

'Book Thief' author: Back after 13 years with new novel

Hal Boedeker
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Thirteen years elapsed between Markus Zusak's last book, the phenomenon known as "The Book Thief," and his new novel, "Bridge of Clay."

"I would write something and go, 'That's not it. That's not what I'm looking for,'" he said. The Australian author is on a book tour that brings him to Books-A-Million in Kissimmee on Tuesday and the Miami Book Fair on Wednesday.

Zusak, 43, said he got waylaid by trying to make everything perfect. Yet he knew he was done with "Bridge of Clay" when he wrote the epilogue with a last line that been in his head for the better part of a decade.

"I felt like Matthew Dunbar, the narrator," he said. "You know it's not real, but you believe it when you're in it."

"Bridge of Clay," his sixth novel, is a sweeping work about family: the five Dunbar brothers and their history.

"I just want people to feel like they are a Dunbar boy and they are part of that family," Zusak said. "A majority of people know how tough it is in a lot of cases to be part of a family and that you can't run away from your family. Family is what makes us who we are in a lot of ways."

People have to break away and make their own lives, said Zusak, who is married and has two children. But he added, "There's a point where you bring your own life back to your family."

His books have been marketed as young-adult titles, but Zusak said he has little interest in labels. "You try to write a book that someone might love," he said. "A loved book is in a category of its own."

Zusak said it was a challenge to follow "The Book Thief," which he thought would disappear soon after publication. "You never can guess how these things will go," he said. In the World War II drama, narrated by Death, a girl rescues banned books from being burned by the Nazis. It has sold 16 million copies worldwide, and he said he hoped its success hadn't changed him.

"You need 99 percent humility to be a writer, but you also need a tiny bit of arrogance that makes you believe you can do it," he said. "No one owes you anything. Readers don't owe me

anything. I owe them everything. I just feel lucky. I feel even luckier if they're willing take this book on."

What's next? A good sleep, he said. "I came out loving writing more after this book," he added. "I'm not sure what I'm going to write next."

On his tour, he usually sits with the audience before he talks. "I love the idea that we're all in it together," he said. "I'm grateful to be a reader. I'm grateful to have readers."

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