



# Jan Rants about *The Reader* for **FILMS FOR TWO®**

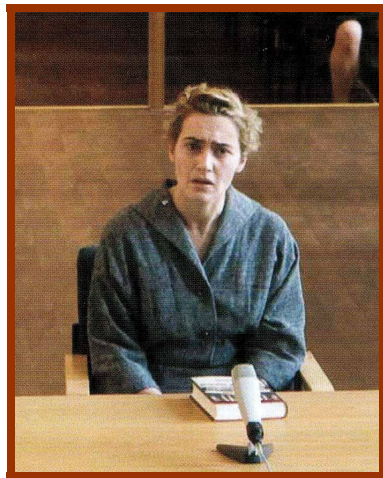
## *The Reader*

Directed by Stephen Daldry

Screenplay by David Hare

(Adapted from Bernhard Schlink's 1995 novel)

Principal Actors: Ralph Fiennes, Michael Kross, Lena Olin & Kate Winslet



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**FOR SHAME!**

## **Jan Rants about *The Reader***

**By Jan Lisa Huttner  
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**Special for Films for Two®**

Let the reader beware: what follows is a “rant” and not a “review.” While I do not believe anyone is ever “objective” in the purest sense, I definitely do believe that my role as a film critic typically requires the most dispassionate analysis I can muster. I take this responsibility very seriously; I always do as much “homework” as possible—even in the face of ever-pressing deadlines—conducting interviews, doing background research, and often watching a film at least twice before writing about it.

In the case of adaptations, I have set myself one firm rule: I want to see films the way most of my readers will. Therefore, since the film audience is typically so much larger than the readership of even very popular books, I always try to see the film first. If I do read a source book, I usually read it after I've seen the film version (something impossible for me with respect to most Jane Austen adaptations, for example, but usually easy for me when the source is a relatively current novel).

I do not subscribe to the conventional wisdom that a source book is always better than its film adaptation. This past year alone, I have already reviewed several films which I believe are actually better than their source books (for example, in my opinion the film *Slumdog Millionaire* is far superior to the novel *Q&A*). Furthermore, I sincerely believe that filmmakers always need to make changes to source material in order to render their

stories cinematically, therefore their success should always be measured by the standards of their own art form (is the story coherent, are the characters well-developed, etc), and these standard do not require a film to faithfully mimic its source.

Last but not least, I always do my best to avoid “spoilers” in all my film reviews. I focus on the set-up, say as little as possible about plot details, and never reveal the ending. In most of my reviews, my primary goal is to convince readers to see the film for themselves, as I often champion films that I think deserve more &/or better buzz.

I am telling you all of this because I am about to violate every one of these principles. Since this is a “rant” about *The Reader* and not a “review,” the filmmakers will be taken to task for various decisions and spoilers will be numerous. And there will be no attempt to take a “dispassionate” stance. This film infuriates me. If you want to know why, then read on...

## **SPOILER ALERT:**

**The following paragraphs discuss plot elements in detail, & compare scenes in the film with text from the novel.**

### **What’s the Story?**

The narrator of Bernhard Schlink’s 1995 novel *The Reader* is a middle-aged man named “Michael Berg” who appears to be similar to his creator in many ways. For example, both men were born in Germany (Berg in 1943 and Schlink in 1944); both men are legal professionals; etc. However, the extent to which the novel is, in fact, “autobiographical” is neither of interest nor concern to me.

As a 15 year old high school student, Michael has a secret affair of several months duration with a 36 year old woman named “Hanna Schmitz” who suddenly disappears one day, with no explanation, leaving him sexually traumatized and permanently unable to form mature attachments to other women.

Skip ahead to 1965: Michael, now a law student, attends a war crimes trial. Imagine his shock when he realizes that Hanna, missing for 8 years, is one of the defendants!

Without revealing his motivations to anyone, Michael becomes a permanent fixture at the trial. Day after day he sits alone, watching witnesses give testimony about transports, selections, death marches, etc, before a German audience which has never dared to discuss any of these details in public before. Mental images of “Hanna 1945” and “Hanna 1958” torment him, but even through the horror of what he is hearing, Michael begins to realize that Hanna is being framed. Her co-defendants are not only older, they appear to be wealthier, and they certainly have better resources.

