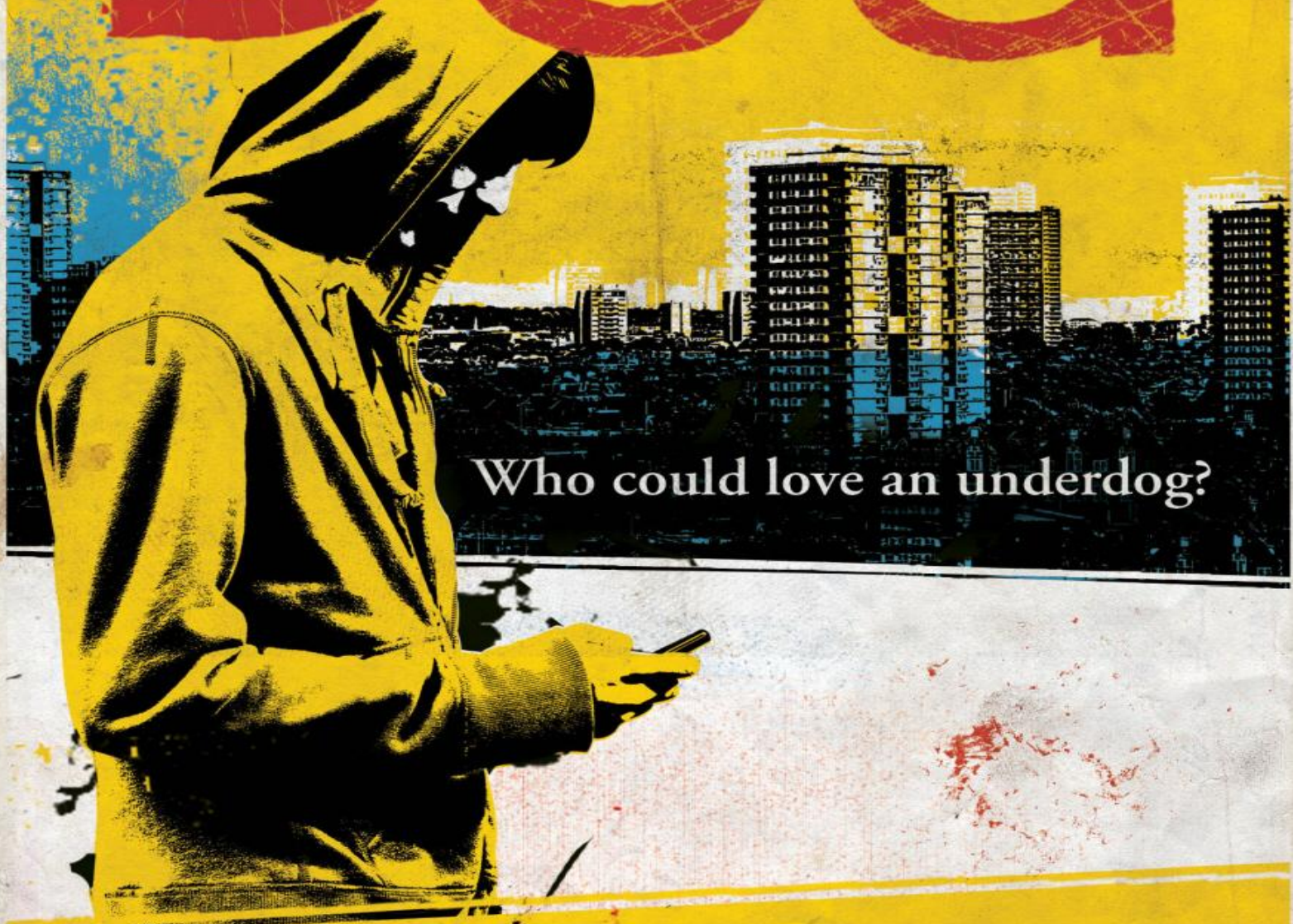


THE UNDER DOOG



Who could love an underdog?

MARKUS ZUSAK

Author of *The Book Thief*

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About the Author

Also by Markus Zusak

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About the Book

My name's Cameron Wolfe.

I have a little bit of sense. I don't have much sense.

My older brother Ruben gets me into plenty of trouble.

I get Rube into as much trouble as he gets me into.

That's me.

Cameron is hopeless, pitiful, and a shake-your head kind of pathetic.

What he really wants is to meet a girl.

But who could love an underdog like Cameron Wolfe?

The uplifting debut novel from the author of the international bestseller, *The Book Thief*.

**THE
UNDER
DOG**

MARKUS ZUSAK

RHCP DIGITAL

For my family

1

We were watching the telly when we decided to rob the dentist.

