

DISCUSSION GUIDE | FEBRUARY, 2016



The Book Thief

Feature film directed by Brian Percival
(2013; 131 minutes)

by Alicia LeBlanc



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Introduction

[*The Book Thief*](#) (2013, 131 minutes), directed by Brian Percival, is based on the novel of the same name by Markus Zusak. *The Book Thief* takes place during World War II in Germany and tells the story of Liesel Meminger, a German girl, who faces the reality of war after her family harbors a Jewish person named Max Vandenburg. While World War II is an important historical topic, the focus of this discussion guide is on connections between symbols, words, and justice and how these topics influence one's life.

This discussion guide focuses on the film and is appropriate for a high school discussion group, but can be adapted for various ages. Each session is 60 minutes in length (not including film viewing time). Facilitators are invited to participate in the discussion; all ideas are welcome and considered learning experiences for everyone in the group. The location of the meetings can be anywhere—a religious education classroom, an after-school program, or a book club. If your program has time for it, you might have the group watch the film together. Familiarity with [*The Book Thief*](#) novel is not necessary; however, comparing and contrasting the film with the book may offer a more enriching experience. Additional film and book suggestions are at the end of this guide in the Find Out More section on page 11.

About the Author

Alicia LeBlanc is the Administrative and Editorial Assistant for the Unitarian Universalist Association's Faith Development Office in the Ministries and Faith Development staff group. She earned her B.A. in English from Merrimack College in North Andover, MA. In 2014, she received her M.A. in English Literature from the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Alicia is the web designer of the [Religion in Life for Girl Scouts](#) website and editor of the pamphlet [To the Point](#). In her spare time, Alicia enjoys reading fiction, studying graphic novels, and riding horses.

Session 1: Symbols (60 minutes)

Goals

Participants will:

- Play a game to help them recall events from the film and begin a deeper conversation
- Discuss the definition of *symbol* in both historical and contemporary times as it applies to *The Book Thief*
- Explore how symbols are used in their daily lives as powerful tools that foster ideas
- Recognize that symbols can represent a reality; they can be instruments of both good and evil in the world.

Materials

- Newsprint, markers, tape, crayons, and color pencils
- Chalice (or LED/battery-operated candle)
- Construction paper in different colors
- Scissors, including left-handed scissors
- Magazines
- Table
- Leader Resource 1, Game Questions
- Leader Resource 2, Game Answers
- A small hourglass or timepiece device (10 seconds)
- Lined paper and pens or pencils
- A coin

Preparation

- Cut out Leader Resource 1, Game Questions. Thought bubbles with a non-bold outline have a 5-point value. Bold-outlined thought bubbles are worth 10 points and zigzags, 15.
- Review Leader Resource 2, Game Answers, before playing the game.
- Place construction paper, drawing implements, tape, scissors, and magazines on a table.

Opening (2 minutes)

Welcome participants to the meeting space. Invite a volunteer to light the chalice as you or a volunteer read aloud the opening words, "[The Chalice Is a Symbol.](#)" by Debra Faulk, from the UUA's Worship Web:

*A chalice lit in our midst is a symbol of our liberal faith,
A faith built on the foundation of freedom, reason and tolerance
A faith sustained by acts of kindness and justice*

A faith that visions a world flourishing, with equality for all her people
A faith that demands the living out of goodness
A faith that requires thoughtfulness
A faith of wholeness
This tiny flame is the symbol of the spark of all this within each of us.

Activity 1: Let's Play a Game (20 minutes)

Form two teams. (If the group is small, conduct the activity as a whole group.) Say in these words, or your own:

We are going to play a game as a way to review The Book Thief. Teams will take turns answering questions that will test your memory of the movie. A coin will be tossed to determine which team picks the first question. Each group picks from three categories: easy, medium, and difficult. Team A will have as long as the hourglass timer (or stop watch) to answer the question. If they do not answer correctly, Team B will have a chance to respond. If Team A answers correctly, then it is Team B's turn to answer a question. The game continues until all questions have been answered. Easy questions are worth five points, medium are worth ten, and difficult are worth fifteen.

If prepared questions run out and there is still time, invite the teams to write their own questions on lined paper and quiz each other. The facilitator will keep track of the scores. The team with the most points wins. Perhaps the winners can pick the next movie or book for the group to discuss, if the group has an ongoing commitment to meet.

After the game, ask:

- Which scenes from the movie did you remember best? Why do you think this is so?
- Did you remember any more symbols while playing the game?

Activity 2: Discussion (15 minutes)

Share a definition of *symbol* with the group. From *The American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, a symbol is defined as

something that represents or suggests something else. Symbols often take the form of words, visual images, or gestures that are used to convey ideas and beliefs. All human cultures use symbols to express the underlying structures of their social systems, to represent ideal cultural characteristics, such as beauty, and to ensure that the culture is passed onto new generations.

