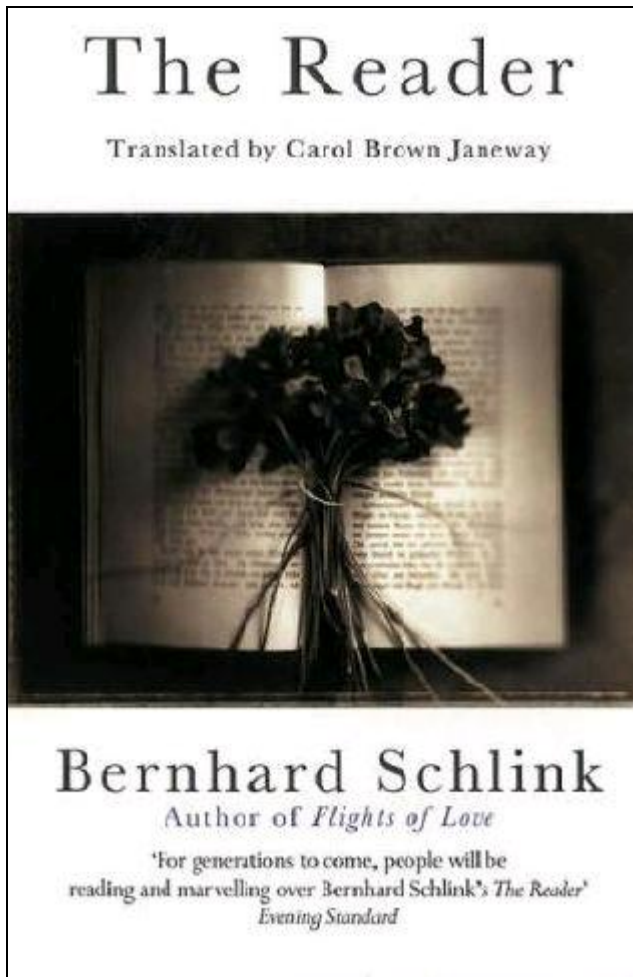


## Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1345747>

### About the Book



Hailed for its coiled eroticism and the moral claims it makes upon the reader, this mesmerizing novel is a story of love and secrets, horror and compassion, unfolding against the haunted landscape of postwar Germany.

When he falls ill on his way home from school, fifteen-year-old Michael Berg is rescued by Hanna, a woman twice his age. In time she becomes his lover—then she inexplicably disappears. When Michael next sees her, he is a young law student, and she is on trial for a hideous crime. As he watches her refuse to defend her innocence, Michael gradually realizes that Hanna may be guarding a secret she considers more shameful than murder.

## About the Author *Source: NoveList*



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 produced it as an Oscar-winning film in 2008.

### Awards

*The Reader* won the Hans Fallada Prize.

### Reviews

*Library Journal*

After falling ill on the street in the German town where he lives, 15-year-old

Michael is helped by a woman named Hanna. When he returns to her apartment to thank her several months later, he begins a passionate love affair with her. In time, she demands that he read aloud to her before they make love, and they essay some of Germany's and the world's great literature together. One day, however, Hanna disappears without saying farewell, and Michael grieves and believes it to be his fault. He finds her again years later when, as a law student, he encounters her as the defendant in a court case. To reveal more of the plot would be unfair, but this very readable novel by German author Schlink probes the nature of love, guilt, and responsibility while painting a sympathetic portrait of Michael and an aching complex picture of Hanna.

### *Kirkus Reviews*

A compact portrayal of a teenaged German boy's love affair with an emotionally remote older woman, and the troubled consequence of his discovery of who she really is and why she simultaneously needed him and rejected him. Seven years after their intimacy, university student Michael Berg accidentally learns that (now) 40ish Hannah Schmitz had concealed from him a past that reaches back to Auschwitz and had burdened her with nightmares from which her young lover was powerless to awaken her. Toward its climax, the novel becomes, fitfully, frustratingly abstract, but on balance this is a gripping psychological study that moves skillfully toward its surprising and moving conclusion.

