

# The Reader (2008)

Rated R. Our ratings: V- 1; L- 3; S/N-6 . Running time: 2 hours 3 min..

*Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.*

*James 4:17*

Kate Winslet's performance as 2008 The Weinstein Co.

Hannah Schmitz, once a guard at a Nazi extermination camp, is the main reason for seeing this film. The first part, set in the early 1950s, includes a great amount of nudity, the woman becoming involved in a love affair with the teenaged student Michael Berg (David Kross). They meet by accident when the sick boy throws up in the entryway to her apartment and she invites him upstairs to clean up. Soon Michael is spending as much time at her apartment as at school. However, Hannah seems more interested in having Michael read to her than in sex.

After a summer of lust and reading, their affair is terminated by Hannah's sudden departure from her apartment. The film shifts to years later, long after their break-up when Michael (now played by Ralph Fiennes) is studying law, and his professor takes the class to witness a trial of a group of women who had been SS guards at Auschwitz and are now charged with aiding in the murder of 300 Jewish prisoners. Michael is surprised that Hannah is one of these, but tells no one.

Unlike the other women, she admits to her guilt, though not to being their leader. The other former guards insist that she was the one who headed up the group that selected prisoners to be sent to be gassed. Michael suddenly realizes why she could not have been in charge of the group, but will he come forward, thus saving her from a far more severe sentence than she deserves?

For reflection/Discussion Spoilers follow.

1. How is the first half of the film just another coming of age story? Did you wonder about Hannah's desire always to have Michael read to her?

2. What do you think of Hannah's defense that the guards had no choice in the selection of the prisoners for extermination? What choice did she have? We are not shown whether she was swept up in the Hitler adulation and the prevalent anti-Semitism: how does this impair our understanding of her situation? What do you think of her question to the judge and his silence? What would you have done in her situation?

3. What do you think of Michael's silence? How is he as guilty as she? How does she show at the trial that she, unlike the other women, is assuming responsible for her role in the death of the Jews? How does An Folman deal with a similar theme in *Waltzing Bashir*, this time ironically it being Jews involved in failing to do much to stop a barbaric slaughter?

4. How could Michael's subsequent actions be seen as a form of atonement?

5. What is Rose Mather/Ilana Mather's (Lena Olin) reaction to Michael's visiting her with Hannah's journal? Why do you think she cannot offer forgiveness? Are there some crimes too awful that they cannot be forgiven, perhaps left to the mercy of God?