

Markus Zusak

author of *The Book Thief*

Three

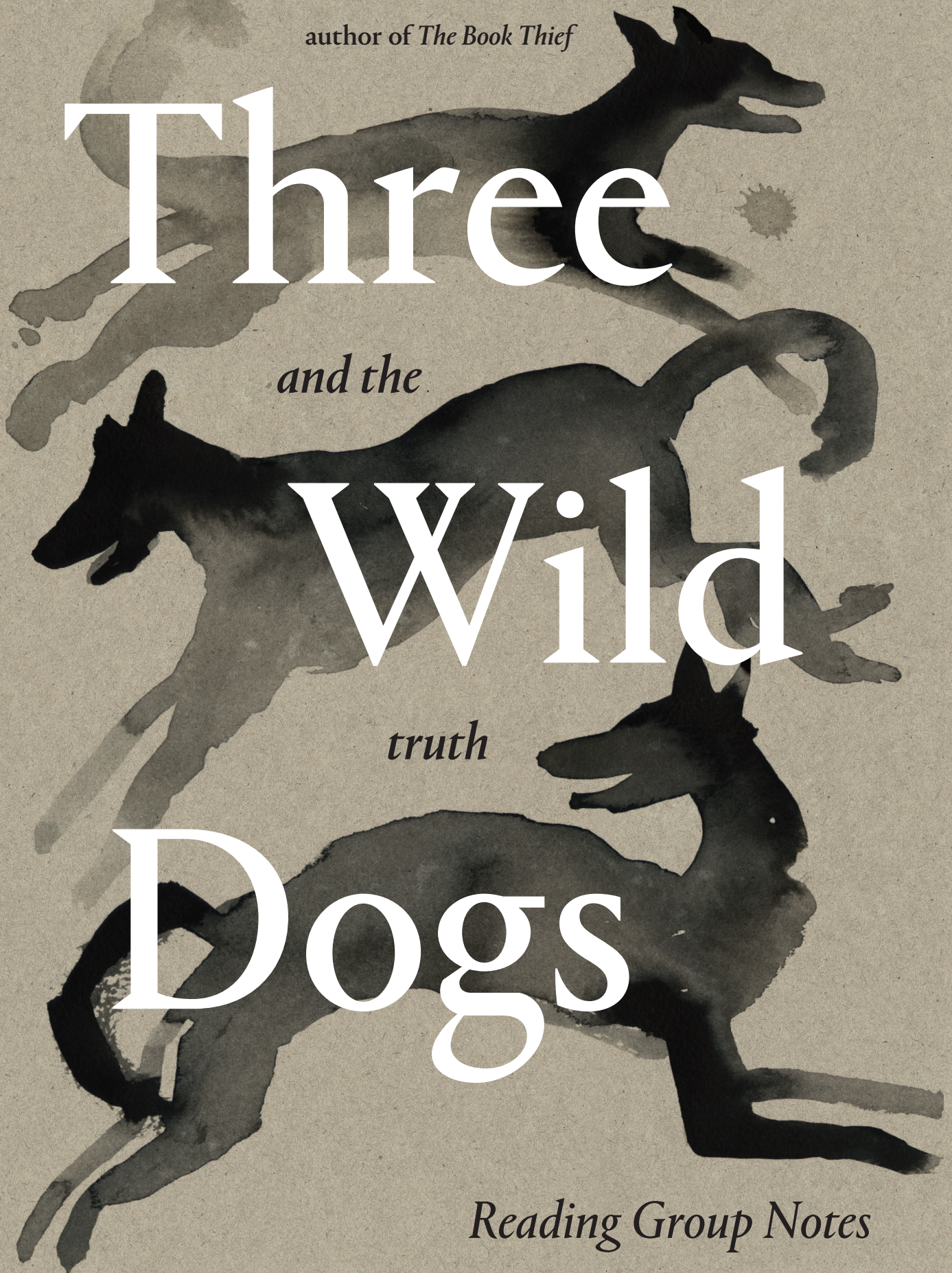
and the

Wild

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Dogs

Reading Group Notes



Blurb

There's a madman dog beside me, and the hounds of memory ahead of us. It's love and beasts and wild mistakes, and regret, but never to change things...

