

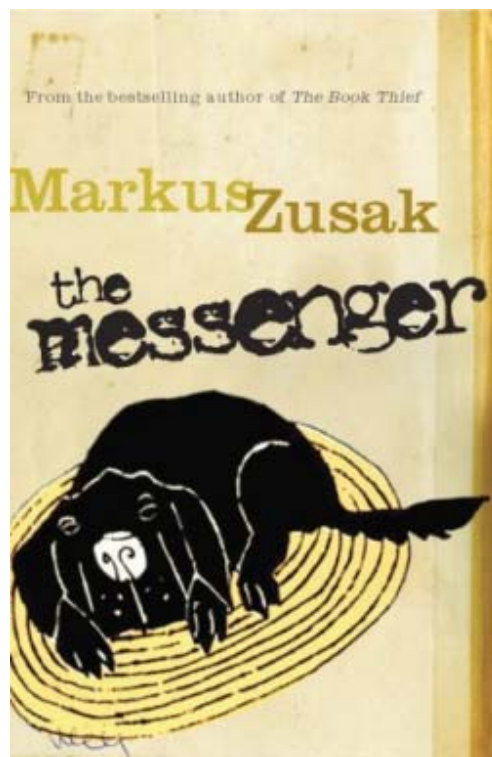
PICADOR
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NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Markus Zusak

THE MESSENGER



Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

CONTENTS:

- Thematic & Plot Summary
- Writing Style & Techniques
- The Author
- Questions for Discussion

THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

What is this novel about? 'It's about glowing lights and small things that are big.' (p 239)

The opening chapter of this novel sets the tone for this satirically cryptic cautionary tale about discovering what's important in life, setting a course for oneself to follow, and above all, learning to care. It's also about how we create stories in order to deal with life's challenges. It begins with a bank holdup by a haplessly pathetic gunman who is foiled by an ostensibly equally hapless guy named Ed Kennedy, in an hilarious description of what not to do when you rob a bank. The parody escalates when Marv, Ed's friend (despite the apparent danger they face), evinces more concern about the fact that his clapped-out Falcon is on a fifteen minute meter and that he might therefore get a parking ticket, than he does about the threat of the gun wielded by the panic-stricken robber. This farcical situation catapults the reader into the life of Ed who in his own estimation is a nineteen year old failure who's achieved 'Jack-shit' (p 17) and whose list of anti-achievements include being 'the Youngest Cab Driver in these parts' (p 17) ie an illegal one. He spends his days in his rented shack and whiles away his nights either driving or playing cards with his equally hopeless mates Marv and Ritchie, and the love of his life Audrey. But when he inadvertently foils the robbery and becomes a local hero, Ed's luck has seemingly changed. And when he then mysteriously receives a playing card in the mail with three addresses and times on it, his life begins to change even more dramatically.

Ed the messenger, Ed the saint, Ed the saviour. This is a richly spiritual journey masquerading as a mystery novel, with a lot of levity thrown in to further disguise its serious intention. For the stories told in this novel are akin to parables. Ed must act the Good Samaritan and help a series of people to find their heart's desire. But the needs of each are different, and the type of task required is different too. After the first card, Ed receives a series of such mysterious missives also written on playing cards, which have to be deciphered and acted upon. 'I never thought I wouldn't want four aces. In a card game, you pray for a hand like that. My life is not a card game.' (p 124)

This novel is nevertheless carefully structured around this metaphor of a card game, so that in each of the first four parts (Part 1 (pp 1-98) *The First Message*; Part 2 (pp 99-193) *The Stones of Home*; Part 3 (pp 195-283) *Trying Times for Ed Kennedy*; Part 4 (pp 285-365) *The Music of Hearts* there are 13 chapters numbered like a deck of cards from Ace, 2 -10,

Jack, Queen, King. In the final Part 5 (pp 367- 386) *The Joker*, there are only five chapters. Each part begins with a message written on that card:

Card 1 Ace of Diamonds has three addresses and times on it. Ed is instructed to visit each of these places and perform some task. At his first location, 45 Edgar Street, Ed observes a man who routinely rapes his wife every night at midnight. The description of her subsequent despair (pp 44-5) is heartrending and Ed's retaliatory treatment of the man is worthy of a crime film. Milla Johnson is a lonely 82 year old woman who lives at 13 Harrison Avenue and has missed her husband Jimmy for 60 years. When Ed visits her at 6pm she mistakes him for Jimmy and he has to share dinner and a story with her. In effect he gives Jimmy back to her. **Sophie** is a fifteen year-old barefooted runner who lives at 6 Macedoni Street and at 5.30am Ed observes her running and later realises that he has to convince her that she needs to believe in herself.

