

READING NOTES

From the author of the worldwide phenomenon
THE BOOK THIEF

MARKUS ZUSAK

Bridge of Clay



Bridge of Clay

Blurb

*Let me tell you about our brother.
The fourth Dunbar boy named Clay.
Everything happened to him.
We were all of us changed through him.*

The Dunbar boys bring each other up in a house run by their own rules. A family of ramshackle tragedy – their mother is dead, their father has fled – they love and fight, and learn to reckon with the adult world.

It is Clay, the quiet one, who will build a bridge; for his family, for his past, for his sins. He builds a bridge to transcend humanness. To survive.

A miracle and nothing less.

Markus Zusak makes his long-awaited return with a profoundly heartfelt and inventive novel about a family held together by stories, and a young life caught in the current: a boy in search of greatness, as a cure for a painful past.

The Author

Markus Zusak is the bestselling author of six novels, including *The Book Thief* and *The Messenger*. His books have been translated into more than forty languages, to both popular and critical acclaim. He lives in Sydney with his wife and two children.

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Plot Summary

After the death of their mother and abandonment by their grieving father, the five Dunbar brothers spend several shambolic years raising themselves in a small house in a fictional horseracing quarter of Sydney.

Amid the mess, the fights, and an assortment of unusual pets, the Dunbar boys have begun to rebuild their lives – except for the middle brother, Clay, who is keeping a painful secret. It is he who helped their mother to die when their father couldn't bring himself to do it, and while knowing he would do the same again, Clay cannot forgive himself.

When their father, Michael Dunbar, reappears in their lives and asks the brothers to help him build a bridge on his new property, all but Clay refuse. Risking rejection from his brothers, Clay travels to Michael's property and together they start building the bridge and slowly healing old wounds.

On regular trips back to Sydney, Clay begins to reconnect with his brothers and spends time with his best friend, apprentice jockey Carey Novac, who lives across the road. But just as healing seems to be within reach, Carey is killed in a riding accident. His grief almost overwhelming, Clay seeks solace and redemption in the building of his bridge, which he and Michael finally complete just before the coming of flooding rains.

Themes

Storytelling

Bridge of Clay is full of beginnings and endings that are not necessarily told chronologically.

If there's one thing I've come to learn, though, it's that if life goes on in our aftermaths, it goes on in our worlds before it. (Page 450)

While neither Penny's death nor Michael's leaving are described till the end of the novel, both have already occurred when the story begins. Penny's death could be described as a definite ending, but Michael's leaving is said to be a 'constant beginning' (page 357).

1. What is Markus Zusak suggesting by structuring the novel in this way? What do you think Zusak is suggesting about the nature of stories?
2. Events yet to be described for the reader, even if they have already happened, are often suggested to be 'in waters still to come'. Why do you think Markus Zusak might have used this expression?

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3. Several books have a role to play in *Bridge of Clay*: Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and the fictional book *The Quarryman*. What is the significance of each of these books in the novel?
4. There is also one other important book underlying these three: it's not named, but there are hints all the way through in the plot and the language. What do you think that book is, and where/how does it appear in *Bridge of Clay*? (Clue: read the opening sentence.)

'I'm sorry,' he whispered to both of them, 'I'm so sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!' The peg was clenched tight in his hand, and he addressed them, lastly, again. 'I promise, I'll tell you the story,' he said, 'how I brought you both home Achilles.'

That mule was never for Tommy. (Page 415)

5. What do you think Clay means when he says this to his absent parents? What is he trying to achieve through the story of the getting of Achilles?
6. How would you describe the role of storytelling in the novel? What does it mean to Penny? To Clay? To Matthew?

Bridge of Clay is brimming with story and stories: it contains an infinite number, some of which are only hinted at, or are not otherwise the focus of the book – think, for example, of the original owner of Achilles weeping as the boys lead him away (how did *he* acquire Achilles, how long did he have him for?), or of how Tommy decided to become a social worker (what made him choose that career path?).

7. Flesh out some of these untold stories in your imagination. For example, what do you think Clay did in his years travelling while his brothers waited for him? What do you think Michael did in the years after he left Archer Street?
8. Are there any stories which you wish Markus Zusak had spent more time on? Or any that felt less relevant to you? Discuss the choices authors must make when writing a novel.