What happens when the Zusaks open their family home to three big, wild, pound-hardened dogs – Reuben, a wolf at your door with a hacksaw; Archer, blond, beautiful, deadly; and the rancorously smiling Frosty, who walks like a rolling thunderstorm?

The answer can only be chaos: there are street fights, park fights, public shamings, property trashing, injuries, stomach pumping, purest comedy, shocking tragedy, and carnage that needs to be seen to be believed ... not to mention the odd police visit at some ungodly hour of the morning.

There is a reckoning of shortcomings and failure, a strengthening of will, but most important of all, an explosion of love – and the joy and recognition of family.

From one of the world's great storytellers comes a tender, motley and exquisitely written memoir about the human need for both connection and disorder; a love letter to the animals who bring hilarity and beauty – but also the visceral truth of the natural world – straight to our doors and into our lives, and change us forever.

Author Biography

Markus Zusak is the international bestselling author of six novels, including *The Messenger*, *Bridge of Clay* and *The Book Thief* – one of the most loved books of the twenty-first century and a *New York Times* bestseller for more than a decade. His work is translated into more than fifty languages, and has been awarded numerous honours around the world, ranging from literary prizes to bookseller and readers' choice awards. His books have also been adapted into film, television and theatre. He was born in Sydney, and still lives there with his wife, two children, and the last dog standing in a once thriving household of animals. *Three Wild Dogs (and the truth)* is his first book of non-fiction.

Discussion Questions

1. Let's come out running, like a dog just hearing the words 'Walk' or 'Grab the leash...'

Markus Zusak's book is one of love, truth, violence, terror, embarrassment, grief, laughter, and so much of what makes us human. He's said that he wanted this book to feel like he was in his kitchen, telling a best friend a hell of a story ... Is there one episode in the book that stood out for you the most? When did you gasp, maybe? When did you laugh? When did you cry? Did you feel what he was looking for, like a friend listening to his story?

2. Consider Markus's admission of being 'impatient, annoyed, foul-mouthed, sometimes cruel' (pg. 4). In what ways does this candid self-assessment challenge the traditional narrative of the author as a moral or intellectual authority? How does it influence your reading of the book?
3. On page 22, the stand-off between Jackson and Bijoux at the old house of stilts is something Markus reflects happily upon. Share with the group a defining memory of an old home.
4. "'Okay,' slipped out of my mouth. Such a simple, perfect word, with so many ramifications.' (pg. 32)
Has there been a time when a simple decision has led to something life-defining for you, as Markus's did when he agreed to bringing Reuben home? Did it bring joy, chaos, good times or bad? Or all of the above?!
5. The reluctance of a parent to bring a pet into the family only to become the person most devoted to them reflects Markus in the early days with Reuben. Has this ever happened in your own experience? Why do you think Markus – and parents in general – are sometimes afraid of welcoming pets into the family? And what makes them crack, and their feelings change?
6. '... I was out in the morning with the Frost, and a young woman asked what breed he was, how old, and if he was desexed *and* fully vaccinated. Only when I'd answered yes to the whole questionnaire did she allow her Vizsla pup to go near him.' (pg. 37)
Interactions between dogs out on walks can be hard to predict. Markus seems to find the interaction above amusing more than anything else, but is the young woman excessive or justified, in your opinion? What kind of encounters have you had with animals, *and* their owners?
7. 'Animals are part of the family. Dogs are in the house more, they sleep inside. They're in the lounge room, watching telly, a constant in daily life.' (pg. 41)
In the past, dogs have mostly been considered outside pets. Nowadays, a dog's place in the family is far more intimate, as Markus notes. What do you think has changed? Why do you think pets are increasingly considered 'part of the family'?
8. 'And no good deed goes unpunished,' Markus says, after keeping Reuben despite the impending chaos. (pg. 53)
Have you ever felt this way? Have you acted with the best intentions only to be repaid with misfortune? And if so, would you do it again?

