

THE READER

BY BERNHARD SCHLINK

NOVEL STUDY GUIDE

Name: _____



PART I

CHAPTER 1

1. What symptoms did the narrator experience during the period when they had hepatitis? How did it affect their daily life?
2. Describe the initial encounter between the narrator and the woman when the narrator was sick. How did the woman react, and how did the narrator feel during this interaction?
3. What role did the woman play in helping the narrator when they were sick? Provide details about the assistance she provided and how it impacted the narrator.
4. How did the narrator's perception of their own weakness and vulnerability evolve throughout the story? What moments or experiences contributed to this change?
5. Examine the significance of the narrator's journey from Blumenstrasse to Bahnhofstrasse at the end of February. What prompts him to undertake this journey, and what does it reveal about his character and gratitude towards the woman?

CHAPTER 2

1. Describe the differences between the old building on Bahnhofstrasse and the new one. How do these changes in architecture and functionality reflect broader societal shifts over time?
2. What were the narrator's childhood impressions of the old building, and how did those impressions influence their perception of the people who might have lived there?
3. Examine the recurring dream the narrator has about the building. What are the variations in the dream, and what emotions or thoughts does the dream evoke for the narrator?
4. Discuss the significance of the narrator's decision not to open the door in the recurring dream. What might this action symbolize, and how does it contribute to the overall themes of the narrative?
5. Explore the symbolic elements in the dream, such as the deserted landscape, the dusty windows, and the sense of isolation. How do these elements contribute to the atmosphere of the dream and the narrator's emotional experience?

CHAPTER 3

1. Describe the differences between the old building on Bahnhofstrasse and the new one. How do these changes in architecture and functionality reflect broader societal shifts over time?
2. What were the narrator's childhood impressions of the old building, and how did those impressions influence their perception of the people who might have lived there?
3. Examine the recurring dream the narrator has about the building. What are the variations in the dream, and what emotions or thoughts does the dream evoke for the narrator?
4. Discuss the significance of the narrator's decision not to open the door in the recurring dream. What might this action symbolize, and how does it contribute to the overall themes of the narrative?
5. Explore the symbolic elements in the dream, such as the deserted landscape, the dusty windows, and the sense of isolation. How do these elements contribute to the atmosphere of the dream and the narrator's emotional experience?

CHAPTER 4

1. How does the narrator's perception of the woman allure challenge conventional notions of seductiveness?
2. Examine the role of self-discovery in the narrator's understanding of desire and attraction. How does this realization contribute to the complexity of the narrator's emotions?
3. Discuss the significance of the narrator's emphasis on the woman's movements and demeanor rather than physical attributes. How does this shift in focus reflect a more nuanced perspective on sensuality?
4. In what ways does the narrator's evolving perception of sensuality challenge societal norms and expectations regarding desire, age, and physical appearance?

CHAPTER 5

1. Describe the narrator's state of mind and daily life during his recovery. How does the prolonged illness contribute to his sense of isolation and alter his perception of the world around him?
2. Discuss the evolving nature of the narrator's guilt and dreams as he recovers. How do his dreams and fantasies challenge societal expectations, and how does he grapple with the moral implications of his desires?
3. Does the narrator's lingering illness create a mental and emotional labyrinth (maze) that continues even after physical recovery? How and why/why not?
4. Reflect on the narrator's internal conflict as he contemplates returning to Frau Schmitz. How does he rationalize his desires and justify his actions? Consider the tension between moral reasoning and the subconscious forces that influence his decisions.

CHAPTER 6

1. Explore the significance of the narrator's decision to wait for the woman. How does his determination reflect his evolving feelings and desires, and what might it reveal about his character?
2. Analyze the role of the clock and its ticking in the narrative. How does the passage of time influence the narrator's emotions and actions during his wait for the woman?
3. Examine the revelation of the woman's occupation as a streetcar conductor. How does this detail add depth to her character, and in what ways does it impact the narrator's perception of her?
4. Discuss the events in the cellar with the coke and its potential symbolic meaning. How does this episode contribute to the narrative, and what might it suggest about the narrator's internal struggles or fears?
5. Explore the transformation from the cellar mishap to the narrator taking a bath at the woman's place. How does this shift in setting symbolize a change in their relationship, and what emotions or conflicts does the narrator experience during this intimate moment?

