



THE BOOK THIEF is a February, 2015 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd film.

Germany 2013 color and black-and-white 131 minutes live action feature drama mostly in English Fox 2000 Pictures / Sunswept Entertainment / Studio Babelsberg Producers: Karen Rosenfelt, Ken Blancato, Charlie Wobcken, Christoph Fisser, Henning Molfenter

13 of a possible 20 points

*****1/2 of a possible *******

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates juvenile performer

Points:

- 1 Direction: Brian Percival**
- 1 Editing: John Wilson**
- 2 Cinematography: Florian Ballhaus Aerial Unit DP: Adam Dale***
- 1 Lighting: Janosch Voss**
- 1 Screenplay: Michael Petroni, based on the novel by Marcus Zusak**
- 2 Music: John Williams* Arranger: Nic Raine***
- 2 Production Designer: Simon Elliott***
- Art Directors: Bill Crutcher* (Supervising), Jens Lockmann*, Anja Müller***
- Set Designers: Katja Fischer*, Michael Fissneider***
- Set Decorator: Mark Rosinski***

**Set Dressers: Bulent Akgun*, Hubert Bock*, Yvonne von Krockow*,
Sandra Wortmann*, Stephanie Gros*, Erik Hennig***

Scenic Artists: James Gemmill, Russell Oxley

Props: Axel Kahnt (Master), David Thummerer

Costume Designers: Anna Shephard, Jeanette Apel

Makeup: Pamela Grujic (Head), Fae Hammond (Designer),

Marika Knappe, Babette Bröseke, Susanne Kasper, Natalia Jaik,

Antje Langner, Monika Lienig, Karla Meirer, Irmela Oswald,

Andrea Pirchner, Margarita Rasbasch, Mike Reinecke,

Katrin Schneider, Christina Wagner, Winnie Matthews

**1 Sound: Glenn Freemantle (Sound Designer and Supervising Sound Editor),
Ryan Cole (Sound Recordist), Manfred Banach (Sound Mixer),
Danny Freemantle, Ben Barker, Glen Gathard, Peter Hanson, and
Eilam Hoffman (Sound Effects), Elspeth Brodie (Dialect Coach)**

Narrator: Roger Allam*

Sound Remixing / Rerecording: Niv Adiri, Tom Lalley, Andy Nelson

1 Acting

1 Creativity

13 total points

**Cast: Sophie Nelisse (j)* (Liesel Meminger), Geoffrey Rush (Hans Huberman),
Emily Watson (Rosa Huberman, wife of Hans), Ben Schnetzer
(Max Vandenberg), Nico Liersch (j) (Rudy Steiner), Heike Makatsch
(Liesel's mother), Julian Lehmann (j) (Liesel's younger brother), Kirsten Block
(Frau Heinrich), Nozomi Linus Kaiser (j)* (Fat-faced goalie), Oliver Stokowski
(Alex Steiner, Rudy's dad), Hildegard Schroedter (Frau Becker, schoolteacher),
Sandra Nedelev* (Max's mother), Rafael Gareison (Walter, Nazi soldier),
Carl Heinz Choynski (Jurgen the Groundsman), Carina Weise* (Rudy's mother),
Rainer Bock (Burgomeister Hermann), Barbara Auer*
(Burgomeister Hermann's wife), Sebastian Hulk (Gestapo agent),
Matthias Matschke (Wolfgang), Martin Ontrop (Herr Lehmann), others**

Depression Germany. A train rattles across snowy fields. Among passengers on board are Liesel Meminger, her sickly younger brother, and Liesel's Communist mother. The family is in flight, attempting to become invisible. Liesel sings a traditional lullaby, only to find at its conclusion that her brother has died.

At the boy's funeral, his sister retrieves a gravedigger's manual accidentally left behind. She is illiterate, unable to fathom the significance of her souvenir.

Next scene finds her sharing a vehicle with its driver and Frau Heinrich, who seems to be a Red Cross worker charged with transporting children at risk to adoptive parents. Apparently, carpenter Hans Huberman and wife Rosa have applied for two such castoffs, a boy and a girl. When the car in which they are riding stops before Hans' residence, Frau Heinrich explains the promised boy is deceased. The Hubermans will have to settle for just fostering his sibling.

