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The Stories Already Written: An Intertextual Analysis of The Book Thief and Belonging

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The notion of intertextuality was originally defined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s as she examined language from a poststructuralist perspective. Kristeva "envisioned culture itself as a network of interconnected texts of every kind, whose meaning is constructed from and transformed by the other texts in that network" (37). Intertextuality moves beyond the influence that writers have on one another to emphasize how "human identity is also constructed or woven out of the texts found in an unique individual social text created by particular circumstances, and the more general social text of culture, shaped by history and society" (Duthoy 329). This theoretical notion analyzes the way in which a writer's story is the sum of the stories they have read, their unique words simultaneously being written as the result of the words of someone else. Daniel Chandler embraces intertextuality in explaining that "when writers write, they are also *written*. To communicate we must utilize existing concepts and conventions." Intertextuality is the framework in which to analyze how writers construct their lives and their identity in relation to the texts they have experienced. This theoretical lens is crucial because of the way the relationship a person has with words, with reading and writing, reflects their relationship with themselves, others and the world. Through the use of the theoretical framework of intertextuality, the following paper will examine the influence that words have on developing the identity of writers found in both the fictional novel *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak and the graphic memoir *Belonging* by Nora Krug.

In *The Book Thief*, intertextuality is highlighted through the life story of Liesel Meminger, a young girl who grew up in Germany during World War II. As Zusak details the life and growth of Liesel, he describes the way her development as a person mirrors her development as a reader and writer. In telling Liesel's story, Zusak emphasizes the influence that literature can have on someone as the life of Liesel is shaped by her relationship with the words around her.

Because of World War II, the characters experience a lack of freedom in expression and therefore, words become sacred. Not only is her voice silenced by the culture surrounding her, but it is also taken away through her initial inability to read or write. Over the course of the novel, Liesel learns to read, and the reading that she engages in begins to affect the way she thinks, feels, and processes the world around her. By the end of the novel, Liesel has become a writer, reflecting on the way the texts she has read have allowed her to find the words to form her own story. Analyzing this fictional story through the framework of intertextuality allows the reader to notice the way words shape the direction of Liesel's life and contribute to the construction of Liesel's identity.

Beginning Words and Superficial Engagement

Even before Liesel can read, words are shaping the story of her life. Liesel experiences the loss of her mother and brother early on in the novel and as she grows up books mark her life. They become valuable symbols in her mind of people, places and experiences she does not want to forget. Liesel begins to learn the value books hold beyond reading them when they become an object of remembrance and sentiment after experiencing loss. Material culture studies and consumer culture research have been theorizing the relationship between humans and material goods, proving that "even the smallest, seemingly insignificant object has a story to tell about the humans who use it" (Alexis 33). Liesel is shaped by the texts that surround her life: the books she interacts with remind her of the people associated with them. Liesel must begin her relationship with words with superficial engagement—understanding how books can hold memories and believing they are important even before she can read them. In the early stages of

the novel, this book is essential for Liesel in how it provides a way to remember her family. Zusak describes Liesel's relationship with words as she transitions away from her past life:

> On her first night with the Hubermanns, she had hidden her last link to him—*The Grave Digger's Handbook*—under her mattress, and occasionally she would pull it out and hold it. Staring at the letters on the cover and touching the print inside, she had no idea what any of it was saying. The point is, it didn't really matter what the book was about. It was what it meant that was more important (Zusak 38).

Even before Liesel can read her first book, *The Grave Digger's Handbook* means something to her because it is a reminder of the last time she saw her brother and her mother. In her article that discusses memoir as confrontation in *The Book Thief*, Emma Domínguez-Rué describes Liesel's first achievement with words:

> Reading *The Gravedigger's Handbook* as a memento of her brother's death and writing various letters to her missing mother, none of which will reach its destination—can be regarded as Liesel's first attempts to articulate the loss of her loved ones and in turn voice the stories of those who will never have the chance to write their own (517).

In order to survive after the loss of her family members, Liesel holds onto the language that honors their lives in the only way she is capable.

Liesel begins her journey as a reader and writer through a deep appreciation for books rooted in her desire to make meaning and hold onto what she has lost. Before Liesel can attempt to find meaning in her life through written language, she values books in the memories they hold in their very existence. When Liesel finishes reading her first book, she feels as if she has "conquered not only the work at hand, but the night who had blocked the way" (Zusak 87). Experiencing a sense of release through language, Liesel reflects on what this book meant to her

after finishing reading it: “Liesel still held the book. She gripped it tighter as the snow turned orange. On one of the rooftops, she could see a small boy sitting looking at the sky. ‘His name was Werner’, she mentioned. The words trotted out involuntarily” (Zusak 87). Liesel finishes reading her first book with a sense of peace in the way language allows her to honor what she has lost. This book represents her brother’s death, since it belonged to him, and in reading it Liesel remembers him and the life he lived. She also begins to close this chapter of her life, causing her to grieve both the end of the book and the end of her former life before coming to live with her new family. After finishing the book, Liesel continues to be influenced by the words, and she remembers the way they honored her brother as she begins to write. According to an article by Aliona Yarova, “Liesel’s thievery of the books is her search (as a child of war) for imaginative space and her subconscious emotional survival strategy in extreme conditions”. Books become a way for Liesel to survive the emotional trauma she is experiencing; the power of storytelling is highlighted as “Liesel’s first stolen book *The Grave Digger’s Handbook* with its trivalised burial procedure helps her to cope with the traumatic memory of her brother’s grave” (Yarova 75). Zusak contributes to the novel’s intertextuality as Liesel is given a glimpse of understanding the power of words through the first novel that affects her life. This crucial first text influences Liesel as a reader, encouraging her to continue to engage with literature, believing already in the large part it has played in writing her own story.

