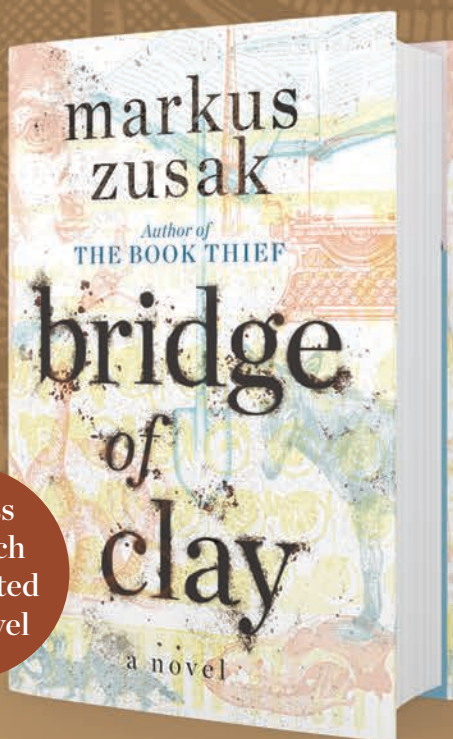


markus zusak

BOOK CLUB

Discussion Guide



Discuss
the much
anticipated
new novel



Revisit the
classic

WELCOME TO THE

markus zusak

BOOK CLUB

The Book Thief, one of the most enduring stories of our time, was published more than a decade ago and has been treasured by readers of all ages ever since. Since its release, Markus Zusak has been hard at work crafting a new masterpiece. Gather your book club friends to revisit the genius of *The Book Thief* or seize this moment to pick it up for the very first time in anticipation of *Bridge of Clay*. In this guide, you will find questions to spark a lively and thoughtful conversation about *The Book Thief* as well as the new world of the Dunbar boys.

THE BOOK THIEF

The Book Thief is “just a small story really, about, among other things: a girl, some words, an accordionist, some fanatical Germans, a Jewish fist fighter, and quite a lot of thievery.” It is 1939. Nazi Germany. The country is holding its breath. Death has never been busier, and will become busier still.

Praise for THE BOOK THIEF

“Brilliant and hugely ambitious.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

“Zusak doesn’t sugarcoat anything, but he makes his ostensibly gloomy subject bearable the same way Kurt Vonnegut did in *Slaughterhouse-Five*: with grim, darkly consoling humor.” —*Time*

BRIDGE OF CLAY

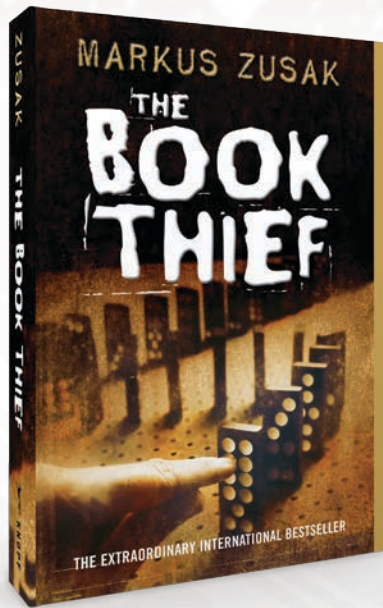
Bridge of Clay is the breathtaking story of five brothers who bring each other up in a world governed by their own rules. As the Dunbar boys love and fight and learn to reckon with the adult world, they discover the moving secret behind their father’s disappearance. At the center of the Dunbar family is Clay, a boy who will build a bridge—for his family, for his past, for greatness, for his sins, for a miracle. The question is, how far is Clay willing to go?



Elena Seibert

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Markus Zusak is the author of the extraordinary international bestseller *The Book Thief* and *I Am the Messenger*, an *LA Times* Book Award Finalist and a Printz Honor Book. He is the recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award for significant and lasting contribution to writing for teens, and lives in Sydney, Australia, with his wife and children.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE BOOK THIEF

