

The Book Thief

HMD film screening and discussion



HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL
DAY 27/1

YOUTH

A film screening and discussion is an engaging way to mark Holocaust Memorial Day with your youth group, school or university. You could combine this with a minute of silence or a candle lighting as an act of remembrance.

The Book Thief focuses on the experiences of a family in Nazi Germany. Young people will learn about the history of Nazi Germany and also have lots to discuss from the story. The DVD was released in 2013, so it is widely accessible, and may even be available to loan from your local library.

The Book Thief

Certificate: 12A / Length: 2 hours



Liesel Meminger is adopted by a German couple in 1938 when her mother cannot look after her. She settles into her new life in Berlin. She learns to read and makes friends with Rudi, the boy next door. But Nazi ideology begins affecting life around her. Hitler's portrait hangs in her school. One night, all of the shops run by Jews have their windows smashed and people are being taken away. Liesel is taken to a book burning, and begins to understand what the Nazis believe in. Then one day, Max arrives. He is a Jew and he is in danger.

Discussion questions

Some suggested questions are provided below to help start a discussion following the film screening. Some basic information is provided under each question to help you facilitate the discussion.

Who do you think is narrating the film? How does that make you feel?

Death is narrating the film. This is an unusual choice. Several characters in the story die, and it is set during World War Two and the Holocaust, when millions of people were being killed.

What examples did you see of Nazi images in Liesel's school? Why were they there?

A portrait of Hitler and swastikas. Children were taught Nazi ideology from an early age in Germany, as the Nazis wanted them to grow up supporting them.

What was happening when the windows were smashed? What was the name given to this night? Why did the film put images of this violence over the song the children were singing?

All the Jewish shops and businesses were vandalised, and Jewish people were attacked. 91 Jews were murdered. It is known as 'Kristallnacht' – the night of broken glass. By hearing the children sing, the connection is made between the discrimination they are being taught and the violence that is happening.

Who is Jesse Owens? Why was Rudi told off for idolising him?

Jesse Owens was a black American athlete, who won medals at the Berlin Olympics in 1938. The Nazis discriminated against black people, so Rudi was not allowed to publicly say he liked him.

Why were they burning books?

The books were written by Jews, and people who disagreed with the Nazis. The idea was to rid Germany of these ideas, so people wouldn't have access to alternative world views. The Nazis wanted to control everyone in the country, and make them agree with them.

Liesel's mother is described as a 'communist'. What does this mean, and why is it important to the story?

The communists were political opponents of the Nazis, and were attacked and imprisoned. Liesel's mother can't look after her anymore because she is in danger. Liesel realises 'Hitler took her mother away' which motivates her resistance.

Max talks about his religion. What does this mean for him?

Max is Jewish, which means he is persecuted by the Nazis. The Nazis wanted to kill all of the Jews in Europe. Talking about his religion brings him comfort and helps him to keep his identity, even in times of great danger.

Why does Max leave?

If he stays, the family will be in danger. People who were discovered hiding or helping Jews would have been taken with them to concentration camps, where they would either live in awful conditions, or be murdered. The danger of discovery is higher after the policeman takes Hans' name.

Who are the people with yellow stars on their clothes marching through town? What is happening to them?

Jews were forced to wear yellow stars on their clothes. The Nazis have rounded them up and are taking them to concentration camps. This is where we see the reality of the Holocaust becoming more visible in the lives of German Jews.

How do we see the 'ugliness and beauty of humans' throughout the film?

Ugliness: The Nazi soldiers treating people badly because of who they are. Ordinary people having to live in fear. The book burning. The Nazi speech and songs. The violence of *Kristallnacht*. Franz – the bully from the Hitler Youth who has been given power over the other children. The shopkeeper being taken away because they suspect him of being Jewish.

Beauty: The Ubermann family's resistance against the Nazis. Their decision to take in Liesel and hide Max. Hans teaching Liesel to read, and the rich lady giving her access to books. Liesel's use of storytelling to make people happy. Liesel's friendships with Rudi and Max.

Summary

The Holocaust was a tragedy for humanity – six million Jewish men, women and children were murdered by the Nazis. Many other groups such as black people, communists, gay people, disabled people, Roma and Sinti and others were also targeted and murdered under Nazi Persecution. Acts of resistance and rescue, like we saw in the film, took place across Europe, and saved the lives of many people.

When a government attempts to destroy a group for who they are, this is called genocide. Genocides have taken place around the world since the Holocaust, and continue happening today.

We all have a responsibility to challenge discrimination and prejudice in society, whenever we see or hear it taking place. We know where it can lead. That is why we learn and remember on Holocaust Memorial Day.

Let us know about your HMD activity by visiting hmd.org.uk/letusknow

Other films

You may want to choose a different film to screen, or hold a second film screening and discussion. Some more films are suggested here, and there are questions below that could be used to discuss any of these films.

Sarah's Key – Certificate 12. This film shares what happened to the Jews during the Holocaust. It is told through the story of a young girl who is taken from her home. She is desperate to survive and escape to rescue her little brother. This story is interwoven with a modern day journalist investigating this story. It is set in France so is partially subtitled.

Denial - Rated 12A. This film is based on the trial in which Deborah Lipstadt, a Holocaust academic, is sued by Holocaust denier David Irving. Deborah and her legal team must prove that Irving lied about the Holocaust having never taken place.

Another Mother's Son - Certificate 12. A film set in Jersey during the time it was occupied by the Nazis. It tells the true story of Louisa Gould, who took in and hid a Russian prisoner of war in an attempt to save his life. You can read more about Louisa Gould at hmd.org.uk/louisa.

First They Killed My Father – Certificate 15. Directed by Angelina Jolie, this film follows the story of Loung Ung, who was 5 years old when the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia. Her family are forced from their home with the rest of the population, and endure forced labour, being trained as child soldiers, and the constant threat of death.

General questions

What do we learn about the Holocaust or genocide through this film?

Why is it important to learn about these events in history?

What parts of the film did you find memorable? Why?

What moral or ethical issues were raised by the film? What are your opinions on these issues?

How were people shown doing awful things in the film? What made them behave like this?

How were people shown to be doing good in the film? Why did they make that decision?




Have you been inspired to learn more or take an action as a result of seeing this film?

If you need any help or support in running this activity, please contact Jessica at youth@hmd.org.uk

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Learning from genocide - for a better future