The Reader Study Guide

The Reader by Bernhard Schlink

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

In 1958, Michael Berg is a middle-class, 15-year-old living in West Germany. As he is recovering from a prolonged illness, he meets a 38-year-old working-class woman, named Hanna Schmitz. Hanna quickly seduces Michael, and the two characters begin a relationship that lasts for several months. Michael begins regularly to visit Hanna at her apartment where they have sex. Hanna mentally dominates Michael and controls the relationship. Michael falls in love with Hanna, but the emotional attachment is not reciprocated. Upon Hanna's request Michael begins to read aloud to her on each of his visits. When Michael is not having sex with Hanna he attends school, develops friendships and infatuations, and otherwise behaves like a typical teenager. Then one day Hanna simply vanishes, and Michael is left feeling guilty and sickened by the strange end of the relationship.

Michael finishes high school and advances to university where he studies law. One of his law seminars requires him to attend a Nazi war crimes trial, and he is randomly assigned to a particular trial, which begins in the fall of 1966. Michael is stunned when he recognizes one of the accused war criminals is Hanna. Through the trial he learns that Hanna was a member of the SS and a guard at the Auschwitz concentration camp and another satellite work camp. As an SS guard Hanna would have younger, weaker, prisoners read to her before she sent them off to their murder. Hanna, accused of several atrocities, is convicted and sentenced to life in prison. During the trial Michael realizes that Hanna is illiterate - and to hide her shame of illiteracy she has made several poor decisions in her life.

Michael gets married and fathers a child. He is unable to succeed in a long-term relationship, however, and divorces after only a few years. He is largely uninvolved with his family and does not have any strong friendships. Eventually Michael begins to correspond with Hanna in prison. Instead of writing her letters, however, he records himself reading aloud from books. He forwards the cassette tapes, devoid of any personal communication, to Hanna in prison. He eventually receives a 'thank you' note from Hanna who has used her time in prison to learn to read and write.

In 1984, after serving a term of 18 years, Hanna's sentence is commuted. The prison warden writes to Michael and asks him to become involved in Hanna's release from prison and reintegration into society. Michael obtains an apartment and a job, but he does not communicate with Hanna directly. On her last night in prison Hanna hangs herself in her jail cell. When Michael arrives to receive Hanna the prison warden informs him of Hanna's suicide and allows him to enter the prison and view Hanna's small prison cell. Michael then contemplates the nature of his relationship with Hanna and compares it to the sociopolitical relationship of the post-war German generation to the generation of their parents.

Part 1, Chapter 1

Part 1, Chapter 1 Summary

Michael Berg, the protagonist and narrator, is a 15-year-old boy living in West Germany during 1958. He has been feeling ill for a few days and, while walking home from school one October day, is overcome by nausea and vomits on the sidewalk. A woman sees him and takes him into her home where she cleans him up a little, and then she helps him wash the vomit from the sidewalk. Michael is overcome by feelings of helplessness and begins to cry. The woman comforts him and then walks him home, just a few blocks away. Michael is diagnosed with hepatitis and spends the next several weeks recovering. He is not allowed to return to school and, in fact, rarely leaves the house through this winter period of illness.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Analysis

The novel opens in about 1985 as a recollection of events beginning in 1958. Although the novel is presented in generally chronological order, there are numerous overlaps and minor temporally divagating plot elements. The novel's chronotope is complex, but easily accessible. The primary timeline details events in the life of the novel's protagonist, Michael Berg, from age 15 through about age 42, with a primary focus on three distinct time periods. Part 1 of the novel details experiences, which transpire in 1958. They are events, which set up the remainder of the novel's plot. Chapter 1 presents a small amount of social background about Michael and Hanna Schmitz, the two primary characters. They live in an apparently typical middle-class neighborhood in a small German town near the Rhine River, with a mix of professionals, such as Michael's father, and working-class people, such as Hanna.

Michael describes Hanna's assistance as akin to an assault - she grabs him and physically takes charge of his actions. This seems a benign comment in the novel's introductory chapter, but becomes more significant, as Hanna's character is developed throughout the narrative.

Part 1, Chapter 2

Part 1, Chapter 2 Summary

Once he has mostly recovered from his illness, Michael returns to the building to find and thank the woman who proffered assistance. Michael will remember the building in great detail throughout the remainder of his life, and he recounts numerous small details about the building and area. Michael will frequently dream about the building, and dream about visiting the building, during the later years of his life.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Analysis

This brief chapter helps set the tone and texture of Part 1 of the novel. Most of the details provided about the physical building and neighborhood are largely insignificant to the remainder of the novel. Plus, they seem out of place, as they are presented in such detail. Michael's future dreams about the building are likewise not particularly relevant to the remainder of the novel except as providing strong foreshadowing that the building will be the site of life-altering experiences for the narrator.

Part 1, Chapter 3

Part 1, Chapter 3 Summary

Michael does not know the woman's name when he visits her apartment. Michael's mother has insisted that he use part of his savings to purchase some flowers and deliver them to the woman in thanks for her assistance of several months earlier. He asks another tenant about the woman, offering a physical description, and learns that her name is Frau Hanna Schmitz. He remembers further details about the building and Hanna's apartment.

Michael proceeds to Hanna's apartment and delivers a mechanical thank you and hands her some flowers. Hanna invites him inside, and the two characters briefly make small talk. Their age difference makes Michael fairly introverted, as he is 15, and Hanna is 36.

Part 1, Chapter 3 Analysis

Similar to Chapter 2, this brief chapter continues to set the tone of Part 1 of the novel. Again, most of the details provided are not of particular significance throughout the remainder of the novel although they continue to foreshadow the importance of the place in Michael's future. Narrative tension, started in Chapter 2, continues to develop through Chapters 3 through 5, to reach a climax in Chapter 6. It is interesting to note that Michael only returns to thank Hanna upon his mother's request. One wonders what Mrs. Berg would think of her enforced commonplace courtesy had she known the eventual outcome.

Part 1, Chapter 4

Part 1, Chapter 4 Summary

Hanna tells Michael she will walk home with him, as she is walking in the general direction on her way to work. Michael waits in the hallway while Hanna changes clothing in the kitchen. She leaves the interposed door slightly ajar, and Michael watches her strip to her translucent slip and put on stockings. Hanna apparently senses she is being watched and, only partially clothed, turns to look through the partially open door into the hallway. She gives Michael a peculiar look, which he interprets as simultaneously knowing and surprised. The two characters lock eyes for a brief moment and then Michael blushes and flees out of the apartment in shame.

Michael wanders around the streets for a long period of time remembering the way Hanna looked and moved. He is obviously sexually aroused. Michael, as narrator, then ponders the scene from the distance of decades. He recalls how, in the coming years, he will request lovers to re-enact the scene by donning stockings, yet none will be able to duplicate the precise motions.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Analysis

Hanna's actions appear on the surface as forthright, but subsequent events will cast doubt on her supposed innocence. Instead of simply accepting the flowers as a token of thanks she invites Michael into her apartment and controls the situation. She tells him she will walk with him and then places him in the hallway behind a partially open door while she changes clothing. She then notices him watching and appears to be surprised, but she could hardly have been actually surprised after so carefully engineering the sexual situation. Michael plays a youthful voyeur but, more telling, Hanna is an adult exhibitionist and establishes clear emotional control of the relationship.

Part 1, Chapter 5

Part 1, Chapter 5 Summary

Michael spends a week remembering the way Hanna moved and looked and then returns to her apartment. He realizes that ordinarily he would not find her attractive, but given the circumstances he finds her a highly sexually attractive woman though she is twice his age. Michael, as narrator, then ponders about the nature of self-determination and the will. He contemplates the reasoning he used to motivate himself to return to the apartment.

Part 1, Chapter 5 Analysis

Chapter 5, like earlier chapters, is a mix of narrative events from 1954, with narrative introspection about the events from the distance of three decades. The dominant theme of the chapter is an explanation of why Michael decided to return to Hanna's apartment. The narrative conclusions are somewhat vague, however. The narrator explains several optional rationales, but then concludes that something else, unexplained and beyond understanding, was the actual motivation. In the end, the action itself becomes its own motivation. The narrator does not suggest that Hanna perhaps engineered the earlier encounter, and in fact seems willfully ignorant that Hanna could have had any ulterior motives for her actions. This narrative gap is particularly poignant when contrasted with the novel's resolution.

Part 1, Chapter 6

Part 1, Chapter 6 Summary

Michael visits Hanna's apartment, but she is not home. He sits on the stairs in front of her apartment for a few hours, until she returns from work. She carries a load of coal and some groceries up the stairs and before he sees her Michael mistakes her footsteps for those of a man. Hanna invites Michael in and sends him on an errand to the basement. Michael goes to the basement and loads two scuttles of coal. While loading them he is covered in coal dust. He then hauls the coal up several flights of stairs to Hanna's apartment. Hanna laughs at his coal-dust-covered face and clothing, draws a bath, and orders him to strip his clothing. While Michael bathes, Hanna beats the coal dust out of his clothing with a broom on the balcony.

Hanna then enters the bathroom with a large towel and instructs Michael to get out of the bath. He turns his back to her, stands up, and steps out of the bath. Hanna encircles him with the towel and pats him dry. She then allows the towel to drop to the floor. Hanna presses her naked body against Michael from behind, and reaches her arms around him, grabbing his erect penis and telling him that sex is the reason he has returned to her. Hanna then takes Michael's virginity and satisfies herself on him.

Part 1, Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6 concludes Michael's seduction by Hanna. Michael has clearly and deliberately returned to her apartment hoping for a sexual liaison, but Hanna is nevertheless a somewhat predatory adult who initiates, drives, and consummates the sexual union. She first instructs him to perform some chores for her, strips him down and bathes him, then sexually engages him. Hanna is probably naked when she enters the bathroom, although Michael is momentarily unaware of this, as he can not see through the outstretched towel. At this stage, Hanna has clearly decided to attempt to have sex with Michael.

Hanna's emotional domination of Michael now begins in earnest and the relationship, which will consume the remainder of the novel, not to mention Michael's youth, is now defined. Although the next eleven chapters continue to describe the relationship between Michael and Hanna, the nature of their relationship does not essentially change during Part 1 of the narrative. The adult Hanna will continue to manipulate and control the young Michael. Michael submits to Hanna's demands, as he cannot imagine ending their sexual relationship.

Part 1, Chapter 7

Part 1, Chapter 7 Summary

Michael returns to his home later than usual. At the dinner table, he is questioned about his tardiness and explains that he was wandering through several parts of town and became temporarily lost. His brother wryly notes that the areas of town Michael mentions are on opposite sides of the city. Michael announces that his convalescence has ended, and he will return to school the next day. His mother demurs, but his father then allows him to make his own decision. Michael notes that his father is emotionally distant and seemingly uninvolved with the lives of his children. He remembers how Hanna treated him and compares it to the way his mother treated him as a small child.

Part 1, Chapter 7 Analysis

Chapter 7 establishes Michael's upbringing as fairly typical for the time and place of the novel. His mother is somewhat over-cautious and somewhat doting. His father is detached, authoritative, and paternalistic. His brothers and sisters share an easy rapport. The narrator compares his sexual encounter with Hanna to being bathed as an infant by his mother. This comparison is interesting and obvious, although the narrator does not seem aware of the sexual irony even from a distance of nearly thirty years' time. Michael's assertion that he will return to school regardless of his parents' stance comes from a newfound self-assurance based on his sexual exploits. This apparent self-assurance will continue through several subsequent chapters but will eventually fade as time progresses.

Part 1, Chapter 8

Part 1, Chapter 8 Summary

Hanna works an early shift, so Michael leaves school early to meet Hanna at noon. They spend about an hour together each day for about a week. Their routine quickly becomes a joint shower followed by lovemaking. Hanna is scrupulously clean and insists on the bathing, which Michael, at first, finds frustrating. Later, he begins to enjoy the intimacy of the shower. After a week, Michael finally asks her name and learns she is Hanna Schmitz. Hanna then asks Michael his name, and he tells her. He wonders why she has not seen his name printed across the front of his schoolbooks. She asks him if he is in college, and he tells her he is still in High School. She guesses his age at seventeen, and he agrees he is seventeen, enjoying the extra two years of age she has assumed. He tells her that, due to his illness and his current habit of skipping much school, he will probably not advance from the 10th grade. Hanna becomes severe and sternly rebukes him, demanding that he strive for good grades. She pantomimes her work as a conductor and refers to it as idiotic and menial. She then curtly dismisses him and tells him in the future to only visit in the evenings. She becomes cold and distant, and he panics.

Part 1, Chapter 8 Analysis

The relationship between Michael and Hanna moves into a new phase, as they exchange names. Frau Schmitz becomes Hanna. Michael's schoolbooks bear his name written on each cover, and he is has assumed that Hanna has taken a moment to learn his name from the books, but she has not. This seems to imply that Hanna is not particularly interested in Michael as anything more than a sexual partner, but it also foreshadows later events in the novel. Hanna has apparently judged Michael to be older than he is by a few years, although this may simply be a ploy on her part. She is demonstrated to be clearly in control of the relationship that, although consensual, is lopsided and based for Hanna entirely around sexual exploits with a boy. Michael, of course, begins to fall in love with the older and seemingly wiser Hanna.