Boyhood, and what it means to be male in today's world

It's a mystery, even to me sometimes, how boys and brothers love. (Page 309)

9. Life for the five brothers in the parentless Dunbar household is sometimes chaotic, unpredictable and haphazard, but there is deep warmth, affection and joy to be found there too. In what ways do the Dunbar boys look after each other and hold each other up?

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10. Why do you think Clay and his other brothers are so sure that Matthew will beat him up when he returns home from his father's property? And why then, and not before Clay leaves? The fight appears in a chapter titled 'The Violence of Brothers'. What does Markus Zusak mean by this, do you think?
11. Clay's brothers write to him on pages 235–236. What does each letter tell us about the brothers and their relationship with Clay? How do their letters compare with Carey's?

Life, death, grief and guilt

The two most important women in Clay's life – Penny Dunbar and Carey Novac – both die, though in very different circumstances: Penny's death is painful and prolonged, Carey's is unexpected and instantaneous.

12. Is one kind of loss easier to cope with than the other, i.e. a drawn-out illness or a sudden death?
13. Clay believes he bears a certain amount of culpability for both deaths: discuss the extent to which you think he is guilty in relation to either of them.

*But then they returned to hurting again.
There was guilt for enjoying anything.
Especially the joy of forgetting.* (Page 512)

14. What does this extract say about the nature of grief and the process of grieving?

'He's gone, Clay, he killed us. He murdered us.' I forced myself to say it. I forced myself to like it. 'What we were – there's nothing left.' (Page 361)

15. Michael leaves the Dunbar household after Penny's death, such is his grief, giving birth to his nickname, 'The Murderer': do you think he deserves it? What is the irony of that nickname?
16. Why does Matthew force himself to say, and *like*, the words above? Why is it necessary for him to do so?
17. Why might Michael's abandonment of the boys be seen differently by Clay?

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As Clay stood, Tommy asked him; all just part of the ritual.
He pointed towards his pocket.
'You want me to mind it for you, Clay?'
Clay said nothing, but told him.
The answer was always the same. (Page 46)

18. Clay always carries a peg in his pocket: why is it so precious to Clay? Why does he keep it near him?
19. There are many other 'totems' or 'mementos' in the book (for example, the engraved lighter, the Monopoly iron, the button from Penny's dress). Identify as many as you can. What do you think Markus Zusak is saying about memory, history, grieving, and even about lore?

[Rory] shoved a hand right into my heart. 'He needs to feel it *here*.'
There was suddenly such gravity, such pain in him, and it came like the force of a piano. The quietest words were the worst. 'He needs to hurt nearly enough to kill him,' he said, 'because that's how we goddamn *live*.' (Page 460)

20. What do you think Markus Zusak's point is in this extract? What is he saying about grief? About life?

Characters

Clay is obviously the central character of this book, but *Bridge of Clay* has a very large cast of other characters; all the members of the Dunbar family, the Statue of Stalin, Carey Novac's family, the members of the racing community, Claudia Kirkby, to name a few.

21. Which character was your favourite, and why?
22. Are there any characters you would have liked to know more about?

Clay

Yes, always for us there was a brother, and he was the one – the one of us amongst five of us – who took all of it on his shoulder. (Page 3)

As a boy, as I said, he was the best of us. (Page 263)

23. Why do you think Clay kept his secret about Penny's death for so long? What signs are there early on that he has a secret of this magnitude?

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24. The deaths of Penny and Carey are pivotal moments in Clay's life, but what signs are there that he was a singular person even before these traumatic events? The role Clay played in Penny's death obviously shaped him as a person, but can it also be argued that he ended up playing that role because of the type of person he was?

'You're thinking of going?'

Clay watched me.

He watched but said nothing while I tried, as I'd often done lately, to somehow understand him. (Page 99)

25. Why do you think Clay felt he had to go to his father?

What was there to know when it came to Clayton, our brother?

Questions had followed him for years now, like why did he smile but never laugh?

Why did he fight but never to win?

Why did he like it so much on our roof?

Why did he run not for a satisfaction, but a discomfort – some sort of gateway to pain and suffering, and always putting up with it?

Not one of those enquiries, however, was his favourite. (Page 21)

26. Having finished the book, do you think you know the answers to these questions? What is Clay's favourite enquiry? And what is the answer to it?

[I]t didn't matter how much we hurt him, we couldn't hurt him. Or how much we held him; we couldn't hold him. (Page 359)

It was training, it was escaping.

