

READING GUIDE FOR SCHLINK: *THE READER*

I chose this novel (it is a work of fiction, although it does have autobiographical elements) as a reading for this course because it powerfully evokes how caught up in the guilt of the Nazi era "the generation that came after" is. Children born after the mid-1930s were under 10 at the end of the war (Schlink himself was born in 1944), and thus can hardly have been aware of any of the crimes the generations of their parents and grandparents knew about and committed. The question is: Can the "children" incur guilt anyway?

This novel uses a love story to show how childish innocence, under the influence of parents and other role models who were shaped by Nazism, can turn into responsibility and guilt. The novel uses human relationships to develop this theme on a personal level. In a 1997 interview Schlink said about the Nazi past:

"It's been one of the big subjects for my generation. For many families it's a personal issue, because it pits fathers against their children. One of my favorite teachers, the one who taught me English, taught me to love the English language, also taught us gymnastics and we could see his SS tattoo. One way or the other, we all had to confront it not as a theoretical abstract, but as a very real and personal problem. ... *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." (<http://www.beatrice.com/interviews/schlink/>).

Please read through the questions below, and while you read the novel jot down some notes and thoughts about them. By the way, a collection of seven of Schlink's short stories, titled *Flights of Love*, was published in English in 2002. They pursue this theme further in other contexts.

1. Hanna's secret is a crucial element for plot development in *The Reader*. Note the situations in which it determines the course of her life.
2. Not only the ability to read, but also what one reads is important. What kinds of things does Hanna have read to her? Late in the novel (p. 185) Michael realizes that the novels he chose to read on tape are classics of bourgeois culture, and his own writing. Throughout the book, what evidence is there that great literature does (or does not) affect one's values or behavior? Did the readings affect Hanna's life? Michael's? Michael's father's? If literature is a metaphor for German culture ("the land of poets and thinkers"), what does Schlink imply about its ability to shape people's perceptions and values, or to influence the choices they make?
3. The exploitative love relationship between Hanna and Michael is another central element in the plot. If we take it as a metaphor for how the guilt of the "parents" (postwar role models who did who-knows-what under Nazism) corrupts the generation of the children, in what way(s) does it deform the "children" (read: Michael) and then boomerang back on the "parents" (read: Hanna)? At what point do the "children" (does Michael) incur guilt for not helping the "parents" deal with their guilt?
4. How did Michael's father behave during the Nazi era? What Nazi-era group might he stand for? What does he advise Michael to do at Hanna's trial? Can we read that advice as a metaphor for that group's postwar behavior? What does Michael do with his father's advice? Why?
5. What Nazi-era group does Hanna represent? Make two lists: one of evidence that Hanna felt compassion for the prisoners she selected, the other of evidence that she was sadistic. Can we know for sure which it was?
6. At two points Hanna asks the judge what he would have done in her situation. What were those situations? What options were open to her? What do you think the judge would have done? You? Do you think Hanna's choice was typically German? Why or why not? What would Michael have done? Does it change anything to know that in real life, author Bernhard Schlink is a judge?
7. The concentration camp survivor at the end has a condemnatory assessment of Hanna. Do you think she is right? Does Michael? Why didn't he ever think of that? What is the symbolism of the tin, the money, and teaching Jews to read?
8. Was Hanna a victim? Of whom? Was Michael a victim? Of whom? Can there be victims with no perpetrators? Can people victimize themselves? Can someone be guilty without committing a crime?