### **Literary Criticism**

#### *Finding Room for Understanding*

At first this seems a simple, intriguing little tale. But be warned. It does to you what history does to its characters: before you know where you are, you are faced with the most extreme, unanswerable questions, which you have to decide.

At 15 the narrator, a boy living in a postwar German town, falls in love with a 36-year-old woman. Their meetings are always the same: they shower, he reads to her, they make love. Hanna is strange and secretive and, when they quarrel, cruel. Michael has to surrender and beg her forgiveness or she will send him away. And yet she seems to need his love and approval as much as he needs hers. Finally, as a result, it seems, of his abandoning her for his friends one afternoon, she disappears. He does not see her again until many years later, when he has become a law student. One day he attends a trial concerning the concentration camps, and she is one of the defendants.

Here the book shuts like a trap and you can't escape, however much you long to. The split between Michael's memories of love and what he is now forced to know makes horribly vivid the torment of the 'second generation' of Germans, the children of those who were, or served, or just accommodated, the Nazis. And by the time he writes down his story nearly 30 years later, he has thought so long

and hard about German guilt that *The Reader* distils its questions, its answers, and its pure pain more simply and disturbingly than anything I've ever read.

Michael himself asks one key question. He notices how everyone in the court, including himself, begins the trial in shock and disbelief, but after a few weeks becomes numb and used to it. And he notices how all the survivors' accounts, and the rare accounts by perpetrators too, talk about this numbness, 'in which gassing and burning are everyday occurrences'. Something similar happens to perpetrators and victims, the dead and the living. But 'can one see them all as linked in this way?' No, he answers; the person who endures suffering and the person who imposes it are incommensurable. But the question has been raised.

One answer is given by a man he meets on the way to see the remains of a concentration camp with his own eyes. 'You want to understand why people can do such terrible things?' the man asks mockingly, even though there was no war, no reason for hatred. 'But executioners don't hate the people they execute, and they execute them all the same.' And not because they are under orders, but simply because it is their job. After this exchange, Michael feels a great emptiness, as if he had been searching for something 'not outside, but within myself, and had discovered there was nothing to be found'.

These questions and answers are painful not only to him but to us, because they are put so well; because Hanna and her generation, like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, are allowed to have, if not the best, at least the best possible lines. We have seen Hanna as a human being--not a good one, but a real one. She herself asks another key question of the judge at her trial: 'What would you have done?' And during the trial Michael shows her as victimised in her turn, honest and dignified. When he puts together his past love and present knowledge he understands something about Hanna that no one else does. It does not make her not guilty; but it makes her less guilty than both the court and the other defendants want to believe. Now Michael himself must decide what to do, whether or not to reveal Hanna's secret. Now it's his turn to find himself with a huge, unchosen moral responsibility which he cannot escape, even--especially--if he does nothing at all.

By putting the dilemma so lucidly, and by recreating it for Michael and for us, *The Reader* brings the question of guilt as close to us as to the Germans. Should we resist? Is *The Reader* revisionist? Is its portrait of Hanna loaded? Is it fair to give her that secret, which explains, if it does not excuse her, when most perpetrators did not have it? Or is there perhaps a suggestion that they did, that each had his or her own weakness which left them unarmed against the system? Every reader will have a different answer. Mine is that *The Reader* is not revisionist, because it is too profound; that it is more destructive of our ability to point the finger away from ourselves than any merely revisionist work could ever be.

In the end its main conclusion, for me, is not about Germans in the past, but about us now. It is a heartbreaking conclusion for everyone who tries to emulate

Primo Levi's great aim: not to hate but to understand. Michael comes to it after his second visit to the site of KZ Struthof-Natzweiler:

I wanted simultaneously to understand Hanna's crime and to condemn it. But it was too terrible for that. 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.

