

BOOK CLUB To Go!

The Reader

By Bernhard Schlink

Introduction

Michael Berg is fifteen and suffering from hepatitis. When he gets sick in the street one day on his way home from school, a woman brings him into her apartment and helps him to wash up. Later, he visits the woman to thank her and is drawn into a love affair that is as intoxicating as it is unusual--their meetings become a ritual of reading aloud (Michael reads to Hanna, at her request), taking showers, and making love. When Hanna disappears following a misunderstanding, Michael is overcome with guilt and loss.

Years later, when Michael is studying law at the university, he is part of a seminar group attending one of the many belated Nazi war crime trials. He is shocked when he recognizes Hanna in the courtroom, on trial with a group of former concentration camp guards. During the proceedings, it becomes clear that Hanna is hiding something that is--to her--more shameful than murder, something that could possibly save her from going to prison. She chooses not to reveal her secret and as a result is sentenced to life.

Married and divorced, Michael has become a scholar of legal history and suffers from a haunting emotional numbness. To help himself through nights of insomnia he begins to read his favorite books aloud into a tape recorder, and he sends the tapes to Hanna in prison. The bond between the two is continued in this unique way until Hanna's release from prison, when, in the face of Michael's ambivalence and Hanna's shame, their story reaches its anguished conclusion.

A parable of German guilt and atonement and a love story of stunning power, *The Reader* is also a work of literature that is unforgettable in its psychological complexity, its moral nuances, and its stylistic restraint.

(readinggroupguides.com)

About the Author

Bernhard Schlink was born in Grossdornberg, Germany, in 1944, to a German father and a Swiss mother. He grew up in the university town of Heidelberg, and went on himself to a university career, earning a law degree and studying in Heidelberg and Berlin. His field is constitutional law, and in that field, he is a respected professor and author. He also serves as a judge with the Constitutional Law Court in Bonn. His career testifies to the hopes he had, but time has brought its share of disillusionment: "I had a belief in justice and rationality that in fact was a secularised version of my parents' belief in God. Growing older I am losing that kind of belief."

Writing fiction came to Schlink relatively late. He became a successful writer of mystery novels. He has written *Selbs Justiz* (with Walter Popp, 1987), *Die gordische Schleife* (1988), and *Selbs Betrug* (1992). "My mysteries are not entirely orthodox insofar as they don't just tell the story of a crime, they also deal with recent German history." Two of the novels are the beginning of a trilogy that will present "Germany's post-war history in three mysteries." The third novel is being written.

The Reader was a departure. Published as *Der Vorleser* in 1995, the book quickly proved to be a European success. There was a tremendous difference in the impact Schlink was used to -- "the audience I've reached with this book is much bigger than the audience I'd reached with my mysteries." He attributes much of its success to having a focus different from the general run of German World War II fiction: "*The Reader* is one of the first books, I think, that addresses how the generation that came after deals with what the previous generation did." A United States edition appeared in 1997, and was well reviewed. The book received a tremendous boost in sales when it was made a selection of Oprah's Book Club, in February of 1999. It has now been translated into 23 languages, and Miramax Studios is preparing to turn it into a film.

(*NoveList*)

Reviews

"A formally beautiful, disturbing and finally morally devastating novel." –*Los Angeles Times*

"Moving, suggestive and ultimately hopeful. . . . [*The Reader*] leaps national boundaries and speaks straight to the heart." –*The New York Times Book Review*

"Arresting, philosophically elegant, morally complex. . . . Mr. Schlink tells his story with marvelous directness and simplicity." –*The New York Times*

"Haunting. . . . What Schlink does best, what makes this novel most memorable, are the small moments of highly charged eroticism." - Francine Prose –*Elle*

(*randomhouse.com*)

Movie Adaptation

Kate Winslet and Ralph Fiennes star in director's Stephen Daldry's haunting period drama, *The Reader*, concerning the relationship between a 15-year-old German boy and a mysterious woman twice his age, and the way that it grows doubly complex when the man reencounters the woman years later and discovers a shocking truth about her past. Based on author Bernhard Schlink's best-selling novel of the same name, the film opens on the character of Michael Berg (Ralph Fiennes) in middle age -- cold, remote, and emotionally withdrawn. It then moves back in time to 1950s Berlin, where ailing teenager Michael (now played by David Kross) has fallen ill with fever, and is discovered in the street by Hanna, a woman in her thirties. After Michael recovers, the two immediately lapse into a torrid affair and Michael falls prey to the confusion of his own burgeoning sexuality. Their liaisons are often marked by Hanna's request that Michael read to her (hence the title). Later, when Michael returns to Hanna's flat and finds it deserted, her absence becomes an emotional blow for which he is completely unprepared, and indeed, scarred for life. The film then moves forward in time by eight years. Michael -- now a law student -- walks into a courtroom and comes across Hanna, one of a series of Nazi prison guards being tried for murderous war crimes during World War II. As he watches her on the witness stand, memories of their past experiences together bring him to the point of realization concerning a startling, long-buried truth about Hanna -- and Michael knows that if he divulges this information, it could modify the prison sentence handed out and dramatically alter her fate. –Jason Buchanan - *All Movie Guide*

(*moviefone.com*)

Movie Reviews

The Reader is a bold and provocative film and one of the most exquisite of 2008. – Michael Granberry-*Dallas Morning News*

As undeniably tasteful as *The Reader* is, it's also an absorbing and finally moving account of how one man comes to terms with both history and his story. –Ann Hornaday -- *Washington Post*

I believe the movie may be demonstrating a fact of human nature: Most people, most of the time, all over the world, choose to go along. We vote with the tribe. –Roger Ebert – *Chicago Sun-Times*

(rottentomatoes.com)

Further Reading

Sister by A. Manette Ansay

Sophie's Choice by William Styron

The Kommandant's Mistress by Sherri Szeman

Schindler's List by Thomas Keneally

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the difference in social class between Hanna and Michael, and how it becomes manifest throughout the novel?
2. Why is the sense of smell so important in this story? What is it about Hanna that so strongly provokes the boy's desire?
3. In a novel so suffused with guilt, how is Michael guilty? Does his narrative serve as a way of putting himself on trial? What verdict does he reach? Is he asking readers to examine the evidence he presents and to condemn him or exonerate him? Or has he already condemned himself?
4. Is Michael's father deserving of his son's scorn and disappointment? Is Michael's love for Hanna meant, in part, to be an allegory for his generation's implication in their parents' guilt?
5. Why does Michael visit the concentration camp at Struthof? What is he seeking? What does he find instead?
6. What do you think of Michael's decision to send Hanna the tapes?
7. One might argue that Hanna didn't willfully collaborate with Hitler's genocide and that her decisions were driven only by a desire to hide her secret. Does this view exonerate Hanna in any way? Are there any mitigating circumstances in her case?
8. Why does Hanna do what she does at the end of the novel?
9. How does this novel leave you feeling and thinking? Is it hopeful or ultimately despairing? If you have read other Holocaust literature, how does *The Reader* compare?
10. At what point does the significance of the book's title become clear to you? Who is "The Reader"? Are there others in the story with an equally compelling claim to this role?

(readinggroupchoices.com and readinggroupguides.com)