Part 1, Chapter 9

Part 1, Chapter 9 Summary

Michael works particularly hard and passes his school classes. He continues his daily sexual relationship with Hanna. Michael tries to learn about Hanna's earlier life, but she is deliberately vague. She tells him she grew up in a German area in Rumania and moved to Berlin when she was sixteen. She worked at a factory for five years and then at age 21 joined the Germany army in 1943 at the height of World War II. After the war, she held odd jobs in various places and then worked for several years as a streetcar conductor. Hanna likes working on the streetcar because, she says, she likes wearing a uniform, being in constant motion, and seeing varied scenery. Michael, the narrator, then ponders the nature of happiness and fidelity from the distance of many years' time. He remembers being very happy in his relationship with Hanna. He remembers several dinner-table discussions held with his family about literature, which seemed to apply to his situation.

During the end of the school year, Hanna inquires about Michael's progress. She asks him what type of books he usually reads. When she learns that many of his assigned novels are written in German, she asks him to read to her from the books. He offers to loan her some novels, but she says she likes his voice and insists that he read to her. Michael slowly begins to enjoy reading out-loud to Hanna, and Hanna is visibly enthralled by the slowly unfolding stories. Their relationship's routine becomes established as a nearly daily period of reading followed by bathing followed by sexual intercourse.

Part 1, Chapter 9 Analysis

Michael's attempts to learn about Hanna's previous life are successful only in the broadest terms. She does not talk about her parents or divulge many specific details. She usually either claims to have no recollection or is simply dismissive. Thus, while Michael strives to build a relationship based on trust and common interests Hanna remains at arms' distance. She does not evince reciprocal interest in Michael's day-to-day life. Even so, Michael will eventually learn that all of the general details she does provide are factually truthful. The literature Michael discusses with his family during dinners focus on relationships between younger men and older women. Michael strongly defends the untraditional relationships, somewhat to the bewilderment of his parents and siblings.

Michael's reading out-loud to Hanna foreshadows later developments in the novel and becomes a primary narrative theme as well as a central area of conflict for the characters. In fact, the novel's title, *The Reader*, indicates and foreshadows how significant Hanna's request and Michael's acquiescence become. Michael is no longer

simply Hanna's young and controllable lover of convenience. He has commenced his journey to becoming 'the reader.'

Part 1, Chapter 10

Part 1, Chapter 10 Summary

Michael enjoys a break from school during a prolonged Easter vacation. On the first day, he arises extremely early and walks across town. He catches a ride on the day's first trip of the streetcar, on which Hanna works as the conductor. Hanna is in the front car with the driver. She watches Michael, unannounced, enter the second streetcar and sit in the back. Hanna stays up front, chatting with the driver, and occasionally glances back at Michael. She otherwise ignores him. He becomes confused and angered and gets off at a random stop, far from familiar surroundings. He then walks to her apartment and waits several hours, until she returns from work.

When Hanna returns home, Michael demands an explanation for her behavior. She quickly turns the tables and berates him for being presumptive and rude. She reverses the situation and tells Michael that he ignored her, not the other way around. She attacks him for presuming she should understand his motivation. Michael, frightened by her anger, quickly becomes obsequiously apologetic and begs for forgiveness. Hanna demands that he leave her apartment. He then wanders around the town for some time and returns to her apartment, where he reiterates an apology. The two then bathe together and have sex. Michael realizes, more and more, that the relationship is entirely controlled by Hanna.

Part 1, Chapter 10 Analysis

Chapter 10 continues to demonstrate that the developing relationship between Hanna and Michael is increasingly lopsided. Hanna blatantly ignores Michael on the empty streetcar, and then berates him for ignoring her. Instead of attempting a rational discussion, Michael quickly assumes full responsibility and apologizes. He is afraid that if he angers Hanna sufficiently, she will permanently terminate the relationship. By this point in the novel, it is quite apparent that Michael has fallen in love with Hanna, while she still regards him as primarily a matter of discreet convenience.

Part 1, Chapter 11

Part 1, Chapter 11 Summary

In early April, Michael and Hanna take a bicycle tour through the countryside. In preparation for the tour, Michael saves money and then sells his stamp collection at a huge loss. Hanna insists that Michael plan the entire trip. Then, on the trip, she makes him responsible for navigation, camping, hotel arrangements, and the other minutia of travel. Michael will always remember the way Hanna looked biking, the way her skirts flowed behind her in the wind. On their vacation they bike, sometimes camp, and have sex. Michael enjoys the experience of being in nominal control of things and becomes more sexually assertive.

One morning in a hotel, Michael arises early and goes out to fetch breakfast, while Hanna sleeps. He leaves a note on the nightstand in case she awakens. When he returns, he finds Hanna immensely distraught and agitated. In anger, she whips him across the face with a leather belt splitting his lip open. An angry encounter ensues, where Hanna discloses her fear that Michael had simply abandoned her, followed by Michael apologizing, as usual, and then sexual intercourse. Some hours later, Michael asks her why she didn't simply read his note. Hanna claims she did not see any note. Michael searches but is unable to locate the note.

Part 1, Chapter 11 Analysis

Michael is sells his stamp collection for about 1/10 of its catalogue value. For example, he sells one imperforate Egyptian stamp, probably an 1867 "Pyramid and Sphinx" issue, for 40 marks but the 1958 catalogue value is 400 marks. The sale of the stamp album indicates how committed Michael is to playing the part of provider and organizer.

The scene in the hotel is particularly telling of the nature of the relationship. Michael, trying to perform courteous service, is misunderstood and not only chastised but also physically whipped across the face by a leather belt. This is clearly an abusive situation for, which Michael must then apologize. Later Hanna will even taunt Michael about the mess his blood has made on his clothing. The event is of narrative importance on several levels. First, it establishes that Hanna has an uncontrolled temper and has a propensity to acts of violence. Second, it clearly establishes the relationship as one of domination. Finally, the 'missing' note provides more foreshadowing for future narrative developments. How does a note simply vanish? In fact, Michael will eventually deduce that Hanna had deliberately destroyed the note.

Part 1, Chapter 12

Part 1, Chapter 12 Summary

Michael's parents and older siblings go out of town for a week, leaving Michael and his younger sister home alone. Michael shoplifts blue jeans and a sweater to bribe his sister so she will spend the week at her friend's house. He also shoplifts a silk nightgown for Hanna and is nearly apprehended by the store detective. Michael then invites Hanna to his family home, assuming she will stay there throughout the week.

Hanna appears somewhat interested in the home and tours it with Michael. She is particularly impressed by Mr. Berg's extensive library. She asks Michael if his father has written some of the books, and Michael says that he has. Michael reads some difficult passages out of one of his father's books. Michael will always remember the way Hanna looked and moved in his father's library.

Michael then serves a home-cooked meal. Hanna then returns to her apartment, which surprises Michael, though he accompanies her. He gives her the nightgown, and she seems pleased, puts it on, and models it for him. They then have sex. She does not spend the week at his house, as Michael had anticipated.

Part 1, Chapter 12 Analysis

Michael again attempts to play the host in the relationship by inviting Hanna to his parents' house. His assumption is they will spend the week living, more or less, as a married couple. Hanna visits the house, performs a perfunctory inspection, stays for dinner, and then leaves. She is clearly not interested in role-playing as a wife. Michael also demonstrates a certain lack of civic morality when he casually engages in shoplifting to secure his little sister's assistance by bribery. Hanna's interest in books and writing becomes apparent. Nearly the only things she pays attention to in the entire house are the books, which she touches repeatedly.

Part 1, Chapter 13

Part 1, Chapter 13 Summary

Michael completes the 10th grade and moves on to the 11th grade. His classes are shuffled such that he finds himself with a group of students with whom he is largely unacquainted. He sits next to a young girl named Sophie. Michael and Sophie develop a rapport, which gradually becomes a type of infatuated friendship normal for their age, now 16, even while he continues his daily encounters with Hanna.

Part 1, Chapter 13 Analysis

This short chapter places Michael within the context of his life beyond Hanna. He spends, perhaps, one or two hours most days with Hanna, reading, bathing, and having sex. Of course, he spends far more time in school and with his family. His burgeoning relationship with Sophie is hampered and ultimately destroyed by his strange attachment to Hanna.

Part 1, Chapter 14

Part 1, Chapter 14 Summary

Michael continues to read, bathe, and have sex. Michael sees Hanna somewhat like a horse. She's smooth, soft, firm and strong. Hanna is momentarily taken aback by Michael's horse analogy but sees in it some grain of truth. Michael gradually begins to spend more time with his friends and Sophie and less time with Hanna. Although he visits Hanna nearly daily, their fighting continues. Hanna ignores Michael's feelings. He quickly apologizes. The pattern makes Michael feel a good deal of resentment.

Part 1, Chapter 14 Analysis

Michael and Hanna have now been having sex nearly every day for several months and the irresistible appeal of sex is beginning to wane. Michael focuses, instead, on the lack of any tangible relationship beyond the physical. He subconsciously contrasts his relationship with Sophie to his relationship with Hanna, and begins to see the obvious shortcomings in the latter. Michael, the narrator, considering the situation from several decades of perspective, realizes in retrospect that his relationship with Hanna was coming to a conclusion.

Part 1, Chapter 15

Part 1, Chapter 15 Summary

Michael begins to feel that he is internally betraying Hanna, because he will not disclose, even to his closest friends, that he spends time with her. In fact, he never discloses his relationship with Hanna to anyone. Sophie and his friends know that he routinely spends a large amount of time away from them. One day, while Sophie and Michael are sharing a private moment, she asks him what is wrong in his life. She wonders where he goes, and why he spends so much time away. She suggests that it perhaps has something to do with his past illness. Sophie therefore, unknowingly and unintentionally, diagnoses Michael's relationship with Hanna as a form of illness. Michael says it does not have anything to do with illness, but chooses not to confide in Sophie.

Part 1, Chapter 15 Analysis

Sophie assumes that Michael continues taking some type of medical treatment for hepatitis. When she asks him if this is the case, he says it is not. However, he will not disclose to her, or anyone else, anything about his sexual relationship with Hanna. Michael does, however, find a certain darkly ironic humor in Sophie's oblique and unintended suggestion that his relationship with Hanna is an illness.

It is interesting to note the complete mental domination that Hanna has over Michael. Although their relationship is consensual, Michael in many ways exhibits the symptoms of an abused prisoner or child. Hanna completely mentally dominates him, for which he routinely apologizes. She clearly will not acknowledge him in any way, and yet, when he fails to subtly acknowledge her in private ways, he feels guilty of betrayal.

Part 1, Chapter 16

Part 1, Chapter 16 Summary

Hanna continues to refuse Michael any large part in her life. For example, she goes to many movies but always goes alone. When Michael happens to see the same movie she will discuss it with him during their meetings, but she will not allow him to accompany her to the theater. In July, Michael notices that Hanna becomes increasingly agitated and preoccupied. She seems very distant, even more so than usual. Their relationship is, at this point, about seven months old. Then one day Hanna seems particularly open and loving. She gently and carefully bathes Michael and spoils and indulges him. Their sexual intercourse seems particularly intense and satisfying.

Afterwards he leaves her apartment and joins his friends at a public swimming pool. Hours later, while reclining at the side of the swimming pool, Michael happens to look up and see Hanna, in the distance, staring at him. Instead of jumping up or giving some sign of recognition, Michael simply returns Hanna's gaze. He looks away for a moment, and Hanna vanishes.

Part 1, Chapter 16 Analysis

Although Michael does not realize it at the time, he has spent his final day with Hanna. She treats him lavishly and fondly, because she realizes it is likely the last time they will ever be together. However, she does not confide in him or treat him essentially different. The nature of their relationship remains one of total dominance and nearly complete submission. For example, Michael clearly knows nothing about Hanna's life beyond the tiny sphere in, which she allows him entry, and yet she knows where Michael spends his free time. It is unclear to Michael, and indeed unclear in the narrative, whether Hanna intended to be seen by Michael - although given her nature it seems likely that she did. Her parting gift to Michael is an intrusion into the normal aspects of his life followed by an unexplained vanishing.

Part 1, Chapter 17

Part 1, Chapter 17 Summary

Hanna simply disappears. Michael returns to her apartment to find it locked up and uninhabited. He tries to telephone her at the streetcar company but is informed that she has quit her job. He telephones the landlord in hope of further information and is told that she has moved out of the furnished apartment. After several days, he goes in desperation to the streetcar company and talks with her previous supervisor. The streetcar supervisor tells Michael that he had, just days before, offered to promote Hanna from conductor to driver. Instead of accepting the promotion, Hanna quit her job. Michael eventually learns through mandatory citizen's registration records that Hanna has moved to Hamburg.

Michael is literally physically ill for a prolonged period of time but maintains a fazade of complacency in front of his family and friends. He misses Hanna physically and emotionally and blames himself for her disappearance. He concludes that he must have done something terribly wrong to deserve Hanna's harsh punishment.

Part 1, Chapter 17 Analysis

Michael quickly realizes that Hanna has moved away without explanation. He rather uncharacteristically aggressively seeks out information about her possible whereabouts. Eventually he discovers she has moved to Hamburg, many miles distant - at this time Germany was under foreign administration following World War II, and citizens were legally obligated to register with the local authorities when moving to or from a locality. How Michael is able to access this official information is not explained. Although it will not become apparent to Michael for many years, Hanna's bizarre, sudden, and permanent departure from work and home following an offer of promotion is in fact typical of a pattern she makes in her life.

Chapter 17 concludes Part 1 of 3 in the novel. The first 17 chapters explore the sexual relationship between Michael, a 15-year-old boy, and Hanna, a 36-year-old woman, over the course of approximately 7 months. Hanna completely dominates Michael, emotionally and mentally, and treats him as little better than an amusement. Michael, in turn, falls in love with Hanna and will suffer emotional damage from the relationship, as described in Part 2.