CHAPTER 7

1. Examine the narrator's feelings of love and yearning for the woman. How does his emotional state evolve after their intimate encounter, and what internal conflicts does he grapple with?
2. Discuss the significance of the narrator's childhood memory involving warmth and care. How does this memory shape his current behavior and attitudes, particularly in relation to the woman, who he has fallen in love with?
3. Analyze the narrator's decision to return to school and the dynamics within his family during dinner. How does his relationship with his family members evolve, and what conflicting emotions does he experience in this familial context?
4. Explore the narrator's perception of his father and his father's role in the family. How does the narrator view his father's priorities, and what insights does this provide into the narrator's understanding of family dynamics?
5. Reflect on the narrator's sense of farewell and homesickness. How does his longing for both his family and the woman create a complex emotional landscape, and what might this foreshadow for his future decisions and experiences?

CHAPTER 8

1. Explore the dynamics of the narrator and the woman's relationship. How does their physical intimacy contrast with their communication patterns and emotional connection?
2. Analyze the woman's reaction to the narrator's revelation about his academic struggles. What does this reveal about her values and expectations, and how does it influence their relationship?
3. Consider the significance of names in this chapter. How does the narrator's inquiry about the woman's first name symbolize a deeper connection, and what does the woman's laughter and subsequent discussion reveal about their relationship?
4. Discuss the woman's actions and words when she imitates her job as a streetcar conductor. What might this reveal about her character and her perception of the narrator's academic pursuits?
5. Reflect on the complexities of the narrator and the woman's relationship. How do their differing perspectives on work, studies, and life impact their interactions and emotional involvement with each other?

CHAPTER 9

1. Describe Michael's self-perception during the mentioned period. How does he feel about his appearance, achievements, and potential future? How does this self-perception contribute to his overall emotional state?
2. Discuss Hanna's approach to life and her past. How does her attitude differ from Michael's, and what does her rootedness in the present suggest about her character?
3. Examine Michael's expectations and projections about the future, particularly concerning his relationship with Hanna. How does he compare his envisioned future with her to his attitudes toward his family and societal expectations?
4. Explore the role of reading aloud in Michael's relationship with Hanna. How does this activity influence their interactions, and what significance does it hold in their routine? Consider the narrator's changing feelings from the start of reading to the end.

CHAPTER 10

1. Analyze Michael's experience on the streetcar to Schwetzingen. How does the setting, the slow pace, and his emotions contribute to the overall atmosphere of the journey?
2. Explore the conflict between Michael and the woman during their confrontation in the kitchen. What misunderstandings arise, and how does the communication breakdown affect their relationship?
3. Examine the power dynamics in the relationship following the confrontation. How does Michael's behavior change, and what impact does Hanna's response have on his actions and attitudes?

CHAPTER 11

1. Examine the dynamics of Hanna and Michael's relationship during their cycling trip. How does their shared experience contribute to the deepening of their connection, and what role does travel play in their happiness?
2. Discuss Michael's decision to sell his stamp collection to fund the trip. How does this act symbolize his commitment to the relationship, and what does the stamp dealer's reaction reveal about Michael's attachment to his possessions?
3. Analyze the conflict in Amorbach, focusing on Hanna's unexpected outburst. What does this incident reveal about her emotional state and the differences in communication styles between the narrator and the woman?
4. How does the outburst and subsequent fight contribute to a deeper understanding of each character's vulnerabilities, and in what ways does it transform the nature of their intimacy?

CHAPTER 12

1. Reflect on Michael's experience of stealing clothes for his little sister. How does this act symbolize his evolving sense of independence and resourcefulness, and what impact does it have on his relationship with his family?
2. Analyze Hanna's exploration of Michael's house and the moment in his father's study. What insights can be drawn from her actions, particularly the scene where she runs her finger along the backs of the books? How does this contribute to the characterization of Hanna and her relationship with Michael?
3. Examine Michael's description of the pictures of Hanna that have stayed with him. How do these mental images contribute to the depth of his emotions for her, and what significance do they hold in the narrative?
4. Explore the dynamics of Michael and Hanna's interactions during the evening in Michael's house. How does Hanna's discomfort with being in the house reflect her feelings about their relationship, and in what ways does it impact the Michael emotionally?

