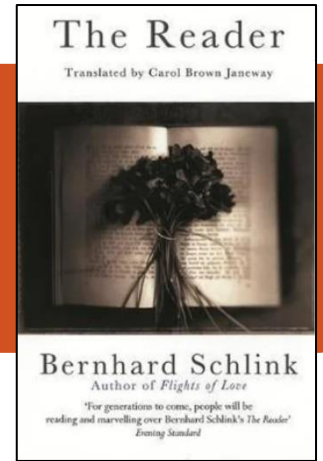




The Reader

Bernhard Schlink



Author Background

Born in Germany in 1944, Bernhard Schlink is a lawyer, academic, and novelist. He studied law at West Berlin's Free University, graduating in 1968. He became a judge in 1988 and in 1992 a professor for public law and the philosophy of law at Humboldt University in Berlin. He retired in 2006.

In 1995, Bernhard published *The Reader*, which became a best-seller around the world, translated into 39 languages. It won many prestigious national and international awards.

In subsequent years Bernhard published several more books, including *Flights of Love*, *Homecoming*, *The Woman on the Stairs*, and most recently in 2020, *Olga*.

In 2008 *The Reader* was made into a film starring Kate Winslet, David Kross and Ralph Fiennes. Kate Winslet won Best Actress at the Academy Awards and BAFTA Awards, and Best Supporting Actress at the Golden Globe Awards and Screen Actors Guild Awards for her role as Hanna Schmitz.

Book Summary

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, Hanna, brings him into her apartment and helps him to wash up. Later, he visits Hanna 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, taking showers, and making love. Hanna is the first woman Michael has ever desired. But there is something slightly off-key about her. When Hanna disappears following a misunderstanding, Michael is overcome with guilt and loss.

Many years later Michael's past erupts into the present – both Michael's past with Hanna, and the past of Germany itself.

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.

Discussion Questions

- ❖ 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?
- ❖ When does the difference in social class between Hanna and Michael become most clear and painful?
- ❖ What is it about Hanna that so strongly provokes the boy's desire? If Hanna represents "an invitation to forget the world in the recesses of the body" [p. 16], why is she the only woman Michael seems able to love?
- ❖ 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?
- ❖ Is the book's central theme - love and betrayal between generations - particular to Germany, given the uniqueness of German history?
- ❖ Once you discover Hanna's past, if you could put yourself in her shoes, what do you think you would have done?
- ❖ How does this novel leave you feeling and thinking? Is it hopeful or ultimately despairing?

References

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