- Discuss the symbolism of Death as the omniscient narrator of the novel. What are Death's feelings for each victim? Describe Death's attempt to resist Liesel. Death states, "I'm always finding humans at their best and worst. I see their ugly and their beauty, and I wonder how the same thing can be both." (p. 491) What is ugly and beautiful about Liesel, Rosa and Hans Hubermann, Max Vandenburg, Rudy Steiner, and Mrs. Hermann? Why is Death haunted by humans?
- What is ironic about Liesel's obsession with stealing books? Discuss other uses of irony in the novel.
- *The Grave Digger's Handbook* is the first book Liesel steals. Why did she take the book? What is significant about the titles of the books she steals? Discuss why she hides *The Grave Digger's Handbook* under her mattress. Describe Hans Hubermann's reaction when he discovers the book. What does the act of book thievery teach Liesel about life and death? Explain Rudy's reaction when he discovers that Liesel is a book thief. How does stealing books from the mayor's house lead to a friendship with the mayor's wife? Explain how Liesel's own attempt to write a book saves her life.
- Liesel believes that Hans Hubermann's eyes show kindness, and from the beginning she feels closer to him than to Rosa Hubermann. How does Hans gain Liesel's love and trust? Debate whether Liesel is a substitute for Hans's children, who have strayed from the family. Why is it so difficult for Rosa to demonstrate the same warmth toward Liesel? Discuss how Liesel's relationship with Rosa changes by the end of the novel.

- Abandonment is a central theme in the novel. The reader knows that Liesel feels abandoned by her mother and because of the death of her brother. How does she equate love with abandonment? At what point does she understand why she was abandoned by her mother? Who else abandons Liesel in the novel? Debate whether she was abandoned by necessity or choice?
- Guilt is another recurring theme in the novel. Hans Hubermann's life was spared in France during World War I, and Erik Vandenburg's life was taken. Explain why Hans feels guilty about Erik's death. Guilt is a powerful emotion that may cause a person to become unhappy and despondent. Discuss how Hans channels his guilt into helping others. Explain Max Vandenburg's thought, "Living was living. The price was guilt and shame." (p. 208) Why does he feel guilt and shame?
- Compare and contrast the lives of Liesel and Max Vandenburg. How does Max's life give Liesel purpose? At what point do Liesel and Max become friends? Max gives Liesel a story called "The Standover Man" for her birthday. (p. 223) What is the significance of this story?
- Death says that Liesel is "a girl with a mountain to climb." (p. 86) What is her mountain? Who are her climbing partners? What is her greatest obstacle? At what point does she reach the summit of her mountain? Describe her descent. What does she discover at the foot of her mountain?
- Hans Junior, a Nazi soldier, calls his dad a coward because he doesn't belong to the Nazi Party. He feels that you are either for Hitler or against him. How does it take courage to oppose Hitler? There isn't one coward in the Hubermann household. Discuss how they demonstrate courage throughout the novel.
- Describe Liesel's friendship with Rudy. How does their friendship change and grow throughout the novel? Death says that Rudy doesn't offer his friendship "for free." (p. 51) What does Rudy want from Liesel? Discuss Death's statement, "The only thing worse than a boy who hates you [is] a boy who loves you." (p. 52) Why is it difficult for Liesel to love Rudy? Discuss why Liesel tells Mr. Steiner that she kissed Rudy's dead body.
- How does Zusak use the literary device of foreshadowing to pull the reader into the story?
- Liesel Meminger lived to be an old woman. Death says that he would like to tell the book thief about beauty and brutality, but those are things that she lived. How does her life represent beauty in the wake of brutality? Discuss how Zusak's poetic writing enhances the beauty of Liesel's story.

GET READY FOR BRIDGE OF CLAY

Now that you have read (or reread) *The Book Thief*, round out your discussion by talking about Markus Zusak's new novel, *Bridge of Clay*.

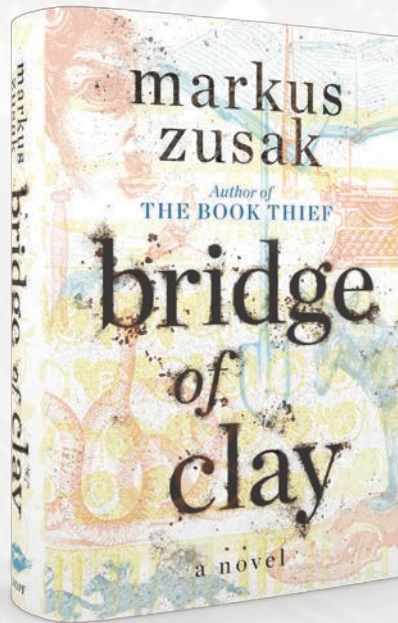
PRE-READING

- The character development in *The Book Thief* is truly remarkable—Liesel and Max jump off the page. What types of characters and relationships are you expecting to see in *Bridge of Clay*?
- Death as omniscient narrator is one of the most recognizable and distinctive aspects of *The Book Thief*. What do you think will stand out in the new novel?
- Why do you think Clay is building this bridge?
- The cover is a collage of a number of images. How do you think they relate to the story?