Markus also notes that thinking 'good karma will always come back' can backfire, although he and his family seem to front up to the problems time and again. What has karma meant to you over the years? How intricate a system is it?

9. 'When it came to suburban warfare – from street fights to scraps, to dealing with smaller, insolent pests – I'd have backed Archer in almost anything.' (pg. 132)
If you have or had pets, share with the group a time where you would have been their staunchest supporter, even if you shouldn't have been.
10. 'Lindi said that while it had been one hell of an awful scare, and the dogs had come in hard, they'd also backed away. Without saying it, she was putting faith in what she thought of us as humans.' (pg. 154)
After being bitten by Reuben and Archer, piano teacher Lindi is gracious and quick to forgive. How would you react when placed in such a situation? Would it have been easy to react the way Lindi did? Did she make the right decision, in your opinion?
11. To combat the ferocity and craziness that Reuben and Archer sometimes display on their walks, Markus takes them out in 'the gloom of almost-morning'. Have you had to change your lifestyle to adapt to the needs of your pets?
12. 'Next, what might be a strange question, but have you ever tried pulling your dog off something it's trying to kill?' (pg. 118)
Markus asks this question as he recounts the possum incident. Have you been in a situation similar to Markus? He talks about his dogs showing him his 'wilderness within' – and it's exhibited here as he enters the fray and fights his own dogs. Can you recall any such high-octane moments in your own life, where you found adrenalin you didn't know you had?
13. 'Looking back, I can only smile, though, for they were dogs who somehow made me, or at the very least, remodelled.' (pg. 7)
Do our animals change us, do you think? Or do they show us another side of ourselves? Or even uncover truths we didn't know?
14. 'There are terrible and poetic things in our lives, and so often they're one and the same.' (pg. 172)
Discuss this quote with the group. What do you think Markus means here? Has there been a moment where you've felt this?
15. On page 188, Markus wonders how much Archer understands the death of Reuben. Also, earlier in the piece, Rocky – a different family dog – goes in search of his companion, Tyja. What experiences have you had with the pets who've lost their housemates or brothers or sisters?
16. After losing Reuben and Archer, the Zusaks face a dogless existence. Discuss with the group Markus's grieving process on pages 197–198. If you've lost a pet, how did you process the grief?
17. Markus's struggle to complete *Bridge of Clay* is mentioned a few times. How does this struggle mirror the broader themes of persistence, dedication, and completion in the face of adversity?
18. Revisit the scene where the author finds his office turned into a 'snowfield of books and paper' (pg. 142) by his dogs. This event leads to reflections on loss, chaos, and the moments that define our lives. How does this chaotic moment encapsulate the book's exploration of love, regret, and not only an acceptance, but a celebration, of life's unpredictability?
19. Much of the narrative is imbued with introspection and a sense of looking back. How does the theme of memory function in the manuscript?

20. The text states, 'Meat-eaters are heartless savages. Vegans are militant snowflakes.' (pg. 145) How does this deliberately provocative statement set the tone for the book's complex topics?

On the back of such statements, Markus has said that he didn't want to lecture, but more ask the questions that he and his family have asked themselves: 'How many animals die to feed a dog in its lifetime?' is one example. (The complexities of pet ownership and vegetarianism is another.) We sense that the Zusaks grapple with these dilemmas, but don't expect everyone to feel the same. How do you feel about these complexities within our ownership and love of animals?

21. 'It's love and beasts and wild mistakes, and regret, but never to change things.' (pg. 13) Discuss whether or not you agree with this view of life, as a journey marked by love, errors and acceptance.

22. 'A car like a moving cave, or the chamber of Jonah's whale...' (pg. 175)

Markus Zusak is known for his occasional use of deliberately unconventional language, sentence structure and punctuation. Did any moments of those stand out in particular, or did the story take centre stage?