Hanna has no family members, friends, or private attorneys. The only person “in her corner” is a young novice from the German equivalent of the Legal Aid Society. And as if all this weren’t enough, Michael suddenly sees that Hanna is also covering up another

secret all her own: Hanna is illiterate and therefore unable to read critical documents that have been entered into evidence against her.

What is Michael to do? Should he go to the judge and reveal Hanna's secret? But how can he do this without also explaining how he knows? Michael places his dilemma, in abstract, before his father (a philosophy professor best-known for his books on Immanuel Kant), and Dad does just what Michael expects him to do: the august German philosopher carefully explains all the reasons why Hanna's right to keep her secret has greater moral weight than Michael's duty to intervene on her behalf. And so Michael does nothing; he's a passive witness in the undifferentiated crowd when the court hands down a life sentence. (Her co-defendants, on the other hand, receive short stints.) Hanna makes eye contact with Michael, signifying that she knows he's there, but they never speak to one another.

More years pass. Facing long nights by himself after a failed marriage, Michael begins recording tapes for Hanna, and Hanna uses these tapes to teach herself to read. Eventually, she begins writing brief letters to Michael, but he never responds to them.

Skip ahead to 1983. A prison official suddenly contacts him out of the blue. Hanna is about to be paroled, and Michael's address is the only one in her file. This woman knows nothing about Michael and she has no insights into the nature of his relationship with Hanna, nevertheless she expects him to help her—Hanna needs a job, a place to live, etc. Michael finds it easiest to acquiesce.

Hanna and Michael meet for the first time in 25 years; she is now 61 and he is 40; she is desperate for warmth but he remains stone cold. The morning of her release, Hanna kills herself. Michael learns this from the prison official when he comes to collect her. But Hanna has left one final request. The key witness at the trial was a young survivor who had written a book about her Holocaust experiences. Hanna wants Michael to take all the money in her account (about \$7,000) and give it to this woman.

And so, the next time Michael has occasion to travel to America, he makes a side trip to Manhattan. The woman is close to Michael in age and even colder in demeanor, but eventually she relents just a bit. Michael suggests they donate the money to a Jewish organization for the promotion of literacy. She's a writer, so that gives her an ironic kick: "Illiteracy, it has to be admitted, is hardly a Jewish problem." Michael makes the donation, and when he receives a computer-generated acknowledgement he takes it to Hanna's grave. The end.

### What's the Problem?

While the story Schlink tells has lots of little difficulties (e.g., an obscure Jewish charity receives a \$7K donation & responds with a form letter???), I think, in the end, that he's made a sincere attempt to grapple with some specific moral and ethical problems that would weight heavy on the mind of a German intellectual born at the end of WWII. And Schlink contextualizes his story with specific references to student protest movements in the late '60s, the release of *Schindler's List* in the early '90s, and other historical events that have impacted Michael's thinking over the years.

But since I'm a film critic and this is a rant about the film, my sole interest is assessing the choices Stephen Daldry and David Hare have made in their adaptation.

**Problem One:** Two actors play Michael in the film adaptation: German actor Michael Kross plays Michael in Act One (1958) and Act Two (1965), and British Actor Ralph Fiennes plays Michael in Act Three (1983) and Act Four (1995).

Kross is a tall, handsome, well-built young man, so his many nude sex scenes with Winslet are both sensuous and romantic. My husband Richard says this is OK because Michael is the narrator and this is the way he remembers it. I beg to differ. When Hanna seduces Michael, she's committing a crime called statutory rape. Think about recent cases where female teachers have been sent to prison for this crime. It doesn't matter whether the boy in question wants sex or not. The teacher is the adult, and she's culpable. Daldry's imagery is full of lies (find me the 15 year old boy with Michael Kross' luminous complexion and muscular physique!) intended to camouflage a reality that would be considered "kiddie porn" if accurately depicted. **For shame!**

**Problem Two:** After Hanna's suicide, the warden takes Michael to her prison cell. In the novel, what he finds there is a shelf full of Holocaust books. Schlink mentions Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Thadeusz Borowski, Jean Amery, and Hannah Arendt by name. Michael asks: "Did she read these?" The warden replies: "She ordered them with care. She asked me to suggest books on women in the camps, both prisoners and guards; I wrote to the Institute of Contemporary History, and they sent me a specialized bibliography. As soon as Frau Schmitz learned to read, she began to read about the concentration camps."

