

“When I started reading, I had no idea what to expect.”

MD TANJIM HOSSAIN

“Read Books, Widen Your Horizon” is a joint initiative by The Daily Star and United International University (UIU) to familiarise the youth with the art of reading. This 10-month-long campaign asks the readers to delve themselves into a book each month, followed by a quiz on the selected books.

The campaign set off in November 2021, with the first read being *The Book Thief* by Marcus Zusak. The top scorers of the maiden quiz of the campaign are Affan Chowdhury from Academia, Zaheen Sadia from Mohammadpur Preparatory School and College, Raiyan Quadri from Sunbeams, Wajiha Rahman from Sir John Wilson School, and Afroz Sultana from International Hope School Bangladesh.

To celebrate the winners, a virtual ceremony was held on January 9 with author Kingkor Ahsan, alongside Dr. Swakkhar Shatabda, Associate Professor of CSE at UIU.

Dr. Shatabda mentioned, “Students often want to imagine things outside of the classroom, which brought us the idea. Outside textbooks, books like these are ones that allow them to go through these imagery ideas.”

He also described the contrasting thought of the reader’s exploration from Munich to Stuttgart to Stalingrad through the pages of *The Book Thief*, while in reality sitting in Bangladesh during the pandemic.

Kingkor Ahsan, with his brilliant knowledge of books, films, and media, rated *The Book Thief* very high primarily due to its re-readability that he believes will provide new perceptions after every read. He also talked about



the well-thought-out character and plot development throughout the book and the importance of these elements in any literature or film as a whole.

Speaking of characters, Dr. Shatabda mentioned one of the main characters, Rudy Steiner, the typical golden hair boy appreciated by German dictator Adolf Hitler.

Rudy laid himself in mud to imitate the dark complexion of Jesse Owens, who bagged four gold medals at the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin but was discriminated against by Hitler. He also painted the contrasting dimension of the story through the character Walter and his love for his Jewish friend Max, while his own battalion was causing a catastrophe throughout the world.

One of the winners, Afwan, brought up the casual perspective throughout the book of the Jewish struggle during Second

World War; Afwan also encouraged others to read the book as he believes it’s important to know about the struggling groups during these historical catastrophes.

Zaheen talked about the immersive writing, and that engaging with Death, the narrator, was surprisingly fun within the book. She mentioned one of her favourite moments from the book was when Rudy handed a Teddy bear to a pilot right after a plane crash. Heart touching, indeed!

Rayhan, who happens to watch a lot of World War movies and documentaries, said, “Usually WWII movies are either held from the Nazi perspective or the Allies’ perspective. But the perspective here was more through the German people themselves.”

When asked about his

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favourite character, Rayhan gave an interesting answer: Death, and how he thinks the character of Death was rather neutral and sympathetic, and he liked to think of it that way.

“When I started reading, I had no idea what to expect,” said Wajiha. “I like it because, despite hard-hitting topics like xenophobia or the war itself, many light elements mingled alongside like stealing apples, and the light and heavy topics seemed to hold the story together.”

Having read the book, Wajiha now thinks about many of these topics in different manners than she did before, thus relating to Kingkor Ahsan’s earlier words on how the book changes at least some form of thinking within the readers.

To Afroz, the power of words came displayed in front of her with the book, not only through the writing but the plot that saved three characters solely through words at different stages.

Overall, it was a brilliant conversation about literature, characters, and *The Book Thief*, among five young readers and two great guests whose multi-dimensional insights definitely encouraged more readers to join the campaign, and more people to read.



The Book Thief is a 2005 award-winning historical fiction written by Markus Zusak, published by Picador.

The novel is set in Molching, Germany, during World War II and follows the story of Liesel and the relationships she makes in a war-torn country. *The Book Thief* is narrated by Death during this time of war and tragedy, who is fascinated by Liesel and thus, tells her story.

Liesel Meminger’s mother drops her off at Hans and Rosa Hubermann’s house, her new foster parents. Along the journey to her foster parents’ house, Liesel steals her first book, *The Gravedigger’s Handbook*, even though she does not know how to read.

After arriving at Himmel Street, Molching, she befriends Rudy, a young boy who loves Jesse Owens and flirts

with Liesel. Rudy and Liesel form a strong bond of friendship filled with adventures, shared secrets, and lots of bickering.

Furthermore, Liesel finds a father figure in Hans as he takes up the responsibility of teaching her how to read and write. On the other hand, Rosa is harsh and strict woman, and yet she holds a soft spot for Liesel.

Things begin to change when the Hubermanns risk their own safety and give shelter to a Jew, Max, in their basement. As he takes refuge in their home, new challenges to keep Max a secret arise.

However, amongst all the tension and danger, Max and Liesel become friends and he writes a story as a gift for Liesel, painting it over the pages of *Mein Kampf*.

Liesel’s days of stealing books do not end with *The Gravedigger’s Handbook*. Liesel goes on to steal a book from a

book-burning celebration from a fire. When her foster family struggles to survive, she begins stealing books from Frau Hermann, one of Rosa’s well-off customers.

As the terrors of the war begin to rattle the people of Himmel Street with bombings, Liesel comforts the people in a bunker with stories. With the power of stories and with the ability to read, Liesel is able to help the people forget the death and disaster that awaits them all in a warzone.

The novel captivated the hearts of many people as it reflects on the horrors of Nazi Germany through the lens of the innocence of a young girl and her family that does not agree with the Nazi’s cruel treatment of Jews. In a time of death,

loss, and struggles, Liesel is able to find her family among Hans, Rosa, Rudy, and Max.

Despite the simple narration, the novel is fit to be loved by people of all ages due to the way it handles complex topics.

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