Although Liesel begins to see the value in words as artifacts to mark her own life, she is missing elements of the healing power of language as a listener and not yet a reader. The beginning of this novel allows the reader to understand the pain caused by the inability to use one’s voice, when faced with watching Liesel attempt to process her life without the tools to read or write. Liesel understands the essentialness of language in the way she struggles to survive

without the words to express her own heart. Zusak describes the earliest version of Liesel as "the book thief without the words. Trust me, though, the words were on their way, and when they arrived, Liesel would hold them in her hands like the clouds, and she would wring them out like the rain" (Zusak 80). Liesel's unique journey as a reader and writer teaches her the value of language from the beginning, pushing her deeper into the pool of words. Liesel searches for a way to make sense of the pain she has experienced, with the urgency of survival that depends upon it. Because Liesel's story is constructed from the words of other writers, she is limited by her lack of exposure to literature. In order to find her own voice, Liesel must continue to engage with words, allowing them to guide her as she constructs her story.

The Activity of Words

As Liesel grows as a human being and reader, the books she interacts with begin to hold more weight in her story. Instead of being solely attracted to words because of the people and places they remind her of, Liesel begins to see the value in reading as an activity. Liesel learns to read through the patient lessons that Papa teaches her every night, building not only her confidence, but also her trust in their relationship. At this point in the novel, language was necessary for Liesel's growth because through reading Papa shows deep care for his foster daughter. As Liesel learns to read, she also learns how to view the world. Emma Domínguez-Rué argues that Papa's lessons were a "graphic allegory of how the use of words will help her both to construct a memoir of her past as well as to endow her narration with a new meaning that challenges the dominant discourse of Nazi ideology" (517). The newly-learned words help Liesel build her identity and teach her the way words can be used for good, contradicting the way they are being used culturally. Liesel's life is enhanced through this activity that connects her to her

foster father, providing a level of comfort in this new story of her life that is being written. The connections that have come out of reading draw Liesel closer to the language itself, helping her realize that the more she interacts with the words, the more she desires to understand them.

Not only does the activity bind Liesel closer to Papa, but it lays the foundation for Liesel's relationship with Max, the Jew her parents are hiding in their basement. Although initially hesitant, Liesel grows a relationship with Max after spending time reading in the basement. Papa encourages Liesel to continue her lessons in the basement where Max is hiding, allowing the activity to draw the characters together and helping Liesel see Max in a more humane way. Beginning at the surface level, Liesel and Max's friendship grows through reading alongside one another, allowing the words to speak for themselves and give the characters a consistent activity to hold onto. Zusak describes the characters' connection in the basement:

> She would read while Max completed those crosswords. They sat a few meters apart, speaking very rarely, and there was really only the noise of turning pages. Often, she also left her books for Max to read while she was at school. Where Hans Hubermann and Erik Vandenburg were ultimately united by music, Max and Liesel were held together by the quiet gathering of words. (Zusak 248)

The words not only drew the characters together, it *held* them together, building a connection that they would eventually need to survive. As Liesel spends more time reading with Max, her perspective of people and the world begins to change. She begins to see people differently through experiencing Max's story, his words shaping and growing inside of her heart. Without knowing what is ahead, the characters build their relationship through reading, laying a foundation of words that is essential for the experiences they face in the future.

Later in the novel, Liesel uses these skills to quell the fear of her town during a bombing. The literal meaning of the words is not what calms them, but rather the simple practice of being read to. The townspeople fight to make sense of the chaotic world surrounding them, clinging to reading, allowing the words to speak over their own story. Through this distraction, the characters feel the positive influence of storytelling, the activity of reading bringing peace even before the words have anything to give them. In one moment of the novel, the characters of the town hide in the bomb shelter together for protection and listen to Liesel read aloud: "She didn't dare to look up, but she could feel their frightened eyes hanging on to her as she hauled the words in and breathed them out. A voice played the notes inside her. This, it said, is your accordion. The sound of the turning page carved them in half. Liesel read on" (Zusak 381). In the chaos, words bring people together and Liesel's reading gives them peace to survive. Although the words do not change the situation, the mere activity of reading aloud gives the people something to cling to: "Everyone waited for the ground to shake. That was still an immutable fact, but at least they were distracted now, by the girl with the book" (Zusak 382). As Liesel reads, she begins to understand the power that is within her own voice, the way that her words provide comfort in the midst of the darkness. In this moment, reading serves as a reminder to the characters of the stories outside of their own, each word a promise of a different world, one full of hope and relief. In an article titled "Children, War and the Imaginative Space of Fairy Tales," Donald Haase argues for the power of literature in the lives of children, stating that "storytelling itself could become a space for refuge—familiarity—linked to protection, security and the return to meaningful life" (366). Zusak highlights the power of Liesel's storytelling in the way words provide refuge for the town, impacting their lives by giving them something to hope in. The words Liesel reads provide an immediate comfort, but do not remove the reality of pain each

character is living in. The activity of reading for the town showcases the importance of literature in each of these characters' lives, reminding both Liesel and the reader of the need for language.