Source: Angier, Carole. "Finding Room for Understanding." *Spectator* 279.8830 (25 Oct. 1997): 54-55. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Janet Witalec. Vol. 174. Detroit: Gale, 2003. Literature Resource Center.  
<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

### Discussion Questions

1. When did you understand the significance of the title?
2. Do you think *The Reader* is a love story? How would you describe Michael and Hanna's relationship?
3. Did you sympathize with Hanna?
4. Do you agree with Michael that Hanna was sympathetic with the prisoners she chose to read to her, and that she chose them so that their final month of life would be better?
5. When the judge confronts Hanna about not unlocking the church, she does not seem to understand what she did wrong. She is completely consumed with her responsibility to keep order. Was this shocking to you? What is lacking in her moral sense?
6. Do you think there is a connection between literacy and morality? Do you think Schlink is suggesting such a connection?
7. Michael feels guilt over a variety of things. In what ways, if any, is Michael guilty? Does loving someone who has committed such a horrible crime implicate him?
8. What did you think of Michael's decision to send Hanna the tapes?
9. Why do you think Hanna killed herself? Do you think she ever came to terms with her guilt as a Nazi? What about her guilt toward Michael?
10. Schlink has been criticized for *The Reader*. Some say it is wrong of him to try to get people to sympathize with Hanna. Others say he is trying to downplay the culpability of the educated class. Still others think he is blaming Hanna's guilt on

illiteracy rather than holding her accountable. Do you agree with any of these criticisms?

11. Rate *The Reader* on a scale of 1 to 5. Why did you rate it this way?

## Multimedia

### ***For 'The Reader,' Guilt Travels From Page to Screen (Radio Broadcast)***

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98883419>

An NPR discussion of the film adaptation of Schlink's novel.

### ***The Reader (Movie)***

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1333743>

(Call number: DVD Drama Reader)

Post-WWII, Germany. Michael Berg is a teenager who becomes ill and is helped home by Hanna, a stranger twice his age. Michael recovers from scarlet fever and seeks out Hanna to thank her. The two are quickly drawn into a passionate but secretive affair. Michael discovers that Hanna loves being read to and their physical relationship deepens. Hanna is enthralled as Michael reads to her from different works of literature. Despite their intense bond, Hanna mysteriously disappears one day and Michael is left confused and heartbroken. Eight years later, while Michael is a law student observing the Nazi war crime trials, he is stunned to find Hanna back in his life, only this time as a defendant in the courtroom. As Hanna's past is revealed, Michael uncovers a deep secret that will impact both of their lives.

## Further Reading

### ***Life behind barbed wire: the secret World War II photographs of prisoner of war*** by Angelo M. Spinelli

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1224714>

(Call number: 940.547 Sp)

Photographs from Nazi prison encampments.

### **Read-Alikes** *Source: NoveList*

#### ***Sister*** by Manette Ansay

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1111038>

(Call number: Fiction Ansay)

A very different novel in which the death of a group of women locked into a burning building reverberates well beyond the time of its occurrence.

#### ***Sophie's Choice*** by William Styron

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1064951>

(Call number: Fiction Styron)

A painful novel in which the experience and the memory of Polish concentration camps has its powerful impact on the characters' search for love.

***The Kommandant's Mistress*** by Sherri Szeman

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1081335>

(Call number: Fiction Szeman)

A young Jewish inmate of a concentration camp, whose survival involves becoming the mistress of the camp commander. The juxtaposition of domesticity and atrocity is riveting.

***Schindler's List*** by Thomas Keneally

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1081335>

(Call number: Fiction Keneally)

The story of a man who does not allow himself to be pushed into facilitating the Holocaust. At the same time inspiring and intensely painful.

***All Quiet on the Western Front*** by Erich Maria Remarque

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1056233>

(Call number: Fiction Remarque)

This novel served as Remarque's attempt to confront and ultimately rid himself of the graphic and haunting memories of his time serving in World War I. A novel with autobiographical overtones, "*All Quiet on the Western Front*" traces the evolution of one man's powerful antiwar sentiments.

### **Extras!**

If anyone in the group is interested in promoting literacy, consider volunteering for Washtenaw Literacy: <http://washtenawliteracy.org/>



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