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The Book Thief: A Conversation with Geoffrey Rush, Brian Percival, and Sophie Néllisse

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, November 6th, 2013

The Book Thief is the best-selling novel by Markus Zusak that has sold eight million copies worldwide since being published in 2005. It made the New York Times best-seller list for nearly seven years. From Director Brian Percival (*Downton Abbey*) comes the highly-anticipated screen adaptation of the novel, featuring Sophie Néllisse (*Monsieur Lazhar*) in the lead as Liesel Meminger; Geoffrey Rush and Emily Watson, as her adoptive parents Hans and Rosa Hubermann; newcomer Ben Schnetzer as the Jewish stowaway whom they assist; and Roger Allam, as Death, the narrator; with an original score by John Williams.

I recently had an opportunity to speak with director Brian Percival and actors Geoffrey Rush and Sophie Néllisse at the Ritz-Carlton, San Francisco hotel when they were in town for the screening of “The Book Thief” on opening night at Mill Valley Film Festival.

Journalists participating in the roundtable discussion included myself, Sophia Stein (Cultural Weekly), Pam Grady (CinezineKane), Meg Ellison (the Daily Cal), Beau Behan (patch.com) and Josh Rotter (download.com). The following is an edited version of the conversation that took place.



Director Brian Percival and actors Sophie Néllisse and Geoffrey Rush at Fox 2000 Pictures special screening of “The Book Thief” held at the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s Museum of Tolerance, on Saturday, November 2, 2013 in Los Angeles.
Photo by Eric Charbonneau/Invision for Twentieth Century Fox/AP images.

In preparing to play the role of Hans Hubermann, you’ve said that the novel by Markus Zusak “became a bible because it offers so much internal observation of the character and his rhythm, pace and inspiration.” What specifically influenced your portrayal of Hans Hubermann?

Geoffrey Rush: I first read the screenplay, and I loved the matter-of-fact ordinariness of Hans Hubermann. I’ve always played characters where the needle has gone to the extreme end of the spectrum of eccentric — colorful, bold characterizations. It appealed to me to play this man who seemingly on the outside was ordinary, to the point of being quite possibly boring. He’s a quiet guy who got on with his life. Yet, you realize underneath it, he’s politically almost a radical in

honoring this ethical bond with his Jewish colleague from the First World War, taking Max in as a refugee, and confronting the Nazis to say, “Please, look we know this person, he’s not a bad guy.” That is crossing a line that brings great shame on his family, he thinks, because it is such dangerous territory. “The Book Thief” is one of the great classics of contemporary literature, a notable Australian novel. While it’s not about Australia, I think it has a subliminal Australian subversiveness in the playfulness of the language and the freedom of the imagination. I put post-it notes in the novel where the screenplay and the novel seriously overlapped. Then there were other little colors that I would use for bits, an aspect of the character that I was intent to incorporate, even though this particular set of events was not in the screenplay. Hans is not working, but I didn’t want to have him just sitting at the kitchen table for the whole thing obsessing, “I’ve got no work, I’ve got no work.” I thought, what do you do in a situation like that? Can I be fixing something? That’s what people do when they’re out of work, they go around and fix all the chairs, make sure the table doesn’t rock. Hans is attending to his accordion, keeping it well-oiled — just little details like that.

Brian Percival: Hans is not a lazy man. He doesn’t work, not because he cannot work, but because morally, he does not want to join the Nazi party — and anybody who didn’t join the party at that time, didn’t get work. So here’s a man who would love to be out working, painting everyday, but he’s not allowed to because of the system. The book is the bible; it gives us a 580 page reference document for the 100 page screenplay. What we had to do was to try and communicate most effectively 580 pages of beautiful writing, into two hours of celluloid. There are always going to be people who prefer the book, and that’s absolutely fine. This film is our interpretation of what Markus has written. We hope we have been faithful to the book because we all adored the book and everything that it stood for. My hope is that the film may reach a wider audience than the novel — film being a visual medium that you can sit down and watch for a couple of hours. If a thousand kids at the end of the film go out, buy a book, read “The Book Thief,” and approach their lives slightly differently because of it — and if a hundred of those kids have a slightly better life for having done so, then that’s great.

Are you concerned that some people may question why this is a film about an amazing German person during the Holocaust, as opposed to a Jewish hero?

Brian: There is a whole generation coming through at the moment that aren’t really taught about what happened in the Holocaust. A friend showed the film to her child, and the first question her ten-year old daughter raised at the end of the film was “Why was everybody so horrible to the Jews?” Now, if that’s the effect the film has, then that probably is an effective way of trying to open the mind of someone who doesn’t know anything about that history, giving them the opportunity to find out about those terrible atrocities themselves. This new generation, presupposing that the Holocaust is not an appealing subject matter, might not go and see “Schindler’s List,” but they might see “The Book Thief,” and from there begin to raise questions in their own mind about what actually went on. Films like “Schindler’s List” have been made (probably far better than I could ever hope to make them), so it wasn’t my intention to try and make another “Schindler’s List.” First and foremost, I set out to make a film about the human spirit.

Sophie, I was curious to learn what you knew about the Holocaust and World War II before you worked on the film?

Sophie Néliste: At my school we didn’t really talk about the Holocaust, except in sixth grade

when we discussed “Hana’s Suitcase.” I knew a little bit more about The Holocaust from my grandma who was alive at that time. She actually hid some Communists during the Second World War that were killed right in front of her. The Nazi’s would just barge into the house and shoot everywhere; they didn’t shoot my grandmother, but everywhere else. My grandpa was in a concentration camp — not for Jews, but for another situation. So they talked a lot about that. And I watched a lot of movies — “Schindler’s List,” “The Pianist,” “The Boy in the Striped Pajamas,” “The Reader.”