The Power of Story Expansion

As the novel progresses, Liesel's relationship with words matures as she finds meaning in the content of the books she is reading. The texts that Liesel reads begin to shape her perspective through the way that they enlarge her understanding of the world and shape her own identity. The words of others begin to expand Liesel's own voice—they give her the tools necessary to understand herself, the broader world and other individuals.

Before Liesel can use language to truly understand others, she must experience the way in which the books she reads give her the words to understand herself. Liesel's story expands within herself as the words provide a way for expression of the pain she has experienced. Liesel does not initially have the words to find meaning in her life, leaving her lost and distraught in the middle of her sorrow. But Liesel finds relief through reading the stories of characters that can put to words what she is going through. In the novel, Liesel turns to the words from a novel she has read called *A Song in the Dark*, remembering how the girl had said "my heart is so tired" after experiencing loss. Liesel remembers these words while walking home with her friend, Rudy: "No, thought Liesel as she walked. It is my heart that is tired. A thirteen-year-old heart shouldn't feel like this" (Zusak 427). In this situation, Liesel experiences the way the texts she reads shape her own story and influence the words that come out of her mouth. Reading the stories intentionally, Liesel finds herself among the characters and their words, her own voice and identity forming slowly through the words around her. For Liesel, the language of others is

essential to survive the hardships she is going through. Liesel continues to construct her own story, understanding her life through the lens of the words she has read.

As Liesel continues to read, she expands not only her own story, but also her perspective on the stories of others. Liesel's worldview is shaped by the stories she reads and hears, teaching her about the lives of people different from her. The reader witnesses Liesel's growth as her worldview expands beyond what she has experienced, pushing her to start thinking about the people around her. Beyond her books, Liesel experiences both Papa and Max sharing pieces of their stories with her, showing her for the first time the value found in knowing others' stories. Papa tells Liesel his stories each day that they spent together, outlining his life before Liesel came into it. Liesel is able to learn about her Papa's experience in the war and his relationships: "Each day, there was a story, and Liesel forgave him if he told the same one more than once" (Zusak 355). Gradually, the stories of Liesel's family members build the story of her life. Each of their stories contributes to the development of her identity and are a part of her journey in finding her own voice.

Likewise, Liesel expands her worldview through understanding Max's life story. Initially, Liesel is hesitant to spend time with Max because she does not understand the truth of his story. As previously noted, Liesel and Max connect through reading alongside each other, but they step into deeper understanding when Liesel reads Max's story that he has written for her. Through the book that Max writes for Liesel, he uses words to explain who he is, allowing her to step into the narrative of his life. In Max's own writing, he seeks to hold onto his identity, and as Whitlock states, Max begins creating "an intimate chronicle… when recognition of him as a human being fails" (180). Through writing his story for Liesel, Max can carve out "a space in which he regained his humanity" and resist the way the Nazis attempted to control him (Fackenheim 226).

Max's production of his own story shows both Liesel and the reader the value of his life. These words are important to Liesel because they help her to see Max beyond the world's perspective of him, as an important human being and friend. Max shares the story of his life with Liesel on the erased pages of *Mein Kampf*, writing over the words that were now "gagging, suffocating under the paint as they turned" (Zusak 237). Max's story silences what has been prewritten for him by an anti-Semetic society, suffocating the differences and displaying the urgency for language to build connections between people. Language redefines the identities of these characters and builds a new narrative for them to live in. After the book is written and read, the characters continue to be connected by the words as "The scrawled words of practice stood magnificently on the wall by the stairs, jagged and childlike and sweet. They looked on as both the hidden Jew, and the girl slept, hand to shoulder" (Zusak 238). The words that Max writes tell his story, and these words change the narrative Liesel will write, because they change her perspective. Liesel uses language to construct her worldview, shaped by the stories inside of her.

As Liesel compiles stories in her heart, she grows in empathy, allowing the words not only to shape her worldview, but to shape the way she thinks about other people. Liesel learns from the different stories in her novels, taking on diverse perspectives to change her way of thinking. Reading fictional stories is associated with the development of empathy in children as "there is an important link between the empathy felt for fictional characters and the ability to empathise with people in reality" (Stansfield and Bunce). Additionally, there is evidence which suggests that "the engagement with the thoughts and feelings of characters in fictional stories might be closely related to the processes by which individuals infer the mental states of people in the real world" (Stansfield and Bunce). Therefore, the more that Liesel reads, the deeper she steps into empathy for the people around her. Liesel continues to read, leaning into the way she is

changed by stories and transferring this change into care for her friends and family. In one specific example, Liesel learns from a book she has read called *The Dream Carrier*. This book challenges Liesel to think of "Max Vandenburg and his dreams. Of guilt. Surviving. Leaving his family. Fighting the Füher. She also thought of her own dream—her brother, dead on the train, and his appearance on the steps just around the corner from this very room" (Zusak 327). The stories that Liesel reads merge with the stories in her heart, influencing her thoughts, her words and eventually, her writing. Liesel grows to consider the stories of others, to see the ways their words have influenced her own.

