



The Reader

Reviewed by Vincent Sicari
Directed by Stephen Daldry
Mirage Enterprises
With Ralph Fiennes, Kate Winslet.



I could never be a mass-murderer. Or could I?
For me that is one of the questions posed by this fascinating study into the human condition. The movie by director Stephen Daldry is based on the novel of the same name by the German author Bernard Schlink. It is an exploration into the psyche of the heroine Hanna Schmitz played by Kate Winslet, who delivers an outstanding performance in her portrayal of the tortured soul. There are many questions posed by the movie. But the most disturbing one for me was the one I alluded to above. Could I have behaved like Hanna? Would I ever be able to do such a horrific thing?

Some people may come out of this movie thinking that the Third Reich was an aberration of human history. But was it really? Do each of us have our own Third Reich within us waiting to come out under the right circumstances?

The movie creates just the right amount of empathy with Hanna. It takes us into her world, her tortured world, and delivers us with an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness. She is no monster, or is she? We are like her, or are we? What really lurks just below the surface of our consciousness? Could I, in similar circumstances, behave as she did?

I see the petty side of this question every day in my life as a public servant in NSW. And no, I do not wish to compare NSW to Nazi Germany! But what little compromises are we being asked to make in all of our every-day work? When we know (or convince ourselves) that the little compromises may make little difference to the lives of our fellow citizens, they may not weigh much on our minds. But what if the little compromise was the taking of Jews to concentration camps? Or the leading of innocent prisoners on a death march?

Hanna Schmitz was asked to do just that. She was a simple guard. Her duties included keeping watch over a group of Jews. Surely she had no choice?

I came out thinking that this is a must-see movie. It posed questions for all of us. Don't go to it thinking that this could never happen to you. There was nothing peculiar about the Germany that descended into the depravity that this movie clearly paints for us. If anything, the Germany of the 1930s was more civilized than most other countries. It was the Germany of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. It was the Germany of Meister Eckhart and of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The Reader is a skillful rendering of that Germany. It is a country that we are all familiar with. We are led along a path of exploration of that country. We are led along a path of exploration of an individual's psyche. We are led along a path of exploration of ourselves.

The Reader is a well-made movie. It has a rhythm that grows with every passing scene. It hooks you. The device of young Michael Berg, played by David Kross, who develops a relationship with the older Hanna Schmitz, presents a point of view of an innocent by-stander. A by-stander, who bit by bit gets inexorably drawn into the reality of another. And that reality is such a different reality. Michael's reality is skillfully painted by David Kross and then Ralph Fiennes. He is from a comfortable middle-class European family from the early 1960s. The cinematography is superb. The Germany of the era is wonderfully recreated. We are like Michael. We empathise with him and see life in post-war Germany through his eyes. We also form a relationship with Hanna and can see her predicament. Would we really have behaved any differently to her? Could we also become a mass murderer?