Prompt discussion with preliminary questions such as:

- What have you learned about World War II in school and other places?

- What are some of symbols in *The Book Thief*? What type of responses do they elicit in people? How do you think the Hubermann family felt seeing the swastika hanging from their door and their neighbors' doors?
- Have you ever encountered a symbol or image that represents hate? Or a symbol that represents something good? How did you react in either situation?
- What was the purpose of the book burning? How did you feel when the youth were singing? What could be ramifications of Liesel stealing a book from the smoldering fire?
- Does your family have a cultural or ethnic symbol that also represents your identity?

Activity 3: Make a Symbol (20 minutes)

Symbols are prevalent in *The Book Thief* and are used to achieve various ends. This activity explores symbols in participants' lives and in the film. Explain, in these words or your own:

Pick a sheet of construction paper and choose additional materials from the table. Draw or cut out a symbol that represents your culture, your country, or a value you hold.

Magazines are provided for you to browse through; you can create a real or imagined symbol with magazine pictures if you choose.

When they have finished, ask if anyone would like to briefly share their symbols. Using the definition of *symbol* shared earlier, ask if their symbols "convey ideas and beliefs" they hold. Does their symbol represent something physical about themselves? Something abstract?

Closing (3 minutes)

Ask participants to return the crafts to the table. If there is energy for continuing the conversation, explain that questions not covered in Session 1 can be discussed in Session 2. Conclude the session with the following brief meditation, explaining that this meditation is inspired from the book; the opening pages explain that Death sees people as shades of color:

Close your eyes if you feel comfortable doing so. Take a few deep breaths. Imagine your favorite color. What does your favorite color represent for you? Picture it in your mind and breathe deeply. Embrace the feeling the color brings to you. I leave you with this feeling today.[Pause for a moment] Open your eyes. Thank you for participating in this session.

Extinguish the chalice.

Session 2: Storytelling (60 minutes)

Goals

Participants will:

- Discover that storytelling is a powerful mode of communication in times of joy or struggle
- Explore how and why Liesel uses stories in *The Book Thief*
- Write of a time when they used storytelling or words to comfort, support, or encourage someone in their life.

Materials

- Chalice (or LED/battery-operated candle)
- Lined paper and pens or pencils

Preparation

- If your meeting takes place in a space that is suitable for small group discussion, create areas for small groups to gather around tables.
- Place paper and writing implements on tables.

Opening (2 minutes)

Welcome participants to the meeting space. Invite a volunteer to light the chalice as the opening words by Ean Huntington Behr, from the UUA's [Worship Web](#), are read aloud:

You are in the story of the world.

You are the world coming to know itself.

May you trust that all you will ever say or do

Belongs in the story of the world.

Activity 1: Discussion (20 minutes)

The Book Thief delves into Liesel's relationship with books, words, and storytelling. Prompt discussion with the following questions:

- How does Liesel use her knowledge of words and reading? Why do you think words or books are powerful? How are her words used: for good? For bad?
- Why does Liesel steal books? At some point in most of our lives, caregivers have told us that stealing is wrong. Yet, in Liesel's situation, she steals for learning and, in doing so,

helps people through her gift of storytelling. Under what circumstances might stealing be okay? Have you ever been in a situation where you questioned what was right or wrong? What was the outcome?

Activity 2: The Power of Storytelling (35 minutes)

Describe the activity in these words or your own:

For the next 20 minutes, you will write about stories and storytelling. Have you ever had to create a story (for a friend, sibling, relative, a stranger)? What was the process like for you—difficult, easy, somewhere in-between?

Think about words and how they can affect thoughts and actions. How are words used in poems? Songs? Books?

Write about a time the act of storytelling made an impact on your life: Have words or stories ever comforted you, challenged you in some way, or changed your life? You may draw an illustration to complement your story.

When you have 15 minutes left in this activity, invite participants to stop and share their writing. If this is not enough time to allow the entire group to share together, form smaller groups for sharing. Say:

Storytelling, writing, and books are such an integral component of The Book Thief. That is why we are going to spend these last 15 minutes reading our writing aloud. You may “pass” if you do not wish to share.

Closing (3 minutes)

If there is energy for continuing the conversation, explain that questions not covered in Session 2 can be discussed in Session 3. Conclude the session with the following words:

Describe the day... If your eyes could speak, what would they say? — Max Vandenburg, from the movie The Book Thief

Extinguish the chalice.

Session 3: Justice in the World (60 minutes)

Goals

Participants will:

- Discuss themes of justice and injustice in *The Book Thief*
- Explore social justice within their communities to connect the justice theme of the book to the present day
- Discuss how to continue the larger conversation about symbols, storytelling, and justice with family members, friends, and people in their communities
- Reflect on moral lessons learned and other take-aways from viewing *The Book Thief*.