Part 2, Chapter 1

Part 2, Chapter 1 Summary

Without Hanna's presence, Michael's life slowly returns to normal. According to his brother, Michael calls out Hanna's name in his sleep. About six months after Hanna vanishes, Michael's family moves across town. Michael finds school throughout 1959 and beyond to be easy. Sophie is diagnoses with tuberculosis and is sent away to a sanatorium to recover. Michael finishes high school in the spring of 1962 and starts university in the fall, choosing to study law. He becomes determined to never be humiliated again, to never feel guilt, and to not love. He adopts a posture of arrogant superiority.

Sophie returns from the sanatorium after three years and commences again her relationship with Michael. Now older, she quickly yields herself to him, and they have sex. Aside from sexual intercourse, however, Michael is not interested in or available to Sophie. She entreats and cries but to no avail and their relationship quickly ends. Later, Michael's grandfather, very near to death, attempts to give Michael a paternal blessing. Michael declines, rudely stating he does not believe in such frivolous things.

Part 2, Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 differs from previous chapters in covering a large amount of time without much detail. Whereas the 17 chapters in Part 1 cover approximately 7 months' time, Chapter 1 spans nearly four years. This narrative structure, coupled with the textual division into Parts, clearly marks a major shift in Michael's life and development.

Although Michael outwardly lives a normal life, he is clearly emotionally wounded. He hides behind a fazade of arrogance and superiority and makes rather rash personal promises to never feel humiliation, guilt or love. Instead of enjoying a loving and constructive relationship with Sophie, he has sex with her and then shunts her away, treating her, in effect, like Hanna treated him. Even his family ties are spurned, as he dismisses his dying grandfather's request as ridiculous sentimentalism. The innocent child has become an unlikable and isolated man.

Part 2, Chapter 2

Part 2, Chapter 2 Summary

Michael pursues his legal studies with mechanical devotion. Trials of alleged Nazi war criminals are underway, and Michael enrolls in a seminar, which requires occasional attendance at the trials. The particular trial that Michael attends begins in the spring of 1966 when he is 23 years old. The students in the seminar consider themselves to be radical explorers of legal history and, in general, are eager to morally condemn everyone living in Germany during World War II. For example, Michael considers his own father to be complicit in war crimes even though he had lost his University teaching job because of his political views and spent the entire war as an underemployed editor of trail hiking guides. Michael and his fellow students feel it is their duty to uncover the truth about horrific war crimes and push that information into the public view. Michael as narrator contemplates his earlier ideology from the distance of decades and concludes that his opinions had been repulsive.

Part 2, Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2 primarily contains narrative introspection about the nature of Germany and its citizens' activities throughout the period of the Nazi Third Reich. Michael and his generation, born at the end or after the war, consider the prior generation to be morally compromised whether or not they were directly involved in political or war activities. The nature of this national sociopolitical conflict is explored and examined.

Michael is randomly assigned to attend a particular war crimes trial. Each student in the seminar is required to rotate through one week of the trial and take extensive notes. The notes are compiled into a written history, or transcript, of the trial proceedings. The seminar instructor will use the transcripts in scholarly investigation into the philosophy of the law.

Part 2, Chapter 3

Part 2, Chapter 3 Summary

The trial Michael attends is in another town. The court is composed of three professional judges and six selected citizens. There are five defendants being tried simultaneously for the same suite of alleged war crimes. As Michael sits in the observation gallery, he is stunned to hear Hanna Schmitz called as a defendant. As she stands and confirms her identity, he recognizes her, even though he cannot see her face.

Hanna confirms her identity, states she was born in 1922 near Hermannstadt, Rumania, and moved to Berlin when she was a teenager. In Berlin, she worked at the Siemens factory. Her employment continued at the Siemens factory, until she was offered a promotion to foreman. Instead of taking the promotion, she left Siemens in 1943 and, at age 21, voluntarily joined the SS and served as a prison guard at Auschwitz. In early 1944, she was transferred to a small satellite work camp near Cracow, where she was a guard until 1945. At the end of the war she, and the other defendants, escorted an evacuation of prisoners westward, just days in front of the advancing Russian army. After the war, Hanna lived in Kassel and numerous other locations, finally moving to Michael's town, where she worked as a railcar conductor for 8 years.

Hanna's court-appointed attorney is young and over-zealous, which annoys the chief judge. The attorney notes that Hanna has always registered with the local police when she has moved, a requirement in occupied West Germany. Since she has been law-abiding since the war her attorney moves to have her released on bail. His motion is denied and after court, Hanna returns to prison. Michael is immensely relieved that Hanna will not be released on bail. He realizes that he will not have to meet her or speak with her.

Part 2, Chapter 3 Analysis

Hanna's appearance in court as a Nazi war crimes defendant is, to say the least, a shocking turn of events. Chapters 1 and 2 of Part 2 serve rapidly to transition the narrative through a period of about 8 years. Chapter 3 establishes the central tension in the novel and suddenly the dates and locations of events take on added significance. The novel is not merely set in post-war Germany. The narrative is entwined with the history of the times. Hanna, born in 1922, is revealed to have been an active participant in the worst activities of the Nazi Third Reich and her direct involvement will continue to be examined throughout the remainder of Part 2.

Hanna's behavior also starts to take on a pattern - instead of taking a promotion at Siemens she left the company, just, as she left the streetcar company after being offered a promotion to driver. She has held a succession of odd jobs in which she has

performed well, but she has never advanced beyond an entry-level position. Furthermore, she has routinely moved from place to place without putting down any roots. Michael ponders this lifestyle even as the trial unfolds.

Part 2, Chapter 4

Part 2, Chapter 4 Summary

Michael watches the entire trial. Hanna appears isolated from the other defendants, and her serious demeanor appears arrogant. She sits as if frozen and never turns her head. Michael only sees the back of her head and shoulders. During the trial, he sometimes remembers having sex with her, but he is emotionally numb and feels nothing. He wonders why he is so numb. Eventually, however, the horrors of the court testimony leave everyone numb. Michael ponders an appropriate societal reaction to the Nazi atrocities - what can be done, what should be done, and why?

Part 2, Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter 4 includes a description of the court and how it functions. The chapter also contains Michael's introspection into his past, as he realizes he is so emotionally numb that he feels nothing while watching Hanna stand trial. He wonders why he is so uncaring but does not appear to link his emotional state to his relationship with Hanna. Michael's numbness eventually spreads to the others in the court as the judges, the attorneys, and the spectators are all devastated by the testimony offered.

Part 2, Chapter 5

Part 2, Chapter 5 Summary

After the preliminary stages of the trial conclude, the five defendants are formally indicted. There are three indictments. First, they are indicted for their personal conduct at Auschwitz. This indictment seems, to Michael, to be routine and insignificant compared to the other charges. Second, they are charged with making selections wherein approximately sixty women were selected, each month, to be murdered in the camp exterminations. Finally, the defendants are indicted with specific charges relating to one night near the end of the war.

A large group of women prisoners had been evacuated from the work camp and were being force-marched westward. Hanna and the other defendants were among the guard contingent escorting the prisoners. One night, the column stopped in a small town. The prisoners were herded into a church and locked inside, while the German guards settled in a nearby house. That evening, an allied bombing raid destroyed the house, killing or wounding most of the German guards, and also starting a small fire in the steeple of the church housing the prisoners. The guard commander and all officers quickly gathered the wounded Germans into a motorized caravan and left. Hanna and the other defendants remained behind and watched the fire slowly consume the steeple and spread to the church's roof, which eventually collapsed, killing several hundred women imprisoned within. Only two prisoners survived, a woman and her small daughter. The daughter later wrote a book about her experiences during the war, and the book contains some of the most damning evidence against Hanna and the other defendants.

Part 2, Chapter 5 Analysis

The narrative does not elaborate on the nature of the charges of personal misconduct at Auschwitz, but Michael suggests they were routine charges leveled at all war crimes defendants. The selections consisted of guards picking weak or sick prisoners to be sent to Auschwitz where they would be murdered and cremated. The selected women were replaced by fresh workers transported to the work camps, and being selected was a death sentence. In this way, Hanna and the other defendants would each personally select about ten women every month for execution, though they did not personally perform the murders. The final indictment alleges that Hanna and the other defendants, through willful inaction, directly caused the deaths of several hundred women who were burned to death when the church's roof collapsed. Instead of opening the church's doors, they stood by and watched the catastrophe unfold.

Part 2, Chapter 6

Part 2, Chapter 6 Summary

As the trial begins, Hanna vehemently contests a minor point in the record. The judge tells her she had been previously furnished with a copy of the record, and her time to correct errors has passed. Later the judge states that the survivor's book will be entered into the record without being read. Hanna, alone, demands that the book be read to the court. The judge declines to have the book read because, although the book has not been published, pre-publication manuscript copies have been made available to all of the defendants. As the trial proceeds, Hanna is accused of having been in possession of the key to the church's doors. She claims she did not have the key, but the judge produces a written statement, signed by Hanna, wherein she admits to having had the key.

During the trial, the judge expresses disgust that Hanna would have involved herself in the selection process. Hanna explains that she had to make room for the new arrivals. The judge again is outraged. Hanna asks the judge what he would have done in the same circumstances and the judge is unwilling, even unable, to offer a meaningful answer.

Part 2, Chapter 6 Analysis

Hanna's behavior in court appears rather erratic. She readily confirms personally damning evidence but subsequently argues minor points in the court record. For example, she had previously signed a document stating she had possession of the keys to the church doors but during the court proceedings, she said there were no keys at all and if there were she did not have them. Her behavior foreshadows later developments in the novel and her seeming irrational decisions are, in fact, part of a pattern that has developed throughout her life.

Hanna's question to the judge - "what would you have done?" (p. 111) - is more than a defensive or rhetorical question. She honestly asks the learned judge what he would have done in the same circumstances. Of course, it is an unanswerable question. The judge declines to offer a substantive response. Michael realizes that Hanna's simple question is legitimate and encompasses the entire generational sociopolitical paradigm of post-war Germany. Michael realizes it is all too easy to condemn others, such as his own father, from his own unambiguous moral position. Hanna's question marks a major turning point in the way that Michael understands legal history and his parents' generation.

Part 2, Chapter 7

Part 2, Chapter 7 Summary

As the trial continues, it becomes evident that the only reliable testimony against the defendants is the testimony of the surviving mother and the testimony and book of the surviving daughter. They are unable to personally identify the defendants, and the defendants themselves and others have no motivation to incriminate each other. However, Hanna freely admits her participation. The other defendants quickly turn all the blame toward Hanna and blame her for everything.

During the trial, it is revealed that Hanna would routinely take frail, young girls into protection. These weak and delicate girls would be given preferential treatment, and Hanna would have them come to her quarters in the evenings. After a time of several weeks, these young girls would then be selected by Hanna and sent to Auschwitz for execution. The assumption had been that Hanna was sexually abusing the girls, but the surviving daughter relates that, in actuality, Hanna was having the girls read aloud. When this is finally revealed during the trial, Hanna turns back and looks at Michael. It is the only time during the entire trial that she looks at him.

Part 2, Chapter 7 Analysis

The trial does not go well for Hanna. She readily admits to her actions and only sporadically argues with seemingly insignificant details in the record. Her willingness to be honest about her participation is quickly seized on by the other defendants who begin to place all of the blame on Hanna. The revelation that Hanna had used sickly children as readers is particularly devastating to Michael.

Part 2, Chapter 8

Part 2, Chapter 8 Summary

Chapter 8 deviates from the narrative's chronological presentation. Michael, the narrator, relates how in the years to come he would read and re-read the book both in English and German. He finds the book to be flat and devoid of emotion. He finds it as numb and disconnected as the trial. He tries to recognize Hanna as one of the guards described in the book but fails to discover which guard she was, if any. Michael then presents a summary of the book with a large amount of detail provided about the night of the fire when hundreds of prisoners died.

Part 2, Chapter 8 Analysis

Chapter 8 presents and re-presents the survivor's book as Michael tries to come to terms with Hanna's actions. Although Michael's presentation of the material here does contain many more interesting details about the particular night of the fire in the church the essential facts remain unchanged. It is as if Michael is attempting to find Hanna's justification in the minute and insignificant details.

Michael, the narrator, seeks to either understand or condemn Hanna and wants to simultaneously do both. He finds he is unable to do either, however. His special focus on the night of the fire presents a large amount of insignificant details that, to him, mitigate or justify Hanna's inaction. He finds the general amorality of the times and the confusion of the recent bombing to be nearly sufficient to exonerate Hanna from wrongdoing. Nonetheless, he simultaneously condemns her actions as unjustifiable in any extreme.

Part 2, Chapter 9

Part 2, Chapter 9 Summary

Chapter 9 returns to the chronological presentation of the trial. As the trial develops the judge asks each defendant, individually, why they did not act to free the prisoners. All of the defendants state they were physically injured, or they were performing assigned tasks, or they were in shock. The prosecution, however, presents a handwritten SS report, which states the after-action details of the event. The report is particularly damning evidence as it refutes many of the defendants' alibis. The other defendants then claim that Hanna wrote the SS report as a cover-up for her own inadequacies, and that the report is not factual.