Liesel's understanding of empathy expands as she experiences the weight of her own words when she uses them to hurt the mayor's wife, realizing for the first time how her own language affects others. In the anger she feels toward Frau Hermann, Liesel "sprayed her words directly into the woman's eyes" and as she continues to let her emotions control her, "she became spiteful. More spiteful and evil than she thought herself capable. The injury of words. Yes, the brutality of words" (Zusak 262). Through reflecting on her own language, Liesel understands the world more accurately and how her story can affect someone negatively or positively. Liesel finds her voice, but struggles to process her emotions in a healthy way. Liesel needs to process her pain and anger through words, but realizes that "the injury of words" is not the release she is searching for.

The climax of Liesel's journey as a reader happens not when she recognizes the way her story has been shaped by words, nor when she learns her words have power to harm others, but when she realizes words of others cannot adequately write the story of her heart. Liesel understands the powerful way reading guides her life, but feels lost when coming to terms with her own broken story. Liesel eventually becomes angry at what she is reading because it does not

provide relief from the world she is living in. Liesel understands the reality of pain in her own world, influencing her perspective on her books: “These images were the world, and it stewed in her as she sat with the lovely books and their manicured titles. It brewed in her as she eyed the pages full to the brims of their bellies with paragraphs and words. You bastards, she thought” (Zusak 521). For the first time, Liesel becomes angry at the words that cannot bring justice to her heart. In defiance against the books she loved for her entire life, Liesel uses her voice to speak directly to them: “Don’t make me happy. Please, don’t fill me up and let me think that something good can come of any of this. Look at my bruises. Look at this graze. Do you see the graze inside of me? Do you see it growing before your very eyes, eroding me? I don’t want to hope for anything anymore” (Zusak 521). The words Liesel reads influence her life, but they are unable to help her truly process the sorrow she is experiencing in her loss—they enrich her understanding of the world and of others, but they do not ultimately reach the deepest parts of her pain. In her deepest emotion, Liesel tears the books apart until all that remains is the scraps of words. Emotion leads her to challenge the power of words themselves:

> The words. Why did they have to exist? Without them, there wouldn’t be any of this. Without words, the Fuhrer was nothing. There would be no limping prisoners, no need for consolation or worldly tricks to make us feel better. What good were the words? She said it audibly now, to the orange-lit room: ‘What good are the words?’ (Zusak 521)

At this point in the novel, Liesel desires to kill the words that she reads because the stories of others no longer provide relief from her pain. In the eyes of Liesel, words no longer hold value because they cannot create meaning to the cruelty within her own life. In the dissatisfaction, Liesel fights for the words within herself to honor life and loss in her own story. In this crucial moment in the novel, Liesel takes power over the words, demanding more of them

and more of herself as a writer. The stories and texts in Liesel's life shape her story and influence her, even in anger. Words carry Liesel through life and, even in her darkest moments, push her along on the journey to finding her identity. In this moment, Liesel needs the words she has read to find the words that honor the complexity of her story. Leaning into the urgency she is faced with in expressing her voice, Liesel experiences the power that words have as she constructs her story through writing.

The Production of Words

Understanding the necessity of language to explain her own story, Liesel steps into her role as a writer. After allowing words to help her understand both herself and others for the majority of her life, Liesel is encouraged to write her own story. Through the lens of intertextuality, Liesel writes her own story and the words reflect the influence of the texts she has previously read. Liesel's identity is shaped by her interactions with literature, as she allows the words to change her perspective and heart. However, as a writer, Liesel continues to be influenced by these stories as they both inspire her and challenge her to express her own voice.

Liesel's writing career begins through the gift of two books, one that inspires her and one that challenges her to use her own voice. Liesel is first inspired to write after her experience with the book that Max wrote detailing his own life. This story was extremely meaningful to Liesel, modeling the value found in sharing one's story through writing. Showcasing the power of intertextuality, the book that influences Liesel to write her own story "is rewritten or literally written over, as Max repaints each page in white and scribbles a booklet, *The Standover Man*, as a present for Liesel." Written over *Mein Kampf*, Max's own story is "a book within a book, a story within a story; the autobiography of a Jew written over a treatise of hatred against Jews"

(Domínguez-Rué 521). Max's story is written over the words that were created to silence him, showing Liesel and the reader how Max's own writing is shaped by the words that surround his life. However, Max's words allow him to write a new narrative for his life, inspiring Liesel to search for the words to accomplish this for herself. The author details the humble nature of Max's writing, explaining the careful way he writes his story regardless of writing experience: "He was educated well enough to get by, but he was certainly no writer, and no artist. Despite this, he formulated the words in his head until he could recount them without error. Only then, on the paper that had bubbled and humped under the stress of drying paint, did he begin to write the story" (Zusak 223). Although Max lacks writing experience, his story is shaped by the experience of not being given a voice; he chooses words carefully. Max rebuilds his identity and takes power back over his own narrative, using the stories of others to explain his own. The novel is full of examples of this way to construct one's story, seeing "identity construction through appropriating others' stories and reimagining them for our purposes. Death does this with Liesel's book, Liesel does it with Max's and Max does it with Hitler's" (Domínguez-Rué 520). The unique way that Max constructs his story inspires Liesel to take back the words that have hurt her as well, making space for her voice to emerge from the texts that have shaped her.

