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by authors - Schlink, Bernhard - Goethe-Institut

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Bernhard Schlink: The Reader



Bernhard Schlink's semi-autobiographical novel is a poignant meditation on love, loss, guilt, human frailty and making peace with the past. Set in the late 1950s, *The Reader* follows the affair between 15-year-old Michael and Hanna, a woman more than twice his age. As he blindly enters into this union Michael inadvertently enters a world of secrets, lies and age-old wounds that will bind these two strange bedfellows together for the rest of their lives.

Schlink uses the relationship between his two central characters to explore German guilt and the legacy and shared responsibility passed from one generation to the next. '...the pain I went through because of my love for Hanna was, in a way, the fate of my generation, a German fate.'

Divided into three parts, the book begins with the blossoming of the troubled, but tender, relationship between Michael and Hanna, which is unexpectedly cut short by her sudden departure. Part 2 sees the couple reunited in less than ideal circumstances, as Hanna stands trial for her role in Nazi war crimes. In Part 3, with the benefit of time and distance, Michael begins his one-sided correspondence with Hanna while she serves out her prison sentence until he learns that she will soon be released.

Michael's attempts to remember the good times he shared with Hanna are initially eclipsed by the dark truths he discovered about her past during the trial. He struggles to reconcile the conflicting images of the Hanna he loved, a strong, feminine figure who smells of soap and sweat, with his post-trial images of her as a 'cruel and impervious' SS guard capable of murder.

With Hanna's fall from grace and Michael's loss of innocence Schlink captures Germany's downfall after the Second World War. Once a figure of national pride, the motherland became shrouded in guilt and shame after the war ended and the horrors of the Holocaust were exposed. Just as Hanna's acts changed the way Michael saw her, so too Germany's war crimes had a lasting effect on how it was perceived by subsequent generations and the world at large.

As our narrator, Michael freely shares his doubts about his former lover and his country, and is also frank and fearless when it comes to examining his own shortcomings. In stark contrast, Hanna is like a closed book that we can only briefly flick through without ever gleaning the full story. She happily shares her body with her young lover, but in every other respect she keeps him, and by extension the reader, at arms length. 'We did not have a world that we shared; she gave me the space in her life that she wanted me to have.'

Despite her distant and often erratic behaviour, Michael contents himself with the simple pleasures they share, such as reading to her, bathing with her and making love with her.

Although it is Hanna who insists on this emotional distance, Michael is the one who is crippled by guilt when she leaves. He is convinced that the mental distance he started putting between himself and Hanna, as his social circle expanded is a form of betrayal that drove her away.

Seven years later their paths cross again when Michael's study group sits in on the trial where Hanna is one of several former SS guards who is implicated in the murders of hundreds of Jewish prisoners. As Hanna's guilt is called into question Michael stands in judgement of her, not only as someone born in the generation after the war, but also as a jilted lover. 'I realised that I had assumed it was both natural and right that Hanna should be in custody. Not because of the charges...but because in a cell she was out of my world, out of my life.'

Michael's harsh view of Hanna is tempered when he realises that she is hiding another secret, her illiteracy, which she is willing to protect at any cost, even if it means serving a life sentence.

Hanna's illiteracy offers explanations for a lot of unanswered questions about her unpredictable behaviour during their affair, why she insisted he read to her and why she left so suddenly. More importantly, it offers a logical explanation about why she entered the SS, why she singled certain girls out as 'favourites' and why she is willing to admit that she wrote the report that implicates her as the ringleader in the church fire that killed hundreds of Jewish women.

With his realisation Hanna is partially vindicated but Michael becomes implicated. Now he must decide whether to betray Hanna by exposing her secret to the judge, which would undoubtedly shorten her sentence, or whether to stand idly by as she is handed a life's sentence. 'I had neither sought nor chosen this new role, but it was mine whether I wanted it or not, whether I did anything or remained completely passive.'

The dilemma that Schlink's central character faces again mirrors the fate of many German people who had to choose between self-preservation and active intervention during the Nazi era. Even though Michael has stood in judgement of those who acted in the name of self-preservation he too eventually acts in his own self-interest and decides to stay silent. 'Could I deprive her of a lifelong lie without opening some vision of a future to her?'

The novel doesn't allow its readers to become complacent either. In the passage where Hanna is confused by the judge's line of questioning she innocently asks '...so what would you have done?' This question is also aimed at the reader and is a clever way of inviting us to stand in the shoes of the accused and see that she sincerely believed she was simply doing her job.

Through Michael, Schlink, who is himself a child of the second generation, begins a soul searching examination of the sins of the father that is frank and refreshing, and filled with conflict and complexity. 'I wanted simultaneously to understand Hanna's crime and condemn it...when I tried to understand it I had the feeling I was failing to condemn it as it must be condemned. When I condemned it as it must be condemned, there was no room for understanding...failing to understand meant betraying her all over again.'

After the breakdown of his marriage and subsequent relationships, Michael revisits his relationship with Hanna, this time at a safe distance. As she serves out her sentence he starts reading to her on cassette, which motivates her to learn to read and write. When he learns of Hanna's imminent release Michael is forced to face her again as an old woman and face the painful aspects of the past he has tried so hard to distance himself from. After their final encounter many questions remain unanswered but Michael is finally able to begin making peace with the past.

It is easy to see why this compassionate and deeply moving, multi-layered book became a bestseller and the subject of an equally successful film. Masterfully written, the novel examines the events of the Jewish Holocaust frankly and from every angle, showing that it is only through understanding and forgiveness on all sides that Germany can reconcile the past and embrace a new future.

The Book

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