

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Markus Zusak talks writing, books and libraries

MARKUS ZUSAK is one of Australia's most beloved and successful authors. *The Book Thief* spent more than a decade on the *New York Times* bestseller list and has been translated into more than forty languages. He spoke to the team at Librarians' Choice about his much-anticipated new novel, *Bridge of Clay*.

Did the success of *The Book Thief* make it possible for you to take greater risks with *Bridge of Clay*?

When I started, it felt more like I could take fewer risks because the stakes were suddenly so much higher. When a book is more successful than you imagined, you get a lot more criticisms too, and after a few years of worrying almost more than working, I slowly started to feel like myself again – to take the risks that needed taking – not least just writing the book exactly how it needed to be.

You've had the idea for *Bridge of Clay* for a long time. How closely does the completed novel resemble your early ideas? Were there things you wanted to include that you had to leave out?

There are always regrets about what's been chipped away, or included, or not thought of at the time. In this case, the central idea has remained the same: a boy who wants to build a bridge to make one beautiful and perfect thing. It's more what's built around it that has changed. A bigger family. Five pets with outrageous names (a mule named Achilles and a pigeon named Telemachus, among others). Either way, it's good to have regrets about the book you've just written. Maybe that's how you start your next book – to atone for the sins of the last one.

This is Clay's story, but it's told by his oldest brother Matthew. Why was he the right person to tell this story?

I tried everyone to narrate this book – the first being a girl called Maggie, who was erased about six years into the process – which is quite staggering, really. Talk about killing your darlings. But I tried every brother in the Dunbar family, both parents, Clay himself. Matthew, in the end, felt right – and he tells the story out of love for Clay.

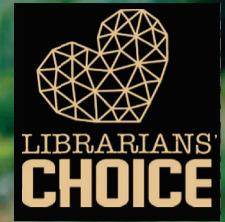


Photo of Markus Zusak by Hugh Stewart

It feels fair to say that when we read a Markus Zusak book, someone is probably going to get punched. What is your interest in fighting?

Possibly the greatest question I've ever been asked! It's also fair to say that there'll also be running, and at least a bit of stealing. The reason there's fighting in all of my books is probably because I feel that way about writing. It's a fight. It's a struggle – but a joyful one. You do it because you love it, and no-one comes away from writing a book without a few bruises. As for the running, I've always been a good trainer. My talents were always considered minimal, so working for things was always a necessity. And the stealing is the necessary mischief!

Do you ever re-read books? Is there a book you've gone back to again and again?

Rereading books is how I became a writer. I've always slightly disagreed with people who advocate reading widely as the only way to become a writer – I feel like I became one by reading narrowly. I just read my favourite books over and over – and that's how I learned not only what I loved, but how I could possibly create something of my own – to find my own voice. Books I've reread countless times are *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, *My Brother Jack*, *The Bell Jar*, *Rumble Fish*, *Wonder Boys*, *The Half Brother* and many more I can't think of right now.

Did you grow up using libraries? Is there a memory that stands out for you?

It was borrowing W.P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe*, which I loved and reread, and made me want to write books that made us see the world in a way we recognised but delivered in a lyrical way. *

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