Card 2 Ace of Clubs contains the message: 'Say a prayer at the stones of home' and eventually leads him to a rock on which is carved three names. Father Thomas O'Reilly is a priest without a congregation. Angie Carusso is a single mum who needs someone to look out for her sometimes. Gavin Rose is a fourteen year old 'complete bastard' (p 180) who needs to be taught a lesson about family; Ed beats him up so that his brother Daniel can rescue him, and then he's beaten up too.

Card 3 Ace of Spades has the names of three writers on it - Graham Greene, Morris West and Sylvia Plath. The names lead him again to three addresses - first to 11 Glory Road where a Polynesian family named Tatapu are poor but happy, but whom Ed realises need one thing more - a new set of Christmas lights to light up their lives; at 23 Clown Street is an Italian restaurant Melusso's which proves to be where his Mother meets her male friend. Ed follows her home and confronts her and they both admit to their residual hang-ups about Ed's dead father and the dead-end life they've been leading, and Ed has to remind his mother that she can't keep blaming the place for her own unhappiness, and she has to admit that her hatred of Ed is based on her resentment towards his father; at 39 Bell Street is an old cinema run by Bernie Price, who has rarely any audience. Ed and Audrey go to a screening during which a mysterious roll of film turns up which shows that Ed is under-surveillance by the same people who are sending the messages.

Card 4 Ace of Hearts contains the titles of three films 'The Suitcase', 'Cat Ballou' and 'Roman Holiday'. Each contains a reference which leads him to the three people he has to help. And this is more personal than the other messages for it invites Ed to deal with the problems of his best friends. Dave Sanchez (Ritchie) is wasting his life away until Ed shows him what a waste it really is and he admits that what he wants most of all is 'To Want.' (p 330); Marv Harris is obsessed with saving money until Ed

discovers what Marv is saving for and sets him on a happy course in life again with Suzanne Boyd, his teenager lover; Audrey O'Neill is a serial monogamist until Ed makes her 'feel' and therefore admit her love for him.

Card 5 The Joker ominously contains Ed's address 26 Shipping Street and is the thirteenth task and the hardest of all, since it requires that Ed help (or save) himself. 'What's in it for Ed Kennedy?' (p 222) This is the question which haunts Ed and the reader of this novel as the action progresses. He finally has his answer when he realises that all along there has been only one person needing help, or in the words of the song: 'And the Joker is Me.'

For this is a novel which **questions the meaning and value of aspirations**. Ed knows he's achieved little in comparison to figures like Joan of Arc who was a saint and a warrior in her teens, or Salvador Dali and Bob Dylan who were successful artists at 19 (p 16) . Ed thinks he's a 'nobody'. His mum hates him for it. Audrey is comfortable with it. His mates know where they stand with him. Then everything goes awry. Without even trying, Ed finds himself with a purpose. 'Now you're somebody Ed.' (p 249) He's no longer looking at a dead man when he looks in the mirror (p 380) for now Ed's got a life. But his success doesn't consist of commonly acknowledged achievements. Just small things...which are big.

Love and the need to be selfless in love, is another subject. Ed's love for Audrey is blighted by her determination to avoid sex with him, although she has no such qualms with anyone else. When she says he's her best friend, he thinks: 'You can kill a man with those words.' (p128) But he knows that Audrey has her reasons and that 'she just can't do that sort of thing with me.' (p 223) She has to trust herself enough to risk loving someone else. Ed's love for his mother is also continually blighted by her fury at him which she eventually reveals is because he reminds her of his father and how he disappointed her. 'Believe it or not - it takes a lot of love to hate you like this.' (p 264) She's still hurting from how Ed's father (p 259) blighted her dreams.

Social class is always an underlying theme in Markus Zusak's works. Ed's is a rough neighbourhood, a place which is 'kind of like everyone's dirty secret' (p 18). When he's beaten up by Daniel Rose's mates, his own mates don't suggest telling the police. 'You don't do that sort of thing around here.' (p 206) But as the story progresses Ed realises that a lot of the attitudes around him stem from people blaming their environment for their own failings. His mother, for example, thinks that his father held her back and left her doomed to live out her life in an area she considers a dead-end. But Ed finally realises that: 'It's not the place, I think. It's the people.' (p 264)

This is also a dangerously written book. It's funny and alarming by turns. It's hard and violent, and yet often seems very sentimental too. It teeters from crisis to crisis but is largely about ordinary events and ordinary people whom Ed is able to somehow make

better in some way. Often the action is unbearably real; for example the rape of Angelina, and Ed's near murder of her husband are described as if ordinary events, because they are. They are scenes which could belong in a Quentin Tarantino movie (pp 93-8), or equally at the end of an ordinary street near the local pub. This parallel between a Hollywood drama and the equal power of the ordinary crisis is deliberate because it's at the heart of what Zusak wants to say. We are all capable of tragedy. Of violence. Of ill-considered actions. Of hate and of love. These are not confined to those who haven't achieved in the world's eyes. They are shared by those whom the world regards as 'achievers' as well.