The second book that Liesel receives is a journal gifted by Frau Hermann. It is Liesel's first book without words. After years of borrowing books to read, Frau Hermann gives Liesel the book that challenges her to write the story that will save her life. Liesel's journey with words has led her to this moment, calling her deeper and beyond the stories of others to write her own. After Liesel's revolt against words, the mayor's wife challenges her to take the power back from the words in her own writing: "She reached into her bag and pulled out a small black book. Inside was not a story, but lined paper. 'I thought if you're not going to read any more of my

books, you might like to write one instead. Your letter, it was…' She handed the book to Liesel with both hands. 'You can certainly write. You write well'" (Zusak 523). Frau Hermann's gift to Liesel pushes her in the direction of becoming a writer, providing a space for the words to be written. In the same way that books have influenced Liesel's entire life, these books continue to lead her as she begins to construct her identity through writing.

Liesel wrestles with the process of writing, experiencing for the first time the difficulty of finding the words to honor her story. The book that Frau Hermann gives to Liesel creates "a reason to write her own words, to see that words had also brought her to life" (Zusak 524). As Liesel sees the way the words shaped her life, she feels a responsibility to tell her story despite the challenge that it is. Liesel's perspective reflects her own experience with literature, leading her to become a writer who understands the power that is held within each word. Liesel does not take her writing lightly, believing in the importance of her work because of the writers that have come before her: "Her hand was sore by page three. Words are so heavy, she thought, but as the night wore on, she was able to complete eleven pages" (Zusak 526). Liesel understands the weight of her words and continues to fight to make meaning. As Liesel constructs her own story, she realizes that "there was so much to consider, so many things in danger of being left out. Just be patient, she told herself, and with the mounting pages, the strength of her writing fist grew" (Zusak 527). The more Liesel commits to writing her story, the more she realizes all of the pieces that played a part in writing her story. An article that analyzes the relationship between creative writing and identity describes writing as "a genuine conveying of oneself to others." Additionally, it explains that the act of writing "conduces to an experience of becoming through words" (Sandbäck Forsell et al. 159). As Liesel writes, she finally has the tools to convey herself genuinely to others, realizing the way that her identity and story has been shaped by words.

Liesel considers all the parts of her own narrative, processing and sifting through the events and people in her own life that have shaped her identity the most. The mere act of writing encourages Liesel to reflect and remember all of the words that have influenced her, helping her to realize the way her story has in some ways already been written.

As Liesel processes through her story, she experiences healing from pain as she puts in words what she has gone through. Liesel now has the ability to sift through her own emotions, allowing her to find peace when she honors her life through words. Philippe Lejeune argues that "a diary can become a 'safe refuge' for a writer, providing a space for the individual to respond to the 'hell' around them". Additionally, because the rules of the outside world are not enforced within the diary's pages, Lejeune states that "the realm of paper, like a house you are invited into, is a protected space where the laws of the outside world are in abeyance" (Lejeune 31). Liesel experiences a release through the way her writing provides a space for her to respond to her loss freely and without the pressures of the outside world. The story that Liesel forms draws her close to the truest parts of her identity as she honestly writes the narrative of her life.

By the end of the novel, Liesel's writing gives her more than internal healing through saving her life. The writing that Liesel does in her basement saves her life in a literal sense, protecting her from the bombs that took away her family. After the bombs hit Liesel's street, she is found in the basement with her writing: "She was still clutching the book. She was holding desperately on to the words who had saved her life" (Zusak 499). As the author highlights the way writing saves Liesel's life that night, he encourages the reader to notice the way writing also saves her heart. After undergoing immense grief, Liesel leans into her writing and reflects on her loss, allowing it to serve as a reminder of the way words have carried her. Writing is a way for Liesel to sort through her story, marking her life through words, instead of in the pain she has

gone through. In her grief, Liesel clings to the books that have been consistent in her life: “She remembered her books in the moments of worst sorrow, especially the ones that were made for her and the one that saved her life” (Zusak 546). Liesel’s story is written through the words that have impacted her from the beginning of the novel, and held together as those words help her to find her own. After the bombs hit her street, Liesel searches for her books but is unable to find them in the mess that surrounds her. Liesel is challenged in this moment to find the words she has lost through writing, realizing “there was no recovery from what had happened. That would take decades; it would take a long life” (Zusak 546). At the end of the novel, Liesel finds herself without the words again, amid all that she has lost. However, through writing, Liesel realizes the way her story has already been written, how the words are already inside of her and how language has impacted her life from beginning to end. Liesel’s life has been shaped by her relationship with words, and even when everything is taken away, the words continue to lead her towards healing as they allow her to process and honor the life she has been given. Despite all that has been lost, Liesel finds her story and her identity in the words she writes and in the words that have been written for her. *The Book Thief* highlights the importance of language and how intertextuality shapes the lives of characters in this novel.