When the judge asks Hanna why she did not act to free the prisoners, Hanna attempts an actual response. In essence, she tells the judge that she and the other guards were few in number but responsible to prevent the prisoners from escaping. Hanna said that they could not open the door, because then the prisoners would have been able to escape. Hanna finally states that her failure to act was the only viable alternative at the time, and she again asks the judge what he would have done. The judge ignores her question and asks Hanna if she wrote the SS report. Hanna says she did not, and the judge tells her to offer a handwriting sample to a handwriting expert for comparison to the handwritten report. Hanna appears momentarily panicked, and then says there is no need for a handwriting expert. She claims that she did write the SS report.

Part 2, Chapter 9 Analysis

The trial continues to proceed poorly for Hanna. Her attorney is not particularly adroit and the other defendants and their attorneys continue to place all the blame on Hanna. Michael feels this is unjust, but Hanna's willingness to speak the truth seems to insure she will face a stiff penalty. Hanna's insistence that she did not write the report followed by her startling acquiescence to being the report's author is strange and again provides foreshadowing to later developments in the novel.

Part 2, Chapter 10

Part 2, Chapter 10 Summary

Chapter 10 deviates from the narrative's chronological presentation. Michael, as narrator, remembers several things that happened throughout the period of the trial. Thus, the events in Chapter 10 occur more or less simultaneously with the events described in Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, and 9.

On Sundays, the trials are suspended, and Michael uses his free time to hike and explore the area around his home. He spends a great deal of time walking in the woods and thinking. While in the woods, he realizes that Hanna is illiterate. His epiphany marks a major turning point in the novel, and invites a re-evaluation of Hanna's life.

Michael realizes that Hanna quit her job at Siemens, because she had been offered a promotion. Her promotion would have required her to be literate. Rather than admit her illiteracy, Hanna chose instead to quit her job and join the SS. Hanna took weak and delicate girls under her protection to, Michael believes, make their last weeks of life more bearable. Hanna left the railcar company after she had been offered a promotion. Her promotion would have required her to be literate. Rather than admit her illiteracy, Hanna chose instead to leave the area and seek another job. She did not read Michael's name from his textbooks not, because she didn't care, but because she couldn't read. She didn't read his note. In fact, she destroyed his note, because she couldn't read. Her strange behavior in court can also be explained by her illiteracy. For example, rather than admit being illiterate, she admitted to writing the SS report.

Michael is troubled that Hanna would rather be condemned as a criminal rather than being exposed as illiterate. He does not understand her rationale and, once again, he feels guilty of betraying her.

Part 2, Chapter 10 Analysis

Chapter 10 contains the climax of the narrative structure. When Michael, as well as the novel's reader, realizes that Hanna is illiterate, it invites a complete reevaluation of Hanna's life and actions. Many of her stranger actions are ameliorated in light of her illiteracy. However her central failure to assist those in mortal danger, those for whom she had a responsibility, is not justified by illiteracy - a fact that Michael does not seem to realize. Instead, he continues to feel guilty for what he considers to be a betrayal of Hanna - his internal failure to acknowledge her.

Part 2, Chapter 11

Part 2, Chapter 11 Summary

Chapter 9 returns to the chronological presentation of the trial. The other defendants now habitually blame everything on Hanna, and eventually Hanna entirely gives up her own defense. Michael contemplates telling the judge that Hanna is illiterate, as he believes that fact will partially exonerate Hanna. Michael spends time with friends talking about hypothetical situations and responsibility.

Part 2, Chapter 11 Analysis

Michael's conundrum is whether he should expose Hanna's secret of illiteracy or allow her to incriminate herself through ignorance. His discussions with friends consist of Michael posing hypothetical situations that are morally akin to his own paradigm. He does not receive satisfactory answers from his friends.

Part 2, Chapter 12

Part 2, Chapter 12 Summary

Michael schedules an appointment and visits his rather standoffish father, a professor of philosophy. He presents a dispassionate and impersonal interpretation of his situation and asks for philosophical clarification. His father tells him that adults should decide what is best for their own situation. Thus, Michael should not intervene. Instead, his father says, Michael should convince Hanna that her actions are not in her own best interest.

Part 2, Chapter 12 Analysis

Michael does not tell his father that the situation is personal, but rather explains it in generic terms. His father, however, seems to sense that the situation involves Michael. It is obvious that Michael's relationship to his father is strained and very distant.

Part 2, Chapter 13

Part 2, Chapter 13 Summary

In June, the court suspends local activities for two weeks. The judges and other court officials then travel to Israel where they depose the surviving mother who has not traveled to Germany to testify. During the break Michael spends a large amount of time mentally fantasizing about Hanna, imagining her as a cruel Nazi tyrant dressed in riding boots and slashing a riding whip. He imagines her as perversely sexual and insanely cruel. He then remembers having sex with her. Michael, as narrator, then briefly relates the history of Holocaust literature and notes having read much of it.

Part 2, Chapter 13 Analysis

Michael's mental images of Hanna are striking and violent, but at the same time, he apparently finds them sexually stimulating. He is once again unable to fully understand her actions, and yet he is simultaneously unwilling to ultimately condemn them. Michael's mental image of Hanna dressed as a Nazi foreshadows her appearance at the court sentencing in Part 2, Chapter 17.

Part 2, Chapter 14

Part 2, Chapter 14 Summary

Michael decides to visit the Struthof-Natzweiler concentration camp, the concentration camp nearest to his town. He hikes and hitchhikes toward the camp. He gets a ride from an older man who extemporizes on the reasons individual Nazis murdered the Jews. The man says they didn't hate the Jews - in fact they were completely indifferent to the Jews - it was just their job. They wanted to finish their job so they could go home. Michael asks the man if he had shot Jews and the man becomes enraged and forces Michael to leave the car. Michael walks the rest of the way to the prison camp.

Part 2, Chapter 14 Analysis

The driver is clearly an older Nazi soldier. He talks about a photograph showing a Nazi officer overseeing the execution of Jews. The Nazi in the photograph is somewhat morose, but also somewhat satisfied and even happy that he is performing his job. Michael realizes the man driving the car is the man in the photograph. The driver is representative of the worst form of apathy turned to horror by the Nazi regime and in the narrative serves as a contrast, somewhat, to Hanna's less atrocious form of compliance.

Part 2, Chapter 15

Part 2, Chapter 15 Summary

Michael visits the Struthof-Natzweiler concentration camp and examines the layout and construction of the camp. While walking in the camp he remembers how Hanna always called him 'kid,' and he mentally connects his experiences to the other children that read to Hanna. Over the next days, he continues to try to make sense of Hanna's life and actions. He returns home and spends some days contemplating his own life.

Part 2, Chapter 15 Analysis

Chapter 15 contains a brief description of the Struthof-Natzweiler concentration camp. Michael had intended to visit Auschwitz, instead, but realized he would likely not have enough time to travel to and from the distant concentration camp. The visit helps put Michael into the context of the concentration camps but does not assist him to better understand Hanna.

Part 2, Chapter 16

Part 2, Chapter 16 Summary

When the trial resumes in Germany Michael privately meets with the judge. He intends to tell the judge that Hanna is illiterate. The judge and Michael make small talk, and Michael then leaves without disclosing Hanna's illiteracy.

Part 2, Chapter 16 Analysis

Michael's actions in this short chapter are interesting. He feels he must do the right thing by disclosing Hanna's illiteracy, but at the crucial moment, he instead listens to the judge talk about enjoying being a judge, and then leaves the meeting without disclosing Hanna's secret.

Part 2, Chapter 17

Part 2, Chapter 17 Summary

The trial ends in late June. Hanna is convicted and sentenced to life in prison. On the day of the sentencing, Hanna arrives in court dressed in a severe black suit with a white blouse. Her outfit is reminiscent of an SS uniform and the court spectators are outraged. Michael is appalled at Hanna's dress and, at some level, is relieved to learn she will spend the rest of her life in prison and, hence, beyond contact. Michael notes that throughout the sentencing Hanna stares straight ahead, as if at attention, and never looks back to see if he is in the court.

Part 2, Chapter 17 Analysis

Chapter 17 concludes Part 2 of the novel. Part 2 begins in 1959 but quickly proceeds to 1965. Although the narrative structure of Part 2 is not strictly chronological, the basic structure does allow for a conventionally chronological presentation of major events. Most of the chapters in Part 2 detail the 1965 war crimes trial where Hanna is convicted and sentenced to lifelong imprisonment.

Hanna's courtroom appearance in a simple black and white outfit reminds most court viewers of the Nazi's SS uniform and is an inexplicable outfit for Hanna to have selected. It is, however, reminiscent of Michael's imagined mental picture of Hanna from Part 2, Chapter 13. The narrative does not disclose the specific findings or sentencing of the other defendants, but due to the course of the trial, it is clear that Hanna's sentence is the most severe.

Part 3, Chapter 1

Part 3, Chapter 1 Summary

After the trial, Michael studies intensively and excludes nearly everything else from his life. He goes through the days feeling emotionally numb and takes reckless chances with his health. After some time he becomes quite ill and spends several weeks recuperating. During this time he also, finally, is overcome with uncontrollable emotions. The late 1960's social changes in Germany cause upheaval at the university but Michael remains apart from the demonstrations. He spends many hours reflecting on Germany's Nazi past and thinking about the societal collective guilt. He comes to realize his parents were in fact innocent of wrongdoing and moves beyond holding them responsible for what happened.

Part 3, Chapter 1 Analysis

Part 3 of the novel begins a new period of time for Michael. With Hanna imprisoned he feels finally free to examine his emotional state. He watches society go through changes and upheaval and realizes it to be a form of expression caused by the collective guilt of Germany's historic past. Chapter 1 therefore presents some of the seminal components of one of the novel's primary themes - that of the collective guilt of the Holocaust.

Part 3, Chapter 2

Part 3, Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2 summarizes a period of several years - the events will be further explored in greater detail throughout later chapters. Michael finished law school but does not want to practice law. Instead, he works as a law clerk. He meets a woman named Gertrud who is also a law school student. Michael does not tell Gertrud about Hanna, and when Gertrud becomes pregnant, the two marry in the late 1960s. Michael is never able to emotionally connect with Gertrud, however, and they divorce around 1974. Michael feels an enormous amount of guilt about the divorce, especially because his young daughter has a difficult time accepting it. Michael then takes a few other temporary sexual partners but is never able to emotionally connect with them.

Part 3, Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2 is very similar in narrative construction to Part 2, Chapters 1 and 2 - the chapter spans many years very quickly and presents a series of narrative developments without much comment. Chapter 2 also deviates from a strictly chronological timeline in that is rapidly presents a series of events, which will be revisited in more detail in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. Michael marries, has a daughter, divorces, completes school, and gets a job all in quick succession. These facts as simple facts are not particularly central to the novel and are presented to provide texture. They also illustrate that Michael is emotionally scarred and incapable or unwilling of forming a lasting stable relationship. By presenting the marriage as failed before it essentially begins, the narrative sets a somber tone, which is continued through the next several chapters.

Part 3, Chapter 3

Part 3, Chapter 3 Summary

Chapter 3 returns to the late 1960s when Michael and Gertrud are just starting their relationship. Michael learns that the professor who taught the seminar, which caused him to attend Hanna's trial, has died. He somewhat reluctantly attends the funeral. At the graveside, he meets an old school acquaintance, and the two men discuss the seminar from years before. The school acquaintance asks Michael why he had been so attentive and interested in Hanna. Michael is surprised that the school acquaintance noticed his particular interest in Hanna. He does not answer and, instead, sees a streetcar approaching and says a hurried goodbye and runs off to catch the streetcar, escaping the question.

Part 3, Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter 3 begins to revisit some of the events, which were quickly passed over in Chapter 2. Gertrud tells Michael about the professor's death. He goes to the funeral even though he has no particular desire to attend. It is interesting to note that his former schoolmate, in fact all of his former schoolmates, were aware that Michael was interested in a particular defendant, Hanna, far more than he was interested in the trial *per se*. Michael had felt he was far more discreet and circumspect, and the realization that everyone knew he sat and stared at Hanna is unsettling. Instead of facing the situation, he takes an opportunity to escape by streetcar, and then realizes he has not ridden a streetcar since Hanna moved away.

Part 3, Chapter 4

Part 3, Chapter 4 Summary

Chapter 4, like Chapter 3, returns to the late 1960s when Michael and Gertrud are just starting their relationship. Michael and Gertrud graduate from law school. Michael does not want to be a lawyer and instead finds a job researching legal history. Gertrud feels this is an escape from responsibility and, although he agrees, Michael continues to work as a historian. He spends time studying the laws of the Third Reich and ponders the nature of the law. He wonders if the law is simply the written word, or if it is what is enforced, or if it is instead what should be enforced. He also begins to read books he had previously read and finds solace in the repetition.

Part 3, Chapter 4 Analysis

The chronology of the events described in Chapters 3 and 4 is not firmly established. The events described in each chapter happen during a general period of Michael's life, but the sequence is not established. Instead of begin a recounting of events, therefore, the two chapters, taken in the context of Chapter 2, mark a gradual resolution for Michael. He begins to realize, finally, that he has been emotionally detached for many years. He realizes that he seeks to escape from life in general although he is not yet ready to make fundamental changes. Chapter 4 also contains insight into the legal process and provides, at least for Michael, the meaning of living in a society of laws, which govern moral conduct.

Part 3, Chapter 5

Part 3, Chapter 5 Summary

Michael and Gertrud separate and later divorce. Michael continues to read, because he is unable to sleep very much. He begins to read aloud to himself, because it helps him to relax. He slowly realizes he is, in fact, reading aloud to Hanna even though she is not present. He buys a tape recorder and begins to record the books. He reads numerous books and then packages up all of the cassette tapes and mails them to Hanna in prison. He continues to read daily, always recording the reading, and sends many tapes to Hanna. He begins to write his own material, which he also records and sends to Hanna. However, he never sends any personal notes or communication beyond the text read onto the tapes.