‘The dentist?’ I asked my brother.

‘Sure, why not?’ was his reply. ‘Do you know how much money goes through a dental surgery in a day? It’s obscene. If the prime minister was a dentist, the country wouldn’t be in the state it’s in right now, I can tell you. There’d be no unemployment, no racism, no sexism. Just money.’

‘Yeah.’

I agreed with my brother Ruben only to keep him happy. The truth was that he was just grandstanding again. It was one of his worst habits.

That was the first truth, of two.

The second was that even though we had decided to knock over our local dentist, we were never going to do it. So far this year we’d promised to rob the bakery, the fruit shop, the hardware, the fish ‘n’ chip shop, and the optometrist. It never happened.

‘And this time I’m serious.’ Rube sat forward on the couch. He must have been seeing what I was thinking.

We weren’t robbing anything.

We were hopeless.

Hopeless, pitiful, and a shake-your-head kind of pathetic.

I myself had a job twice a week delivering newspapers but I got sacked after I broke some guy’s kitchen window. It wasn’t even a hard throw. It just happened. The window was there half open, I threw the paper, and *smack!* It went

through the glass. The bloke came running out and went berserk and hurled abuse at me as I stood there with a pile of ridiculous tears in my eyes. The job was gone - cursed from the start.

My name's Cameron Wolfe.

I live in the city.

I go to school.

I'm not popular with the girls.

I have a little bit of sense.

I don't have much sense.

I have thick, furry hair that isn't long but always looks messy and always sticks up, no matter how hard I try keeping it down.

My older brother Ruben gets me into plenty of trouble.

I get Rube into as much trouble as he gets me into.

I have another brother named Steve who's the oldest and is the winner of the family. He's had quite a few girls and has a good job and he's the one a lot of people like. He's also some kind of good footballer on top of it.

I have a sister named Sarah who sits on the couch with her boyfriend and has him stick his tongue down her throat whenever possible. Sarah's second oldest.

I have a father who constantly tells Rube and me to wash ourselves because he reckons we look filthy and stink like jungle animals crawling out of the mud.

('I don't bloody stink!' I argue with him. 'And I have a shower quite bloody regularly!')

'Well have you heard of soap? . . . I was once your age myself y' know, and I know how filthy guys your age are.'

'Is that right?'

'Of course it is. I wouldn't say it otherwise.'

No point arguing on.)

I have a mother who says very little but is the toughest thing in our house.

I have a family, yes, that doesn't really function without tomato sauce.

I like winter.

That's me.

Oh, and yeah, at the point in time I'm talking about, I had never, not even once, robbed a single thing in my life. I just talked about it with Rube, exactly like that day in the lounge room.

'Oi.'

Rube slapped Sarah on the arm as she kissed that boyfriend on our couch.

'Oi - we're gonna rob the dentist.'

Sarah stopped.

'Hey?' she enquired.

'Ah, forget it.' Rube looked away. 'Is this a useless house or isn't it? There are ignorant people everywhere, too busy with 'emselfes to care.'

'Ah, stop whingein', I told him.

He looked at me. That was all he did, as Sarah got back down to business.

I switched off the TV then and we left. We left to check out the dentist's surgery we were going to 'hit', as Rube put it. (The real reason we went there was just to get out of the house, because Sarah and her boyfriend were going insane in the lounge room and our mother was cooking mushrooms in the kitchen, which stank out the whole place.)

'Bloody mushrooms again,' I said as we walked out onto the street.

'Yeah,' Rube smirked. 'Just drown 'em in tomato sauce again so you can't taste 'em.'

'Bloody oath.'

What whingers.

'And there she is.' Rube smiled as we walked onto Main Street in the darkening air of June and winter. 'Doctor Thomas G. Edmunds. Bachelor of Dental Surgery. Beautiful.'

We started making a plan.

Plan-making between my brother and me consisted of me asking questions and Rube answering them. It went like this:

'Won't we need a gun or somethin'? Or a knife? That fake gun we had got lost.'

'It isn't lost. It's behind the couch.'

'Y' sure?'

'Yes. I'm sure . . . and in any case, we don't need it. All we need is the cricket bat and we'll get next-door's baseball bat, right?' He laughed, very sarcastically. 'We swing those babies a few times and they can't possibly say no.'

'OK.'

OK.

Yeah, right.

We scheduled everything for the next afternoon. We got the bats, we went over everything we had to remember, and we knew we weren't going to do it. Even Rube knew.

We went to the dentist next day anyway, and for the first time ever in one of our heists, we actually went inside.