The Power of Words in *Belonging*

Nora Krug’s graphic memoir *Belonging* can also be viewed through the lens of intertextuality. Krug explains the way she finds her identity when she finally has the words to write her own story. Because Krug is a third generation German living in the aftermath of World War II, she experiences a sense of guilt and shame towards her identity. Additionally, Krug’s family does not discuss or process the history of their family members, leaving the author with

questions about where she is from, who her family was and who she is now. Through this graphic memoir, Krug allows the reader to walk alongside her as she discovers both her family's story and the words to explain where she came from. Similar in some ways to Liesel, Krug has the ability to write her own story only after understanding the stories of the people that have come before her, highlighting the way her words are shaped by the words around her.

Early in her writing career, Krug struggles to write her own story because of the disconnection to her identity. Because Krug does not know the stories of her past, she does not have the tools to construct her own story. Krug is unable to derive meaning from other texts, living in the "generation of postmemory," as someone who felt "the need to investigate the lives and responsibilities of characters whom they had only known as grandparent, great-grandparents, or uncles" (Cerulo 249). In a desperate need to understand the stories that have shaped her own words, Krug steps into an urgent search for the stories of her family. Faced with the necessity of language to explain her place in the world, this graphic memoir outlines Krug's own relationship with words, explaining how knowing the depths of her story brings the healing and peace she was searching for.

Krug's investigation to complete the story of *Belonging* reflects the way in which the author fights to construct her own story through the stories of others. Krug's completed story comprises "photographs, illustrations, documents, and handwritten passages that form an intense scrapbook of historical and emotional excavation" (Reyes 14). However, the story that Krug constructs comes together slowly through the complicated writing process and two years of Krug's research into her family's archives. Because Krug's own family did not have a narrative for her to write from, she explains how she "wanted to get a more visceral sense of what it was like to live under the Nazi regime" (Reyes 14). The scrapbook nature of the graphic memoir

visually displays the way in which Krug pieces together her own story through the stories she finds. Because of the limited information that Krug has about her past, she can only draw conclusions based upon "the relics of these personalities submerged by history: objects, photographs, and letters…." In the deconstructed manner of building a text from the text of others, "the story of a life becomes a plurality of divergent stories and personal experiences" (Cerulo 249). Through this process, Krug is able to piece together her own narrative, utilizing all of the stories that she finds as the foundation of her identity as a writer. Therefore, as Krug writes, she begins to discover that her story has already been written through the lives of her family members.

The graphic memoir begins with the author explaining the meaning behind the German word *heimat*, an alternative title for the story. The term is defined as "the concept of an imaginarily developed, or actual landscape or location, with which a person… associates an immediate sense of familiarity. This experience is… imparted across generations, through family and other institutions, or through political ideologies" (Krug, ch. 1). This term is crucial for the beginning of the graphic memoir because without the texts to shape her perspective as a writer, Krug is unable to find the words to express her own story or identity. The lack of clarity in Krug's history has "obscured her identity and precipitated her strong desire to understand the past," because as she processes through understanding the truth, she feels connected to her family heritage, and ultimately her identity, again (Reingold 557).

Krug wrestles with understanding her identity because her family's narrative has not been passed down through generations. The author experiences the discomfort of not understanding her own story, "the silences and gaps that both her parents have towards the family's Nazi past and the associated feelings of shame do not go unnoticed by Krug", and ultimately those feelings

lead to the development of her own "shame about herself and her feelings of homelessness" (Reingold 560). The author searches for her story, but continues to come up short because of the distance built between her present life and the history that her identity is craving to understand. Krug describes the beginning stages of her search: "The longer I've been away, the more books I pick up at the New York Public Library about my hometown, to learn everything I can about its wartime history. From this safe distance, I allow myself to see the loss it once endured." From a distance, Krug can learn about her past, but she cannot understand her true identity. The more Krug searches, she realizes that "the longer I've lived away from Germany, the more elusive my idea of my identity becomes. My HEIMAT is an echo, a forgotten word once called into the mountains. An unrecognizable reverberation" (Krug, ch. 2). Feeling lost without the words to form her identity, Krug too feels the urgency of language, understanding the importance of both finding and telling her story to feel rest.

As Krug sorts through her story, she realizes that in order to find the belonging she is searching for, she must take the time to understand and express her own story through writing. In her writing journey, Krug feels the urgency of finding the words to explain her story because she knows the pain of not having the context to release her voice. Similar to the experience of Liesel in *The Book Thief*, Krug sees the value in words because she understands how it feels without them. The author fights for the development of her own identity, as she fights to understand the narrative that has been written before her. Krug closes the distance between her past in deciding that

> The only way to find the HEIMAT that I've lost is to look back; to move beyond the abstract shame and ask those questions that are really difficult to ask—about my own hometown, about my father's and my mother's families. To make my own way back to

the towns where each of them is from. To return to my childhood, go back to the beginning, follow the bread crumbs, and hope they'll lead the way home. (Krug, ch. 2)

Krug believes in the essential nature of language, seeking the peace found in the stories of her family that she is searching for. Krug feels stuck in her writing career without the words to express her own story. Krug realizes that in order to understand her identity in a deeper way, she must journey back to the stories of her family that have come before her own, allowing their words to lead her in finding her own.

