



## **The Reader**

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Societal trauma leading to collective responsibility, half truths, emotional stagnation, and moral complexity – these are the themes explored in the novel and film, *The Reader*. In a striking way it mirrors questions and challenges in my life, in all adult lives. How are we to know what to do in all circumstances? How do we know how to positively act in the remaining grey? If you have not reached this point, you will. Whether in your personal, professional life, probably in both, all of us are challenged with deeply conflicting interests, wounds, loves, values, morals, control (or lack thereof), weaknesses, and needs. These are the challenges and lessons presented in *The Reader*. The space they occupy, without resolution, is holy ground, because though painful, deeper understanding creates growth and transformation.

*The Reader* was first published in German in 1995, by Bernhard Schlink. Schlink, born in 1944 as WWII came to a climactic close. He is a writer, professor of law, and judge. The situation and themes explored must be deeply personal for Schlink, a first generation post WWII German, struggling with the legacy of his parents, elders, country, leaders, culture, and identity.

Here is the spoiler alert. I am about to talk about all facets of the book and film. The book/film begins in a German village in the late 1950's. The main character, a fifteen year old boy, named Michael Berg has, unbeknownst to him, hepatitis. He becomes increasingly ill, and one day, violently ill while on his way home from school. A brusque woman appears and helps him home. Five months later, after he is recovered, Michael

returns to find his helper. He does this at his mother's suggestion (this is in the book not the film), so that he may thank her.

Michael finds the woman and learns her name is Frau Schmitz. She is in her late thirties, strong, controlling, silent, and direct. She refers to Michael as "Hey kid" or just "kid." At this meeting Michael becomes attracted to Frau Schmitz. He flees, then returns a week later. This time he fetches her coal, becomes coated with dust and she insists on drawing him a bath. As he gets out of the bath their sexual affair begins, lasting for a summer. When Hanna learns that Michael is a student who reads, she asks him to read her everything and anything and listens for hours.

The beginning of their affair is bizarrely natural. Natural because it involves sexual attraction. Bizarre, because Hanna is an adult and Michael is a boy. We would say this is illegal, immoral, and unethical. The adult, Hanna, has the power, by her age, and is/was responsible for retaining appropriate boundaries. Michael is sexually attracted to Hanna from their second meeting. As a young man he is primed to enter a passionate, obsessive affair, which he does.

Yet, there is more to it. Schlink refuses to write a world of black and white. Hanna does not know Michael's age. When she asks him his age weeks later, she assumes he is in college. He lies and he tells her that he is 17 and in high school (this is in the book, not the film). Obviously, Hanna could and should pry more – one of her sins seems to be willful ignorance, or just plain ignorance (this question is regularly uplifted and never resolved). If 17, why is he in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, etc.? But she does not. Their affair continues. Their relationship begins on morally complex and ambiguous ground. Who knows what? Who tells what? Who conceals what? Who is responsible for what? These questions repeat throughout the novel in shades of grey (cinematographically the film is grey), and the affair sets up the rest of the book.

Hanna abruptly disappears at the end of the summer and Michael is devastated. In the book Michael notes that she is upset and agitated for weeks before she leaves though he does not know why. Michael learns Hanna was up for promotion at her job, to become a conductor, and just disappeared. The end of their relationship. Sort of. Michael goes to college, becomes remote, a distant intellectual man who does not connect well with his classmates. As the book/film progresses we learn that he has trouble sustaining intimate relationships with women. He is distant, afraid to become vulnerable to anyone else after the pain he suffered when Hanna disappears. Periodically he thinks of Hanna. Their relationship is not over. Shades of grey.

Eight years after Hanna disappears, Michael, now in law school, takes a concentration camp seminar. His class attends a lengthy trial of several female S.S. guards accused of letting several hundred Jewish prisoners burn to death in a church that catches fire during a bombing raid. In horror Michael sees that Hanna is one of the accused.

There is no question that Hanna was an S. S. guard, much to Michael's dismay. What is at question is her level or responsibility for the fiery death of so many Jewish women and children. One Jewish survivor testifies that Hanna had "favorite" children she selected to read to her in the evening. Michael is horrified. Is he just another victim or her thoughtless, cruel humanity?

Hanna is the only former guard who admits responsibility. The others deny their role. Hanna's admissions are haunting. Yes, they had to return 60 women and girls a month to the ovens of Auschwitz. Yes, she selected her ten and the guards selected their ten. Yes, she refused a promotion to be a foreman at a plant and instead became an S. S. guard. And after vehemently denying that she wrote the statement of events that horrible fiery evening, when asked for a writing sample, she admits that she wrote it and is responsible. Ultimately Hanna receives life in prison while the other guards receive short prison terms.