What greeted us was a shock, because behind the counter was the most brilliant dental nurse you've ever seen. I'm serious. She was writing something with her pen and I couldn't take my eyes off her. Never mind about the baseball bat I was holding. I forgot all about it. There was no robbery. We just stood there, Rube and I.

Rube and I, and the dental nurse, in the room, together.

'Be with y' in a sec,' she said politely, without looking up. God almighty she was beautiful. Absolutely. Brilliant.

'Oi,' Rube whispered to her, really quiet. He was making sure only I could hear him. 'Oi . . . This is a holdup.'

She didn't hear.

'Stupid bloody cow.' He looked at me and shook his head. 'Y' can't even hold up a dentist any more. Sheez. What's the world comin' to?'

'Now.' She finally looked up. 'What can I do for you fellas?'

'Ah . . .' I was uneasy, but what else was I meant to say? Rube said nothing. There was silence. I had to break it. I smiled and fell apart. 'Ah, we just came to get a checkup.'

She smiled back. 'When would you like it?'

'Aah, tomorrow?'

'Four o'clock OK?'

'Yep.' I was nodding, wondering.

She looked into me. Right in. Waiting. Helpful. 'So what are your names?'

'Oh yeah,' I responded, laughing pretty stupidly. 'Cameron and Ruben Wolfe.'

She wrote it down, smiled again, and then spotted the cricket and baseball bats.

'Just been puttin' in some practice.' I lifted the baseball bat.

'In the middle of winter?'

'We can't afford a football,' Rube interrupted us.

We had a football and a soccer ball somewhere in our back yard. He pushed me towards the door. 'We'll be back tomorrow.'

She grinned her happy-I'm-here-to-help smile. She said, 'OK, bye-ee.'

I stayed a second and said, 'Bye.'

Bye.

Could I think of nothing better?

'Y' bloody spastic,' Rube told me, once we were back outside. 'Checkups,' he whined. 'The old man wants us smellin' like roses, sure enough, but he's not interested in us havin' clean teeth. He couldn't give a bloody toss about our teeth!'

'Well, who got us in there to begin with, ay? Whose great idea was it to rob the dentist? Not bloody mine, mate!'

'OK, OK.' Rube leaned against the wall. Traffic limped past us.

'And what the hell was all that whisperin' about?'

I'd decided by now that while I had him against the wall I'd go in for the kill. 'The only thing you forgot to say was *please*. Maybe she'd have heard y' then. *Oi, this is a holdup,*' I imitated him with a whisper. 'Absolutely pathetic.'

Rube snapped. 'All right! I blew it . . . Still, I didn't exactly see you swingin' that baseball bat.' This was better now for Rube, since we were back on what I did wrong as opposed to what he did. 'You didn't swing a thing, mate . . . You were too busy lookin' in Blondie's big blue eyes and starin' at her, her breasts.'

'I was *not!*'

Breasts.

Who was he kidding?

Talking like that.

'Oh yeah.' Rube kept laughing. 'I seen you, y' dirty little bastard.'

'Ah, that's lies.' But it wasn't. Walking down Main Street, I knew I was in love with the beautiful blonde dental nurse. I was already fantasizing about lying in the dentist chair with her over the top of me, on my lap, asking, 'Are y' comfortable, Cameron? Y' feeling nice?'

'Great,' I'd reply. 'Great.'

'Oi.'

'Oi!' Rube shoved me, 'Are you still listenin'?'

I turned back to him. He continued talking.

'So why don't y' tell me where the hell we're gonna get the money for these checkups, ay?' He thought about it for a minute as we started up walking again and quickened the pace for home. 'Nah, we're better off cancelling.'

'No,' I answered. 'No way Rube.'

'Dirty boy,' was his retort. 'Forget the nurse. She's prob'ly doin' it with Mister Doctor Dentist as we speak.'

'Don't you talk about her like that,' I warned him.

Rube stopped walking again.

Then he stared.

Then he said, 'You're pitiful, y' know that?'

'I know.' I could only agree. 'I guess you're right.'

'As always.'

We walked on. Again. Tail between the legs.

Oh, and by the way, we didn't cancel.

We considered asking our folks for the cash but they'd have wanted to know just why we went down there to begin with, and a discussion of that nature wasn't exactly high on our list. I myself got the money I needed by taking it out from my stash under the wrecked corner of carpet in our room.

We went back.

I tried like hell to keep my hair down. For the nurse.

We went back there the next day.

It didn't work - with the hair.

We went back there next day and there was a kind of beastly dental nurse there of about forty years of age.

'Now *there's* someone in your range,' Rube whispered at me in the waiting room. He was grinning like the dirty