

This book, like all the others in the Critical Insights series, is divided into several different sections. It opens, for example, with a “flagship” essay or interview with a major scholar who addresses many of the issues dealt with in the volume as a whole. Here the “flagship” contribution comes from Michelle Abate, a widely published scholar who often writes about literature for young people. In her contribution to this book, she explains how and why she first became fascinated with Markus Zusak’s novel *The Book Thief* and why she thinks the book has also appealed to so many other readers. Her discussion is then followed by a longer-than-usual biography of Zusak by the volume’s editor, who traces brief comments by book reviewers on Zusak’s developing corpus of fiction.

### Critical Contexts

The book’s second section—“Critical Contexts”—looks at Zusak’s novel from several deliberately distinct points of view. An essay by Lindsay Huysentruyt sets Zusak’s text in a particular historical context. Huysentruyt, drawing on interviews with Germans who actually lived under Hitler, tries to explain why the Nazi dictator came to power in the first place and eventually won such widespread popularity. The answer, in part, lay in the way his regime revived the crippled German economy, moving it (very quickly) from massive unemployment to almost no unemployment at all. The construction of the Autobahn—the famous highway system—was both one cause and a potent symbol of this economic transformation.

In another contextual essay, Joyce Ahn surveys much of the academic, scholarly criticism or analysis *The Book Thief* has engendered in the fifteen years since it was first published. Ahn charts the growth of such commentary chronologically, commenting

on the kinds of themes it has considered and the other kinds of issues it has explored. Next, in an essay that complements Ahn's, Robert Evans uses a particular "critical lens" to survey numerous newspaper and magazine reviews of *The Book Thief*, showing not only how they assessed the book but also how they reflect various standard approaches to literary theory and literary criticism. Finally, in the last of the contextual essays, which is deliberately comparative, Caitlyn Mattera examines the themes of language and morality not only in *The Book Thief* but also in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, three novels that all emphasize the experiences of young people.

### **Critical Readings: I**

The volume's next section is devoted to a series of "critical readings" designed to offer a kaleidoscopic view of Zusak's book from many different perspectives. The first of these essays, by Eric Sterling, sets the book in the context of the larger genre on "holocaust literature"—that is, literature that deals with the deliberate attempt, by the Nazis, to exterminate European Jewry during the Second World War. *The Book Thief*, in one respect, is definitely a holocaust novel, but it is also somewhat unusual in its emphasis on the experience of "ordinary" Germans who were confronted with the horrors of the holocaust and the war. In the next essay, Robert Evans, again emphasizing (as in the earlier Huysentruyt essay) interviews with such "ordinary" Germans, tries to explain why and how some of them became, like several characters in the Zusak book, "righteous gentiles" who tried to rescue Jews from destruction. Evans calls attention to one story of rescue that has some parallels with the story Zusak tells but is also, in some respects, even more remarkable. In a third essay, Evans once more draws on interviews with Germans (in this case, German children) who, like Liesel and Rudy, the young German friends Zusak portrays, lived through and suffered from the terrors of the war, especially the terror that resulted from Allied bombing of German towns and cities. Such children have become known as "Kriegskinder"—"children of the war."

In another essay that again draws on interviews with people who survived World War II—in this case both gentiles and Jews—Lindsay Huysentruyt examines how various persons have answered the question, “What did you know about the holocaust?” The answers to this question vary greatly among the persons whose interviews Huysentruyt explores, ranging from professions of almost no knowledge to confessions of knowledge that was widely shared. Meanwhile, in an essay on a completely different set of interviews, Kelly Snyder surveys many different discussions in which Zusak himself talks not only about *The Book Thief* but about aspects of his life and his suggestions for aspiring writers.

### **Critical Readings: II**

Another set of the “critical readings” essays begins with a survey, by Jordan Bailey, of various visualizations of the personified figure of Death. Death, of course, is the narrator of *The Book Thief*, but he is not the stereotypical Grim Reaper so fundamental to so many different western representations of Death as (paradoxically) a living being. Bailey discusses several different ways in which Death has been visually imagined in western culture, concluding with one of many depictions of Death on the cover of one edition of *The Book Thief*. Erin Gipson next discusses the nature and functions of Death as the narrator of *The Book Thief*, suggesting that this figure—at least as presented by Zusak—is less omnipotent and omniscient than is often assumed. In another essay on both death and Death, Jerusha Yoder looks at *The Book Thief* in terms of the theme of trauma, and then, in a succeeding essay, builds on her preceding work by exploring trauma in *The Book Thief* in terms of death, friendship, and the power of words.

