

## The Reader

Screenplay by David Hare. Directed by Stephen Daldry. Produced by Donna Gigliotti, Anthony Minghella, Redmond Morris, and Sydney Pollack. A Weinstein Company (U.S.) release of a Mirage Enterprises (U.S.)/ Neunte Babelsberg Film (Germany) production. Released in the United States January 9, 2009. 124 minutes.

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The motion picture, *The Reader*, based on Bernhard Schlink's book of the same name,<sup>1</sup> treats adaptation to life on several levels. It is not a Holocaust genre film, and we will not be discussing the psychology of postwar Germans. However, because it contains courtroom drama, the way in which psychology and law collide makes it relevant to forensic professionals.

*The Reader* is told from the perspective of a middle-aged lawyer who, in 1995, is recalling his life. We flash back to a chance encounter by a woman in her 30s (Hanna) who befriends an ailing teenage boy (Michael, the narrator) in Neustadt, West Germany, in 1958. She finds him vomiting and instantly helps him clean up and get home. When Michael, who had scarlet fever, recovers, he takes Hanna flowers to thank her. We sense that the boy is intrigued by Hanna as a woman. Michael returns and helps her take some sooty coal up to her apartment. Hanna sends him to the bath and returns naked, as if they both knew they wanted intimacy. The two have a sexual affair that lasts for the summer. During their trysts, she has him read to her. He is a student, and ostensibly she wants to benefit from his studies. The transaction is highly erotic and mutually satisfying, so we don't analyze the literature sessions and thus consider Michael to be the reader. But Hanna is more interested in the reading, Michael in the sex. Some bathtub talk, for example: Hanna says, "You're good at it, aren't you?" "Good at what?" he asks. "Reading!" she replies as she splashes him with bathwater. "I didn't think I was good at anything," Michael replies, permitting us to see his sense of inferiority and why he prefers Hanna to family and peers.

Hanna is somewhat coarse and aloof and a bit edgy. She persistently calls Michael "Kid." There seems to be no conscious irony in her doing so, and

we witness what one might consider statutory rape by today's standards (the age of consent was probably 14 in 1950s Germany; Michael was 15). When interviewed about it, Kate Winslet, who played Hanna, was defensive:

I'm so sorry, "statutory rape?" I've got to tell you, I'm so offended by that. No, I really am. I genuinely am. To me, that is absolutely not this story at all. That boy knows exactly what he's doing. For a start, Hanna Schmitz thinks that he's seventeen, not fifteen, you know? She's not doing anything wrong [Ref. 2].

Winslet goes on at length, suggesting identification with Hanna, which could have intensified her award-winning performance. And yes, that's not what it's about.

Beyond her aloofness, and intermingled with tenderness, Hanna has a few angry outbursts that puzzle Michael and us. She goes to work as a trolley conductor and Michael gets on the trolley but sits in the rear car so that they do not interact. Afterward, she becomes unaccountably furious and suggests to him that he means nothing to her. In another sequence they take a bicycle trip. Hanna demurs on reading the map, pretending to be a free spirit, and has Michael order off a menu for her, as if he were a man in charge. In the book version, he leaves a note for her saying that he has stepped out, but she destroys it. When he returns, she is furious at him for stranding her and he is at his wit's end to understand what happened to the note she denies seeing. One wonders: is Michael infatuated with a woman with borderline personality disorder? That's not it either.

Unknown to Michael, Hanna is notified of her promotion to a desk job. She panics, packs up and disappears from view and from Michael's life. Eight years later, Michael, now a law student in Heidelberg, watches a war-crimes trial of a group of women, all former Nazi SS guards. They are accused of turning their backs on a group of 300 female prisoners who burned to death in a locked church during a death march. The two survivors, a mother and daughter, testify that the daughter has written a book implicating the guards. Hanna is one of the defendants. When asked if she is familiar with the book, Hanna says she is. In the book version, it is clear that Hanna had been ignoring subpoenas. In fact, she could not read them; nor could she digest the factual claims made in the survivor's book, leaving her singularly unprepared to defend herself. Michael, who has figured out (as we may have) that Hanna is illiterate, is horrified as she testifies that she and the

others stood by as the Jews perished. Questioned by the court, Hanna admits making “selections” (who would be killed or spared) and that she had her favorites read to her at the concentration camp. Hanna insists that all the defendants made selections, but she looks as if she had exploited the prisoners for her entertainment, oblivious to the overall purpose of the camp.

