

The Book Thief - HMD Film Screening and Discussion



HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL
DAY TRUST

A film screening and discussion is an engaging way to mark Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) with your group, suitable for a wide range of ages and interests. You could combine this with a minute of silence or a candle lighting as an act of remembrance. This resource is designed for those leading the film screening and we recommend it is not shared with other members of the group as it contains details of the film's plot.

The Book Thief focuses on the experiences of a family in Nazi Germany. You can stream the film on several platforms, and the DVD was released in 2013, so it is widely accessible. It may also be available to loan from your local library. Your group may choose to watch the film together, either on a big screen or at a cinema if possible, or through an online platform such as zoom, and then discuss it immediately after the screening. Alternatively, they may wish to watch the film individually at a time or place convenient to them and schedule a later session to come together for the discussion.

The length of time your activity will take will vary depending whether you choose to screen *The Book Thief* or one of the other films listed at the end of this resource. We would suggest between half an hour, for groups including younger audiences, to an hour of discussion time for adult audiences, for your group.

The Book Thief

Certificate: 12A Length: 2 hours

Liesel Meminger is adopted by a German couple in 1938 when her mother can't 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.



Background context:

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

Other genocides have taken place around the world since the Holocaust. For more information on what genocide is, and how the term came to be legally defined, [see this page on our website](#). You can also learn more about the **Holocaust** and **Nazi Persecution**, and the genocides in **Cambodia**, **Rwanda**, **Bosnia** and **Darfur** on our website.

We all have a responsibility to challenge discrimination and prejudice in society, whenever we see or hear it taking place. Our world often feels fragile and vulnerable and we cannot be complacent. That is why we learn and remember on Holocaust Memorial Day.

Discussion questions

Questions for adult audiences

Some suggested questions are provided below to help start a discussion following the film screening for an adult audience.

- **What do we learn about the Holocaust/genocide through this film? Is it informative enough? What issues might there be using fictional stories to portray a real genocide?**
- **What parts of the film did you find memorable? Why?**
- **Consider if the film subverted your expectations, or fitted them. Were there major turning points or unexpected twists in the plot and characterisation?**
- **Are there any recurring motifs – either visual, musical or thematic, for example, which contribute to the narrative and emotional impact of the film? How does this build throughout the film?**
- **How did the film's editing and cinematographic choices contribute to its treatment of the moral or ethical issues raised in the story? What are your opinions on the issues the film raises?**
- **What motivated the characters in the film? What points of view did the camera show and why do you think this was?**
- **Have you been inspired to learn more or take an action as a result of seeing this film?**

Questions for younger audiences

In this second set of discussion questions, some basic information is provided under each question to help you facilitate a discussion which includes younger audiences.

- **Who do you think is narrating the film? How does that make you feel?**
Death is narrating the film, an unusual choice. Several characters in the story die, and it is set during World War II and the Holocaust, when many 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 and surrounded by propaganda, 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, which you can read more about [here](#). 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, although during the Olympics, discriminatory policies were **paused and covered up**. This is why Rudi was not allowed to publicly say he liked Owens.

- **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. You can find out more about book burnings **here**.

- **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, as they 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. You can read about more ways Jewish people resisted the Nazis **here**.

- **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 people.

- **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 wealthy woman giving her access to books. Liesel's use of storytelling to make people happy. Liesel's friendships with Rudi and Max.

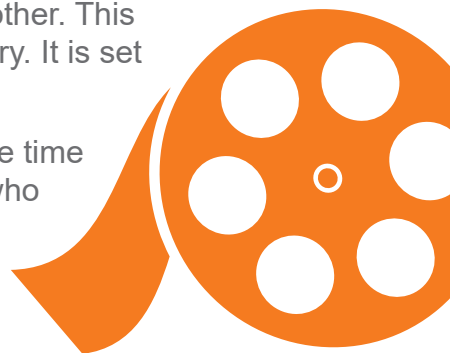
Once your group have finished their discussion, you could conclude your HMD activity with a minute of silence, a candle lighting, or reading a poem aloud as an act of remembrance. There are many other options, and you can find out more about these on our website's **resources section**.

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 we have produced a separate HMD film screening guide for films about the genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur [here](#). There are questions below that could be used to discuss any of these films.

Sarah's Key – Certificate 12. This film tells a lesser known Holocaust story of what happened to the Jews in Paris. 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.

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.



What next

If you enjoyed watching *The Book Thief* or other films for HMD, why not explore our other **HMD Together resources**, which include:

- **Hosting a book club for HMD** – your group may find it particularly interesting to read the original text of *The Book Thief* that the film is based on.
- **Writing a poem** with your group for HMD
- Creating a **group artwork** for HMD

Let us know about your activity by adding it to our activity map:

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your activities: hmd.org.uk/resources

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Learning from genocide – for a better future