

Level III

Second Place Winner

Sai Rayala

(Grade 9: Self-entered, Powell)

Letter to author Markus Zusak concerning his novel, *The Book Thief*

Dear Markus Zusak,

When I was in middle school, I made a grave mistake. I actually made many mistakes at that age, but this one was probably the worst. My best friend and I had gotten into a serious fight. Looking back, the cause was trivial but the fight was brutal. I let my emotions take over, and some harsh words came out of my mouth that never should have been there in the first place. At that time, I didn't know my mistake would have so much weight behind it. Only after my friend burst into tears and after I got called to the principal's office did I realize how much of an effect my words had.

When I read *The Book Thief* the next year, it helped me to understand what I had done and changed my whole perspective on words. You have helped me realize the power of words and how they can have a monumental effect. They are greater than mere letters on a paper. Words have the power to bring a shining light or bring total darkness.

You have shown me that words, when used wrongly, can have disastrous effects. In your book, Max writes a story for Liesel in which he shows how words caused one of the most evil people in the world to come to power—Hitler.

Growing up, I was under the impression that Hitler came to power with force and violence like most dictators. When I read your book, I shockingly found out that such was not the case. He came to power by gaining the support of the German people; he did so through the power of words, with which he was determined to rule the world. Your book completely changed my perception on the events that took place in Nazi Germany. It was frightening to me that Hitler was able to persuade and seduce an entire country just through the power of speech.

When I read about Liesel's own experience with the dark side, I immediately connected with her because we had done the same thing. In one of the parts, she harshly speaks to the mayor's wife out of anger. Afterwards, she realizes what she has done after seeing the pain on the woman's face. I had done the same thing by calling my friend hurtful words. Both Liesel and I have caused other people to suffer due to our rash words. Although I regretted them deeply, later I thought that my friend would have gotten over it. They were just words, right? She would probably forget about them. However, to this day, we still have a tense relationship and we have never gotten back to the closeness that we once had. By reading your book, I was able to understand why. You have shown me that words will stick with someone. They are able to bury themselves deep into a person and mess with their minds. The saying "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" is completely wrong. Sticks and stones may be able to hurt you on the surface, but words will go much deeper.

Yet, amidst of all the darkness, you have shown me that there is always light. Harmful words can cause irrevocable damage but words coated in wisdom and love can do feats far greater than one can imagine. Max and Liesel were brought together through their common love for words. It was an unlikely friendship with Max being a Jewish hideaway and Liesel being a

German girl. If they had set one foot outside their home, they would have found the world trying to tear them apart. However, they had a bond far stronger than any normal one because of their similar passion.

Your book has made me understand that words can do good, and that is what I have been trying to do ever since I read it. I've already experienced the harm; now, I've been trying to find the light. Through speeches and debate, I've used my words to speak out on issues that are important in society. Through my writing, I've expressed my own ideas and perspectives. Issues like women's equality, discrimination, and individual freedom are just a few of the topics that I have focused on. You have given me strength to talk about these issues by reassuring me that my words will be heard and they have the power to make even a little difference.

Before reading your book, if I had been asked whether there was any power in me, I would have answered with a distinct no. Why would I have any power? However, now I know better. Because of you, I know that we all have the power of words in us. It's only a matter of how we use them. You have shown me that words come with a darkness and light. Thank you for making me realize that I must chose my words wisely and not make another mistake like I had done in the past. Thank you for showing me how to use the power of words for good and helping me to follow the light. Lastly, thank you for writing the incredible masterpiece that is *The Book Thief*.

Sincerely,

Sai Rayala, age 14