It was perfect pain and happiness. (Page 368)

27. What does the book suggest is the reason Clay runs and fights almost beyond endurance? Is it just to escape his grief, or is it something else, something more, too?

'We live the lives of the *Slaves*.'

The bridge was all they had. (Page 398)

28. What does Clay mean by this? Why do you think Clay loves Michelangelo's permanently half-finished *Slaves* so much?

29. What do you think the bridge represents to Clay? Why is he building it?

30. One of the pivotal moments in this book is when Carey Novac tells Clay that his bridge will be made of *him*. But what is Clay Dunbar made of – and how many bridges does he actually build?

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Penelope Lesciuszko

They'd brought her in the metronome, and it was one of the boys who said it. I think his name was Carlos.

'Breathe in time with this, Miss.' (Page 314)

31. The students from the notorious Hyperno High obviously love their teacher: why do think that might be? What does that tell us about Penny?

Her ambition of reading both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* ... was her constant immigrant Everest.

How typical then, and perfect.

This, after all, was Penelope. (Page 123)

32. Penelope's story is both extraordinary and ordinary, in its own way. What does it have to say about the journeys asylum seekers have to make? What does this tell us about Penny in particular?

Carey Novac

Once, when she came storming through the field, on a mare by the name of Stun Gun, a jockey lost his whip in front of her, and it struck her below the chin. It caused her a moment's distraction, and the loss of the horse's momentum.

She finished fourth, but alive, and pissed off. (Page 353)

33. What sort of a person is Carey?

She pointed casually over, at her roughed-up, trampled-down dad, and already she was on her way:

To here and Clay, and Archer Street.

She said, 'I'm gonna be just like him.' (Page 427)

34. What is it about Carey that you think draws Clay to her? What personality traits do they share? How are they different?

In Carey Novac, Clay had found someone who knew him, who *was* him, in all but one life-defining way. He also knew that if she could have, she'd have traded anything to share that with him as well:

The reason he carried the peg. (Page 120)

The only way he could live with himself was knowing he'd tell her [Carey, about the peg] at the end – when she'd need to leave him behind. (Page 483)

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35. Why does Clay assume that Carey will leave him if he tells her the truth about Penny's death – was he right to assume so? Why do you think Clay thinks Carey's death was his fault?

The animals: Achilles, Rosy, Moon, Hector, Telemachus, Agamemnon

The animal in question was named Achilles, and there was a backstory longer than a country mile as to how he ended up in our suburban backyard in one of the racing quarters of the city. On one hand it involved the abandoned stables and practice track behind our house, an outdated council by-law, and a sad old fat man with bad spelling. On the other it was our dead mother, our fled father, and the youngest, Tommy Dunbar.

(Page 16)

36. Why were the animals integral in keeping the boys together in their parentless house?
37. Why is Achilles' role so important in this story? What does he represent, for Clay, Tommy and the other Dunbar boys?
38. Why do you think the boys finding Achilles on the bridge after the flood is so momentous?

Settings

The novel's two main settings are an unnamed Sydney suburb built around a fictional racecourse known as Royal Hennessey, and a rural property situated on a fictional river, the Amahnu.

39. The racing quarter, including the Dunbar house in Archer Street, features heavily in this book; it could almost be said to be a character in its own right. How does this setting colour and inform the book's main storylines?
40. The wilder natural environment of Michael Dunbar's property, including the 'corridor of strapping eucalypts', provides a stark contrast to the book's urban settings. How are the different settings used to convey different ideas in the story?

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Writing Style

41. *Bridge of Clay* is divided into eight parts, the chapters in each of which switch between present-day and past settings. It is written in the past tense, ostensibly by Matthew Dunbar, the narrator, and occasionally in the present tense when he speaks of the writing itself. Why do you think Zusak chose this very particular structure and style for the book? Is it successful, do you think?
42. This novel showcases Zusak's rich, often unconventional use of language. What are some of the devices he uses to create imagery, pace and tension?
43. This book is narrated by Matthew: what defines his style and voice as a narrator? Can you imagine another narrator? For example, Clay, or Carey? Mrs Chilman? Or could it have been written in the third person? How might that change how the story unfolds?
44. There is much tragedy in *Bridge of Clay*, but the novel is also punctuated with surprising moments of humour. How does Zusak use humour in unexpected ways?