What? One girl to do the work of two wards? No sturdy boy available? This was not the deal Rosa anticipated. Furthermore, Liesel's dirty from travel, uncommunicative, still shocked by loss of a brother. Rosa's tart tongue and disapproving face repel her projected houseguest. Only Geoffrey, considerate and protective, offers appropriate welcome. Childless no longer, the quiet, retiring laborer begins to bond with a similarly taciturn visitor. Both feel more comfortable with gestures than words.

Watching the arrival of wordless newcomer, chatterbox Rudi Steiner's immediately enchanted. Liesel looks about his age and size. Good. He can adopt her as friend and playmate. Very conveniently, she's moving in next door to his house. They can walk to school together, perhaps even attend the same classes.

Rosa is not so appreciative of the stranger. Grudgingly, she accepts the Steiner boy's help in bringing her to and from school. True, he's a distraction and lingerer, devoted to sports, heedless of time. Frau Huberman is not so sure it's wise to encourage his attentions.

When Liesel responds to a request from Frau Becker to write her name on a classroom blackboard, it becomes apparent to everyone there that the newcomer hasn't yet learned letters or writing. She uses only crosses in place of a name. This makes her a ready target for verbal abuse, which she finally silences by a frustrated assault on playground bully Wolfgang. Administering a

drubbing to her chief tormentor, Liesel establishes herself as a force to be reckoned with. Classmates retreat in deference. Rudy becomes even more favorably impressed by his neighbor's temper and power. She's no pushover, slinking away when trouble brews.

Shared love of music creates a tentative bond between Hans and Liesel, for he accompanies her singing with an accordion. The instrument came into his possession as a gift from surviving family members of a self-sacrificing Jew who preserved Hans' life during World War I. Why they should be inclined to make that kind of donation to someone partly responsible for the death of their breadwinner is an unresolved plot mystery, one of many improbabilities undercutting credibility of author Markus Zusak's story.

When Hans discovers Liesel treasures a small black book serving as memento of her brother's burial, he assures his "princess" the secret acquisition will not be returned to its owner. Instead, the pair of them can use it as a primer. Together, they will hone reading skills, something Hans failed to do during his formative years. A makeshift classroom with chalkboard is established in the Huberman basement. There Hans creates alphabetical vocabulary lists to study and memorize. Over time, these informal literacy sessions make an ambitious reader of Liesel, whose embarrassments at school are goads spurring quick progress.

Further incentive to read is provided by Burgermeister Hermann's wife, who observes Liesel's furtive rescue of a volume from a bookburning bonfire organized by local Nazis. When Liesel arrives one morning at the Hermann mansion with laundry cleaned by Rosa, its mistress invites her into a library developed by a son gone permanently missing in the First World War. Liesel's new relish for devouring stories reminds the woman both of her own childhood and the departed Hermann heir. She invites the girl to freely make use of the hardcovers whenever she returns with fresh laundry. Liesel is happy to do so, much to the chagrin of pal Rudy. He would prefer stuffing himself with food. There's not so much of it at home. This is due to the Fuehrer's war against Britain, which has taken farmers off the land and put them in tanks and trenches. Spouses and children have been left behind to manage planting, weeding, and harvesting as best they can. What is grown goes first to troops,

with leftovers carted off to grocery shops. Going hungry becomes a national pastime.

In the aftermath of a Gestapo roundup of Jews, young Max Vandenberg is sent off from his home. Eventually he arrives at the Hubermans, seeking refuge on the basis of Hans' pledge long ago to do whatever Vandenberg's need in repayment for his messmate's heroic intervention. The Hubermans become a household of four. Liesel initially resents this, but gradually grows more accommodating due to Max's outcast status and attraction to literature. These parallel her own.