Although Krug is the first to search for her story, the author's family also feels the weight of misunderstanding in their identity. Through Krug's questioning, her father realizes words have never been spoken or written about the narrative of his family. As Krug investigates, it becomes clear that her father experiences the distance towards identity that Krug is fighting against. Krug's father is ignorant to his story because he " never knew much about his father, or his grandparents, or, in fact, anyone else in his family. No shared family narrative was delivered from father to son to grandson, told over and over through generations. And because there was no story, there was also no history" (Krug, ch. 5). In her research, Krug realizes she has the ability and the desire to construct her family's narrative on her own. Krug is the first person in her family to vocalize the pain she feels without a story, and thus she begins to search for the texts and stories that allow her to write her own. As Krug questions her family members, she realizes that her father "chooses every word carefully, as if this was the first time he has ever talked about these memories" (Krug, ch. 7). In addition to her father's ignorance, Krug's mother grew up in a time period where the past was not discussed, creating further distance between Krug and her family's story. Living in denial of what happened does not allow Krug's mother to process what she was experiencing. Instead, the lack of expression proves to deteriorate any

sense of identity for the family and draw them further away from each other and the truest form of themselves. As Krug steps forward in courage to find the truth to her story, she also paves the way for her family to find their voices as well. Because Krug is a third generation German, she is given more liberty to understand the stories of the past, and can give this relief to her family. Hirsch writes that "Perhaps it is *only* in subsequent generations that trauma can be witnessed and worked through, by those who were not there to live it but who received its effects, belatedly, through the narratives, actions and symptoms of the previous generation" (12). Krug is not the only person in her family desiring answers, but her unique position allows her to sift through the memories with an ease that is not tainted by the pain of these experiences. Krug steps forward in reconstructing her story, building a narrative of texts for her entire family to find the framework of their identity in.

As the graphic memoir progresses, the author begins to explain the process of finding her story, showcasing the complex way that she fought to piece together her story. Although the structure of the memoir is seemingly messy and disorganized, the reader witnesses how "history is not a sequence of facts, but instead is a sequence of decisions made by individuals" (Cerulo 271). Because Krug is working with the stories and histories of real people in her life, the construction of her narration reflects the inconsistencies she finds. The unique scrapbook structure of the narrative "leaves the author the freedom to jump from past to present, real and poetic, documentary and imaginary" (Cerulo 261). This characteristic of the memoir showcases the way the author's story is influenced by the texts she is reading, and how past stories affect the story she is writing. The writing process for Krug is fluid, moving and changing as her words continue to be written by the writers before her.

As Krug travels to meet more of her family members in Germany, the story of her life becomes more connected to their stories as well. The author allows more of her identity to be constructed by the stories of the people who have shaped her, and thus she finds her way home. Through knowing more about her family, Krug grieves the losses they experienced alongside them, instead of feeling distant toward where she is from. In the stories that Krug learns from reading her grandfather's letters, something inside of her begins to shift, soften, and heal toward her past: "finally, my emotions catch up with me. For the first time, I feel my family's loss. And through this loss, I feel the gap between me and Willi shrink" (Krug, ch. 8). As Krug processes what her family has experienced, she "comes to not only better understand her family, but to feel at home through claiming ownership of the memories of her family's story" (Reingold 557). As Krug accepts the way her own story is built from the texts of her family history, she realizes the way she feels at home, "not with German history or the country itself but being at home with her own family's history" (Reingold 557). Additionally, without ever knowing her uncle, the author connects her own childhood with his when she chooses to identify with her family's past. She believes that her family's stories have helped to write her own, contradicting the initial shame she felt toward her family. In a similar way that Liesel is affected by the stories that she reads, Krug's heart softens as she hears more stories herself, allowing the understanding of different perspectives to change her own. Piecing together the family history allows for the author to understand her family members, and especially her uncle:

> Even though my uncle isn't in the picture, I feel his presence. Judging by my aunt's age, he would have been about twelve years old at the time the picture was taken—the age he was when he wrote the story about the poisonous mushroom, almost the age I was when I

> first discovered his illustrated exercise books. For a moment, I feel my uncle's childhood merge with mine. (Krug, ch. 13)

As the author pieces together information about her history, she finds the personal stories of her family members that have shaped her. Krug begins to feel more connected to these stories and these people through her "attempt to reconstruct family history from both the paternal and maternal branches, the writer comes across a series of forgotten characters, submerged by history." The research that Krug does leads to rest in her heart "by unearthing personal documents that reflect the life of a whole generation" (Cerulo 251). The more Krug grows to value her history, the more she learns the importance of language for the construction of her own identity. Krug realizes how desperately she needs the words of her family's story that has come before her in order to adequately find her own voice.