In the meantime there are parades of grey. Michael describes this as a numbness that settles over everyone, particularly the judges and lay observers. Michael reflects

It was like being a prisoner in the death camps who survives month after month and becomes accustomed to the life, while he registers with an objective eye the horror of the new arrivals: registers it with the same numbness that he brings to the murders and deaths themselves. All survivor literature talks about this numbness, in which life's functions are reduced to a minimum, behavior becomes completely selfish and indifferent to others . . . In the rare account of perpetrators, too, the gas chambers and ovens become ordinary scenery, the perpetrators reduced to their few functions and exhibiting a mental paralysis and indifference . . . The defendants seemed to me to be trapped still, and forever, in this drugged state, in a sense petrified by it. Even then, when I was preoccupied by this general numbness, and by the fact that it had taken hold not only of the perpetrators and victims, but of all of us, judges and lay members of the court, prosecutors and recorders, who had to deal with these events now; when I likened perpetrators, victims, the dead, the living,

survivors, and their descendants to each other, I didn't feel good about it and I still don't . . . <sup>1</sup>

Schlink goes on to have Michael explain that there was/is an enormous difference between being a victim or a perpetrator, of being forced into the camps or choosing to work there. What Schlink explores through Michael, are the after-effects a generation after the Holocaust. What is the eventual shared human experience of surviving societal cruelty and tragedy? According to Schlink, everyone is tainted, everyone is harmed. Not just the victims and perpetrators. There is the sense of collective responsibility for people who were there and did nothing, maybe because they were or felt powerless. For example, the villagers who testify about the fire and, at the time, did nothing to help women trapped inside. Descendants are even harmed. There are children born into this societal betrayal (whether Jewish, German, or other), who love their parents (remember the opening reading) and feel shame about their past complicity or fear about human cruelty, or a mixture of both.

Hanna was a low level S. S. guard – the commandant and other superiors had fled and left these women in charge. Had anyone found them or held them responsible. Were/are those with greater responsibility living among us in peace? In a naked moment of pain (for everyone) Hanna asks the presiding judge what she should have done, what he would have done at a certain moment, and he pauses, I think because he does not know what he would have done if in the same situation.

I read one reviewer who insists that the judge pauses because he is horrified that Hanna does not understand her wrongdoing. I think he pauses because he finds himself on shockingly ambiguous moral ground. Humans, all humans are capable of this Holocaust. The German government of the time legally carried out the Holocaust. Everyone who attends the court on a daily basis, even if not alive at the time, begins to experience post traumatic stress, shared silence, complicity, confusion, suffering and shame. This parallels the legacy of slavery in America. One hundred and fifty years after slavery we still struggle with the after-effects of. There is an emotional societal toll after mass human betrayal, that even law cannot solve or penetrate.

The secret of *The Reader*, finally realized by Michael, is that Hanna is illiterate. He understands only after she refuses to take a writing test and admits to being the guard who wrote the account of the events of the fire.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader* (1995) 102-103.

Michael knows she is lying, and then understands why, because she is so deeply ashamed of being illiterate. Then a host of other things fall into place for him. She disappeared eight years earlier because she could not accept a promotion as train conductor because she could not read signs. She left the factory and refused a job as a foreman because she could not read. Instead she became an S. S. guard, possibly not entirely knowing what she was getting into. She wanted children to read to her because she could not read to herself. Although she was present, she could not have been the guard who wrote the account of the events, because she can not write.

Now Michael finds himself with inherited, collective responsibility (beyond just loving a criminal which he also feels). He knows something, the truth, which the court, in its adversarial make-up of prosecution and defense, did not seem that interested in finding. Should he tell someone or respect Hanna's silence? He goes to a series of "elders" for advice, and one by one, they fail him, as the WWII generation of German adults would eventually burden and "fail" their children with their complicity in the Holocaust. His professor and the judge are no help. He loses courage. The most painful, though, is his own father, a professor of philosophy. His father readily admits to "forgetting" his own son for philosophy though he counsils his own son to talk to Hanna (though Michael presents the case in the abstract so his father does not know about Hanna).

Here, we as readers, finally learn another piece, that Michael's father has been distant and absent from his son. Did no one notice his affair as a teenager? Did Michael run towards an affair because his house was so void of intimacy and connection? Did this childhood void teach him to distrust intimacy and connection, make him vulnerable to Hanna's strange moods and silence. Did it set him up to mistake physical intimacy for emotional intimacy? Emotional intimacy and truth telling are notably and intentionally absent in this book. Without emotional intimacy we will not risk telling secrets, our shame, the truth as we know it. Societal trauma stunts emotional intimacy, makes it too risky, numbs us into mental paralysis and potentially damages all of us for generations. Is this part of the trauma Michael's parents carried forward as civilian survivors?

It is easy to blame Hanna for Michael's distance, but I think it began before he met her. Why didn't his parents take him to the doctor when he was so obviously ill? It was like they did not see him until a stranger had to bring him home. Now obviously, parents are not in control of their teenagers. Shades of grey. Perhaps Michael's parents were ashamed and damaged as civilian survivors that they also lived mental paralysis and

indifference, even in their own home. So the legacy of shame, suffering, and silence continues in the next generation.

