*The Reader*

Bernhard Schlink, [*The Reader*](http://www.amazon.com/The-Reader-Bernhard-Schlink/dp/0375707972)(New York: Pantheon, 1997)

Summary:

“I wanted simultaneously to understand Hanna's crime and to condemn it. But it was too terrible for that…. I could not resolve this. I wanted to pose myself both tasks—understanding and condemnation. But it was impossible to do both.”

Thus reads the primary tension in Bernhard Schlink’s novel *The Reader*, originally published in Germany in 1995. Schlink, a former law professor and judge, fearlessly and utterly questions whether one can condemn and comprehend the past at the same time; or, one could phrase it as to *judge* and *understand*. This novel falls within the genre of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung,* the German word for “overcoming the past.” Schlink’s offers two possible ways to overcome the past—condemnation and comprehension—with a controversial and haunting story.

In post-WWII Germany, fifteen-year-old Michael Berg begins an affair with a woman two decades his senior. Several months in, Hanna vanishes. She emerges years later on trial for murdering Jewish women during her time as an SS officer in the war. Michael realizes during her trial that Hanna would rather go to prison than reveal a secret.

Themes, Symbols, & Motifs:

* Reading. Reading is a metaphor as well as a literal idea in the book. Michael reads to Hanna. Hanna has the Jews read to her. Hanna is presented as morally illiterate. Lastly, *you* are the reader, and being asked to read the world in a different way.
* Love. Michael resolutely states that he loves Hanna, and Hanna certainly has some kind of feeling toward Michael, even if it isn’t exactly love.
* Parable. This book is often called a parable. A parable is typically a short story with a moral. I once heard a parable defined as a “story about another story.” *The Reader* is a parable of a young generation struggling to understand the motives of those who were complicit in the atrocities of Nazi Germany.
* Communication. Hanna has a difficult time expressing herself with Michael. Michael too struggles, even after he is a teenager. Later, Michael finds an alternate way of communicating with Hanna via tapes. Hanna then communicates with letters.
* Law. Enlightenment law, the foundation of both the American and German legal systems, is “based on the belief that a good order is intrinsic to the world.” Michael’s experiences change his view on this.

Discussion Questions:

1. Who is “the reader”?
2. Is Michael another of Hanna’s “victims”?
3. How does this novel leave you feeling and thinking? Is it hopeful or ultimately despairing? If you have read other Holocaust literature, how does *The Reader* compare?
4. Is Michael guilty in any way? Is Hanna?
5. Michael consults three people for advice: his professor, the judge, and his father. Assess their advice.
6. Why does Michael visit the concentration camp? What is he seeking? What does he find instead?
7. Why does Hanna do what she does at the end of the novel?
8. What is this book’s statement about moral culpability?