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Does The Reader Deserve Oprah?

by Ellen Jaffe Gill

Are Cynthia Ozick and I the only people in America who didn't think much of **The Reader** (Random House, 218 pgs.; \$11.00)?

This slender novel by German law professor and judge Bernhard Schlink, which centers on the relationship between a young man and a woman put on trial as a Nazi war criminal, was published in English in 1997 to glowing reviews in the stateside press. **The New York Times**, for example, called **The Reader** "arresting, philosophically elegant, morally complex," while a **Los Angeles Times** review described it as a "formally beautiful, disturbing and finally morally devastating novel" that "ensnares both heart and mind." The paperback edition, published last fall, reached the number one slot on the New York Times paperback bestseller list in March, and as Jews across America were setting their tables for the first seder on March 31, **The Reader** and Schlink were being lionized on national television by Oprah's Book Club.

The novel opens circa 1959, when 15-year-old Michael, ill with hepatitis, collapses on a sidewalk and is rescued by Hanna, a woman in her thirties. After Michael recovers, he and Hanna have an affair, which awakens the boy not only sexually but emotionally. His feelings for Hanna are tender and genuine, but in the callowness of youth, he treats her carelessly, and one day she disappears. Several years later, as a law student, Michael is monitoring a war-crimes trial and sees his first lover in a line of defendants, accused of atrocities she committed as an SS guard during World War II.

Hanna had continually asked Michael to read to her during their affair, and as he watches her trial, he realizes that she is illiterate, and so ashamed of it that she accepts a long prison term rather than mitigate her wartime actions by revealing her secret. While she is in prison, Michael, who has become something of an emotional drifter, reestablishes a connection, sending her tapes of himself reading much of the Great Books canon.

I reviewed **The Reader** for the **Baltimore Jewish Times** in September 1997. While I thought Michael and especially Hanna were interesting characters and appreciated the novel as a window on Germany's "second generation" rarely open to American readers, I called the book "a plodding chronicle of information, events, and thoughts" that takes place "so completely within Michael's head that I wouldn't have been surprised to find out that Michael had dreamt the whole thing." Schlink telegraphs Hanna's secret long before he reveals it, breathlessly, almost two-thirds of the way through the novel. "I figured it out on page 42," one woman told Oprah.

(more)

The moral issue that galvanized many of the people who commented on **The Reader** during the Oprah broadcast was the age difference between Michael and Hanna. Many of them saw the sexual attentions of a 36-year-old woman toward a 15-year-old boy as sexual abuse, with at least one woman comparing Hanna to the Washington teacher who seduced and bore the child of a 13-year-old student. Only in good old puritanical America, I thought. The cognitive, emotional, and physical differences between a 13-year-old boy and a 15-year-old are enormous, and while Hanna does seduce Michael, it is only after Michael demonstrates that he is ready, willing and able to have sex with her. Schlink, too, was bemused by how vehemently American readers insisted that Michael's youth made the sexual relationship inappropriate; French and German readers, he told Oprah and the book club, had no trouble with a woman in her thirties sleeping with a tenth-grader.

Ozick, writing about **The Reader**, among other books, in the March 1999 issue of **Commentary Magazine**, criticized it as much too forgiving of Hanna, focusing particularly on her illiteracy, a condition, Ozick said, that was almost unheard of in prewar Germany. By making Hanna "grotesquely atypical," she wrote, the author, in his shame and guilt as a member of the second generation, tries to make Hanna an object of pity rather than [of] the opprobrium she deserves."

Ozick's point is well taken. If Hanna's illiteracy is a metaphor for the widespread moral blindness among the citizens of the Third Reich, why make her affliction so unusual? If her illiteracy simply is what it is, does that give her a excuse--as Schlink suggests it does--to abet the murder of hundreds of prisoners? Hanna is presented as neither unintelligent nor lacking in integrity. Why didn't her sense of right and wrong prevent her from joining the SS?

In 1997, I dismissed **The Reader**; now its success--Ozick says it has been popular among Jewish readers as well as Gentile--alarms me. **The Reader** has been marketed as a tragic tale of a woman ensnared by her own limitations during one of history's most brutal moments. By turning criminal into victim, Schlink might give us an accurate view of the second-generation psyche, but he undervalues the humanity of the true victims, those whose deaths were brought about by people like Hanna.