One of the legal questions Michael discusses with his classmates in the seminar is whether or not the guards should be held responsible for doing something that while morally unacceptable was legal, if not expected, at the time. This was one of the deepest moral blows for me. We think of the law and court as presiding over truth and order. But do they really? I recently asked a lawyer if he thinks the law is interested in justice. He paused and replied “That’s an interesting question.” Think about that. I then asked if he thought the law was interested in the truth. He replied “That is another interesting question.” Think about that.

Bernhard Schlink is a presiding judge and law professor. The legal and moral questions, raised by the book, are not accidental. While noting the importance of justice and attempts at reconciliation, he is painfully clear about the limitations of both. At the end of the book Michael, when deciding which path of law to follow considers, “Prosecution seemed to me as grotesque a simplification as defense, and judging was the most grotesque oversimplification of all.”<sup>2</sup> Oversimplifications do not lead to truth. They do not lead to emotional intimacy. They do not lead to healing or reconciliation, understanding or safety.

As I read *The Reader*, I saw Hanna as a metaphor for Germany. She is young, Aryan looking, strong, direct, obedient, hides her fear under pride, uneducated (Germany was profoundly poor and demoralized after WWI which was one of the reasons they responded positively to the seedy messages of Adolph Hitler), and her ignorance isolates her. In a positive and healthy environment Hanna would be benign. She might even confess she could not read and get help instead of living a hard, second class life of shame. In a weak and desperate environment Hanna becomes numb, selfish, and indifferent and this leads to murder. Hanna also “seduces” a young Michael, like parents seduced their children into silence, shame, and collective guilt through love.

Hanna is emotionally stunted, avoiding emotional intimacy, like Michael’s father, an educated man. Schlink’s book is a story of the long term horrors of war, trauma, violence, and murder on all of society. Michael reflects on Hanna’s secret “What did she gain from this false self image which ensnared her and crippled her and paralyzed her? With the energy she put into maintaining the lie, she could have learned to read and write long

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<sup>2</sup> 179.

ago.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the second greatest loss after human trauma (the first being life) is emotional trust and intimacy. In many ways Hanna, Michael, his father, the classmates, perpetrators, victims, lawyers, are all lost together. Which is why Michael eventually goes to visit the Holocaust survivor who testified at Hanna’s trial.

Hanna serves two decades in prison. At one point, still thinking about her Michael sends her tapes of books. We are shocked to realize that Michael still loves Hanna even after the trial and feels guilty about it. As a reader I too liked Hanna and felt ambivalent about that, uncertain. I did not, like Michael, want my like of her to be acceptance of what she did. I struggled like post war Germans.

With endless time on her hands Hanna begins to figure out letters and in a moment of triumph, finally teaches herself to read. How happy and sad we are for her and everything lost. Towards the end she reads Holocaust literature and knows the fullness of her crime. Without Michael’s love and loyalty she would not reach this point. She and Michael meet a week before she is to be released. He does not want to see her. She does not apologize, still refers to him “kid.” In their odd silence they are deeply connected. The day before she is to be released she commits suicide. Perhaps it was too hard for her to re-enter the fray, perhaps she felt too guilty – it is hard to know. Hanna does not explain her actions.

Her last wishes include giving her money the Holocaust survivor who testified at her trial. I read one reviewer who was horrified that Michael goes to the survivor with Hanna’s money. I was not. Survivors have the power to choose – too meet or not. This survivor chooses to accept the meeting. This was the first baby steps towards an honest exchange and it is excruciating. How else would it be to recover from mass human betrayal? The survivor is the only person in the entire book, among the many who suspect and/or ask, whom Michael tells the truth about their affair. This truth is a beginning for Michael. Not the half truth. The whole truth. Michael releases his secret at least once (much like when Hanna finally shares her illiteracy with the warden so she can learn how to write).

Healing did not happen in court (the survivor and her mother watched three hundred women burn to death – that can not be changed). Justice did not happen in court (Others with more authority are never tried or receive lighter sentences). Truth did not come in court (Hanna bears much of the blame for the other female guards and no one knows of her relationship with Michael). Instead, healing, justice, and truth come forward in the riskiest of

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<sup>3</sup> 138.

emotional intimacy - a conversation between a survivor and the lover of a perpetrator. The survivor will not accept Hanna's money because she does not want to give absolution. Painful and understandable. She accepts Michael's decision to donate the money to a Jewish charity that promotes literacy. The survivor also keeps the tin the money came in, so similar to one she lost when she was forcibly taken to a camp. There is no absolution, but there is an exchange. Does it fix everything, no. Does it heal everything, no. Does it create justice, no. Does it change the past, no. Is the truth told, yes. Does it change the future, maybe. This small movement is as good as it can get.

There are no simple answers to *The Reader*. There is the pain of societal human betrayal that ripples and spreads beyond victims and perpetrators to even those not yet born. And the wreckage stunts emotional intimacy and vulnerability so that truths are not told, connections are missed, and healing is impossible. If anything is learned, it is to slowly collect and reveal truths without a rush to judgment. The final lesson is that a world without emotional intimacy is unbearable. Emotional intimacy enables truth telling and must be preserved, if at all possible. The way back without emotional intimacy is long, hard, and darker even than the confusing grey.