

## Some thoughts on watching films

Stories are the stuff of life. They allow us to reflect on all sorts of issues at a safe distance as we engage with the characters, cry with them, laugh with them, get cross with them and generally share their experience. How they deal with the issues they come across may frustrate us, or give us new insights; cause us to laugh or cry; result in us hurling abuse at the screen or willing there to be a happy ending. And through it all we can encounter God in all sorts of unexpected places if we only take time to look.

### Questions to ask yourself

What did you think of the film? What do you like most? Least?

Which incidents made you *think* or *feel* most strongly? How well did you think the film treated those incidents?

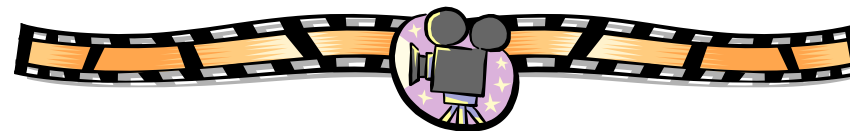
What issues did the film raise for you?

What character(s) do you most identify with and why?

Does the film have any echoes of Christian beliefs or stories from the Bible? Does it support or challenge Christian values?

### Some facts about the film

- Kate Winslett originally turned down the role due to a conflict with *Revolutionary Road*. Instead, Nicole Kidman was given the part and filming was delayed to allow her to finish *Australia*. However, by the time filming was due to begin, Kidman was pregnant and withdrew, allowing Winslett, who was now free, to once more take the role.
- The concentration camp scenes were filmed at the Majdanek concentration camp, located in Lublin, Poland. This camp was functional at the time of its liberation by the Soviets in 1944, meaning that it is intact today. Most other camps (including Auschwitz) were either partially or completely destroyed by the Nazis in an attempt to cover up what had been going on.
- The Latin lines Michael quotes to Hanna are the opening lines of Horace's 7th Epode, a short poem where he expresses outrage at the fact that his countrymen are still engaged in civil war. "Villains, where are you rushing to? Why are your hands / Grasping those swords that were sheathed?" The Greek lines are the opening stanza of Sappho's 16th fragment: "Some say a host of horsemen, others of infantry, and others of ships, is the most beautiful thing on the dark earth: but I say, it is what you love."
- It took seven hours in makeup for Kate to be transformed into the old Hanna.
- *The Reader (Der Vorleser)* is a 1995 novel by German law professor, judge, and detective novelist Bernhard Schlink. The novel was adapted for the film by English playwright, Sir David Hare.
- Kate Winslett won both an Oscar and a BAFTA for Best Actress for this film. The film was also nominated for four other Oscars, including Best Film and Best Director.



**A chance to watch films together.  
An opportunity to discuss the issues raised.  
A time of friendship, food and fun.**

**5th Sep Doubt**  
**10th Oct The Soloist**  
**7th Nov The Reader**  
**5th Dec Heaven**  
**9th Jan Inception (with FEATURES @ Tackley)**  
**6th Feb Departures**

**Films start at 5:30pm  
Followed by food, coffee and conversation**

**10 Bletchingdon Road  
Islip**

**Further details from Jonathan (Ox 842214)  
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## The Reader

This Oscar-winning film is set in postwar Germany and revolves around the relationship between a young man (Michael) and a woman who, when they first meet, is twice his age (Hanna). Over the years, the story takes various twists and turns. As it does so, we are invited to reflect on issues of truth and reconciliation, collective guilt, and how one generation comes to terms with the crimes of another.

*\*\*\* SPOILERS \*\*\* It is impossible to raise questions about this film without giving away a key element of the plot. You may therefore prefer not to read this leaflet until after you have seen the film.*

### **Collective guilt**

How does a society as a whole come to terms with its past? The trial in the film is seen as a way of calling to account a previous generation for the sins of the past, but the danger is that it simply finds scapegoats. As one of the student claims: “Everyone knew”, to some extent or other. How do you balance a desire to understand what happened (and why), particularly when those involved are parents, family and friends, with a desire for justice? And what does justice mean in this context? Christian forgiveness is about enabling people to make a new start, but how do you set about that when the evil has run so deep?

### **Keeping secrets**

Throughout the film, secrets are kept. Michael never discloses the hold Hanna has over him, despite it clearly influencing his relationships. Hanna would rather shoulder the blame for what went on in the camps than admit her illiteracy. Why was it so important to them to keep these things secret? And should Michael have told what he knew? After all, he hadn't been sworn to secrecy. Is it ever right to betray a confidence if it is to the person's benefit?

### **Doing your job**

It remains the classic Nuremberg defence—I was only doing my job. Yet, to Hanna, that is precisely what she was doing. When she asks the judge “What would you have done?”, it is a genuine question. She honestly wants to know. Should she have signed up at Siemens or not? Most people involved in the Nazi machine had no particular grudge against the Jews or anyone else. They were simply playing out their small role in a society of which they were a part. It's easy to demonise but what would you have done? When should one make a stand, regardless of the consequences?

### **Morality vs. Law**

Is it ever possible to enshrine morality within a code of law? How as a society do we face up to moral questions? Professor Rohl claims that all the court can do is examine the legality of what happened—and that that legality was a case of what was legal at the time. And those same issues remain. The question the government wanted an answer to at the time of the Iraq War was again, ‘Is it legal?’. Is that enough?

### **Other questions to ponder**

Why does Hanna seduce Michael in first place?

Why does Hanna leave Michael and her job without saying goodbye?

Why does Michael never write in response to Hanna's letters?

Who is “The Reader” of the title?

## Memorable Quotes

**Teacher** The notion of secrecy is central to Western literature. You may say the whole idea of character is defined by people holding specific information which, for various reasons, sometimes perverse, sometimes noble, they are determined not to disclose.

**Prof Rohl** What we feel is unimportant. What is important is what we do.

**Prof Rohl** Societies think they operate by something called morality. But they don't. They operate by something called law. You're not guilty of anything merely by working at Auschwitz. Eight thousand people worked at Auschwitz, and precisely 19 have been convicted, only 6 for murder. To prove murder, you have to prove intent. That's the law. The question is never ‘was it wrong?’, but ‘was it legal?’. And not by our laws. No—by the laws of the time.

**Judge** So, to make room you were picking women out and saying: “You, you and you have to be sent back to be killed”?

**Hanna** Well, what would you have done?

**Student** People go on about how much did everyone know. Who knew? What did they know? Everyone knew. Our parents, our teachers. That isn't the question. The question is: ‘How could you let this happen?’

**Hanna** We couldn't just let them escape. We were responsible for them.  
**Judge** So you did know what was happening. You made a choice. You let them die rather than risk letting them escape.

**Prof Rohl** You have a moral obligation to disclose this information to the court.

**Michael** There's a problem. The defendant herself is determined to keep the information secret.

**Prof Rohl** What are her reasons?

**Michael** Because she is ashamed.

**Michael** What do you feel now?

**Hanna** It doesn't matter what I feel or what I think. The dead are still dead.

**Michael** I wasn't sure what you'd learned.

**Hanna** Well, I have learned, kid. I've learned to read.

**Rose** People ask all the time what I learned in the camps. But the camps weren't therapy. What do you think those places were? Universities? We didn't go there to learn. What are you asking for? Forgiveness for her? Or do you just want to feel better yourself? My advice—go to the theatre if you want catharsis. Go to literature. Don't go to the camps. Nothing comes out of the camps. Nothing.

**Michael** You know, I'm aware I was difficult. I wasn't always open with you. I'm not open with anyone.