Materials

- Chalice (or LED/battery-operated candle)
- Writing paper, pens, and pencils
- Electronic devices with an Internet connection, such as tablets, cell phones, or computers, one for every three participants
- Newsprint, markers, and tape

Preparation

- Place writing paper, pens, and pencils on tables.
- On a sheet of newsprint, write the links to resources provided in the Find Out More section, below. You can also create a document for participants to take home, or, make plans to email or text participants the links after the session.

Opening (2 minutes)

Welcome participants to the meeting space. Invite a volunteer to light the chalice as you or a volunteer read the opening words, from *The Book Thief*, aloud:

In my job, I'm always finding humans at their best and their worst. I see their ugliness and their beauty, and I wonder how the same thing can be both. — Death (narrator)

Activity 1: Discussion (25 minutes)

Focus this final discussion on the theme of justice in the film. Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Participants can write notes and thoughts about the questions if they choose. Prompt with the following questions:

- Liesel's actions supportive of justice? What type(s) of justice does she exhibit?
- What injustices, if any, take place in your community? Do people turn away from injustice? If you see injustices being ignored, why do you think this occurs? Have you been pulled into an injustice unwillingly?
- How have you worked to combat the effects of injustice in your community? Or in the wider world?
- Is the narrator, Death, a form of justice? Could the way people died at the end of the film be a type of justice? Why or why not?

Activity 2: Continuing the Conversation (30 minutes)

Take about 25 minutes to discuss ways participants can extend their responses to *The Book Thief*.

Prompt with the following questions:

- Do you plan to bring the conversations from these discussions about World War II or the Holocaust to your family? To your friends?
- Is there one lesson or moral you have taken away from our discussions about *The Book Thief*? Would you be willing to share it, now, with the group?
- If you have read the book, how are the two art forms, film and book, different or similar? Why do you think the film is different from the book?
- What are some next steps you could take to further compassion and justice in your communities? What local social justice networks could you volunteer with, such as a shelter, a food bank, or a group planning a justice rally for a cause you are passionate about?

Spend at least five minutes using the Internet to research social justice networks in your area.

Form groups of three and ask participants to locate two or three opportunities to pursue following this discussion series. Invite them to share their results with the larger group.

An alternative is to invite participants to explore the physical space of the congregation, including posted newsletters, social justice pamphlets, etc., to discover justice projects already embraced by the congregation. Make plans to participate in these projects in age-appropriate ways. Consult a member of the justice committee or the congregation's religious educator if more ideas are needed.

Closing (3 minutes)

Thank everyone for their participation in the discussion. If participants show some energy for continuing the conversation, explain that questions can be discussed through email or at future

group meetings. Share the Find Out More links with participants. Conclude the session with the following reading from the UUA's [Worship Web](#):

*We have come into this room of hope
where our hearts and minds are opened to the future.
We have come into this room of justice
where we set aside our fear to name freely every oppression.
We have come into this room of love
where we know that no lives are insignificant.* — Libbie D. Stoddard

Extinguish the chalice.

Find Out More

- [The Book Thief](#) by Markus Zusak (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 2005)
- [Fahrenheit 451](#) by Ray Bradbury (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979) explores the meaning of books in a world where book burning is a regular occurrence. There is also a [movie](#) of the same name.
- “[Unitarian Couple Honored for World War II Heroism](#),” by Michelle Bates Deakin (UU World, Dec. 12, 2005), is a story about Martha and Waitstill Sharp, who fostered justice in war-torn Europe by rescuing refugees; <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/unitarian-couple-honored-world-war-ii-heroism>.
- Anne Frank used words in much the same way as Liesel and took comfort in them while hiding from the Nazis. A website about [Anne Frank](#) features information about her life, story, and diary; www.annefrank.org.
- The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum provides more information about [Kristallnacht](#) and the [Hitler Youth](#); www.ushmm.org.

Leader Resources

The Session 1 game uses all four Leader Resources.

- Leader Resource 1: Game Questions – “Easy” (5 points)
- Leader Resource 2: Game Questions – Harder (10 points)
- Leader Resource 3: Game Questions – Difficult (15 points)
- Leader Resource 4: Game Answers

Print each Leader Resource on a separate, single-sided sheet of paper. If possible, print in color.

Cut apart the questions on Leader Resources 1, 2, and 3. Plan to put them into three separate containers (“easy,” harder, and difficult) or all together in a single container—depending on how you wish to play the game.

Keep Leader Resource 4: Game Answers out of participants’ sight!

