The Book Thief Study Guide

Prologue: A Mountain Range of Rubble

“Death and Chocolate”
1. From what point of view is the novel written? Who is the narrator of the story? How do you know?
2. What theory does the narrator suggest about colors?
3. What purpose do colors serve for the narrator?
4. What elements does the narrator specifically name as critical components of the story?
5. Who might you infer is the book thief? Has he or she already been named? Explain your answer.
6. What might the reader infer about the book thief?

“Beside the Railway Line”
1. What purpose does this section of the novel serve?
2. What impression does Death give of himself? Do you feel that you can trust Death as the narrator? Why or why not?
3. Whose death does Death describe first in the novel?
4. What fact does Death clarify for the reader at the end of the chapter?

“The Eclipse”
1. Whose death occurs in this section of the novel?
2. In addition to describing the pilot’s death, what does Death describe for the reader?
3. What does an eclipse frequently symbolize for Death?

“The Flag”
1. Judging from Death’s initial description of the setting in this section of the novel, what do you suppose has happened just prior to his arrival?
2. What image does Death paint for the reader when he sees the book thief the third time?
3. How does Death “feel” about the image of Liesel?
4. What opinion do you form about Death following this section?
5. Why does Death not comfort the child? What does this imply about Death’s ultimate power?
6. What item does Death claim from the garbage truck? Why does Death take the item?
7. The narrator associates three colors with the book thief. What are they? What clue to the novel’s historical context does the reader get from “the colors?”

Part One: The Grave Digger’s Handbook

“Arrival on Himmel Street”
1. Death opens Part I with a flashback. To what incident?
2. Who are Liesel and Werner Meminger?
3. What is the setting? How old is Liesel?
4. What happens when Liesel wakes from her dream about the Fuhrer?
5. What observation does Death make for the reader?
6. What falls from the grave digger apprentice’s pocket without his knowledge? What does Liesel do with the object?
7. Why are the Memingers on the train? What is Liesel’s ultimate destination?
8. To what does Himmel translate?
9. What kind of atmosphere does Death describe Himmel Street?
10. Identify and describe Liesel’s foster parents.
11. What literary device does Zusak use to close the chapter? What might the reader infer from the final sentence of the chapter?

“Growing up Saumensch”
1. How many books make up the story of Liesel’s life? What similarity do you notice between Death’s explanation of Liesel’s book collection and the organization of the novel?
2. How does Death’s admitted preoccupation with colors show itself in this chapter?
3. What single fact does Liesel know about her father?
4. What act does Liesel refuse to do from the beginning of her stay at the Hubermanns? Who overcomes her unwillingness? How?
5. What does Death explain to the reader regarding Rosa’s actions toward Liesel?
6. What is Liesel supposed to call the Hubermanns after a few months? Why do you think Rosa tells Liesel to refer to the Hubermanns in this manner?

7. Which parent does Liesel seem to bond with more easily?

“The Woman with the Iron Fist”
1. What makes Liesel’s adjustment to life with the Hubermanns particularly difficult? How does Papa help her?
2. Why is The Gravedigger’s Handbook so important to Liesel?
3. Identify the Hubermanns’ children.
4. What makes school particularly difficult for Liesel?
5. Into what is Liesel enrolled after her tenth birthday?
6. Describe Rosa’s feelings and behavior with regard to her laundry clients.
7. Which client does Rosa detest the most? What happens when she sends Liesel to the client’s door?
8. Why does Rosa tell Liesel she has to do other people’s laundry?
9. What is Frau Holtzapfel know for at the Hubermann house? Why? How does this effect Liesel?

“The Kiss”
1. How are friendships between children made on Himmel Street?
2. Who is responsible for “The Jesse Owens Incident?” Briefly explain it.
3. Who introduces Liesel to the “secrets” of the neighbors? Explain.
4. What is Schiller Strasse?
5. What challenge does Rudy offer Liesel following the taunting of Pfiffikus? What is the outcome?

“The Jesse Owens Incident”
1. Who is Jesse Owens?
2. Was Liesel present for the “Jesse Owens Incident?” Explain.
3. How does Death’s explanation of Mr. Steiner’s politics explain his anger with his son’s emulation of Jesse Owens?
4. What is Rudy’s father trying to make Rudy understand when he tells Rudy that he should be happy that he has blond hair and blue eyes?
5. What is the significance of the event that Death foreshadows at the end of the chapter?

“The Other Side of Sandpaper”
1. What important number does Death provide with regard to the Germans’ support of Hitler? How does this relate to Hans Hubermann?
2. What event led to Liesel’s bed wetting?
3. How is Liesel’s bed wetting a defining moment in her life?
4. Why is the sandpaper useful?

“The Smell of Friendship”
1. Where does Papa take Liesel for their reading lessons? How does he get Mama to agree?
2. Liesel notices a change in Hans when they are at the river, but doesn’t realize what it means. Why do you believe Hans is going to the river?
3. Where do Papa and Liesel work on reading most often in their home? Why? How does Papa use this area for instruction?
4. What elements blend together to create the “smell of friendship” for Liesel? Why do you think Liesel finds the smell so appealing, and Rosa finds it repulsive?

“The Heavyweight Champion of the School Yard”
1. According to Death, what two important events occur in September-October 1939? What do you think is the significance of the fact that Death lists these two events under the same heading?
2. What piece of news arrives at the Hubermann household? How does Papa react?
3. What change does Liesel experience in school? Why?
4. What even in the classroom sets Liesel up for antagonism in the school yard? Why does Liesel attack Ludwig Schmeikl and Tommy Muller in the school yard?
5. Why are Liesel’s classmates silent when Sister Maria beats Liesel for fighting?
6. Why is Liesel overcome with emotion? How does Rudy respond?
7. What literary device does Zusak use in the final line of this chapter to describe Liesel’s future use of words?