Absolutely every bit of this information, so critical in the novel, has been eliminated from the film. For Schlink, literacy offers the hope of redemption; for Daldry/Hare literature is merely sexual foreplay. **For shame!**

**Problem Three:** Here's how Schlink describes Michael's trip to Manhattan: "The daughter lived in New York on a street near Central Park... The daughter served tea by large windows looking out on the vest-pocket backyard gardens, some green and colorful and some merely collections of trash." Schlink says nothing about this woman's physical appearance whatsoever, and he never even gives "the daughter" a name. He's totally focused on the words she and Michael use during their weighty conversation.

So given that Daldry/Hare have almost no constraints over how they are to depict this critical scene, how do they use their artistic license? They send Michael to meet a woman dripping with chunky gold jewelry, a woman who lives in an enormous home filled with huge works of art (both paintings and sculptures), as well as a few artfully-placed Menorahs. And does she greet Michael personally when he arrives? No, Michael is greeted at the front door by a Black maid in a uniform.

At best this is a relatively benign trope ("All Jews are rich."), but Daldry/Hare lay it on so thick that a more sinister explanation suggests itself. What do we know about this woman? She told us at the trial that she and her mother were among the 300 Jewish women that Hanna and the other guards locked in a village church during their march

from Auschwitz. Then the church was bombed, but the guards refused to open the doors, and all 300 women died in the fire. Somehow “the daughter” and her mother escaped. (Note that Schlink provides an explanation, but Hare can’t be bothered.)

So, this woman escapes from a burning building with nothing but the charred clothes on her back and eventually makes her way to America where, but wait, she does have one possession to take with her: she has her story as a Holocaust survivor! And apparently this commodity is her ticket to almost incalculable personal wealth...

So who is the Holocaust victim in this film? Surely not “the daughter;” she’s living large in Manhattan, thank you very much. No, Daldry/Hare pull every string possible to get us to empathize with poor Hanna, aging so pathetically in her lonely jail cell, struggling to read the specific books that remind her most of days spent making love to the beautiful boy who first told her the story of *The Lady with the Little Dog*. **For shame!**

## CONCLUSION:

Please don’t tell me this is just a movie. As someone personally and professionally committed to decoding media images of women and Jews, I see what I see here. I’m not saying Daldry/Hare consciously intended anything offensive, but even if their messages are subliminal, they’re on display for all to see. And if I don’t say these things, then who will???

Although I firmly believe that filmmakers must be given wide latitude to make changes to source material during the adaptation process, I believe with equal fervor that they must also be held accountable for the choices that they make along the way. If I were a film critic writing “a review” of *The Reader*, I would be obligated to tell you the film is well-crafted, beautifully acted, etc, etc. But since this is “a rant” by a Jewish Feminist, my only obligation is to tell you that watching this film filled me with rage. A week after having seen it a second time, I was left shaking my head in despair: what were these people thinking?

Furthermore, I was deeply saddened on 12/11/08 as I listened to representatives of The Hollywood Foreign Press Association announce FIVE Golden Globe nominations, thereby immediately increasing its box office appeal and putting it on track for multiple Oscar nominations which will likely increase its box office reach even more. I haven’t been this upset with my colleagues since the night *The Pianist* won multiple Oscars, including Best Adapted Screenplay, in 2003.

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Follow link below to read my rant about *The Pianist*:

[http://www.films42.com/oscar\\_picks/oscar\\_reflections2003.asp](http://www.films42.com/oscar_picks/oscar_reflections2003.asp)

Follow link below to read my thoughts on the Daldry/Hare adaptation of *The Hours*:

<http://www.criticdoctor.com/features/huttner/topten2002.html>