During the trial, we learn that Hanna joined the SS in 1943, instead of accepting a promotion at her job at Siemens. We understand that she has consistently made adaptations to hide her illiteracy. Her ostensive reason: “I heard there were jobs. . . . They were looking for guards.” Guileless and unrepentant, she cites her duty to guard the prisoners, denying the possibility that the SS officers could have unlocked the church, as that would have unleashed chaos. Turning to the judge, she earnestly asks (him and us), “What would you have done? Should I never have signed up at Siemens?” The co-defendants, smelling blood, turn on Hanna, saying that she wrote a cover-up report, the key to her conviction. When she asserts that they all wrote it, the judge suggests that she is dodging individual responsibility. Flustered, Hanna does not admit her illiteracy, and Michael, watching her go down in flames, cannot get past his horror over her crimes to go to her aid. At the trial’s climax, Hanna is asked to supply a handwriting sample to prove her innocence. She declines, instead admitting that she wrote the report.

During the trial, Michael visits a concentration camp, which hardens his heart against his former lover. Following his revelation of Hanna’s illiteracy and acting against her liberty, Michael, clearly troubled, obliquely discusses the situation with his law professor. The older man says that there is an obligation to come forward with the truth, but Michael cannot do it. It bothers him that he may be helping a defendant. Moreover, he says she is determined to keep the information secret “because she’s ashamed.” It is not clear whether he too is throwing Hanna under the bus or resonating with the integrity of her adaptation. The professor thinks he should talk to Hanna, but Michael’s feelings do not permit it. “What we feel isn’t important. It’s utterly unimportant,” the Yoda-like mentor advises, “The only question is what we do.” Michael tries to visit Hanna in jail, but cannot go through with it. Ashamed and immobilized, he remains silent about Hanna’s illiteracy. She is convicted of 300 counts of murder and

sentenced to life in prison, in contrast to her co-defendants, who receive several-year sentences for aiding and abetting.

Michael grows up, has a law career, gets married and divorced, and has a grown daughter. During the divorce, he comes across the books he had read to Hanna. Aware of Hanna’s whereabouts, he dictates audiotapes of books to send to her in prison, reprising many of the classic works they had enjoyed during their erotic summer, starting with Homer’s *Odyssey*. With tapes and library books she teaches herself to read and write, word by word. So, it is Hanna who is “the reader.” In 1980, she starts to write to Michael, but he files away her letters. After Hanna has served over 20 years, a prison official contacts Michael, asking that he make arrangements for her release. He visits his now-haggard lover a week before her scheduled parole. He makes preparations for her postprison living arrangements. We then see her standing atop a pile of books on a table. She hangs herself just before her scheduled release. Hanna’s suicide and modest cash bequest to the survivor/author throw Michael into moral hell. He visits the survivor in New York City, naively offering her the money and suggesting she help illiterate Jews. She responds that literacy is not a Jewish problem, but permits him to use the money for a Jewish anti-illiteracy agency.

Shame can shape an individual’s behavior and influence culture. Careers in anthropology were made of this fact.<sup>3,4</sup> In pioneering anthropologist Ruth Benedict’s work on the Japanese character, she pithily distinguishes shame from guilt by noting that shame has an audience (real or imagined).<sup>3</sup> Although her findings seem oversimplified and remain controversial, there has been some speculation that postwar Germany has evolved from a shame culture to a guilt culture.<sup>5</sup> This, in turn, may have animated Michael’s behavior. By the time he witnessed Hanna’s trial, he was bearing the guilt of the acts of the previous generations. The use of shaming criminal offenders as a means of social control is not unknown in America, but scarlet-letter jurisprudence is the exception.<sup>6</sup>

We have a hierarchy of shameful deeds, wishes, and impulses, but everyone’s is different. Hanna and Michael show little shame about the affair; he is too in love to react morally, and she is oblivious to her exploitation of him. Hanna, ashamed of her learning disability, passes up a clerical job for the second time and disappears. The fact that she left a good civilian job to join the SS casts a sinister shadow at the trial

(only Michael understands her choices). Her life “selections” covered her ugly deficit—using the girls at the camp for her amusement and trading sex for education with Michael. The war-crime trial snares Hanna, but her matter-of-fact assertion that she was doing what anyone would have done gives her an unintended callousness. Clueless, she stares with horror at the blank paper. She, Michael, and we know she could not have written the cover-up report. Michael cannot get past his outrage over her wartime behavior to allow his knowledge of her illiteracy to save her at the trial. Is it shame over the affair, respect for Hanna’s autonomy, or his guilt-ridden view of justice?

