

## ‘The Book Thief’ Fails to Find Tone of Familiar Story

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on November 15, 2013 - 10:07am

- [Brian Percival](#) [2]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [3]
- [Film Review](#) [4]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [5]
- [Markus Zusak](#) [6]
- [Roger Allam](#) [7]
- [The Book Thief](#) [8]



Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Brian Percival’s “The Book Thief,” from the hit book by Markus Zusak, is a well-intentioned piece of work that nonetheless fails, sometimes spectacularly, to connect in the ways that its creators intend. Tonally adrift between something clearly aimed at young adults and something much darker and more cynical about the nature of man and the afterlife, the film is only carried at all by the strengths of its talented leads – Geoffrey Rush, Emily Watson, and the remarkable Sophie Nelisse. Try as they may, these talented performers can’t overcome the overall work’s notable flaws, even if one senses that the hearts of all involved are in the right place.

Zusak’s book was narrated by Death himself and Percival and his team make the daring move of keeping a lot of that narration intact. So “The Book Thief” opens with a the voice of Death (Roger Allam) noting how he rarely notices humans as he’s doing his job but how one – a girl named Liesel (Sophie Nelisse) – stood out on the day he killed her brother. It sets a dark and yet almost whimsical tone. Even the death of a child is just something that happens. And Zusak and Percival set the tone that this will not be a typical story of WWII Germany in presenting that unique way of looking at (and hearing from) death. The problem is that “The Book Thief” does become a relatively typical story of personal triumph in a time of tragedy and that opening scene is never really fulfilled upon.



The Book Thief  
*Photo credit: Fox*

Liesel is adopted by the kindly Hans (Rush) and strict Rosa (Watson). Her new father encourages her to read and write, playing accordion late at night after a few too many drinks. Her new mother encourages proper behavior, seeming like the kind of person who doesn’t like to draw too much attention in the small German town in which they live. When Nazi furor begins to grow and the town stages a book burning in the middle of the square, Liesel tries to rescue one of the burning books, seeing the value in the written word that the ignorant do not. She draws the attention of a local rich woman named Ilsa (Barbara Auer), the wife of an SS official, who encourages her to sneak into her library and

steal books for what she thinks is just a personal collection.

Meanwhile, Max (Ben Schnetzer), a Jewish refugee whose father was a friend of Hans, arrives at their doorstep, looking for shelter and safety. As the rise of Nazi Germany happens around them, Liesel and Max form a friendship in that basement, defying Hitler's cries and seeking humanity not often seen in films about this part of the world in World War II. Of course, tragedy will come to this inconsequential German home as it did to so many of them in this part of the world in the '30s and '40s.



The Book Thief

Photo credit: Fox

Perhaps the tonal tightrope-walking act of a story that careens wildly from young adult romance (Liesel has a potential beau in Rudy, played by Nico Liersch) to Kristallnacht would have worked better on the page, especially in a book clearly designed for young adults, but it proves to be too much for Percival and his team, including writer Michael Petroni, to handle. Rarely has a film been more inconsistent in its apparent audience, often coming off across as too dark for kids but too light for adults. It's not that a film necessarily has to appeal directly to either but "The Book Thief" misses the mark with all demos through its inconsistency.

The tonal problems of the film are enhanced by its remarkable familiarity. For nearly every issue mishandled by "The Book Thief," the mind wanders to a better film. The issue of a German girl who learned the truth about her country's atrocities in World War II was handled with grace and depth earlier this year in the excellent "Lore." The bizarre combination of finding humor in horror was handled in "Life is Beautiful." By flitting with so many different themes, "The Book Thief" is constantly reminding one of better films. It doesn't help that the lackluster art direction and production design looks like a back lot version of WWII Germany, enhancing the sense that you're watching a movie and not something truthful.

It's through no fault of the talented cast. Rush and Nelisse have a wonderful father-daughter chemistry and the way they work off each other is easily the best element of the film. Rush has long-ago proven that he can do anything as an actor and Nelisse will someday be a huge star. She has that natural charisma that is only granted to a lucky few. She'll be in a better movie soon. Probably her next one.

*"The Book Thief" stars Sophie Nelisse, Geoffrey Rush, Emily Watson, Barbara Auer, Ben Schnetzer, Nico Liersch, and Roger Allam. It was adapted by Michael Petroni and directed by Brian Percival. It opens in Chicago on November 15, 2013.*



[9]

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