ARE YOU READY TO MEET THE DUNBAR BOYS?

Break the seal for
Bridge of Clay—specific
discussion questions.

SPOILERS AHEAD!



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR BRIDGE OF CLAY

- The book starts with a striking scenario: “In the beginning there was one murderer, one mule and one boy . . .” What expectations did this give you for the novel? Do you think this is representative of the story as a whole?
- Penny’s and Michael’s upbringings are very different. Do you see reflections of their childhoods in the way they choose to bring up the boys? What do you think was the purpose of focusing on their family history?
- Each of the Dunbar brothers seems to be connected to one of the pets. Can you draw connections between these relationships and the animals’ literary names?
- Why are Michael, and later Clay, determined to build the bridge? Do you believe that they are doing it for different reasons?
- Clay and Carey’s relationship is a cornerstone of his story—why do you think he was able to tell her things that he couldn’t tell his brothers? How do you think her death affected the remainder of his story?
- Readers go over the story of Penny’s death a few times throughout the later sections of the narrative. What more do we learn about her character and about how her passing transformed all the boys? How do each of the boys react?

- On pg. 9, Matthew says:

*“Let me tell you about our brother.
The fourth Dunbar boy named Clay.
Everything happened to him.
We were all of us changed through him.”*

Discuss the changes this is referring to. How are each of the boys different by the end of the story?

- The action that makes up the bulk of the novel has already happened when Matthew tells us the story. Were you still surprised by the conclusion and where all the boys ended up?
- At first it is not clear why Matthew is narrator, but later on (pg. 490) he says:

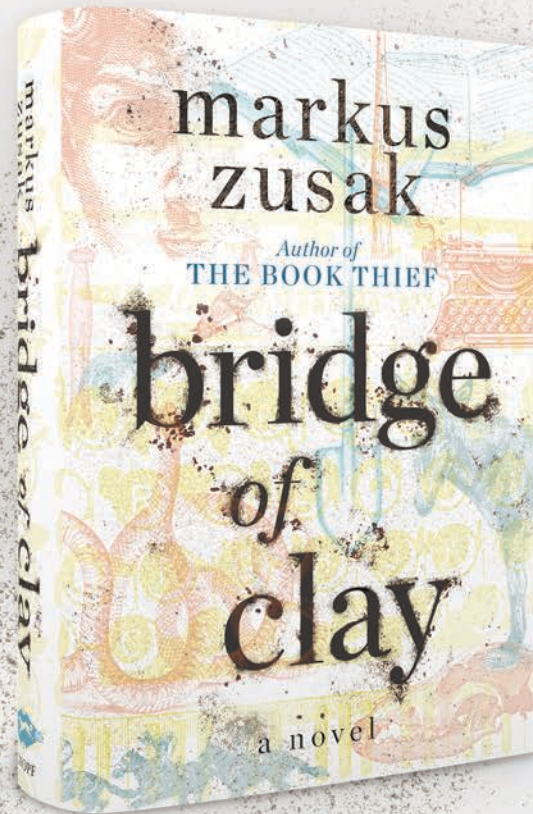
*“For starters, this story wasn’t over yet.
And even then, it wouldn’t be him.
The story was his, but not the writing.
It was hard enough living and being it.”*

Why do you think it was important to tell this story? What can you assume about Matthew’s relationship with Clay following the events in the book?

- *Bridge of Clay* is about the complexity of the relationships within the Dunbar family. As you read their story, did you find anything relatable? Was there anything you found hard to empathize with?
- Markus Zusak has said: “*Bridge of Clay* is about Clay Dunbar, who builds a bridge to honor his parents. . . . He builds a bridge for his brothers, but he’s also building the bridge for himself. That’s his one attempt at greatness. And I think he really wants to produce a miracle as a kind of cure for the tragedies he’s endured, and he wants to make one great thing to transcend humanness. I think at the end of the day, even if he falls short, he just wants it to be a great attempt, and that to me is what the book is really about.” How do you assess Clay’s “great attempt”?



The much anticipated new novel from the
#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of
THE BOOK THIEF



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