In a sense, they are both victims: she of the stigma of learning disability and he of second-generation German guilt.<sup>7,8</sup> Neither is let off the hook. As *The Reader*’s screenwriter David Hare observed:

It’s clear the moment you finish the novel that in no sense can it be seen as a book about forgiveness. On the contrary, Schlink makes it plain, both in his writing and in private conversation, that no writer of whatever background, portraying the crimes of the German people, has the moral right to extend to his characters any possibility of redemption. For that reason, anyone whose unlikely response to the book is to want to make a film of it faces an unusual challenge. The conventional Hollywood narrative always ends in the hero coming to some understanding of his own flaws. Uplift, you may say, is built into the contract. But Hanna, at the author’s own insistence, reaches no real understanding of what she has done. You may even argue that no understanding of such extreme crimes is even possible. How, then, was anyone to embark on a movie in which one of the two principal characters essentially learns nothing? [Ref. 9].

Like many evocative stories, *The Reader* is a study in adaptation. In Hanna’s case, she joins the SS to avoid detection of her illiteracy. This does nothing to excuse her subsequent actions, and she knows it. As Bernhard Schlink commented to television interviewer Charlie Rose, “It doesn’t exculpate her at all. It’s just how people get into doing something. . . . [She made the choice] not to unveil her illiteracy because she was more ashamed of her illiteracy than she felt guilty about what she had done.”<sup>8</sup> But as Michael points out to his law professor, the court’s knowledge of her deficit could affect sentencing (Schlink is a judge).

People with learning disabilities, illiteracy, and mental retardation indeed learn something. They learn to mask their deficits, to get by, to conform, and to avoid the stigma of inferiority. They learn it as children and carry their adaptations forward. In

Hanna’s hierarchy of shame, a long prison sentence is better than the humiliation of exposing her illiteracy. Hanna is unable to wrap her mind around the enormity of her wartime behavior. Schlink notes, “There’s an element of moral blindness in her. . . . There was something really lacking in her.”<sup>8</sup> She retains her lifelong adaptation, but at great cost. Although she teaches herself to read and write, her moral blindness is unresolved. Her suicide, in our view, represents her acceptance that others see her as evil and that Michael cannot forgive her, although we doubt that there is empathic remorse. The differential diagnosis, then, extends to Asperger’s disorder. Did Hanna have “mindblindness,”<sup>10</sup> such that she lacked the capacity to see beyond her own needs? There is poor evidence of it in the film, but we suggest that forensic professionals keep this range of adaptations in mind when explaining defendants’ behavior to juries and judges.

How does the drama in *The Reader* play out in everyday forensic practice? For nearly 20 years, the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law (AAPL) Committee on the Developmentally Disabled has focused on the plight of impaired citizens undergoing criminal hearings and trials. For example, we see innocent criminal suspects with mental retardation who confess to crimes because they have learned to acquiesce to authority; teenagers with Asperger’s disorder who lack empathy and come off as unrepentant; and yes, illiterate persons who will “fake good” and sign their rights away rather than be exposed. All have different adaptations: the suspect with mental retardation “reads” nonverbal behaviors and acts in a way that fits in, oblivious to the warning, “What you say will be used against you.” The firesetter with Asperger’s disorder cannot empathize and fails to play the game of juvenile justice, receiving harsher treatment as someone not amenable to rehabilitation. And the illiterate defendant, like Hanna, makes conscious choices but at the expense of failing to see the moral landscape.

We are not romanticizing the Hanna character here or portraying her as a helpless victim of a developmental disorder. Nor are we suggesting that illiteracy and mass murder are morally on the same plane. But as professionals, we must be students of adaptation and constantly alert to behaviors that can pass as normal and informed or come off as callous and unempathic. There has been significant consideration in the United Kingdom of the problems faced

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by individuals with learning disabilities in the community and in prisons—how they are manipulated by antisocial types and then get lost in the justice system.<sup>11</sup> The Prison Reform Trust, supported by the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund, has a series of publications devoted to recognition and regard for offenders with learning disabilities.<sup>12</sup> The American justice system would do well to adopt an enlightened view that acknowledges individual differences. We urge forensic professionals to learn to “read” adaptational styles so that we can best inform the justice system.

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