CHAPTER 13

1. Examine Michael's initial reaction to the new school year and the restructuring of classes. How does this transition mark a significant change for him, both in terms of the class composition and the introduction of girls?
2. Analyze Michael's observations and feelings about interacting with girls in the new class. How does his confidence fluctuate, and what role does his past experiences with Hanna play in shaping his attitude toward relationships with her?
3. Reflect on the setting of the new classroom and its impact on the narrative. How does the physical environment contribute to the atmosphere, and what significance might be attached to the absence of superfluous items in the room?
4. Explore Michael's struggle with self-confidence and his tendency to oscillate between feelings of success and worthlessness. How do these internal conflicts affect his relationships, particularly with Hanna, and how does he perceive success in his personal life?

CHAPTER 14

1. Reflect on the analogy of the airplane's glide path as a metaphor for Michael's summer with Hanna. How does this metaphorical journey shape the dynamics of their relationship, and what hints are provided about Hanna's perspective on their relationship?
2. Analyze the significance of the pet names Michael and Hanna create for each other, especially the association of "Horse." How does this naming ritual contribute to the intimacy of their relationship, and what does the narrator's choice reveal about his perception of the woman's qualities?
3. How does Hanna's reaction to the theater experience shed light on her understanding of societal norms, and how does Michael navigate the balance between his life with Hanna and his involvement with classmates at the swimming pool?
4. How does Michael's conflict between wanting to be with his classmates and Hanna create tension, and how does his reaction to the woman's bad mood and subsequent fight reflect his internal struggles and fear of losing her?

CHAPTER 15

1. What is Michael's perspective on the act of disavowal as a form of betrayal, and how does he grapple with the consequences of this betrayal?

2. How does Michael's relationship with Hanna evolve over time, particularly in the context of friendships with others like Holger Schlüter and Sophie? Explore the reasons behind his hesitation to share information about Hanna and the impact of this decision on their relationship.

3. Discuss the significance of the thunderstorm scene with Sophie. How does the weather reflect the emotional atmosphere, and what internal conflict does Michael face when Sophie brings up the topic of illness? Analyze Michael's struggle to disclose information about Hanna and the missed opportunity for communication.

CHAPTER 16

1. Explore the theme of secrecy in Michael's relationship with Hanna. How does he handle Hanna's refusal to share details about her personal life?
2. Analyze the symbolism of the bath scene, particularly the act of Hanna bathing Michael. How does this moment represent vulnerability, intimacy, and a desire for emotional connection? Consider the impact of this experience on both characters.
3. Discuss Michael's emotional state during and after the unexpected encounter with Hanna at the swimming pool. How does this event contribute to Michael's self-reflection and understanding of their relationship? Explore the themes of longing, uncertainty, and the complexities of human connection.

CHAPTER 17

1. Describe Michael's emotional and physical response to Hanna's sudden disappearance. How he attempt to gather information about her whereabouts, and what impact does the lack of information have on his well-being?

2. Analyze Michael's feelings of guilt and remorse in the days following Hanna's departure. How does he reflect on his own actions and decisions, particularly the moment when he failed to immediately approach her? Explore the internal conflict and the consequences of his perceived betrayal.

3. Examine Michael's attempt to rationalize the situation by questioning the identity of the person he saw. How does he grapple with the uncertainty of whether it was truly Hanna, and what psychological impact does this uncertainty have on him? Discuss the theme of denial and its role in shaping his perspective on the situation.

PART II

CHAPTER 1

1. Analyze Michael's emotional journey from Hanna's departure to his later years in school and university. How does the narrative convey the evolution of his feelings towards Hanna, and how do his emotional experiences shape his personality?
2. Explore the metaphor of the city and the train station in Michael's description of forgetting Hanna. How does the imagery of the city staying behind as the train pulls out symbolize his relationship with Hanna and the process of moving on?
3. Examine the contrast between Michael's external demeanor of arrogance and his internal sensitivity. How does this duality reflect the internal conflicts within Michael's character, and what impact does it have on his relationships and behavior?

CHAPTER 2

1. Evaluate the significance of Hanna's appearance in a courtroom and the context of the trial related to the camps. How does the setting contribute to the novel's exploration of justice, memory, and the aftermath of historical events?

