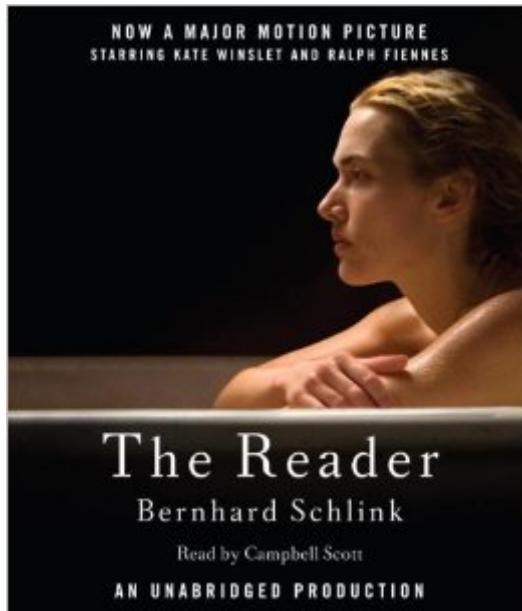


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# The Reader



## Synopsis

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. From the Trade Paperback edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Winner of the Boston Review's Fisk Fiction Prize, this thematically complex story is written in clear, simple, lucid prose. It is a straightforward telling of an encounter that was to mark fifteen year old Michael Berg for life. The book, written as if it were a memoir, is divided into three parts. The first part of the book deals with that encounter. While on his way home from school one day in post-war Germany, Michael becomes ill. He is aided by a beautiful and buxom, thirty six year old blonde named Hanna Schmitz. When he recovers from his illness, he goes to Frau Schmitz's home to thank her and eventually finds himself seduced by her and engaged in a sexual encounter. They become lovers for a period of time, and a component of their relationship was that Michael would read aloud to her. Michael romanticizes their affair, which is a cornerstone of his young life. Then, one day, as suddenly as she appeared in his life, she disappears, having inexplicably moved with

no forwarding address. The second part of the book deals with Michael's chance encounter with Hanna again. He is now a law student in a seminar that is focused on Germany's Nazi past and the related war trials. The students are young and eager to condemn all who, after the end of the war, had tolerated the Nazis in their midst. Even Michael's parents do not escape his personal condemnation. The seminar is to be an exploration of the collective guilt of the German people, and Michael embraces the opportunity, as do others of his generation, to philosophically condemn the older generation for having sat silently by. Then, he is assigned to take notes on a trial of some camp guards. To his total amazement, one of the accused is Hanna, his Hanna.

The topic of the Holocaust is raised almost every day in some manner. Many books have been written about the topic. Whether in studies, documentaries or fictional accounts, finger-pointing at the perpetrators of the crimes against millions has been part of the process of coming to terms with the Nazi atrocities. For Imre Kertesz, renowned author and Nobel laureate of 2002, there is no other topic. Yet, when he reflects on the traumatic impact of Auschwitz, "he dwells on the vitality and creativity of those living today" and "thus, paradoxically, not on the past but the future." Bernhard Schlink, professor of law and practicing judge in Germany, born in 1944, has attempted to capture the struggles of his generation in confronting the past and the future in "The Reader". "Pointing at the guilty party did not free us from shame", his narrator and protagonist contemplates, "but at least it overcame the suffering we went through on account of it". The usually unambiguous distinction between villain and victim has facilitated the identification with those who lost their lives or suffered under the Nazi atrocities while all scorn, abhorrence and hate was piled on the perpetrators. Until recently, few books have focused on the after-war generation. While growing up, the children had to come to terms with the, often sudden, exposure of their parents' active or passive participation in the crimes of the Nazi regime. "The Reader", set in post-war Germany and against the backdrop of the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials of the mid-sixties, takes this new and, for our generations, important angle: in the form of the fictional memoir of Michael Berg.

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