon calm down and start listening with wrapt attention, like everyone else when Zusak starts off in his own special way.

'He's got it,' he'd think. He knows how to put over the subject matter clearly and make historical facts come alive.

As I said, though, I don't know whether the role of teacher would really be Markus Zusak's "thing". Perhaps he'd say 'I don't like teaching – or standing up in front of all those people. The only thing I really want to – and know I can – do, is to write books.

Just as well. Apart from which: I'm not a government Minister or school governor.

But I can still encourage those responsible to put the *The Book Thief* on the curriculum. I am sure that anyone who has read the book will want to know more about what happened then, and be motivated to look up standard historical works, with their figures and dates, facts and photographs, statistics and documents. It would prepare readers to stand up and face others who try to play down the Nazis, with their hatred for dissidents, their persecution and massacre of the Jews, or those who wish to blot out those times, or even idealise them. It would help readers to speak out against the way refugees are treated today in this country, when they are shoved to and fro and driven into illegality.

The lyric writer Hilde Domin, herself a deportee, once said “If only we could inoculate the younger generation with out tears.”

One could say that Markus Zusak’s book is the right vaccine, that it prevents fascist thoughts from nestling into and taking hold of our minds. It sensitises us and puts us on the alert against the forces of temptation clothed in words and paragraphs, slogans and symbols. In the great passage about the word shaker, he makes it clear how Hitler used and misused the inherent power of words. But the author also shows how one can safeguard one’s fellow beings and put them to the test.

Best of all, however, is the fact that Markus Zusak attains all this, not with highfalutin expressions and theories, or by discussing the famous people and statesmen of the time, but by explaining things through people like you and me, through the Hubermanns, Steiners and Hermanns, who live and love like we do. Have weaknesses and abilities that are not apparent from the outside, but who possess unthought-of resilience. Or are capable of being hurt deeply. Or of being a failure. Or who cause unhappiness by doing good.

Hence the description of the small strip of world in Molching’s Himmel Street, that symbolises human life. It is at once devastating and brilliant, as it exemplifies human life in all its facets, with its “beauty and brutality” – as Death remarks at the very end of the book when, many years later, he and Liesel sit down at the side of the curb in Sydney and watch new people “driving by each way” in their cars, the “Hitlers and Hubermanns, and Maxes, killers, Dillers, and Steiners...”.

5

In spite of this, *The Book Thief* does not give the reader cause for resignation. Quite the contrary. This is due to Marin Zusak's literary ruse of making Death the narrator of the whole story.

What a concept – and what a Death. A Death with a heart, a Death that can be sad. Not an ice-cold fulfiller of fate, but a Death who is man's ultimate saviour, who gathers up souls, and is supremely careful that not one is left lying sullied by the wayside. A Death who is not responsible for the millions of dead in the Second World War, a Death who suffers because of them and who makes it quite clear to every one of us that wars and persecution are not fate, but the work of man.

I find it extremely gratifying that Markus Zusak succeeds in bringing over this view throughout the entire book. Where wars and those killed in wars are concerned, none of us anywhere can hold anything else responsible: fate, the powers that be or other constraints in the world. Killing is planned and carried out by us humans – just that, by us humans.

Humanity is indeed a multi-faceted concept.

It can turn the ancient theological question (how could God permit so much suffering in the world?) into an anthropological issue: how can we humans allow so much suffering to happen?

And Zusak shows us how things could be different. His book is a song of praise for friendship.

6

Word had got round that *The Book Thief* is a thrilling book, with its in-built illustrated tales and unorthodox story-telling sequences, all of which anticipate the end of the story. But then, that is exactly how Markus Zusak, or Death the narrator, builds up the book's tension.

To some extent, it has even been emulated: on March 9th an article appeared in the *Hamburger Morgenpost*: “Hammerbrook. Two girls (12 and 13) break in to the central library at Hühnerposten. They entered the building on Saturday evening through the entrance door, which they claimed was still open. But because of a defect closing mechanism, they had to be rescued from the building by ladders, through the windows.”

I only hope *The Book Thief* will not be filmed. But if it is, then as many grown-ups and young people as possible should read it first.

They say a picture speaks more than a thousand words.

But 120 minutes of film could never attain what this book triggers off inside us in a few days’ or weeks’ reading. Markus Zusak’s stories speak more than a thousand pictures – or two hours of film.

7

One more thing struck me: that animals do not play a part in the book. So it’s high time they did – and today is the best opportunity to rectify this, in Buxtehude, by giving Markus Zusak an animal for his book: the Buxtehude Bull prize.

*

I should like to thank all those responsible for producing the book and the members of the jury. Very special thanks, of course, go to Markus Zusak who, in *The Book Thief*, revealed German history to us from another corner of the world.

By writing it, he has accomplished a small miracle.