Two remaining essays close out the “critical readings” section. The first, by Caitlin Mattered, picks up the theme of trauma but discusses it, this time, in relation to Max Vandenberg, the young Jewish man whom Liesel and her adopted “parents” try to shield from harm. Finally, Mikia Holloway surveys a wide array of reviews of the 2012 filmed version of *The Book Thief*, showing how and

why the movie was received and how it was both compared and contrasted with the novel.

### **Resources**

This volume closes, as do all the volumes in the Critical Insights series, with a chronology of the author's life; a list of works *by* the author, categorized by genre; a bibliography of relevant secondary works; a note about the editor; notes about the contributors; and, finally, a comprehensive index of names, titles, and topics.

CRITICAL  
CONTEXTS

# Hitler, Hope, and the Autobahn: “But the Lord sent us our Führer and he fed us”

Lindsay Huysentruyt

After Hitler was in power the general public realized that he produced work. He started building the Autobahn and all the big projects. It got people out of the breadline once they started working. . . . We kids were given input on Hitler. None of our teachers would let anyone know if they were not Nazis. The same things happened at church. They might say, “Germany went through some hard years, but the Lord sent us our Führer and he fed us.” (Wilmar Kurtz interview)<sup>1</sup>

It is well known that, after World War I, Germany was held responsible for financial reparations to the war’s victors. Coinciding with the global effects of the Great Depression, this financial obligation launched the country into massive economic distress, allowing Germany to become “ripe for a dictatorship” (Neumann and Kirchheimer 38). Despite the rights given to the people under the post-war Weimar Republic, job scarcity and rising food costs led to the public’s loss of confidence in German politicians as the economic situation continued to worsen. As the economic downturn continued, so did political unrest, including coup attempts, strikes, and political crimes. By 1933, after years of unrest, Hitler had come to power and would continue to rule until 1945, the year that marked the end of the second world war, the war Hitler both sought and lost.

Why did the German people allow the rise of Hitler? Why did they often support his regime so enthusiastically, both before the war and as the war was being fought? Oral histories can help us answer both of these questions. In post-war interviews, German

citizens were asked why Hitler was so appealing in the beginning of his reign. Two factors stand out: jobs and the Autobahn. The war and the Holocaust would probably never have happened if Hitler had begun by immediately plunging the country into armed conflict and if he had immediately set out to exterminate Jews. Besides, Germany could not have afforded any expensive military adventures—at first. Instead, Hitler used the first six years of his rule to re-build the German economy while imposing ever greater control over the country through propaganda and an ever-growing dictatorship.

In a series of fascinating but little-known interviews conducted by researchers at California State University at Fullerton, scholars asked various Germans who lived during the Nazi period to describe their experiences, feelings, and thoughts, including their ideas about how and why Hitler came to power and was as apparently popular as he was. The interviewees' answers provide illuminating insights into the world described in Markus Zusak's novel *The Book Thief*, which is set during the latter half of Hitler's rule. In the excerpts that follow, various interviewees describe how Hitler managed to come to power in the first place.

### **Hitler's Rise**

One of the "Fullerton interviewees," Helmut Basch, shares his memories of Hitler's ascendancy and initial success:

It didn't take very long after 1933 before we didn't see any more beggars. The work programs apparently got people off the streets. The construction of the Autobahns [a national highway system] gave thousands of people jobs. There was also continuous drive to help the needy, the hungry, the mothers, those who were cold, whoever. . . . The question is, "Did all Germans favor Hitler's marching into Poland?" No. My father said, "That is not going to go over well." Hitler had governed Germany for only six years, but by that time our people had seen a tremendous improvement in the German economy. In 1936, Germany had

the Olympics in Berlin, and Charles Lindberg, as many other people, was impressed with the state of the country. Life was great. People had work and enjoyed life. If you put food in the workingmen's bellies, they will be happy. They won't think about the ultimate goals the government may or may not have. (Basch interview)