As war drags on, pressure to inform on neighbors mounts. Can the Hubermans maintain their dangerous secret? Rudy suspects Liesel has found another admirer and becomes jealous. Wolfgang promotes to brownshirt, continuing to menace suspected traitors such as pacifist Rudy and Communist Liesel. How much longer will Max's hideout stay safely undetected? Will Liesel's own story end in tragedy for all of them?

Readers can end the suspense by obtaining this dvd and watching it from start to finish.

As a depiction of appalling events transpiring in Germany during the Nazi era, **THE BOOK THIEF** leaves much to be desired. Hunger is suggested, but not dominant. The war itself, mostly kept at a safe distance, is presented in a muffled, sanitized version. Though Kristallnacht's brutality is shown frankly, forerunning anti-Semitism barely surfaces. So viewers see only consequence, not cause. Similarly, training in patriotic martyrdom is limited in this film to choral propaganda and one detached evening rally, despite being taught vigorously in a school system micromanaged by fascist zealots. What **ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT** revealed openly, **THE BOOK THIEF** obscures. This makes the connection between what is seen on screen and contemporary terrorism abroad difficult to perceive. Such diluted education serves no useful purpose.

Both book and film are narrated by Death, suavely voiced by Roger Allam in this visual production. Here Death is a gentleman: responsible, curious, compassionate, obviously not a Party member in good standing. Just an innocent bystander to the follies of humanity.

Recreation of Nazi-era Germany by the art department is exemplary, though as KORCZAK proves, black-and-white photography throughout would have communicated far better the oppressive, bleak atmosphere of a nation bent on cultural suicide. Costumes are adequate, props and furnishings utterly faithful to the era.

Considerable cathartic power is generated by the mournful music score created by John Williams, working once again in a richly suggestive SCHINDLER'S LIST vein. Here orchestrations are muted, somber in both coloration and tone, quite appropriate to the content.

Lighting and sound are variable in quality, the former partly due to inherent chaos of shelter scenes and darkness never fully removable from corners of dank cellars. Sound problems arise due to foreign performers attempting Teutonic accents in English speech and sound effects pitched too far forward in the mix.

Brian Percival's direction and Michael Petroni's screenplay adaptation equally suffer from tepid treatment of incendiary themes. Greater dynamism is not only warranted but essential. In attempting to keep intact entire passages of dialogue from the novel, Petroni's script gives actors too much to say and too little to show. This especially works against lead Sophie Nelisse, a gifted French-Canadian actress whose relative unfamiliarity with English rhythms keeps her off-balance in longer conversations, overshadowing personal strong suits of gesture and gaze. Emily Watson's conversion into loving substitute mother is considerably less persuasive than her tyrannical grump encountered in earlier scenes, though not because of any shortcoming in effort by the actress. Character development taking chapters in the book is frequently compressed into mere minutes by Percival, intent on cramming epic drama into a two-hour format. There's too much material here for that, including a key relationship between Liesel and Max that doesn't even start to develop until about halfway through the story. Of performers who do stand out effectively, Barbara Auer as Ilsa Hermann, a ghost living primarily in the past, and brief cameos by impatient goalie Nozomi Linus Kaiser and Sandra Nedeleva as Max's frantic mother are especially hard to forget.

Reasonably sincere in tone, limited in dramatic and cautionary effectiveness, **THE BOOK THIEF** is nonetheless an excellent inducement to read for enlightenment, if not survival. Ignorance is clearly not bliss. Overlooking propaganda doesn't prevent it from causing mental anguish and physical suffering. It hasn't in the past and won't do so in the future.

THE BOOK THIEF makes acceptable viewing for teens and adults. It contains considerable violence, gross-out humor, and obscene language. So parents should strongly consider previewing it themselves.

Special features of the dvd include captions, scene selections, four judiciously excised scenes totalling six and one-half minutes, and a theatrical trailer that runs about two and one-quarter minutes.

One additional comment: Captioning of English translations in the book bonfire and patriotic song scenes is abysmal. Print is too tiny to read, making words frustratingly incomprehensible. Shame on Fox for releasing utterly unreadable material in a film otherwise to be lauded for promotion of literacy.