In summary this novel is a joyous response to the difficulties we all face in day-to-day life. How to act in a meaningful way? How to give our lives meaning? In the tasks he is set, Ed Kennedy finds the answer. It's not a big one. It's not about great acts or events or lives. For in the end we are all small people living our lives as best we can, knowing that things can't be determined; that the things which happen to us in life rarely have meaning; that love doesn't always make us happy; but that in knowing all of this, we can be full of the joy of life in accepting its reality. 'If I'm ever going to be okay, I'll have to earn it.' (p 293) His mates learn similar lessons too: 'There's only one thing I want...To want.' (p 330) In the end Ed realises that he loves the life he has now. He learns to care. He accepts his lot, knowing that he's also going to have to work a lot harder to make his life what he knows it can be. He embarks on a journey forward with glee and anticipation:

'I love the laughter of this night.

Our footsteps run and I don't want them to end ...

For now, just let us run.

We run straight through the laughter of the night.' (p 166)

WRITING STYLE AND TECHNIQUES

1. Discuss narrative voice and point of view in this work. The narrator is supposedly unaware of the tasks to be confronted but ultimately the writer is creating the tasks and so he is an omniscient figure lurking in the background. He admits as much to Ed (pp 381-6). Metafiction is a device which is commonly used by postmodern writers, although Zusak saves this surprise for last. Discuss.

2. Language is always used by Markus Zusak in a range of interesting ways. Words really matter to him, but not flowery, ornate and often meaningless words for his in contrast are sharp, blunt, often brutal and always spartan in meaning and intent. He often **builds an impression by using descriptions which 'grow'**. 'Old Marv's at the end of his tether, or his wit's end. Whatever you want to call it -he's got the shits something terrible.' (p 5) Zusak likes 'old-fashioned' and slightly arcane words too. For example, when Ed is being interviewed by the policeman who tells him not to get 'shirty', he thinks 'I quite like that word.' (p 12) And he calls the gunman 'a shocker' (p 13).

He often attributes to inanimate objects or the natural elements, the capacity of human thought, emotion or action. For example: 'The breeze looks away - almost embarrassed at having watched - and I'm left there alone.' (p 27) Or: 'It feels like the mornings clap their hands. To make me wake.' (p 81) Or: 'A pause that murders' (p 265) Or: 'The kitchen light is loud. It deafens me as I walk towards it.' (p 122) Or: 'I stand in long grass and hear the river now for the first time. It sounds like it's drinking.' (p 141) His description of emotion is visceral and athletic in its power: 'I don't move because my cowardice tramples me, even as I lift my spirit from its knees...sky.' (p 83) 'The sentence lands between us like a ball with no air in it.' (p 145) He's a master of expressions which creep up on the reader, and leap out of a seemingly ordinary description. For example, at New Year Ed writes: 'Drunken louts have decorated my cab, shrieking happiness that can only end in bedsheets soaked with the breath of beer and the weight of tomorrow.' (p 332) His description of characters is equally strong.

Marv is described succinctly (p 6) but later in one memorable phrase, as a 'maestro of meanness. The prince of penny-pichers.' (p 37). Ed Kennedy is also described (p 6), and then later in a list of phrases which summarise his characteristics ' *Taxi driver. Local loser. Cornerstone of mediocrity. Sexual midget. Pathetic card player.* And now, *weird-shit magnet* on top of it.' (p 146) Ritchie (aka Dave Sanchez) is described (p 35) and (p 322), but later as 'Ritchie sits there like an injury' (p 328). Discuss Zusak's use of language and style.

3. **Literary allusion** is a prominent device in the novel which refers to many texts and writers. eg Ed is set a literary quiz (pp 218-227) concerning Graham Greene, Morris West and Sylvia Plath. Others mentioned include James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, *Wuthering Heights* and 'a beautiful, strange book called *Table of Everything*' (p

171). It also includes a range of other types of texts such as Films (*Cool Hand Luke*; *Stir Crazy*; *See no Evil, Hear no Evil*, and William Wyler's *Ben-Hur*); Songs (Bob Dylan's 'The Hurricane', 'Oxford Town'; the Beatles' 'Eight Days a Week' and Bon Jovi's 'You Give Love a Bad Name'); Poems ('Barren Woman' by Sylvia Plath (pp 218-220) her *The Bell Jar*). There are also literary references embedded in the text for the reader to discover. eg *Murder at the Cathedral* (p 87); *alice doesn't live here anymore* (p 130). Discuss some of the texts referred to in the novel in relation to its themes and style.