Because Krug recognizes the way her story is shaped by the texts of her family's history, she can share this peace with her mother who searches for the same understanding. Krug's mother experiences peace as she finds a deeper way to understand her family when she can witness the way all of the pieces and stories fit together. For the first time, her mother considers how her father suffered after learning part of his life's story. In understanding the truth about her father, the author's mother experiences a sense of release she was not aware she needed. Krug describes her mother after she experiences the way the words have changed her:

> The weariness with which she usually talks about her father is gone. Perhaps Willi's file allows her for the first time to look at him for who he was. Not as the person she knew growing up—a father trapped in a repressed, prudish postwar middle-class society—but as a man who had experienced the war, someone who had to fight to make ends meet to

allow her to live and become who she is now. The woman who had me and made me who I am. (Krug, ch. 14)

Krug's mother changes as she encounters the truth about her father's past. Because her mother no longer lives in a state of oblivion, she begins to feel at peace within herself and with the person that she is now. Both Krug and her mother experience an unburdening of their familial shame which allows them the feeling of rest that comes with knowing their identity. Through feeling more connected to the history of their family, they are able to feel more connected to themselves because the words of their family members are the words that have made them as well. Krug encourages both her family members and the readers of her story in the healing and identity found in the stories that have come before.

Not only did Krug's work restore a sense of "heimat" to her mother, but it had the same effect on the rest of her family. It is Krug's posture towards her research that ultimately connects her to her family: her goal is to honor them through asking questions and genuinely seeking to understand their perspective. Each family member struggled with the same battle of misunderstanding their own "heimat" because no one discussed the past, which connected them more than they realized. Originally separated from the lack of belonging, the author's family is brought together again in the discovery of their communal story that each of them played a part in sharing.

Krug's experience with words is different from that of Liesel Meminger's, but she also experiences the way language serves as a connective tool for her family. Krug's construction of her family narrative brings her family together through the story of their lives that she told. Krug describes the way her family came together when they observe what she had created: "As we look at the photographs together, big Franz-Karl's life rises up once more in front of us. We are a

perfectly united family" (Krug, ch. 15). Through Krug's work, her family experiences the way their family is interconnected through the stories that have come before them, the stories that have built their family.

The further that Krug searches for her story, the closer she feels to understanding her place in the world. As the narrative of her life continues to unfold, she feels a sense of belonging and peace, finally at home with the words that make up the story of her life. By the end of the graphic memoir, it is clear that although the author does not know the answers to every question about her past, she finds rest in having the words to explain her identity and the lives that make up her history. As Krug remakes her story, she also remakes her identity. Diane R. Collier details that because literacy and identity are inextricably linked, "through the making of texts, writers are able to remake themselves and their relations with the world" (147). At the end of her journey to find her story, Krug describes the unique way she has grown connected to her past:

> And as the wine from the grapes of the family vineyard flows from my mouth to my stomach and then into my veins, I know that each step that leads me closer to my uncle, each new word that's added to my family narrative entangles me, that I am irrevocably intertwined with people and with places, with stories and with histories. (Krug, ch. 15)

The stories that Krug now knows shape her and give her the belonging she is searching for.

Throughout the memoir, it is clear that Krug needs the words of her past to be able to find her own story and close the distance within her own heart to her identity. Within the novel, "the narration is often intertwined with the author's process of writing the book, including the artistic and ethical dilemmas she faced." Claudia Cerulo outlines the way *Belonging* was formed, as Krug writes "adding her contemporary knowledge to the fragments of the past" (255). The research that Krug has completed in this process highlights the novel's intertextuality,

showcasing the way her own story has been intertwined and written through the stories of others. Although the process was not linear, Krug's writing did in fact lead her home—at home with her story, her family and herself, which is undoubtedly the "belonging" that she is looking for.

Conclusion

The novel *The Book Thief* and the graphic memoir *Belonging* both emphasize the life-shaping power of words. Zusak and Krug express the essentialness of language as the writing in their books is shaped by the language around them. Analyzing these stories through the theoretical framework of intertextuality allows the reader to recognize the way the characters' own stories are written through the words they read. Within the fictional story found in *The Book Thief*, Markus Zusak crafts the story of a girl who is both shaped and saved by words. Because Zusak allows the reader to walk closely along the life of Liesel, they witness the way words have marked her entire life. Liesel's story needs to be told so that each reader can understand the importance of language, and the way one's own story is written through the words of others. Nora Krug's graphic memoir, *Belonging,* complements the story of Liesel because Krug also journeys to find her own words and her own voice. Similar to the story of Liesel, Krug begins her memoir without the words to write her own story and she must find those words in her family's history. Krug's writing allows the reader to walk alongside her through the process of piecing her own story back together, encouraging the reader to notice how each story she hears shapes her own. *Belonging* emphasizes the intertextuality in writing that is found in *The Book Thief*, but provides a differing perspective through evidence of the influence of literature on building a real story from the words of a real author.

Both Zusak and Krug emphasize the importance of language on the writers, explaining how words have the power to shape someone's life and lay the foundation for their identity as a writer. In analyzing both of these books with the theoretical framework of intertextuality, the reader learns to appreciate these stories in a new way. Through this lens, the reader can focus on the unique way that words have guided each of these stories, showing the value of literature in the lives of these characters, but also pushing the reader to notice the formative importance of the words they experience in their own life.

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