Part 3, Chapter 5 Analysis

Michael has once again become Hanna's reader, an action, which gives the title to the novel. His actions demonstrate that he has been able to move beyond simply condemning Hanna and accept her as a friend. The transition is not complete, however, because even while he reads to her, providing her with something he feels she needs and enjoys, he does not attempt to contact her personally. The image of Michael, a divorced father in his early 30s, reading hour after hour into a tape recorder for the enjoyment of a convicted Nazi war criminal in her mid-50s is strange and pathetic. He is, in a way, unable to escape his subservient role and instead comes to accept it. The narrative makes it evident that Michael records literally hundreds of hours of tapes over many, many years.

Part 3, Chapter 6

Part 3, Chapter 6 Summary

After sending tapes to Hanna for four years, Michael finally receives a thank-you note from Hanna. The handwriting is crude and childish, and Michael realizes that Hanna has learned to read and write. The knowledge makes him happy. Hanna then regularly writes to Michael, and he finds her letters enjoyable and keenly insightful, although he never responds beyond sending tape after tape. He records a book and mails it to Hanna without any personal correspondence. Hanna writes back and comments on the book.

Part 3, Chapter 6 Analysis

Hanna learns how to read and write and thus eliminates the shame of illiteracy that has, quite literally, ruined her life. One can only speculate how different things would have been for Hanna, not to mention Michael, had she received adequate education in her early years. Michael's actions are poignant. He is unable to completely sever his ties to Hanna even, as he is unwilling to engage her in a more open relationship. He plays the part of a delicate and weak child reading aloud, reminiscent of the Auschwitz concentration camp victims of over three decades ago. Even when Hanna begins to write back to him, he does not vary from his role as the reader.

Part 3, Chapter 7

Part 3, Chapter 7 Summary

In 1985, Michael receives a letter from the warden of the prison where Hanna is serving her sentence. Michael learns that Hanna will be eligible for release in about one year. The warden is famous for progressive reforms, and she requests that Michael take an active part in re-socializing Hanna after her release. Michael is troubled by the news that Hanna will be free but decides he will assist her to successfully re-enter society. However, he procrastinates responding to the warden and the months slip by. After about a year, the warden finally telephones Michael and repeats her request. Michael agrees to help. Hanna has been granted a release from prison.

Part 3, Chapter 7 Analysis

Michael continues in the inaction of inertia. He decides to help Hanna but takes no outward action. He continues to read and send tapes but does not respond to either Hanna or the warden. Hanna will have served eighteen years of a life sentence in prison, and during these many years, Michael has felt a certain security in the fact that Hanna is beyond his reach, or, perhaps more correctly, he is beyond her reach.

Part 3, Chapter 8

Part 3, Chapter 8 Summary

Michael travels to the prison where he briefly meets the warden and then he meets Hanna. He sees her sitting in the yard and is stunned by her aged appearance. Hanna has grown fat and frumpy while Michael's mind's-eye picture of her has not changed from the time she was his lover and in her mid-30s. He sits by her and remembers that she used to smell of soap, perfume and sex. Now, she smells like an old woman. Hanna and Michael make small talk. Hanna is, at first, very excited to see Michael. When she discerns that he is emotionally distant and no longer a child, the sparkle goes out of her eye. Michael tells Hanna, briefly, about his life since their relationship, and then he bids her farewell and returns home.

Part 3, Chapter 8 Analysis

The Hanna of Michael's imagination has remained young and attractive. He has never mentally progressed from finding her an intensely sexual being, capable of possessing him completely. When he finally sees her in the prison, she is over 60 years old, dressed in prison garb, and not particularly attractive or even very clean. Hanna is, at first, happy to see Michael after so many years but his constrained demeanor quickly saddens her. Both Hanna and Michael realize that reality has progressed while their memories have not.

Part 3, Chapter 9

Part 3, Chapter 9 Summary

Hanna will be released one week after Michael's visit. During that time, he finds and rents a furnished apartment where Hanna will be able to live. He locates a job for her, and takes care of many of the small aspects that are necessary for a prisoner when leaving prison. He performs the actions mechanically with a feeling of resigned duty. He calls the warden and discusses the future. He then talks to Hanna and asks her how she would like to handle the release and relocation. Hanna jokingly tells Michael to plan it all out because, she says, he likes to plan things. Her lighthearted attitude and comments angers Michael, and he curtly ends their conversation. Michael notices that her voice, over the telephone, sounds the same as it did many decades ago.

Part 3, Chapter 9 Analysis

Michael performs his assumed responsibilities competently, but without much enthusiasm. He is worried about being in contact with Hanna and ponders the amount of time he will spend in her presence. Nevertheless, he secures a good job and decent living conditions at his own expense. When Hanna refers to Michael's planning abilities, he is angered, apparently still harboring some deep-seated resentment about the way she treated him many years ago.

Part 3, Chapter 10

Part 3, Chapter 10 Summary

At daybreak on the day that Hanna is to be released, she hangs herself in her prison cell. Michael arrives at the prison and is greeted by the warden who informs him of Hanna's suicide. The warden is distressed over Hanna's action and closely questions Michael about any potential warning signs. Michael appears largely unemotional but is somewhat surprised. Michael and the warden discuss Hanna for some time. The warden tells Michael about Hanna's struggle with illiteracy. They proceed to Hanna's cell where Michael reviews the books that Hanna has obtained - he notes that most of them are Holocaust-related. He then notices a newspaper clipping, which contains a photograph of his graduation. He wonders how Hanna learned of his graduation or obtained the photograph. The warden then tells Michael that Hanna learned to read by obtaining the books Michael had recorded, and then following along with the recording, as she deciphered the printed words.

The warden then gives Michael a tin full of money and a note. The note is addressed to the warden. It instructs the warden to give the money, a considerable but not huge sum, to Michael and request that he convey the money to the surviving daughter who wrote the book that incriminated Hanna, to allow the daughter to determine how the funds should be dispersed. The warden then tells Michael that for many years Hanna had been a respected and productive inmate who worked hard and enjoyed a solid rapport with her fellow inmates. Then over the past few years, Hanna had become more and more withdrawn and solitary. She stopped exercising and started over-eating and became fat. She stopped taking care of herself, and her personal hygiene suffered. Hanna died fat and smelly, alone and isolated. Michael asks to see Hanna's body and the warden agrees. They proceed to the prison infirmary, where Hanna is laid out in a death pose. Her head is tied into a coffin pose, until *rigor mortis* sets in.

Part 3, Chapter 10 Analysis

Hanna's suicide does not bring any peace to Michael, though the warden is visibly disturbed. The warden, a progressive and successful reformist, searches for meaning or warning signs, which could be used to improve future outcomes. Michael provides no significant input for the warden. It is ironic to note that Michael, essentially, taught Hanna to read. The tapes that he provided allowed her to follow along with the printed word and eventually learn how to read alone. Thus, their unequal relationship ends on a typically unbalanced note.

Michael notes with anger that Hanna left her final note to the warden and did not leave anything for him. He takes the tin and the money and agrees to convey it to the book's author. Michael will fulfill the last request Hanna makes of him.

Part 3, Chapter 11

Part 3, Chapter 11 Summary

Michael eventually travels to the United States of America on a business trip, probably in 1984. While in the States, he takes a trip to New York and visits the author of the book that incriminated Hanna and the other guards. He presents Hanna's money to the author, and she asks Michael if the money is intended to buy absolution for Hanna's actions. Michael does not know how to respond. The two characters discuss reading, and Michael discloses the nature of his sexual relationship with Hanna. The author quickly discerns Michael's emotional damage and recounts his life story, as she imagines it. She is incredibly accurate and cautions Michael that Hanna had been a particularly brutal woman. Michael again urges her to take the money, asking her to donate it to some worthy cause. The author refuses to take the money, but she does keep the tin, noting that she had entered Auschwitz with a similar tin, which had been promptly stolen. She tells Michael to dispose of the money, as he sees fit. Michael later contributes the money to a Jewish illiteracy group, in the name of Hanna Schmitz.

Part 3, Chapter 11 Analysis

The meeting between Michael and the author provides the falling action, or dynouement, of the novel. The emotionally damaged Michael has felt numb for so long he no longer realizes he has been damaged by Hanna. The author immediately sees Michael's life story laid out before her and gets all of the seminal details essentially correct. The author tells Michael that Hanna was a particularly brutal woman, and she also refuses to accept Hanna's money, seeing it as an attempt to purchase absolution. Instead, she tells Michael to dispose of the money while she keeps the tin, noting that such a tin had many uses in Auschwitz. Her symbolic and gracious gesture alleviates some of Michael's suffering without unduly compromising her own position.

Part 3, Chapter 12

Part 3, Chapter 12 Summary

After several weeks, Michael receives in the mail a computerized thank-you note acknowledging the receipt of Hanna's donation. Michael takes the note and drives to the cemetery where Hanna is buried, and visits her gravesite. It is the only time he visits.

Ten years pass by and Michael, about 1994, decides to write Hanna's story. He is now in his early 50s, and he tells the story in his mind over and over again. He eventually writes it down. He writes down the story, which is, in fact, the novel itself.

Part 3, Chapter 12 Analysis

Michael says his final goodbye to Hanna and is, perhaps, finally free of her influence. Although he largely still loves Hanna, she has been predominantly a negative force in his life since their first days together.

The novel closes with a meta-fictional technique, as Michael, the narrator, claims to have authored the very book itself. In effect, he is the protagonist, the narrator, and the author in what he perceives as the story of Hanna's life. However, the story is actually the story of Michael's life in, which Hanna plays a dominant role. The novel's self-reference, and the narrator's claim to authorship, are interesting literary techniques. Of course, Michael Berg is not the author. Bernhard Schlink is the author, but Michael's claim makes the novel seem autobiographical, lends it an authentic texture, and gives it quite a serious tone.

Characters

Michael Berg

Michael Berg is the protagonist and narrator of the novel. He is born in 1943 in West Germany and grows up under the foreign occupation after World War II in an atmosphere heavily tainted by Nazi atrocities. When he is 15-years-old he meets the 36-year-old Hanna Schmitz, who seduces him and has a sexual relationship with him for several months. Hanna then abruptly disappears, and Michael blames himself, feeling she must be punishing him for doing something wrong.

Michael next meets Hanna in a courtroom when he is in his early 20s. He is a university student studying law and attends a random war crimes trial as a course assignment. He is amazed to discover that Hanna is on trial for war crimes. He learns that she was a Nazi, a member of the SS, and served as a prison guard at Auschwitz, where she took part in wartime atrocities. Michael watches the proceedings closely and deals with emotional turbulence while he watches Hanna be convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

In the years after the trial Michael marries, has a daughter, and divorces. He then lives through a somewhat meandering life without relationships or much meaning and eventually strikes up a correspondence, of sorts, with the imprisoned Hanna.

After many years of imprisonment, Hanna is scheduled to be released. Michael arranges an apartment and a job and then discovers that Hanna has hanged herself. Michael then tries to sort out his emotional state and, eventually, begins to write about his experiences.

Hanna Schmitz

Hanna Schmitz, the only major character in the novel beyond the narrator, was born in a German region of Rumania in 1922. She moved to Berlin at age 16 and worked in a factory for several years. During World War II, she joined the SS at age 21 and served as a prison guard at Auschwitz through the end of the war. While a prison guard she was involved with several war atrocities, one of, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of women.

Hanna is illiterate and one of her primary motivations is to conceal her illiteracy from the world. In order to avoid discovery she makes numerous poor and seemingly erratic choices in her life, including a sort of wandering life where she has very few friends and apparently does little besides working menial jobs and going to the movies.

When she is 36, she seduces the 15-year-old Michael Berg and has frequent sex with him for several months. She treats him harshly, even whipping him across the face with a leather belt on one occasion, and excludes him from nearly all aspects of her life

beyond their sexual intercourse. Once again threatened with being exposed as an illiterate, Hanna abandons her relationship with Michael without any explanation or warning, and moves away to another town.

Hanna is eventually, in 1965, tried as a war criminal. She is convicted, largely due to her illiteracy, and sentenced to life in prison. While in prison, she finally learns to read and write and begins a prolonged correspondence with Michael. After 18 years, at age 61, she is scheduled to be paroled. However, instead of facing the world outside of prison, she hangs herself in her cell.

Michael's Parents

Mr. and Mrs. Berg, otherwise unnamed in the novel, are minor characters. The Bergs live in Germany during World War II but did not materially participate in the conflict. Mrs. Berg appears to be a traditional homemaker. Mr. Berg is a university professor of philosophy and has published a few books. Mr. Berg is a distant father and largely emotionally uninvolved in his children's lives. Mrs. Berg is a proper and typical mother.

Michael's Siblings

Michael Berg is the third of four children. He has an older brother, an older sibling, and a younger sister, though they are all minor characters in the novel. His older brother appears to share a typical teasing rapport with Michael while his younger sister appears to be a typical pre-teen girl, interested in clothes and friends.

Sophie

Sophie is a classmate of Michael. She is apparently attractive, with long brown hair. Sophie and Michael meet in 11th grade and develop a rapport, which evolves into an infatuation typical for their age. During the school year, Sophie and Michael spend large amounts of time socializing and studying. Sophie then is diagnosed with tuberculosis and sent to a sanatorium, where she recuperates for three years. When she returns home, she again engages in a brief relationship with Michael. The two characters have sex, which leaves Sophie cold. She realizes Michael is emotionally detached and breaks off the relationship.