4. The **humour** used includes several devices such as satire, irony and parody. Read the passage in which Ed describes his love for his dog Doorman and then diffuses the emotion with a one-liner, 'He just smells like he's dead' (p 20), and discuss the humorous devices used in it. Then choose another funny passage which appealed to you and discuss it too.

5. This text is also full of **symbolism and metaphor**. There are recurrent symbols such as the idea of a **Messenger/ Message/ Medium**. Ed receives messages but he also delivers messages of hope. eg He tells Milla, 'I've been looking for you'(p 56) because she thinks he's her dead lover Jimmy. Those he helps have messages for him too. The very word messenger or message conjures up its own references - for example, Marshall McLuhan's iconic work *The Medium or the Message*; the Microsoft Messenger system- there are a bundle of meanings wrapped up in the title of this book, which is about communication, relationships and self. **Cards** similarly represent metaphorically the cards you're dealt with in life-the joker, the ace of spades, etc. Ed receives four aces but they don't bring good news. 'In moments of awakeness, I remember the diamonds, relive the clubs and even smile about the spades. I worry about the hearts.'(p 303) 'People die of broken hearts. They have heart attacks. And it's the heart that hurts most when things go wrong and fall apart.' (p 292) **Numbers are symbolic too** - 13 cards are received but this number which generally represents bad luck brings Ed not only to the end of his old life but possibly to the beginning of a new life. Discuss the use of symbolism and metaphor in this work.

THE AUTHOR

Markus Zusak was born in 1975. His work is published in the USA, UK and throughout Europe. He lives in Sydney. His children's books include the award-winning trilogy *The Underdog*, *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* and *When Dogs Cry*, and his book *The Messenger* which attracted a crossover audience. The latter won the 2003 CBCA Book of the Year (Older Readers) Award. Released in the US as *I am the Messenger* it was named a Printz Honor Book in the Michael L Printz Awards for Excellence in Young Adult Literature - the first time an Australian book had been honored by the American Library Association. *The Book Thief* was released in the US in March 2006 and debuted at No 3 on the NY Times Bestseller List. Film Rights have been optioned by Fox 2000.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. This novel seems to veer a precarious course between reality and telling a surreal moral fable. But in the end it proves to be a postmodern exercise in creating a metafictional hero exploring the conventions of writing a literary 'bildungsroman' narrative. Discuss.
2. Challenge is a major theme in this novel. Ed confronts physical, emotional and intellectual challenges. Which is the most testing of the challenges he faces?
Discuss.
3. The idea of using cards as symbols of these has a further significance if one realises that each 'suit' is related to a different type of challenge or task. They can be divided into five types of action: Protect the Diamonds; Survive the Clubs; Dig Deep Through Spades; Feel the Hearts; Be the Joker. Discuss.
4. Each of the titles of parts and chapters are intriguing. Discuss the meanings of several of them.
5. Ed discusses men's intimidation re the concept of sex (pp 23-5), and also how his love for Audrey is unconsummated as she only has sex with men she can't love. Why is such sexual insecurity common in our society?
6. 'I'd rather chase the sun than wait for it.' (p 306) This is one of many wise sayings which Zusak pens in this book. Others include: 'Have you ever noticed that idiots have a lot of friends? It's just an observation.' (p 37) 'I want words at my funeral. But I guess that means you need life in your life.' (p 301) 'Tradition can be a dirty word. Especially around Christmas.' (p 303) Choose a few others and discuss them with the group as well.
7. 'Now it's true that I've read a lot of books.' (p 224) This admission by Ed is a clue to the nature of the text as well. For all the tasks which are set are imbued by the author's love of and knowledge of literature too. Discuss.
8. The two thugs Keith and Daryl play classical narrative roles by offering 'light relief' in this plot, while also acting as messengers, and can be compared to similar characters who appear as hapless sidekicks in Shakespeare's plays, for example. Discuss.
9. 'Nothing really ends at the end. Things just keep going, as long as memory can wield its axe, always finding a soft part in your mind to cut through and enter.' (p 290) Discuss.
10. 'I got hearts, and for some reason this feels the most dangerous of all.' (p 292) Is love such a dangerous business?

11. 'I won't be okay just for the sake of it. Not anymore.' (p 293) How much is this novel about complacency?

12. The cover of the book compares the novel to Nick Hornby's *How To Be Good* and Ian Softly's film *K-Pax*. If you've read or seen either you may wish to make comparisons and discuss.

13. Fate and accidents of fate are key topics in this novel. Discuss.

14. The novel ends with the words 'I'm not the Messenger at All. I'm the Message' (p 386). What does this mean?

15. This novel above all is about the old-fashioned concept of caring for ourselves and each other. Discuss.

THE MESSENGER

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