2. Investigate the seminar's debates on retroactive justice and the professor's perspective on the defendants. How do these discussions shed light on the complexities of legal and moral considerations in the context of historical crimes?

3. Explore the formation of the group identity among the students in the seminar. How does their shared exploration of the past contribute to a sense of belonging, and what does it reveal about their attitudes toward their parents' generation?

CHAPTER 3

1. Explore Michael's emotional numbness and detachment during Hanna's trial. How does the author convey the protagonist's inner state, and what impact does this emotional numbness have on Michael's perception of Hanna and the trial proceedings?

2. Analyze the courtroom dynamics during Hanna's trial. How does the legal process unfold, and what insights does the chapter provide into the pursuit of justice for crimes related to the Holocaust?

3. Investigate Michael's initial reaction to Hanna being in custody. How does his desire for Hanna to be far away from him reflect personal bias, and how does it challenge the objectivity necessary for a fair trial?

CHAPTER 4

1. Examine Michael's observations of Hanna during the trial. How does the author use physical descriptions and body language to convey Hanna's demeanor and reactions? What insights does this provide into Hanna's character?

2. Evaluate the impact of numbness on various characters involved in the trial, including judges, prosecutors, and other students. How does the author depict the progression of emotional numbness, and what implications does it have for the pursuit of justice?

3. Describe Michael's internal conflict regarding the second generation's responsibility in the face of knowledge about the horrors of the Holocaust. How does the author present the ethical dilemma of staying silent versus actively exploring and confronting the past?

CHAPTER 5

1. Analyze the structure and content of the indictment presented in Chapter Five. How does the use of the subjunctive mood contribute to the narrative, and why does the author choose to emphasize the charges related to the small camp near Cracow over those at Auschwitz?

2. Explore the role of survivors and witnesses in the trial, especially focusing on the daughter who wrote a book about the camp. How do their testimonies contribute to the charges against the defendants, and what challenges do they face in providing their accounts?

3. Investigate the significance of the charges related to selections in the camp. How were the defendants involved in these selections, and how does Hanna's admission to participation set her apart from the other defendants?

CHAPTER 6

1. Assess Hanna's performance during the trial in Chapter Six. How does her interaction with the presiding judge and her lawyer reflect her understanding of the legal proceedings? What impact does her approach have on the court and the audience?
2. Examine the court's handling of evidence, particularly regarding the German version of the daughter's book. How does this episode highlight the dynamics between the court, the defendants, and the presented evidence?
3. Delve into Hanna's moral dilemma presented in her questioning about the selections in the camp. How does the judge's response contribute to the portrayal of Hanna's internal struggle, and what does her final question reveal about her perspective on her own actions?

CHAPTER 7

1. Explore the impact of Hanna's contradictions on the judge, her co-defendants, and her own defense. How does her willingness to admit things affect the overall trial and her relationship with others?

2. Analyze the defense strategies employed by Hanna's co-defendants' lawyers. How do they use Hanna's admissions to both incriminate her and exonerate their clients? What role does Hanna's acknowledgment of having special prisoners play in the trial dynamics?

CHAPTER 8

1. Examine the daughter's book and its role in creating distance. How does the book contribute to the overall narrative and portrayal of characters, especially Hanna? Discuss the daughter's narrative style and her ability to observe and analyze events.

2. Consider the comparison between Hanna and other guards in the daughter's book. How does the daughter describe guards like "Mare," and what implications does this have for identifying Hanna as a character? Explore the daughter's reaction to the comparison.

CHAPTER 9

1. Analyze the judge's questioning regarding the locked doors and the conflicting accounts of the defendants. How does Hanna respond to the judge's questions, and what reasons does she provide for not unlocking the doors?

2. Explore Hanna's admission to writing the report. What does this admission reveal about her character, motivations, and the dynamics within the group of female guards? How does Hanna justify her actions regarding the report?

CHAPTER 10

1. Reflect on the significance of the Sundays in the narrator's life. How does nature play a role in his experiences, and what does his exploration of different places reveal about his character?
2. Explore the theme of shame in Hanna's character. How does her illiteracy influence her decisions and actions, particularly in relation to her job choices and behavior at the trial? Analyze Michael's understanding and acceptance of Hanna's shame.
3. Consider the narrator's internal struggle regarding Hanna's motives. Why does he reject the idea that Hanna chose a criminal path out of shame for her illiteracy? How does this internal conflict shape his perception of guilt and responsibility in their relationship?

