Background information for *The Book Thief*

*The First World War*

WWI, in which England, France, and Russia fought Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey was one of the deadliest wars in history. The war was at a stalemate until 1917 when the U.S. intervened on behalf of the English and French. Jews fought for their various countries on both sides of the conflict.

*The Nazification of German Society*

The Nazi party and Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933. Over time the Nazis thoroughly dominated Germany with all institutions of society being Nazified or disbanded. All dissenters, such as democrats, socialists, communists, and the religious were ruthlessly suppressed. Books which contained writings that did not conform to the Nazi ideology of Aryan superiority were burned. Paintings and other works of art that the Nazis disliked were destroyed.

*Propaganda*

The Nazi party used propaganda, including Hitler's autobiographical manifesto, *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*), to acquire and maintain control over German society.

*Hitler Youth and United German Girls*

All children were required to belong to the Hitler Youth (for boys) and the United German Girls; the boys were prepared to be soldiers and girls were prepared to be homemakers and mothers. In 1933 Hitler stated that:

My program for educating youth is hard. Weakness must be hammered away. In my castles of the Teutonic Order a youth will grow up before which the world will tremble. I want a brutal, domineering, fearless, cruel youth. Youth must be all that. It must bear pain. There must be nothing weak and gentle about it. The free, splendid beast of prey must once again flash from its eyes...That is how I will eradicate thousands of years of human domestication...That is how I will create the New Order.

*The Holocaust*

In Nazi Germany, Jews, political opponents of the Nazis, socialists, communists, the very religious, the handicapped, and Gypsies were hunted down and placed into concentration camps. The goal of the Nazis was to "purify" Germany of people who were their opponents and of people who didn't conform to the ideal of an Aryan. In addition, non-Jews from Nazi occupied countries, such as Poland, Russia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, Holland, and France were killed in the concentration camps. It is estimated that 6,000,000 Jews died in the concentration camps and another 5,000,000 non-Jews died there as well. In addition, the Germans killed millions in the countries that they conquered without bothering to take them to concentration camps.

The concentration camp at Dachau, which was close to Munich, held clergy, communists and other political opponents of the Nazis, German royals and aristocrats, resistance fighters, scientists, writers and, of course, Jews. The conditions at Dachau were notoriously brutal. In addition, inmates at Dachau were subject to inhumane medical experiments which often caused their deaths. Dachau was also a major slave labor center. Other concentration camps, such as Auschwitz, were established for the purpose of simply killing people.

*Kristallnacht*

Kristallnacht means, in German, "the night of crystal." On November 9 - 10, 1938 the Nazis coordinated attacks against Jewish synagogues and business throughout Germany, Austria, and German occupied areas of Czechoslovakia. The name comes from the shards of glass from the broken windows of buildings owned by Jews. That night Nazi rioters destroyed 267 synagogues and 7500 businesses. Ninety-one people were killed, and there were numerous rapes. The authorities looked on and, in fact, cooperated. 30,000 young Jewish men were arrested and incarcerated for no reason. Fire fighters would not douse the flames on Jewish-owned buildings but only sought to prevent the flames from spreading to structures owned by non-Jews.

*Jesse Owens*

Hitler had planned to use the 1936 Summer Olympics which were held in Berlin to show the superiority of Aryan athletes. It didn't turn out that way, in large part because of Jesse Owens, an African-American. Owens won four gold medals: in the 100 meter dash, the 200 meter dash, the long jump, and the 4x100 meter relay. He was the most successful athlete at the games. Jesse Owens ran track for Ohio State University and held the world record in the long jump for 25 years.

*German Bombing of England and Allied Bombing of Germany*

World War II saw the first sustained aerial bombing of cities as a strategy of war. In those days, there were no precision-guided bombs as there are now. Aerial bombing was very inaccurate and many bombs missed their targets. In the summer of 1940, the German Air Force, the Luftwaffe, started bombing military and industrial sites in England. In September 1940 the Luftwaffe shifted its tactics and bombed civilian areas of British cities, particularly London. The goals were to degrade British industry and military preparedness and to demoralize the population in preparation for a German invasion of England. The bombing of civilian areas lasted for eight months, until the following May, when Hitler gave up on the idea of invading England and turned his attention to Russia. The British called the bombing campaign "the Blitz." The Blitz only stiffened British resolve to fight.

The German bombing of London was intense. During the first 57 days of the Blitz, London was bombed day and night. In all, 40,000 - 43,000 civilians in London and other British cities were killed by the Luftwaffe between September 1940 and May 1941. Another approximately 46,000 were injured. 1.4 million were made homeless. Later in the war, the British and the Americans repaid the favor with aerial bombing that killed more than 300,000 German civilians, destroying entire neighborhoods. Again, the stated reasons were to degrade war industries, disrupt military preparedness, and demoralize the population. There is no evidence that the air campaign demoralized the German population. While today the indiscriminate killing of civilians from the air would clearly be considered a war crime, no German official was prosecuted for his participation in the Blitz. Some historians contend that this was because the U.S. and British air forces had themselves killed so many civilians from the air.

