The Reader

The author of the book is Bernard Schlink and it was first published in the 1997. The novel is set in west Germany in the post war.

This Novel is about a 15-year-old boy named Michael Berg. Michael has an affair with a forty-year-old woman named Hanna. The age difference is big, but they still make love to one another. One day Hanna mystically disappears, and Michael thinks he will never see her again.

Part two takes place ten years later. Michael studies law and observes a trial connected to his studies. One of the defendants in the trial is Hanna. Hanna is accused of a Nazi war crime. Michael must decide whether he owes Hanna anything, or if their earlier affair is gone forever. This is the conflict in the book. The events take place chronologically from when Michael was a teenager to his adult life.

Characterization: Michaels personality changes during the novel. In the first part he is a 15-year-old teenager. He suffers from a sickness called Hepatitis. Michael has poor self-confidence and appears as a weak person. However, his self-confidence groves when he meets Hanna. He grows more confident in everything he does, both school and talking to girls.

However, Michael becomes emotionless, arrogant and overbearing when Hanna disappears. He stops thinking about everyone else around him and looses himself in his own studies. However, he changes again towards the end of the book. Michael thinks through all his actions and his emotions are clearly visible when Hanna commits suicide.

Hanna is a woman with a strong and feminine body. She has pale blue eyes, blond hair and strong features. She always smells good and has a soft smooth bottom. Hanna is the leader in the relationship between her and Michael. She is illiterate and restricts herself because of her inability to read and write. Hanna changes during the novel. She is still her same self during the trials, but she slowly starts to give up on life. In prison she stops caring about her looks, smell and her appearance for the other prisoners. She becomes fat and she smells bad. Eventually she hangs herself at the end of the novel.

It is a first-person point of view in the novel. The narrator is Michael himself, he tells the story and he is also the person we follow throughout the novel. Therefore, we get to know both his emotions and thoughts.

The overall tone in the novel is not dynamic and it is very serious throughout the story. This is because Michael debates very serious themes with himself. The themes vary from the Nazi-past and guilt for what happened during the Nazi period, to love and ethics in job.

The language in this book is very ethical and philosophical. Michael always debates these matters with himself. One good example from the book is “What should our second generation have done, what should it do with the knowledge of the horrors of the extermination of the Jews? We should not believe we can comprehend the incomprehensible, we may not inquire because to inquire is to make the horrors an object of discussion, even if the horrors themselves are not questioned.” Therefore, the language in this book is very hard to understand, but interesting at the same time. The book requires you to think through these questions yourself and discuss ethics and morals.

I think there can be many themes in this book. Guilt is one important theme. The book discusses whether the second generation should feel guilty of what happened during the extermination of the Jews. Should persons who are a part of this generation feel guilty of themselves even though they did not directly participate in the extermination? Should the second generation have guilt for the next generation who must comprehend what their parents was a part of? This is important matters discussed in the book. Therefore, guilt is an important theme.

Another theme could be analphabetism. Hanna was illiterate and struggled throughout her life. She was given offers from better jobs, but she rejected them because it would require her to read and write. Hanna would not even prove that she was illiterate when the consequence was many years in prison. Analphabetism is even today a very serious matter. Being illiterate restricts you heavily in the society.

I think that the message is that you must think twice about your actions. You need to be able to discuss whether an action is right or wrong. “We should not believe we can comprehend the incomprehensible” This quote from the book underlines that you must think twice about your actions. The second generation could not comprehend what had happened during the second world war. However, if they thought about their actions and whether they were right or wrong, then what had happened could have been comprehensible.

My thoughts about the book is very spit. I think it was a very well written book with a clear read thread throughout the book. It discusses ethics and philosophy very well. I like the themes the book discusses like for example post war guilt. However, it was very hard for me to truly understand the message and themes in the book. Therefore, I am still not sure if my conclusions are right or wrong.

I would recommend “The Reader” to adults who interests themselves in ethics, philosophy and the post war. I would not recommend it to teenagers unless you are very interested in philosophy and ethics.