

*The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink is a book that introduces a number of issues about post-war Germany. It is a novel told in the first person by Michael Berg who is remembering when he was aged fifteen and still at school. He falls ill in the middle of the street and is helped home by a woman who displays both decisiveness and loving care. The illness turns out to be hepatitis, which keeps Michael off school for some weeks. Following his recovery, he takes flowers to the woman, whose name is Hanna and, in a scene that is the stuff of most teenage boys' dreams, they begin a passionate affair. Michael becomes obsessed by the sex but Hanna angrily threatens to cease the relationship when he suggests giving up school. She then asks him to read to her and enjoys listening to the German classics.

Hanna is employed as a ticket collector and, on one occasion, Michael takes an early tram so as to meet her at work. He becomes embarrassed when he sees her on the tram and gets off without talking to her, which he later feels was a betrayal of her. Later, he fails to acknowledge her when he sees her at the swimming pool and, the following day, she disappears. She leaves no forwarding address and Michael misses her intensely. His memories of her affect his behaviour, particularly towards other women. He marries, but the relationship breaks down.

The book then changes from a narrative to more of a disquisition on changing attitudes in Germany. Immediately following the end of World War II, a quite large number of Nazis were able to merge back into society, sometimes in positions of influence, and little was said against it. By the early 1960s, there was a growing feeling of antipathy among younger Germans towards their parents, whom they felt had colluded in this. They wanted those who had committed war crimes, particularly in the camps, to be punished. Michael was strongly invested in this attitude and began to study law. He went to trials and at a trial of female SS guards, he saw Hanna as a defendant. Her case was not well presented and her attitude annoyed the judge. When asked to provide a sample of her handwriting to determine whether she had written a report into the deaths of several hundred women in a burning church, she promptly admits to having done so. Although he had felt no emotion towards her during the trial, this, along with earlier clues, makes Michael suddenly realise that she was unable to read or write and the shame of her illiteracy being discovered was greater than the prospect of imprisonment.

Throughout her imprisonment, Hanna sets about learning to read and write. At the same time, Michael sends her tapes of his reading a variety of books which she also uses to help with her learning but he can never bring himself to either write or visit her. Eventually, the prison governor contacts him saying that she is due for release and could he help with providing accommodation. He does so rather reluctantly and goes to visit a week before her release and finds that she has let herself go, being overweight and not attending to personal hygiene. The governor tells Michael that she had ceased caring for herself not long before.

On the day of her release, Hanna was dead, having taken her own life. As with most suicides, the question why is foremost. Michael had been cool to her during his visit; did she fear life outside prison only being tolerated by someone who had at one time loved her? She read a lot about the Holocaust in prison; did the enormity of what she had been involved in overwhelm her? To be fair to her, Hanna's illiteracy and her shame of it severely reduced her opportunities. Offers of promotion meant discovery, so she left. An SS guard didn't need to read or write, just carry out orders.

More generally, the author states that the attitude of condemnation by the younger generation of their parents was really self-righteousness. The younger people hadn't lived through totalitarianism,

which was followed by trying to rebuild a shattered country. We need to look beyond the pantomime villains portrayed by Hollywood triumphalist cinema and understand the climate of fear created by a tyrannical society. Also, how such tyranny developed.

June – *The Perfect Golden Circle* by Benjamin Myers

July – *Act of Oblivion* by Robert Harris

September – *I'm not scared* by Niccolò Ammaniti