By the end of the war, the Germans had lost the ability to send bombers to England. However, they fought back with V-2 rockets, the first guided missiles. The V-2s killed about six thousand British civilians and wounded another seventeen thousand. V-2s were more accurate than bombing from airplanes but did not have anything like the accuracy of modern cruise missiles which can hit a specific building. Casualties would have been much worse except for a British disinformation campaign that convinced the Germans that the V-2 rockets were over-shooting London targets by 10 to 20 miles. The Germans fell for it and this limited the V-2's effectiveness. After the war, Germans who worked on the V-2 program, including Wernher von Braun, were recruited by the Allies and the Russians and became leaders of the competing American and Soviet space programs. They were not prosecuted for war crimes. After helping put the first U.S. satellite into orbit in 1958, Von Braun was instrumental in the development of the Saturn Rocket used in the Apollo Moon landing program. He also pioneered the concept of the Space Shuttle. Von Braun was naturalized as a U.S. citizen in 1955. His contributions to the United States were immense and he received many honors from the United States Government. However, it should be noted that under current international law, Von Braun would probably have been considered a war criminal for making weapons that could only inflict random death and destruction to a civilian population. Note that many of the Allied tactics in World War II, such as the fire bombing of Dresden and Tokyo, might not be tolerated today.

What are two things that you found interesting from this background information? Why?

Directions: Read the following poem and annotate.

Wernher von Braun Song

Gather round while I sing you of Wernher von Braun,
A man whose allegiance
Is ruled by expedience.
Call him a Nazi, he won't even frown.
"Ha, Nazi Schmazi," says Wernher von Braun.

Don't say that he's hypocritical,
Say rather that he's apolitical.

"Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down?
That's not my department," says Wernher von Braun.

Some have harsh words for this man of renown,
But some think our attitude
Should be one of gratitude,
Like the widows and cripples in old London town
Who owe their large pensions to Wernher von Braun.

You too may be a big hero,
Once you've learned to count backwards to zero.
"In German oder English I know how to count down,
Und I'm learning Chinese," says Wernher von Braun.

* What is the poet implying with the line "In German oder English I know how to count down,
Und I'm learning Chinese," says Wernher von Braun.”? How do you respond to that line?
* How is Von Braun characterized in this poem? What specific lines create that characterization?
* What point do you think the author is trying to make with this poem? Do you think they were successful in making their point?
* Do you agree with the poem’s argument? Why or why not?

*The Book Thief* Viewing Guide Questions

Directions: Write your answers on a separate sheet of paper. They are due the day after we finish the movie.

1. Identify two symbols in this story.
2. List some instances of situational in the story.
3. Identify a theme from the story that taught you something or confirmed or expanded your understanding of something that you already knew.
4. Who are the killers in this story? What is the significance of this fact?
5. What does this story tell us about death? (Death in this question does not include the character of the narrator in this story.)
6. Some commentators say that the strongest literary element in this story is characterization and that plot is secondary. Describe why they say this and why you agree or disagree. How does the movie help to develop all of the characters?
7. Today, the bombing of a street like Himmel Street would probably be considered a war crime. Why is that? What is the implication of your answer to the use of atomic weapons?
8. A commentator wrote that, "Without ever denying the essential amorality and randomness of the natural order, The Book Thief offers us a believable, hard-won hope." What is that hope?
9. What is the reason for Liesel's brother, Hans, Rosa, and Rudy to die and for Liesel and Max to live?
10. This story suggests how to respond to the random dreadfulness of death. What does it tell us?
11. Why is the personification of death, the narrator of this story haunted by humans?
12. The novel contains the following passage at page 65:

Some crunched numbers. — Since 1933, ninety percent of Germans showed unflinching support for Adolf Hitler. That leaves ten percent who didn't. Hans Hubermann belonged to the ten percent.

Consider this passage in relation to the one below from a novel called The Magus by John Fowles.

The human race is unimportant. It is the self that must not be betrayed. I suppose one could say that Hitler didn't betray his self. . . . But millions of Germans did betray their selves. That was the tragedy. Not that one man had the courage to be evil. But that millions had not the courage to be good. (The Magus, p. 132)

As a member of a society what do these passages mean to you? Do you think that Hans did enough to resist Hitler?

1. What was the benefit to the story that the narrator was a personification of death? Is it a helpful concept?
2. Death has different reactions to the souls of the people that it takes in the story. What do those reactions have in common?