Leader Resource 1: Game Questions, “Easy” (5 points)

1. What is the name of the street that Liesel and Rudy live on?

5 points

5. What does Max give to Liesel before he leaves?

5 points

2. What instrument does Hans play?

5 points

6. What is the narrator, Death, haunted by?

5 points

3. What book does Liesel find at her brother's gravesite?

5 points

7. Where does Max hide when the basement is searched?

5 points

4. Where does Franz throw Liesel's journal?

5 points

8. What is the service that Rosa provides for the mayor?

5 points

Leader Resource 2: Game Questions, Harder (10 points)

9. What is Liesel's brother's name?
10 points

13. How many years does Liesel live before Death comes for her?
10 points

10. What phrase does Hans say to get Liesel to step out of the car?
10 points

14. Liesel does not say "stealing" to describe her book taking. What is the word?
10 points

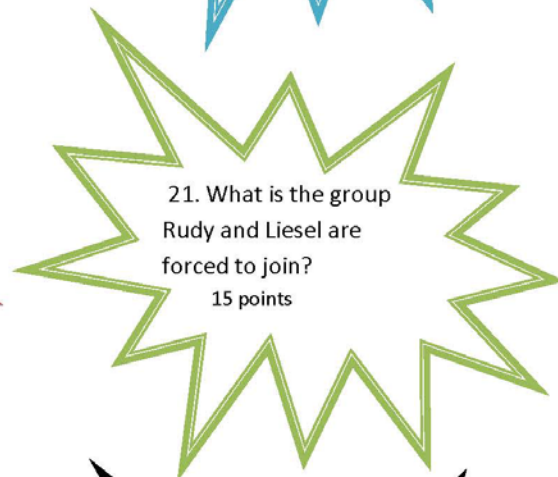
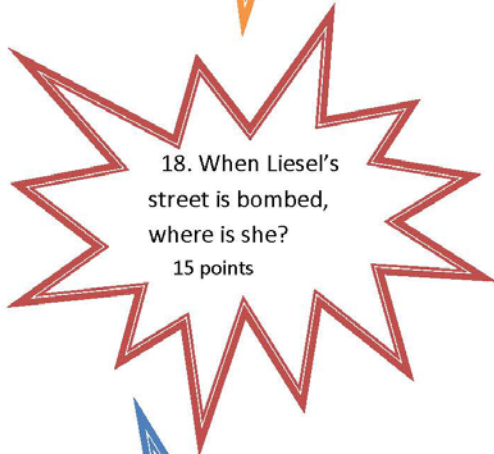
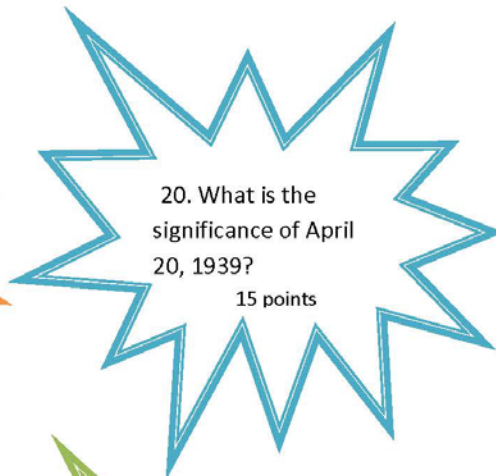
11. Liesel shares a story in the bomb shelter. Who is it about?
10 points

15. What does Liesel draw on the chalkboard when asked to write?
10 points

12. How many years pass before Liesel sees Max again?
10 points

16. What do Liesel, her family, and Max build in the basement on Christmas Eve?
10 points

Leader Resource 3: Game Questions, Difficult (15 points)

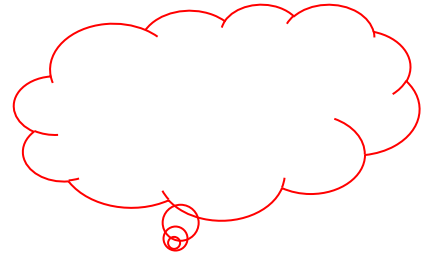


Leader Resource 4: Game Answers

Game Answers

“Easy” – 5 points

1. Heaven’s Street
2. Accordion
3. A gravedigger’s book or *The Grave Digger’s Handbook*
4. Into the river
5. A journal
6. Humans
7. Under a Nazi flag
8. Laundry service



Harder (bold outline) – 10 points

9. Werner
10. Your Majesty
11. Her brother
12. Two years
13. Ninety years
14. Borrowing
15. Three Xs or XXX
16. A snowman



Difficult (zigzag) – 15 points

17. The accordion
18. In the basement at her writing desk
19. Soccer (or football, or running)
20. Hitler’s birthday
21. Hitler Youth
22. Looks up to the sky, or looks at the night sky