Hanna's Attorney

Hanna's attorney, a minor character in the novel, is an unnamed young attorney without much experience. He is appointed to her case by the court. Although he is inexperienced he is over-zealous, which irritates the judge, and does not defend Hanna particularly adroitly - Hanna is sentenced to life in prison. Hanna's attorney is contrasted in the novel to the other attorneys of the other defendants. The other attorneys are older, more experienced, and ex-Nazis themselves. Their defense strategy is less

flamboyant, more traditional, and far more effective. Their defendants are exonerated or sentenced to short periods of incarceration.

The Author of the Holocaust Book

Several hundred women prisoners of Auschwitz are evacuated to the west only to die in a church as it burns down. The conflagration is survived by only two people - a woman and her daughter. Hanna Schmitz was an SS guard who could have opened the church doors and allowed the trapped women to escape the first. Instead, she did not open the doors and many died. The woman and her daughter survived the remainder of the war. The daughter grew up and, in the mid-1960s, wrote a dispassionate book detailing her experiences in Auschwitz and the fire. The book does not name Hanna or other guards but, coupled with SS records, is particularly incriminating of Hanna and her co-defendants at a Nazi war crimes trial.

The woman also remembers, at the trial, that Hanna used to enlist delicate or sickly girls to read to her at the concentration camp. This revelation is particularly shocking to Michael Berg. Nearly two decades after the end of the war crimes trial, Michael seeks out the woman, and they discuss Hanna and Michael's relationship. The woman is particularly gracious and generous with Michael, considering the circumstances. Although a fairly minor character in the novel, the unnamed author plays a pivotal role in the narrative structure.

The Driver to Schirmeck/Struthof-Natzweiler

Michael gets a lift from an unnamed driver and the two characters talk about the Nazi Holocaust. The driver claims that the Nazis didn't hate the Jews. In fact, they had no feelings about them whatsoever. The driver then talks about a photograph showing a Nazi officer overseeing the execution of some Jews. He says the officer appeared a little morose, but also a little happy and eminently satisfied that he was doing his job. Michael realizes the driver is the man in the photograph, which outrages the driver. Although the driver is a minor character in the novel, he does represent an entire class of German citizens involved in the war with a substantially distorted perspective.

Gertrud

Gertrud is a law student who meets Michael Berg in the late 1960s. Gertrud becomes pregnant and thereafter marries Michael. She delivers a daughter and then begins a professional career. Throughout their marriage Michael is emotionally unavailable and the two characters divorce. Their daughter is sent to boarding school. Gertrud is, surprisingly, a minor character in the novel appearing only in a few brief passages.

Michael's Daughter

Michael and Gertrud have a daughter who is born around 1969. Michael fails to emotionally bond with the daughter and after Michael and Gertrud divorce the daughter is sent to boarding school. It is interesting to note that Michael feels considerable distress about the emotional distance that separates him from his own father, and yet his is unable or unwilling to bridge the emotional distance with his own daughter. Michael's daughter would be approximately 15 years old at the time of Hanna's suicide - the same age as Michael was when he first met Hanna. The unnamed daughter is a minor character in the novel appearing in only a few brief passages.

Objects/Places

Hanna's Apartment

Hanna Schmitz lives in a furnished, working-class apartment on an upper floor in an urban tenement. The apartment is largely unremarkable although Michael Berg will remember numerous minute details about the apartment and the building even long after it is razed. Hanna's apartment door has a window through which her apartment's interior is visible. The apartment also has, at least, a kitchen and a bedroom separated by a hallway.

The Railcar

Hanna works as a railcar conductor for about 8 years. Michael attempts to visit Hanna on the railcar while she is working, but she ignores him and, later, blames him for ignoring her. Michael thereafter equates railcars with emotional distress and avoids riding on them for many years. The railcar is the only place that Michael and Hanna's lives intersect, however briefly, outside of the bounds, which Hanna sets on their relationship.

Michael's Vacation Courtesy Note

One vacation morning Michael leaves a note for Hanna telling her he has gone out for breakfast and will return shortly. Hanna wakens and finds the note but being illiterate, cannot read it and fears it is some sort of goodbye note. She destroys the note and, when Michael returns, slashes him across the face with a leather belt in a rage. Michael apologizes and accepts her blame and then tries, unsuccessfully, to find the note. The missed communication is reminiscent of many other similar circumstances in literature and also serves as a metaphor of how incapable Hanna is of truly communicating with Michael.

Mr. Berg's Home Library

When Hanna visits Michael's house she is particularly interested in the books within Mr. Berg's library. She asks Michael to read to her from one of the books that Mr. Berg authored - a complex treatise on philosophy. The library is symbolic of the vast distance that separates the literate, educated Michael from the illiterate, uneducated Hanna.

Public Swimming Pool

Michael and his high school friends spend most of their free time in and around a public swimming pool. The pool is therefore the center of Michael's social life, away from

Hanna. The other schoolchildren around the pool, unencumbered by a semi-abusive and age-inappropriate sexual relationship, frolic and enjoy themselves. Michael enjoys the camaraderie but stands apart from it. Michael is reclining at the pool when he sees Hanna, in the distance, for the last time in their relationship. Instead of jumping up, he simply looks at her and then she vanishes.

War Crimes Court

Following World War II, many Nazis were tried in various courts for war crimes and participation in atrocities. The type of court depended upon the nature of the alleged offenses. Hanna Schmitz and her co-defendants are tried in a local court, which consists of three judges and six prominent local citizens. The novel contains a large amount of introspection about the courts, the law, and collective guilt. Much of Part 2 of the novel occurs in the war crimes court.

Auschwitz Concentration Camp and Satellite Work Camps

An infamous concentration camp operated by the Nazis during World War II. Auschwitz was the site of countless atrocities and murders sponsored by the Third Reich. Hanna Schmitz was an SS prison guard at Auschwitz and another satellite work camp. Two decades after the conclusion of the war, Hanna is convicted for atrocities she committed while a guard at and near Auschwitz.

Struthof-Natzweiler Concentration Camp

A less-known concentration camp operated by the Nazis during World War II. Struthof-Natzweiler was the site of countless atrocities and murders sponsored by the Third Reich. Michael Berg visits Struthof-Natzweiler during a recess in the trial of Hanna Schmitz - it is the closest concentration camp to his town.

Selections

Every month new forced laborers, prisoners of the Nazis, were sent to the work camps to replace those who were worn out, hurt, sick, or otherwise incapable of performing manual labor. Those who were being replaced were 'selected' by the prison guards to be returned from the work camp to Auschwitz where they faced certain murder and cremation. Hanna was responsible, every month, for selecting about ten women or girls to be sent away for execution. Hanna routinely selected delicate or sickly girls whom she had caused to read to her aloud.

The Survivor's Book

One of the few survivors of an atrocity perpetrated, in part, by Hanna Schmitz, wrote a book detailing her wartime experiences at and near Auschwitz. The book does not specifically identify Hanna but, coupled with other sources of information, is particularly damning at Hanna's trial where it is presented in manuscript form. The book is eventually published in multiple languages, including German and English.

Books on Tape

After Hanna has been in prison for many years Michel begins a sort of correspondence with her. He knows she is illiterate and likes to be read to, so he reads books aloud and records his voice. He then sends cassette tapes to Hanna so she can experience the books while in prison. Hanna eventually begins to obtain copies of the books Michael has recorded, and she teaches herself to read by following along in the book, as Michael reads on tape.

Hanna's Tin and Money

One of the few possessions that Hanna has in prison is a small tin in, which she keeps a considerable, but not huge, amount of money. Her suicide note requests that Michael take the money to the author who wrote the book used to incriminate Hanna at her trial. Michael takes the money and the tin to the author who refuses the money but graciously accepts the tin, Hanna's unintended gift. The author notes that such a tin had many uses at Auschwitz and that her own tin had been stolen within a few days of her entrance into the camp. The tin is, therefore, symbolically replaced and serves as a tiny link between Hanna and the author. Michael later donates the money to an illiteracy group.

Social Sensitivity

O riginally published in German as Der Voleser in 1995, Bernhard Schlink's The Reader deals with one of the weightiest possible social concerns: the Nazi Holocaust that wiped out over six million people— the majority of whom were Jewish, although Slavs, gypsies, Communists, homosexuals, and Jehovah's Witnesses were also targeted.

Set in the 1960s, the novel is concerned with the legacy of collective guilt inherited by the post-war generation, and it raises important questions about complicity and what could have been done differently. Schlink attempts to make his subject-matter manageable by reducing his focus to a single cross-generational relationship—that between the narrator, Michael Berg, and the much older Hanna Schmitz, with whom he has his first sexual encounter.

Michael initially meets Hanna when he is stricken by hepatitis outside her apartment block. She comes to his aid, and months later he visits her to thank her for her assistance. Michael is clearly attracted to her and, in spite of their differences in age, the pair begin a relationship in which Hanna is the dominant partner. Michael's involvement with Hanna is analogous to the post-war generation's engagement with the past.

When years later he learns that his lover was a guard at a concentration camp, he undergoes a period of angst, which forces him to dredge up not only his own emotional past, but also his nation's recent history. The questions he is forced to ask himself are akin to those faced by Germany in the post-war years when he, like many in his country, has to question how he could have loved a Nazi and the extent to which he was seduced and deceived. The novel is concerned with both personal and public justice, and the tensions between the two.

Techniques

One of the most important issues raised by The Reader is the subjectivity of human justice and the dangers of reducing right and wrong to simplified binary categories.

Hanna's acts are certainly never condoned.

However, the narrative raises questions about her motivation and demonstrates how socio-economic pressures can foster evil regimes. Indeed, as Hanna asserts towards the end of her life, "I always had the feeling that no one understood me anyway, that no one knew who I was and what made me do this or that". Schlink also presents his readers with different levels of justice and uses the technique of an unreliable narrator, himself recounting unreliable evidence to reveal the fundamental subjectivity of all versions of history. Michael himself is a procrastinator, as he muses: But today I can recognize that events back then were part of a life-long pattern in which thinking and doing have either come together or failed to come together—I think, I reach a conclusion, I turn the conclusion into a decision, and then I discover that acting on the decision is something else entirely, and that doing so may proceed from the decision, but then again it may not. Often enough in my life I have done things I had not decided to do.

He makes this admission at the commencement of his version of events and it is certainly endorsed by his failure to speak or act at times of crisis, such as Hanna's trial.

Indeed, if one juxtaposes Michael's nonactions with Hanna's actions there is little to choose between the two, and both lead to evil. Schlink's aim above all is not to make his readers judge, but rather to bring them to a point of self-awareness at which they are able to register that it was ordinary people like Michael and Hanna who facilitated the atrocities committed by the Nazis.

The Holocaust was not simply the result of a giant, sweeping force of evil, but was caused through complicity and passivity— traits possessed by most people.

Themes

Themes

The Reader addresses the legacy of guilt that the Holocaust has left behind, and Hanna's question to the judge at her trial, "What would you have done?" is the question that every reader must ask him or herself. The extent to which Hanna is guilty is a complex question and one that Michael attempts to unravel when he demands: But could Hanna's shame at being illiterate be sufficient reason for her behavior at the trial or in the camp? To accept exposure as a criminal for fear of being exposed as an illiterate? To commit crimes to avoid the same thing?

Readers may ask themselves these same questions. If Hanna's motive was fear of exposure—why opt for the horrible exposure as a criminal over the harmless exposure as an illiterate? Or did she believe she could escape exposure altogether? Was she simply stupid? And was she vain enough, and evil enough, to become a criminal simply to avoid exposure?

On the one hand it appears that Hanna had no alternatives in a society that stigmatizes illiteracy and values learning. On the other, the not altogether reliable evidence presented at the trial suggests that she took pleasure in carrying out her orders with efficiency and even cruelty. Since he is attempting to reconcile matters for himself, Michael Berg cannot be relied upon for a definitive answer. His recollection that Hanna was startled when he suggested "horse" as a suitable nickname for her leads him to conclude that she was alarmed because of comparisons made between herself and a particularly sadistic guard known as "mare". Yet later, Michael concludes that Hanna was neither stupid, nor evil, nor vain. Instead, he argues that Hanna is struggling for some kind of private truth and justice whose precise meaning must elude all others. Michael's explanation is evasive, and its credibility is open to debate, since he too is attempting to rationalize his own failure to speak out in support of his former lover.

There are also a number of important class tensions in play in The Reader, of which Hanna's illiteracy is only one symptom. As a member of the working class, the only time that Hanna is given a chance to speak is at her trial, and even then she is not able to tell her story as she sees it, but must instead answer a series of questions aimed at incriminating her. We are never given any evidence to suggest that she is, before the trial, haunted by recollections of her past and at least a partial explanation for this must be that Hanna is a character who is forced to live in the present. She needs to earn a sufficient living to stay alive, all the while concealing her inability to read. Unlike the leisured middle classes, she does not have the luxury to spend time contemplating life as both Michael and his philosopher father are able to. Whilst Michael is more or less oblivious to class tensions, Hanna is deeply uncomfortable when he cooks for her in his parents' home. Thus while he is able to inhabit both worlds, Hanna registers the material difference in their backgrounds and feels culturally displaced.