Basch's testimony is particularly intriguing because he shows the people's simultaneous love for Hitler and a recognition, at least by some, of at least one of his mistakes—the decision to invade Poland, a decision that started World War II. Many interviewees express reluctance to admit full support of Hitler, but when they do, they often say they were seduced by propaganda and by Hitler's promises in the early years of his reign. For example, when Bruna Kloss was asked if Hitler's propaganda charmed her, she answered:

Yes, it sure did because my mother got a good job then. I still remember the election in 1933 before Hitler came to power. I must have been six or seven years old, and we whispered to each other in class, "who did your parents vote for?" And all my friends would say, "we voted for Hitler." "Oh, we did too!" But it was not very important to us because we were so young. A few years later my mother got a very good job. I knew that everybody had more work, and there was no unemployment so it got better. I didn't know why, but it got better. (Kloss interview)

Kloss was too young at the time to know why things seemed to be getting better for Germans after the economic depression, but she knew people turned to Hitler to pull them out of it. This positive response to Hitler can be attributed not only to Nazi propaganda but also to the building of a massive new highway system. Plans for the Autobahn began as early as 1924 under the Weimar Republic, yet actual construction began under the orders of Adolf Hitler in 1933.

Historian Uwe Oster explains, “Unlike many of his fellow party members, Hitler grasped how popularly and effectively motorway construction could be ‘sold’ by means of propaganda” (40). According to Oster, Hitler’s primary goal was not to create jobs but to demonstrate the sense of national community he had promoted in his campaigning. Yet, among the German people, creating jobs became the most important and popular aspect of his program. The accounts of many interviewees, such as Elga Blaser, reveal the importance of their family members, friends, and neighbors having the opportunity to return to the workforce thanks to a great degree to the Autobahn program. Even if some of the people Blaser knew opposed Hitler, many others found hope in their leader in 1933:

My father was against Hitler. He said, “All politicians say the same thing.” My two oldest brothers didn’t trust Hitler, but my brother who lived in the Black Forest was for him. He said that Hitler was our only salvation, and that we had to do something with our lives. He joined the Party. He drove throughout the country with his job. After Hitler came to power he had the Autobahn built. He employed a tremendous amount of people and everybody made money. They were totally for him because he was a good cause. The people looked up to Hitler because he brought them work, so they thought he must be good. More and more people joined the Party. (Blaser interview)

By 1936, roughly 130,000 Germans were employed working on the Autobahn, a development that contributed to Hitler’s popular support and to a rising tide of pride in Germany.

Interviews with Germans reiterate this point repeatedly. Emily Kressler, for instance, remembers from her experience that a “large part of the population admired him for the same reasons most Germans admired him. Number one, he got jobs for everyone and there was total employment. That was very important” (Kressler interview). Similarly, Claudia Hellerman recalls that “For me, the

years 1933 to 1939 were good years. I think for Germany as a whole they were good years, too, because people had work and the economy was picking up. There was a lot of social help around” (Claudia Hellerman interview). Rudolf Hellerman, although a child during this period, recalls his family’s feelings about politics. His father, he states, was not a fan of Hitler in the end, but in the beginning, he held a more positive view: “Like millions of other Germans, my father supported him in the early 1930s because everything we saw at the time was basically positive. He restored pride in Germany and threw off the chains of the Versailles Treaty. He made us proud to be German again” (Rudolf Hellerman interview).

