In praise of 'One Book, One Chicago'

By Al Gini
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Fall is in the air. Trees are beginning to turn yellow and orange. Football season is in full swing. And, the mayor’s office has just announced the fall selection for One Book, One Chicago: The Book Thief by award-winning Australian author Markus Zusak. The setting is World War II in Nazi Germany, and the story is of an orphan girl, Liesel Meminger, who finds friendship and love in a family who takes her in. Amidst the madness of the Nazi regime Liesel learns how words can be used to make life meaningful and worthwhile — or conversely, to create evil and darkness.

Since the inauguration of One Book, One Chicago in 2001 there have been 23 books offered to the public, usually in the fall and spring. I’ve been uncomfortable with a few selections, mainly because I thought they were either too long, too arcane or too disconnected from the Chicago experience to interest a local audience. But overall, I have enjoyed the selections, and in fact, six of them are in my personal pantheon of favorite books! To Kill A Mockingbird by Harper Lee; A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry; The Coast of Chicago by Stuart Dybek; One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn; Go Tell It on a Mountain by James Baldwin; and, The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros.

The purpose of One Book, One Chicago is not just to generate a list of worthwhile books. It’s real purpose is to share ideas and encourage debate and dialogue through seminars and presentations. But for me the best part of it has been the innumerable spontaneous chats I’ve had with fellow readers while riding the Green Line and the cups of coffee I’ve had with colleagues while debating the nuances of the latest selection. And, the simple pleasure of simultaneously reading a book with my wife and sharing our impressions while on a leisurely walk or in the car.

Of course, the beauty of all books is that they take us out of ourselves, show us other parts of the world and introduce us to characters we might never otherwise meet. Good works, good ideas, good reads — it's truly a worthwhile personal and communal activity. As Groucho Marx once said: “Outside of a dog, a book is a (person’s) best friend. Inside of a dog, it’s too dark to read!”

WBEZ is a media sponsor of One Book, One Chicago. Al Gini is a Professor of Business Ethics and Chairman of the Management Department in the Quinlan School of Business at Loyola University Chicago.