Guilt and Collective Guilt

The novel is suffused with guilt. The entire nation of Germany reels with the collective guilt of the Holocaust. Hanna is guilty of war crimes. Michael is guilty of betrayal. Michael's father is guilty of being a poor father. The driver to Schirmeck/Struthof-Natzweiler is guilty of performing executions. Even some of the Holocaust survivors feel guilty for surviving. Nazi sympathizes and collaborators are found in all areas of Michael's life. As a student, he has friends whose parents were executioners, informants and soldiers. As an adult, he feels guilty for being a divorced father, for betraying Hanna in thought, for not having a better relationship with his father. Michael's very employment as a legal historian focuses on guilt - he seeks answers from the past about what was wrong and what was right.

There are very few characters in the novel from Hanna's generation that Michael views as essentially innocent. For example, he notes that the villagers who testify at the trials and even the defense attorneys are all complicit in hiding their collective guilt - much the same way that Hanna hides her illiteracy.

Many of the novel's major plot developments are based around the supposed resolution of guilt. Nearly a third of the novel deals with Hanna's trial, which definitively establishes her guilt. Another third of the novel deals with Michael's reaction to her guilt. In one sense, Michael and Hanna's relationship can even be interpreted as allegorical for the Germanic generational conflict caused by the collective guilt of the Holocaust. Michael even alludes to this allegorical relationship several times, and events in the novel, such as the university student demonstrations, support it.

Illiteracy

Hanna, one of the novel's primary characters, is illiterate. She is ashamed of her illiteracy and puts forward a great effort to conceal it. Even her presumably closest companion, Michael, does not realize she is illiterate for several years. Hanna's illiteracy leads her to make numerous seemingly erratic decisions. For example, when offered a promotion at both Siemens and the railcar company she declines the promotions and flees the area, because she realizes the promotions would require literacy. During her trial, she signs unread affidavits and later attempts to dispute the contents. She is unable to read the written evidence presented against her and even claims to have written some of the evidence to avoid being exposed as illiterate.

While Hanna was a concentration camp prison guard, she would routinely have young girls brought to her private quarters where she would cause them to read aloud. The other guards and the prisoners assumed, incorrectly, that Hanna was repeatedly molesting and abusing the girls. When given the opportunity Hanna would then send the readers away to execution to keep her illiteracy secret.

Hanna would rather be condemned as a war criminal and a sexual deviant than be exposed as illiterate. She sacrifices her career advancements and what few

acquaintances and friends she has, and lives a life of wandering and forced moves to avoid the perceived shame of illiteracy. Hanna's illiteracy stands in stark contrast to Michael's scholastic achievements - not only is he an accomplished legal historian, he writes Hanna's story, and he educates Hanna by reading to her.

Generational Relationships

The relationship between Michael and Hanna is unusual. When their relationship begins, Michael is 15 and Hanna is 36. When their relationship ends, at the time of Hanna's suicide, Michael is 40, and Hanna is 61. Hanna was born before the Holocaust and World War II and was an active participant in those events. Michael was born in the last months of the war and grew up in an occupied society, wracked with guilt and internationally condemned for its previous activities. Hanna belongs to the generation of Michael's parents, yet he finds in her his lifelong love. Michael also has abortive relationships with other women, Sophie and Gertrud, for example. The collapses are of his own generation. Yet, he is unable to connect to them in any significant way. Michael is similarly unable to connect to his child. He is only able to find a meaningful relationship with Hanna, who represents many of the worst aspects the past has to offer.

When Michael is in law school, he spends a great deal of time thinking about the concepts of collective guilt for which he, along with his fellow students, universally condemns his parents' generation. The culture of the times is presented as being deeply divided by a consciousness of deliberate and painful separation of generations. This is signified in the novel by, for example, the student uprisings. Michael eventually comes to feel this deliberate distance between generations was a mistake that did not serve any constructive purpose. Yet, the fact remains that the only durable relationships presented in the novel of Michael and Hanna, and the Holocaust survivor and her daughter, span the divisive generational conflict found in post-Holocaust West Germany.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first-person limited point of view. Michael Berg, the novel's primary character and protagonist, is also the narrator and in the final chapter claims to be the author of the supposed autobiographical text. This meta-fictional element constructs an artificial credibility within the text, which is supplemented by the authoritative writing.

The first-person point of view, coupled with the fictionally autobiographical construction, gives the text a gritty and believable texture. Michael is a sympathetic character even though he is not, in many ways, a particularly likable character. He is introverted, emotionally distant, and fairly self-centered. Nevertheless, the novel's construction allows Michael to present himself in a favorable light. Also of interest, the character of Hanna Schmitz, an illiterate Nazi war criminal, is constructed to be somewhat sympathetic, because access to her is controlled entirely from Michael's viewpoint. Since Michael finds her sympathetic, the reader also finds her sympathetic.

Setting

In general, the novel is set in post World War II West Germany although the narrator does make one short trip to the United States of America. The setting of West Germany is critical to the success and meaning of the novel as the entire plot development and many thematic elements of the novel are dependant upon the time and location of post-Holocaust Germany. Individual scenes of the novel are set, for example, in a small German town, a university, a nondescript courtroom, and a concentration camp.

The novel is divided into three parts, the bulk of each taking place in a particular time period. Part 1 of the novel takes place in 1958, Part 2 takes place in 1965, and Part 3 takes place about 1983. However, the novel does cover numerous events, which take place outside of these three specific years. References are made to minor events as early as 1922 and 1936 and as late as 1993. Hanna's war record extends from 1943 to 1945, and Michael's short-lived marriage takes place from about 1969 to around 1974. Finally, Michael claims to write the novel circa 1993. Thus, the novel describes events spanning more than seven decades. While the novel's construction includes many out-of-chronological-sequence scenes, the timeline is internally consistent and fairly easy to decipher. The bulk of the novel is presented in traditionally chronological sequence.

Language and Meaning

The novel is translated into easily accessible English. Dialogue is believable and taught, with age-appropriate language used by Michael, as he matures throughout the text. The paragraphing and chapter divisions are appropriate and aid in the novel's clarity. The

novel purports to be an autobiographical account of events written several years or decades after the events described. The tone is rich and complex, and the structure is interesting. The description of events is interspersed with a large amount of brooding and often dark introspection into the nature of morality and history.

The character of Michael can be viewed as allegorical for the entire younger generation of Germans born into post-Holocaust West Germany, while Hanna is allegorical of the entire older generation of Germans who participated in the Holocaust to one degree or another. Other characters, for example Michael's father and the driver to Schirmeck/Struthof-Natzweiler, bracket Hanna between their stances and level of participation in perpetrating the Holocaust. In this sense, the novel can be interpreted as a fictionalized interpretation of a period of upheaval in the sociopolitical history of Germany.

Structure

The 218-page novel is divided into three parts of 83, 80, and 55 pages in length. Parts 1 and 2 contain 17 chapters each, while Part 3 contains 12 chapters. The three parts of the novel are presented in chronological order. Part 1 occurs when Michael is a boy and Hanna a mature woman, Part 2 primarily occurs when Michael is a young man, and Part 3 primarily occurs when Michael is a grown man. The three divisions of the novel assist in clearly defining the plot and thematic developments.

Chapters vary in length but in general are quite short and average less than five pages each. The chapter numbers start over in each part of the novel. For example, there are three Chapter 1s, etc. Each chapter, in general, deals with either a specific pivotal event, a limited time period, which contains a related set of events, or introspection on a particular topic. Of course, there is overlap within these three divisions but the short length of each chapter divides events and narrative pondering into easily accessible units. For example, Part 2, Chapter 9 deals with certain legal developments and courtroom events during Hanna's war crimes trial. Part 1, Chapter 2 deals with Michael's memories of and feelings about a specific apartment building in the town where he grew up. Part 3, Chapter 4 is largely devoted to Michael's pondering on the nature of the law and his involvement in the legal profession.

Quotes

"When rescue came, it was almost an assault. The woman seized my arm and pulled me through the dark entryway into the courtyard. Up above there were lines strung from window to window, loaded with laundry. Wood was stacked in the courtyard; in an open workshop a saw screamed and shavings flew. The woman turned on the tap, washed my hand first, and then cupped both of hers and threw water in my face. I dried myself with a handkerchief." (Part 1, Chapter 1, p. 4)

"I waited in the hall while she changed her clothes in the kitchen. The door was open a crack. She took off the smock and stood there in a bright green slip. Two stockings were hanging over the back of the chair. Picking on up, she gathered it into a roll using one hand, then the other, then balanced on one leg as she rested the heel of her other foot against her knee, leaned forward, slipped the rolled-up stocking over the tip of her foot, put her foot on the chair as she smoothed the stocking up over her calf, knee, and thigh, then bent to one side as she fastened the stocking to the garter belt. Straightening up, she took her foot off the chair and reached for the other stocking.

"I couldn't take my eyes off her. Her neck and shoulders, her breasts, which the slip veiled rather than concealed, her hips which stretched the slip tight as she proper her foot on her knee and then set it on the chair, her leg, pale and naked, then shimmering in the silky stocking.

"She felt me looking at her. As she was reaching for the other stocking, she paused, turned towards the door, and looked straight at me. I can't describe what kind of look it was - surprised, skeptical, knowing, reproachful. I turned red. For a fraction of a second I stood there, my face burning. Then I couldn't take it any more. I fled out of the apartment, down the stairs, and into the street." (Part 1, Chapter 4, pp. 13-14)

"I didn't look up when she came into the kitchen, until she was standing by the tub. She was holding a big towel in her outstretched arms. 'Come!' I turned my back as I stood up and climbed out of the tub. From behind, she wrapped me in the towel from head to food and rubbed me dry. Then she let the towel fall to the floor. I didn't dare move. She came so close to me that I could feel her breasts against my back and her stomach against my behind. She was naked too. She put her arms around me, one hand on my chest and the other on my erection.

"'That's why you're here!'" (Part 1, Chapter 6, p. 25)

"We stood facing each other naked, but she couldn't have seemed more dismissive if she'd had on her uniform. I didn't understand what was going on. Was she thinking of me? Or of herself? If my schoolwork is idiotic, that makes her work even more so - that's what upset her? But I hadn't ever said that my work or hers was idiotic. Or was it that she didn't want a failure for a lover? But was I her lover? What was I to her? I dressed, dawdling, and hoped she would say something. But she said nothing. Then I had all my

clothes on and she was still standing there naked, and as I kissed her goodbye she didn't respond." (Part 1, Chapter 8, p. 36)

"Does everyone feel this way? When I was young, I was perpetually overconfident or insecure. Either I felt completely useless, unattractive, and worthless, or I was pretty much a success, and everything I did was bound to succeed. When I was confident, I could overcome the hardest challenges. But all it took was the smallest setback for me to be sure that I was utterly worthless. Regaining my self-confidence had nothing to do with success; every goal I set myself, every recognition I craved made anything I actually did seem paltry by comparison, and whether I experienced it as a failure or triumph was utterly dependent on my mood." (Part 1, Chapter 13, p. 67)

"I never found out what Hanna did when she wasn't working and we weren't together. When I asked, she turned away my questions. We did not have a world that we shared; she gave me the space in her life that she wanted me to have. I had to be content with that. Wanting more, even wanting to know more, was presumption on my part. If we were particularly happy with each other and I asked her something because at that moment it felt as if everything was possible and allowed, then she sometime ducked my questions, instead of refusing outright to answer them. 'The things you ask, kid!' Or she would take my hand and lay it on her stomach. 'Are you trying to make holes in me?' Or she would count on her fingers. 'Laundry, ironing, sweeping, dusting, shopping, cooking, shake plums out of tree, pick up plums, bring plums home and cook them quick before the little one' - and here she would take hold of the fifth finger of her left hand between her right thumb and forefinger - 'eats them all himself.'" (Part 1, Chapter 16, pp. 77-78)

"The days went by and I felt sick. I took pains to make sure my parents and my brothers and sisters noticed nothing. I joined in the conversation at table a little, ate a little, and when I had to throw up, I managed to make it to he toilet. I went to school and to the swimming pool. I spent my afternoons there in an out-of-the-way place where no one would look for me. My body yearned for Hanna. But even worse than my physical desire was my sense of guilt. Why hadn't I jumped up immediately when she stood there and run to her! This one moment summed up all my halfheartedness of the past months, which had produced my denial of her, and my betrayal. Leaving was her punishment.

"Sometimes I tried to tell myself that it wasn't her I had seen. How could I be sure it was her when I hadn't been able to make out the face? If it had been her, wouldn't I have had to recognize her face? So couldn't I be sure it wasn't her at all?

"But I knew it was her. She stood and looked - and it was too late." (Part 1, Chapter 17, pp. 82-3)

"It wasn't the first trial dealing with the camps, nor was it one of the major ones. Our professor, one of the few at the time who were working on the Nazi past and the related trials, made it the subject of a seminar, in the hope of being able to follow the entire trial with the help of his students, and evaluate it. I can no longer remember what it was he wanted to examine, confirm, or disprove. I do remember that we argued the prohibition of retroactive justice in the seminar. Was it sufficient that the ordinances under which

the camp guards and enforcers were convicted were already on the statue books at the time they committed their crimes? Or was it a question of how the laws were actually interpreted and enforced at the time they committed their crimes, and that they were not applied to them. What is law? Is it what is on the books, or what is actually enacted and obeyed in a society? Or is law what must be enacted and obeyed, whether or not it is on the books, if things are to go right? The professor, an old gentleman who had returned from exile but remained an outsider among German legal scholars, participated in these debates with all the force of his scholarship, and yet at the same time with a detachment that no longer relied on pure scholarship to provide the solution to the problem. 'Look at the defendants - you won't find a single one who really believes he had the dispensation to murder back then.'" (Part 2, Chapter 2, pp. 90-91)

"'Did you not know that you were sending the prisoners to their death?'