CHAPTER 11

1. Analyze the dynamics within the group of defendants during the trial. How does Hanna's role evolve, and what tactics do the other defendants use to shift blame onto her? Explore the impact of perception on the villagers and their inability to confirm or deny Hanna's leadership.

2. Discuss Hanna's behavior during the trial. How does her struggle manifest, and why does she eventually give up? Examine the courtroom atmosphere and Michael's perception of the court's attitude towards Hanna.

3. Reflect on Michael's internal conflict and his contemplation of revealing Hanna's illiteracy to the judge. What ethical dilemmas does he face, and how does his understanding of Hanna's struggles impact his decision-making process?

CHAPTER 12

1. Explore the relationship between Michael and his father. How does the father-son dynamic shape Michael's approach to seeking advice? Discuss the father's philosophical perspective on freedom, dignity, and interference in the lives of others.
2. Examine Michael's relief upon discussing his problem with his father. What conflicting emotions does he experience, and how does his father's philosophical stance provide a resolution to Michael's moral dilemma?
3. Consider Michael's struggle with the decision to talk to Hanna about her illiteracy. How does he grapple with the idea of depriving her of her lifelong lie?

CHAPTER 13

1. Reflect on Michael's emotional state during the court's trip to Israel. How do the vivid images of Hanna's past, both in the concentration camps and in Michael's personal experiences, impact his ability to concentrate on his studies? Discuss the juxtaposition of the court proceedings and the touristic elements of the trip.

2. Examine Michael's struggle with his own memories and fantasies of Hanna. How do these images, both positive and disturbing, contribute to his internal conflict and sense of identity? Explore the psychological impact of his dreams on his perception of self.

3. Consider Michael's observation about the limited direct knowledge of the concentration camps during that time. Discuss how the lack of firsthand experience and the static nature of imagination affected the collective understanding of the horrors that occurred in the camps.

CHAPTER 14

1. Analyze Michael's decision to visit Struthof in Alsace. What motivates him to seek out a concentration camp, and how does he hope this experience will influence his understanding of the events?
2. Reflect on the conversation with the driver during the journey to Struthof. How does the driver challenge Michael's preconceptions about murderers and the motives behind terrible actions?
3. Consider the narrator's experience at Struthof. How does he feel as he walks around the camp, and how does this visit impact his perception of the concentration camps? Discuss Michael's attempts to imagine the reality of the camp and his feelings of failure in doing so.

CHAPTER 15

1. Contrast Michael's recent visit to Struthof with his first visit. How has his perspective changed, and what emotions does he experience as he revisits the concentration camp? Discuss the significance of the snowy landscape and the closed camp.
2. Explore the incident in the restaurant involving the old man with a wooden leg. How does this event reflect Michael's sensitivity to violence and injustice, and how does it connect to his internal restlessness and fear during the night?
3. Delve into Michael's inner conflict regarding Hanna's crime. How does he grapple with the simultaneous desire to understand and condemn her actions? Discuss the impossibility of reconciling these two tasks and the impact on Michael's emotional state.

CHAPTER 16

1. Explore Michael's internal conflict and emotions as he contemplates visiting Hanna in prison. What thoughts and questions torment him regarding Hanna's betrayal and his own role in her life?

2. Analyze the meeting between Michael and the presiding judge. What is the judge's demeanor, and how does the conversation unfold? Discuss the judge's background, his satisfaction with his career, and his interest in the seminar group's evaluation of the trial.

3. Reflect on Michael's train journey and his emotional state during this time. How does the numbness he experiences relate to his past emotions and thoughts? Discuss the impact of the trial on his perception of Hanna and his ability to return to everyday life.

CHAPTER 17

1. Describe the atmosphere in the courtroom during the announcement of the verdict. How do the spectators react to Hanna's appearance, and what assumptions are made about her attire? Discuss the reactions of the people in the courtroom, from students and journalists to those from the justice system.

2. Reflect on Michael's focus on Hanna's head and neck during the verdict. What significance might this have, and how does it contribute to the portrayal of Hanna's emotions and state of mind? Discuss the complexity of Hanna's expression and the narrator's attempt to connect with her through observation.