Geoffrey: A lot of those films often have focused on the big picture and the terror of the concentration camps. When I first read the novel and the screenplay for “The Book Thief,” I identified with the setting of the story. [Himmel Street in the fictional Bavarian town of Molching, Germany] recalled for me a working class community in a small outback town in New South Wales, or somewhere in the Midwest. These political events are taking place slowly and slyly around them, and then suddenly, it’s a dividing line between are you going to join the party or not? For the English, Americans, and Australians – it’s a story about our former enemy told on a street level, human scale. It’s a microcosm of what happens in the average daily life of the townspeople. It shows their perception of the war that they were fighting. Initially, they were thinking “Oh, we’ll win this. It’s great because Hitler’s reviving the economy and the country, and we’ve come out of the devastation of the loss of the First World War.” Markus’ take is based on stories that he was told as a child living in Sydney, Australia, by his German mother and Austrian father, first-hand accounts of their experiences living in wartime Munich and Vienna. “The Book Thief” offers an unbiased account of the German perspective.

Brian: It’s a cautionary tale about how ordinary, simple folk can be corrupted by an ideology based in totalitarian or fascist beliefs. I think, in that sense, ordinary people are always at risk of being manipulated.

Geoffrey: A theme emerges in the book and the film — that language can be used as a controlling, ideological device. Rather than allowing language to manipulate and diminish her humanity, Liesel transitions from a traumatized ten year old into a young woman who defines and appreciates the world through language.

Sophie, did you identify with your character, Liesel?

Sophie: Like Liesel, I love to read. I started to read the first twenty pages of “The Book Thief,” before I was cast in the film. Once I was cast, I didn’t want to continue reading the book at the same time as working on the movie because I thought it would be a bit confusing. I just finished reading the book last month. I remember when I read the first twenty pages previously, I would see the train scene in my head; I would see who Hans was in my head. Now when I read the book, I just see the movie. When I read the train scene, I see the camera, and I remember how I played the scene. So, it’s like reading the movie. I would have loved to read the whole book before.

Geoffrey, did you learn to play the accordion in preparation for your role?

Geoffrey: I had an accordion tutor because it was not an instrument that I was familiar with. It was a beautiful prop to have as an adjunct to the character. When I worked with the tutor, he said, I want you to carry the accordion around and put it down and pick it up ten times a day, so that you have a familiarity with this instrument. It was like having lungs. It was like breathing. There was something magical in the flow. He would say, don’t worry too much about the fingering, you’re

getting it, it's coming, but getting that flow of the bellows — that's what everyone's eye will gravitate towards. Hans is an amateur accordionist who plays for pure pleasure.



Amidst the hardships of World War II Germany, Liesel (Sophie Néllisse) and her friend Rudy (Nico Liersch) find joy. “The Book Thief.”

What is your favorite app on your phone and why?

Brian: There are a couple of handy cinematography apps: **Sun Scout** which basically tells you where the sun is going to be in the sky on any day, at anytime of the year, and **Artemis**, which turns my phone into a video viewfinder. You choose lenses and ratios, and it's just there. You can take stills and email them to people.

Geoffrey: **Vibe** is a free program for texting and phone calls. (I don't know what they get out of it? They are probably zapping information out of our lives!)

Sophie: **iMovie** is a great app because I get to create my own trailers. With **Video Star**, I can make my own music videos with special fx. If I have nothing to do, this will fill my time, and it's really fun.

Geoffrey: Sophie and Nico [Liersch, Rudy Steiner in “The Book Thief”] would sit in the make-up van with an iPad, and film themselves being made up. By the end of the hair and make-up, they will have edited the clip, done a few tricks, put some music behind it.

Sophie: Actually, I also made a video for Brian.

Brian: A fantastic little video.

Sophie: It started when we were in Görlitz shooting the book burning. Brian in the winter wears all these North Face coats, so he really looks like a big Teddy Bear that you want to hug. There's this song called “The Gummy Bear Song.” So me and Nico said, “Ah, wouldn't it be funny to do “The Teddy Bear Song.” I talked to Karen the producer about our idea, “Look, me and Nico would find this interesting — just a simple thing, just me and the camera man and the guy that does the sound recording, just do it quick-quick.” It turned out that we got everybody involved — Geoffrey and all the main actors, the hairdresser, the AD's —

Geoffrey: The AD's were doing call sheets for her.

Sophie: It's about a minute-and-a-half, a big video with costumes and all the departments. John [Wilson] and Sascha [Dhillon] edited the video with some pops and music. It's amazing. And Brian never found out! We all did it behind his back.

Brian: It's really an incredible piece. She's got the whole crew, a whole hundred people standing up and cheering.

Geoffrey: It's a bit like “Build Me Up Buttercup” from the end of the “There's Something about Mary.”

Sophie: And we also wrote the lyrics on Brian's life and everything.

Geoffrey: It's going to go viral.

Sophie: It's not on YouTube yet —

Brian: And it's not likely to go on YouTube! [Enormous laugh by all.]

“The Book Thief” opens in limited release on November 8, 2013, and wide release on November 15, 2013.

“The Book Thief” Official Website

Facebook Page for “The Book Thief”

Top Image: Liesel (Sophie Nélisse) reads to Max (Ben Schnetzer), who is hiding in her home.

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