"'Yes, but the new ones came, and the old ones had to make room for the new ones.'

"'So because you wanted to make room, you said you and you and you have to be sent back to be killed?'

"Hanna didn't understand what the presiding judge was getting at.

"'I... I mean... so what would you have done?'

"Hanna meant it as a serious question. She did not know what she should or could have done differently, and therefore wanted to hear from the judge, who seemed to know everything, what he would have done.

"Everything was quiet for a moment. It is not the custom at German trials for defendants to question the judge. But now the question had been asked, and everyone was waiting for the judge's answer. He had to answer; he could not ignore the question or brush it away with a reprimand or a dismissive counterquestion. It was clear to everyone, it was clear to him too, and I understood why he had adopted an expression of irritation as his defining feature. It was his mask. Behind it, he could take a little time to find an answer. But not too long; the longer he took, the greater the tension and expectation, and the better his answer had to be.

"'There are matters one simply cannot get drawn into, that one must distance oneself from, if the price is not life and limb.'" (Part 2, Chapter 6, pp. 111-112)

"'Yes, she had favorites, always one of the young ones who was weak and delicate, and she took them under her wing and made sure that they didn't have to work, go them better barracks space and took care o them and fed hem better, and in the evenings she had them brought to her. And the girls were never allowed to say what she did with them in the evening, and we assumed she was... also because they all ended up on the transports, as if she had had her fun with them and then had got bored. But it wasn't like that at all, and one day one of them finally talked, and we learned that the girls read aloud to her, evening after evening after evening. That was better than if they... and better than working themselves to death on the building site. I must have thought it was

better, or I couldn't have forgotten it. But was it better?' She sat down." (Part 2, Chapter 7, p. 116)

"I saw Hanna by the burning church, hard-faced, in a black uniform, with a riding whip. She drew circles in the snow with her whip, and slapped it against her boots. I saw her being red to. She listened carefully, asked no questions, and made no comments. When the hour was over, she told the reader she would be going on the transport to Auschwitz next morning. The reader, a frail creature with a stubble of black hair and nearsighted eyes, began to cry. Hanna hit the wall with her hand and two women, also prisoners in striped clothing, came in and pulled the reader away." (Part 2, Chapter 13, pp. 145-146)

"I wanted simultaneously to understand Hanna's crime and to condemn it. But it was too terrible for that. When I tried to understand it, I had the feeling I was failing to condemn it as it must be condemned. When I condemned it as it must be condemned, there was no room for understanding. But even as I wanted to understand Hanna, failing to understand her meant betraying her all over again. I could not resolve this. I wanted to pose myself both tasks - understanding and condemnation. But it was impossible to do both." (Part 2, Chapter 15, p. 157)

"Taken together, the titles in the notebook testify to a great and fundamental confidence in bourgeois culture. I do not ever remember asking myself whether I should go beyond Kafka, Frisch, Johnson, Bachmann, and Lenz, and read experimental literature, literature in which I did not recognize the story or like any of the characters. To me it was obvious that experimental literature was experimenting with the reader, and Hanna didn't need that and neither did I." (Part 3, Chapter 5, p. 185)

"Hanna? The woman on the bench was Hanna? Gray hair, a face with deep furrows on brow and cheeks and around the mouth, and a heavy body. She was wearing a light blue dress that was too tight and stretched across her breasts, stomach, and thighs. Her hands lay in her lap holding a book. She wasn't reading it. Over the top of her half-glasses, she was watching a woman throwing bread crumbs to a couple of sparrows. Then she realized that she was being watched, and turned to face me.

"I saw the expectation in her face, saw it light up with joy when she recognized me, watched her eyes scan my face as I approached, saw them seek, inquire, then look uncertain and hurt, and saw the light go out of her face. When I reached her, she smiled a friendly, weary smile. 'You've grown up, kid.' I sat down beside her and she took my hand." (Part 3, Chapter 8, pp. 195-196)

"She laughed. 'You like her, don't you? What was your relationship?'

"I hesitated a moment. 'I read aloud to her. It started when I was fifteen and continued while she was in prison.'

"'How did you...'

"'I sent her tapes. Frau Schmitz was illiterate almost all her life; she only learned to read and write in prison.'

"'Why did you do all this?'

"'When I was fifteen, we had a relationship.'

"'You mean you slept together?'

"'Yes.'

"'That woman was truly brutal... did you ever get over the fact that you were only fifteen when she... No, you said yourself that you began reading to her again when she was in prison. Did you ever get married?'

"I nodded.

"'And the marriage was short and unhappy, and you never married again, and the child, if there is one, is in boarding school.'

"'That's true of thousands of people, it doesn't take a Frau Schmitz.'

"'Did you ever feel, when you had contact with her in those last years, that she knew what she had done to you?'

"I shrugged my shoulders." (Part 3, Chapter 11, p. 213)

Key Questions

Discussions on literature of and about the Holocaust by their very nature often become highly emotive. While the following questions deal with incidents and characters from the novel, the allegorical nature of the text makes it inevitable that the debate will branch out to address wider issues of human behavior and justice. It is important to recognize that Schlink himself does not offer his readers a right or wrong answer, nor is the conduct of any character lauded over that of another. Underlying any discussion on this powerful novel will be Hanna's own demand, "What would you have done?" and this question will allow students to develop their understanding of the text and to suspend immediate moral judgement.

1. Hanna is more concerned that her illiteracy may be discovered than her past as a concentration camp guard. How do the two pasts become intertwined?

2. Why can Hanna only settle to learn to read once she has been incarcerated?

3. How reliable is Michael Berg as a narrator? Why is his unreliability significant to the novel as a whole?

4. In the final chapter, Michael admits that there are several different versions of what he refers to as "our story". He claims that the version we read is the correct one, stating, "The guarantee that the written one is the right one lies in the fact that I wrote it and not the other versions. The written version wanted to be written, the many other versions did not". Does the fact that the story "wanted to be written" necessarily make it right? If it is the definitive account, then why are there other stories that Michael is unable to write?

5. After Hanna's death Michael visits the daughter who testified at Hanna's trial.

She insinuates that Michael has been damaged through his involvement with the older woman. To what extent do you agree with the daughter's assessment? Can Hanna be held solely responsible for Michael's shortcomings?

6. Hanna's bookshelf contains a combination of works by concentration camp survivors, Nazis, and Holocaust scholars. What might she be trying to achieve by reading this range of materials?

7. Why does Michael not speak to the judge about Hanna's illiteracy? How could this failure to speak out be connected to the wider concerns of the novel?

8. The work's title identifies Michael as a reader. How effective a reader is he?

9. Michael tells us that he initially enrolled in a seminar dealing with the trials of alleged Nazis out of curiosity.

He declares, "I wanted more; I wanted to share in the general passion." Consider the extent to which his interest in the trials is bound-up with an attempt to find himself. Is Michael a voyeur or is he seeking a cause?

10. Why do you think Michael regards it as "both natural and right that Hanna should be in custody"?

Topics for Discussion

The novel is titled *The Reader*. Is Michael the reader? Is he the only reader? Is he only the reader?

Is the tone of the novel fundamentally positive or negative?

The novel is full of guilt. Is Michael guilty of something? If so, what?

A 36-year-old Hanna seduces a 15-year-old Michael and subsequently conducts a prolonged sexual relationship with him. Do you view this as a form of child sexual abuse? Is Michael mature enough and old enough to willfully engage in sex with an older woman?

In your opinion, did Hanna's participation in the Holocaust constitute crimes that were unpardonable by society? Should Hanna's illiteracy be considered a viable mitigating circumstance?

Imagine that Hanna had learned how to read as a child. Imagine that Michael had exposed Hanna to scores of books of literature before she enlisted in the SS as a prison guard. Do you think either of these imagined events in Hanna's life would have changed her life in a substantive way?

Why do you think Hanna hanged herself? Was her suicide an act of restitution? Was she overcome by feelings of guilt? Was she simply desperate and depressed? Was her suicide just another selfish act?

Michael presents Hanna as a complex, penitent, and worthwhile person, even though she is sentenced to life imprisonment for war crimes. Does Michael's love of Hanna prevent him from seeing a deeper truth? Is Hanna truly a brutal, predatory Nazi?

There are many women in the novel, who influence Michael's development and thought. They include his mother, Hanna Schmitz, Sophie, Gertrud, the prison warden, and the author of the Holocaust book. Which woman had the clearest vision of Michael as a person?

Is it possible for non-Germans to understand the true nature of collective guilt? What about the nature of generational betrayal? Is there anything in the modern history of other countries, which approaches the Holocaust?

Hanna twice asks the judge, "What would you have done?" Knowing the situation which faced Hanna, ask yourself the same question. What would you have done?

Literary Precedents

As Ernestine Schlant has observed, The Reader belongs to a category she has labeled "literature about fathers and mothers", penned by the children of the generation of Germans who lived through the Nazi regime in an attempt to make sense of what took place. Michael asks himself, "What should our second generation have done, what should it do with the knowledge of the horrors of the extermination of the Jews?" These novels attempt to grapple with how the new generation should channel its collective guilt and its knowledge of the human capacity for evil. Such works are also usually a way of examining the blame that is apportioned to the parental generation, either because of its complicity with the Nazis or because of its failure to act against the Third Reich. Michael Berg enacts such a process when he goes to speak to his father about Hanna and, like the authors of these works who condemn the previous generation, his failure to speak at crucial moments raises questions as to whether he could or would have behaved differently.

Guenter Grass is one of the most obvious influences on Schlink's novel, and The Tin Drum (1959), his magic realist story of the dwarf Oskar Matzerath, presents the reader with a grotesque and macabre allegory in which Oskar's physical degeneration mirrors Germany's moral degeneration. One day Oskar, an inhabitant of the town of Danzig, announces that he will not grow any more and begins to bang a tin drum, which becomes an inane accompaniment to Germany's descent into chaos—a process which is depicted through a dual first and third-person narrative technique.

The Reader also fits into the bildungsroman tradition, which deals with the development and coming of age of a character. It is therefore interesting that the first work Michael chooses to read to Hanna is Homer's epic poem The Odyssey, which details Odysseus's adventures whilst returning from war. Odysseus is, of course, in a way that eludes the dysfunctional Michael, able to discover himself and find peace at home with his wife, Penelope. Michael, on the other hand, is left to mull over the past and to ponder on the extent to which Hanna may be held responsible for his failure to sustain relationships.

Thomas Mann's Doktor Faustus (1947) and The Genesis of Doktor Faustus (1949) are also important predecessors in that they examine Nazism and the relation and responsibility of the artist to society at large.

Related Titles

The philosopher Theodor Adorno famously observed in his essay "Cultural Criticism and Society" that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric", and Michael Wyschogrod later expanded this comment, explaining: I firmly believe that art is not appropriate to the holocaust. Art takes the sting out of suffering. . . . It is therefore forbidden to make fiction out of the holocaust. Any attempt transform the holocaust into art demeans the holocaust and must result in poor art.

While for the likes of Adorno and Wyschogrod, transforming the event into art is a trivializing attempt to contain it, for many survivors and indeed for subsequent generations, writing about the Holocaust has become a way of dealing with feelings of bewilderment, despair, nihilism, and guilt.

Literally thousands of responses have been published since the end of the Second World War, and any selection is bound to be a subjective one. Some of the best known novels dealing with the period include Thomas Keneally's Schindkr's Ark (1982, later Schindler's List), which tells the true story of the industrialist, Oskar Schindler, who saved Jews from being sent to their deaths by employing them in his factory. William Styron's Sophie's Choice (1979) attempts to deal with the guilt of an individual Auschwitz survivor, the Polish Catholic Sophie who has resettled in the United States and who is involved with a Jewish paranoid schizophrenic, Nathan. The story is recounted by Stingo, a struggling young writer, and it gradually emerges that Sophie is haunted by flashbacks to her time in the camp and a devastating decision she was forced to make. Paul Celan, one of the most famous poets of the Holocaust, is a Romanianborn writer who worked in France but wrote almost entirely in German. His parents died in a Romanian concentration camp, and he himself was imprisoned for two years in a labor camp. Celan's first collection of poetry Poppy and Memory (Mohn und Gedaechtnis, 1952) included his 1948 poem "Death Fugue" ("Todesfuge"), which offers a depiction of the camp at Auschwitz.

In terms of literature by survivors, The Diary of Anne Frank (1952—posthumous) is perhaps the most widely-known. Elie Wiesel's Night (1958) provides a useful starting point and raises a number of weighty questions about the role of mankind in this systematic mass destruction, as well as the types of crises of faith it induced in many survivors.

Like Wiesel, Primo Levi also spent time in Auschwitz and his Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity (1959) provides a graphic, moving, and at times even humorous account of day-to-day camp life.

An invaluable primary source for those interested in first-hand accounts by camp inmates is Dr. Sid Bokosky's archive Voice Vision: Holocaust Survivor Oral Histories, an internet site which holds transcripts of interviews with over 150 survivors. The site is still under development, but may be found at http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu.

For those interested in learning more about the history of the Holocaust Martin Gilbert's A History of the Jews in the Second World War (1978) provides the reader with a thorough and authoritative historical overview. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's Hitler's Willing Executioners (1996) raises similar questions to those of Schlink by asking to what extent the German people were willing participants in genocide and what their alternatives might have been.

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