PART III

CHAPTER 1

1. Analyze Michael's behavior during the summer after the trial. How does he immerse himself in studying and avoid social contacts?
2. Explore Michael's decision to spend Christmas vacation with a group of students at a ski lodge. What medical risks does he consciously take while skiing, and how does this reflect his mindset?
3. Reflect on Michael's realization that the numbness had to overwhelm him before letting go. Discuss the psychological and emotional aspects of this numbness and its role in allowing him to return to everyday life.

CHAPTER 2

1. Analyze Michael's reasons for not actively participating in the movements related to university reforms and the Nazi past. What are his thoughts on collective guilt and the shame he associates with the Nazi past?
2. What are Michael's views on parental expectations and the challenges faced by the generation that grew up in the aftermath of Nazi crimes?
3. Examine Michael's struggle with pointing at someone for guilt. Why does he feel compelled to point at Hanna, and how does this act reflect on his own emotions and sense of responsibility?

CHAPTER 3

1. Discuss Michael's decision to marry Gertrud and their life together. Explore his comparisons between Gertrud and Hanna, and the ongoing feeling that something is wrong.
2. Reflect on Michael's divorce from Gertrud and the impact on their daughter, Julia. How does the narrator experience guilt and remorse regarding Julia's sense of warmth and safety?
3. Analyze Michael's approach to later relationships, including his honesty about Hanna and his attempt to go deeper into these connections. What are the reactions of the women he confides in?

CHAPTER 4

1. Explore Michael's decision to pursue a career in legal history. What are Gertrud's perceptions of this choice?

2. What is Michael's experience in building bridges between the past and the present as a legal historian? Discuss his satisfaction in exploring different stretches of the past and the joy he finds in certain historical periods.

3. What is the influence of Michael's research on the legal codes and drafts of the Enlightenment and the evolving understanding of the purpose and goal of legal history?

CHAPTER 5

1. Why did Michael choose to read aloud to Hanna during the nights when he couldn't sleep?

2. What types of literature did Michael read to Hanna, and how did his choices evolve over time?

3. How did Michael's reading aloud to Hanna become an integral part of his creative process when he started writing himself?

CHAPTER 6

1. What was the significance of Hanna's note to Michael, and how did it impact their wordless connection?

2. How did Hanna's handwritten notes evolve over time, and what did they reveal about her progress?

3. What insights did Hanna provide on literature, and how did her observations influence Michael's reading choices?

CHAPTER 7

1. How did the warden's letter change Michael's perspective on his relationship with Hanna?

2. What steps did Michael take in finding Hanna an apartment and a job, and why did he hesitate to visit her?

3. How did the letter from the warden reflect the challenges Hanna might face upon her release after eighteen years in prison?

CHAPTER 8

1. Describe Michael's first impression of Hanna upon meeting her after her release.

2. How did Michael attempt to make amends for disappointing Hanna during their conversation?

3. What internal conflict does Michael face regarding his relationship with Hanna, and how does he feel about her impending release?

CHAPTER 9

1. What was Michael's state of mind as he worked on his lecture, and how did the initial idea for the lecture turn out?
2. Describe Michael's actions in preparing for Hanna's release, and what emotions does he experience during this process?
3. What internal conflict does Michael face regarding his visit to Hanna, and how does he deal with thoughts of betraying her?

CHAPTER 10

1. How does Chapter Ten open, and what news does Michael receive about Hanna's fate?
2. Describe the warden's reaction and questioning when Michael arrives at the prison. What information does the warden seek?
3. What does Michael discover about Hanna's life in prison, especially in the last years, and what emotions does he go through during this revelation?

CHAPTER 11

1. What actions does Michael take to fulfill Hanna's last wishes, and how does he approach the meeting with Hanna's daughter?

2. How does the daughter react to the news of Hanna's death and the instructions from her will?

3. What discussion ensues about granting absolution, and what is Michael's suggestion for using the money?

CHAPTER 12

1. What is Michael's reflection on the events that happened ten years ago, and how has his perspective on the story of him and Hanna evolved?

2. Why did Michael decide to write his story, and how did the process of writing affect his relationship with the memories?

3. How does Michael describe the layers of their lives and the impact of earlier events on later ones?