Constructing the Autobahn was just one way that Hitler was able to rally his citizens to support him as well as take advantage of their desperation. In a speech delivered in September of 1933 he discussed the project and the nation’s Four Year Plan, stating,

we promised the nation we will remove its present distress. When that promise was made we asked for four years and we wish to use these four years for the profit and advantage of our German people and therefore primarily on behalf of the German workman. . . . The best possible way to bring the German people back into work is, as I see it, to set German economic life once more in motion through great monumental works. (Hitler, *Speeches* 871)

With the help of men like Fritz Todt, who designed and helped oversee the construction of the new motorways, Hitler was able to put this project into motion, create jobs, and utilize the success of such efforts in propaganda designed to fuel his nationalistic Nazi machine. Ironically, historian Adam J. Tooze’s book *The Wages of Destruction* claims that the Autobahn project did not contribute significantly to any dramatic rise in national employment. Though many men did work on the project, this fact, according to Tooze, alleviated only a fraction of the national unemployment rate. What was most significant about the Autobahn was not so much a rise in

# CRITICAL READINGS

## Zusak's *The Book Thief* in the Context of Holocaust Literature

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Eric Sterling

Markus Zusak published his novel *The Book Thief*—which deals with the twin themes of World War II and the Holocaust—in 2005. By that time, both the war and the Holocaust were sixty years in the past. During those six decades, both the conflict and the Nazi effort to exterminate the Jews had become the subjects of numerous poems, stories, novels, plays, and films. Thus, by the time *The Book Thief* appeared, it was part of an increasingly well-established genre—the genre of “Holocaust Literature.” What are some traits of that genre? What kinds of discussion has the genre provoked? How did the genre arise, and how did it develop historically? How did it manifest itself in the literature of different nations and languages? What kinds of sub-genres are part of the larger, broader field of “Holocaust Literature”? These are the kinds of questions the present essay seeks to answer by offering an overview of one of the most helpful guides to literature about the Holocaust, a 2013 collection of essays, edited by Alan Rosen, whose very title is *Literature of the Holocaust*.

Rosen, author of three books on the Holocaust, editor of two books concerning Elie Wiesel, and lecturer at Yad Vashem's International School for Holocaust Studies, in this valuable essay collection divides Holocaust literature into different sections by country of the authors of Holocaust literature, resulting in sixteen chapters. After a chapter entitled “Wartime Victim Writing in Eastern Europe” and then a chapter on “Wartime Victim Writing in Western Europe,” the book presents sections on postwar Holocaust writing in various languages: Italian, German, Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, English, Polish, Hungarian, and French. Rosen divides the last section into oral Holocaust memoirs, songs written during the War

about the *Shoah*, Sephardic literature, literature anthologies, and the relationship between Holocaust history and the novels it influenced. The book ends with a comprehensive “Guide to further reading.”

David Roskies’s chapter, “Wartime Victim Writing in Eastern Europe” (15–32), recognizes that historical events inspire certain genres to become prevalent. In Eastern Europe, intellectuals became diarists to preserve their history for future generations. Diarists such as the Warsaw Ghetto’s Emanuel Ringelblum wrote down their observations from their tragic daily lives for posterity. Diaries were written hastily by Jews who spoke various Eastern European languages; many diaries were destroyed but some survived, buried or hidden in safe houses, religious buildings, and underground bunkers (15). Roskies observes that many diarists described their tragic circumstances in great detail but did not write much about their Nazi oppressors. A notable exception was Hebrew scholar and educator Chaim Aron Kaplan, whose *Scroll of Agony* focused on German mistreatment of Jews and “employs Scripture to underscore the desecration of God’s covenant and the daily degradation of God’s chosen” (15). Kaplan, a Belorussian living in Warsaw, was pessimistic and feared for both his life and the preservation of his diary. His forebodings proved true because he died shortly after he wrote that the end was near for many Jews in his ghetto. It is poignant that he and other diarists foresaw and accepted their deaths, so they took great lengths to preserve their diaries so that their accounts would survive and share the stories they could never tell themselves. Oskar Rosenfeld used his diary, which also served as a reporter’s notebook, to write about the first public hanging in the Łódź Ghetto and how the poor children there, dressed in rags, spent their days. Rosenfeld asks in his diary what will become of him, the adults, and the children in the streets. Most of the diarists perished even though their notebooks survived. They never knew which diary entry would be their last. They wrote in the moment, never knowing what to expect, but their readers now know what happened to them. Roskies mentions that while they were trapped in Eastern European ghettos, Jews wrote poetry (and literature of other genres) about heroism, armed resistance, deportation, and martyrdom. Roskies concludes

his chapter with the fascinating story of Polish prisoner Zalmen Gradowski of the *Sonderkommando* (men ordered by the Nazis to prepare Jews for the gas chambers, remove the gold teeth from the dead, and remove and dispose of the bodies). Gradowski knew he would not survive the war, but he wanted his secret diary, which delineated the Nazis' mass murders, to be preserved. Gradowski was interested in Jewish heroism in Auschwitz, but he seemed more intrigued by Jewish passivity and acceptance of their deadly fate.

In the next chapter (33–47), David Patterson writes about wartime victim authors in Western Europe. Patterson observes that Western European diarists manifested a strong desire to provide testimony but had little opportunity to revise their work and no expectation that their writing would be published or read. As with the Eastern European wartime writers, these diarists penned their work without knowing how imminent their deaths were. Western European writers kept their diaries secret because they could be killed for maintaining them; they related personal anecdotes and communal tragedies with a sense of desperation and urgency. Patterson mentions an important distinction between Eastern and Western European writers: the former wrote primarily in ghettos, while the latter (such as Anne Frank) wrote from hiding places or camps. Some Western writers penned novels or collections of letters. The novelists did not believe that their fiction would be read, but the letter writers had a specific audience in mind who would read their letters, and they often suspected that Nazi censors scanned their work to prevent the dissemination of accounts of Nazi atrocities. Consequently, letter writers often wrote cryptically or in code. Patterson covers wartime writers from Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. He discusses the fascinating case of diarist Victor Klemperer, who denied his Judaism, claiming that he was German, not Jewish. Patterson discusses German author Gertrud Kolmar, whose letter collection is entitled *My Gaze Is Turned Inward: Letters, 1938–1943*. Because she was worried about Nazi censors retaliating against her, she never mentioned atrocities specifically in her book. She also wrote a novella called *Susanna*. In his section on the Netherlands, Patterson correctly points out that the play *Diary of*

*Anne Frank* differs from Frank's diary by attempting to "de-Judaize the Holocaust" (37). Patterson notes that *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941–1943* strangely lacks internal torment and reflection. Philip Mechanicus's *Year of Fear* demonstrates a maturity and sensitivity that Hillesum's text lacks and manifests a genuine concern for the fate of Jewish children and sadness for mothers who smile at their children while knowing that they will probably die soon. Abel Herzberg, a professional writer, unlike the aforementioned Dutch authors who took to writing in response to the Holocaust, wrote *Between Two Streams: A Diary from Bergen-Belsen*. The two streams represent Nazism and Judaism. Patterson is intrigued by Herzberg's comment that Christians hate Jews "not because Jews killed him [Christ]—it was because they gave birth to him" (39). Herzberg believes that Christians feel self-loathing and ambivalence because they are unable to live up to Christ's teachings, so they project their anger onto Jews, feeling that they would not feel inadequate spiritually if Christ had not been born.

Robert S. C. Gordon's chapter on Italian Holocaust literature (51–67) includes an important narrative by Giacomo Debenedetti. His book entitled *October 16, 1943* (published in Rome in 1945) involves his reporting on the horrific night of October 16 when Nazi soldiers captured more than a thousand Jews in a ghetto and sent them to Auschwitz. Debenedetti's book also discusses the September 1943 incident when Nazi officials in Rome demanded 50 kilograms of gold from Rome's Jews as a "tribute" (53). Debenedetti's *Eight Jews* (1945) concerns the March 1944 massacre that killed 335 Italians, including 75 Jews, in retaliation for a Resistance attack (53). Curzio Malaparte's *Kaputt* (1945) involves the author's report of his venture throughout Axis nations and the countries invaded by the Nazis. He reported, for instance, on the mass killings in Iasi (Romania) and the Warsaw Ghetto. Gordon characterizes Debenedetti and Malaparte's writings as neutral and compassionate. The most famous Italian Holocaust writer is Primo Levi. Levi wrote the important memoir *If This Is a Man* (1947), released by a small publisher because large, established publishers rejected the manuscript due to low interest in the Holocaust and human suffering shortly after the war. The

memoir “displayed the immensely subtle ethical and ethological features that would make Levi’s work so influential” (54). Some of the most significant Italian Holocaust writings shortly after the war were by women, including Giuliana Tedeschi’s first-person account *This Poor Body* (1946) and Liana Millu’s *Smoke over Birkenau* (1947), which consists of six semiautobiographical stories drawn from her personal experiences in a concentration camp. The stories uniquely focus on the horrific suffering of women in the camps and discuss issues such as maternity, sexual desire, family, and personal dilemmas. Like Levi’s memoir, Millu’s book received scant attention in 1947 but gained popularity decades later. Aldo Bizzarri’s 1947 novel *Living Is Forbidden* combines his personal reflections as an anti-fascist inmate imprisoned in Mauthausen with fiction. The novel contains a frame narrative, like Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*. Some prisoners spend their Sundays telling stories to pass the time. The stories told by the concentration camp inmates serve as escapes from their harsh existence, but reality intrudes, causing the tales to become dark, clearly influenced by the atrocities in the *lager*.

Stuart Taberner begins his chapter on German Holocaust literature (68–83) by conceding that unlike works by writers from other nations, German Holocaust literature lacks defining, authoritative texts. No work has attained the status and popularity of the writings by Wiesel, Frank, or Levi. Edgar Hilsenrath wrote *Nacht* (*Night*, 1964) about the horrors and death he witnessed in the Prokow ghetto. Paul Celan’s “Todesfuge” (“Death Fugue” in English) (1948) is taught regularly and is a poignant text, as is Nelly Sachs’s “O The Chimneys.” Jurek Becker’s East German novel *Jacob the Liar* (1969) is a tragicomic work about a man in a Polish ghetto who causes great harm to his fellow Jews by falsely claiming that he possesses a radio and hears that the advancing Russian army will save them. The false hope he gives them leads to complacency and then deportation. Despite the inspired writing in Becker’s novel, the work failed to become popular or gain widespread attention until Robin Williams played Jacob in an American remake of the East German film. Taberner observes that German Holocaust literature

# RESOURCES

## Chronology of Markus Zusak's Life\_\_\_\_\_

- 1975** 23 June: born, in Sydney, Australia, the youngest of four children; son of a house painter and maid.
- 1999** Australian publication of *The Underdog*, Zusak's first published book.
- 2000** Australian publication of *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, sequel to *The Underdog*.
- 2001** Australian publication of *When Dogs Cry*, third book in the *Underdogs* trilogy.
- Winner, for *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, of an Honour Book award in the CBCA Children's Book of the Year Award competition for Older Readers.
- Shortlisted for the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards Ethel Turner Prize for Young People's Literature.
- 2002** Australian publication of *The Messenger*.
- Winner, for *When Dogs Cry*, of an Honour Book award in the CBCA Children's Book of the Year Award competition for Older Readers.
- 2003** *When Dogs Cry* published in the United States as *Getting the Girl*.
- Winner of the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards Ethel Turner Prize for Young People's Literature.
- Winner of the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Award.
- 2005** *The Messenger* published in the United States as *I Am the Messenger*.
- Australian publication of *The Book Thief*.

## Works by Markus Zusak

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### Novels

*The Underdog*. 1999

*Fighting Ruben Wolfe*. 1999

*When Dogs Cry*. 2001, also published as *Getting the Girl*.

*The Messenger*. 2002, also published as *I Am the Messenger*.

*The Book Thief*. 2005

*Bridge of Clay*. 2018

### Nonfiction

“Printz Award Honor Speech.” 2007

“The Strangeness of My Success, and Other Detours.” 2008

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## Contributors

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**Joyce Ahn** is an instructor of English at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where she has taught extensively. Her research interests include Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and Renaissance and medieval literature. She has published on Jonson and American literary characters; she serves as an associate editor of the *Ben Jonson Journal*, and for many years she was its managing editor. She is the author of numerous overviews of criticism on various topics.

**Jordan Bailey** is an independent scholar whose research interests center around education in the United States, especially the historical development of the public education system and its responses to changing political and social environments. She is also interested in and concerned with education in general, including teaching reading, writing, and literature across developmental stages. Her areas of literary research are the development of children's and young adult literature in the United States. Previously published essays have dealt with feminism, Martin Luther King, Jr., greed in literature, *The Odyssey*, and Abraham Lincoln.

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