Bernhard Schlink is another writer who provides his own commentary, though not in the same volume. *The Reader*,¹ not so long ago released in an award-winning yet highly controversial film version, is hardly a work on the scale of *War and Peace*. But like Tolstoy, Schlink used his novel to work out a way of coming to terms with a horrific and otherwise inexplicable past. In this case, why would ordinary, otherwise decent citizens and good neighbours commit, or permit, atrocities? And more particularly, how can their children and grandchildren live with the knowledge of their parents’ past actions, or inactions? Schlink’s more recent book *Guilt about the Past*² provides the considered later commentary on his own storytelling. *The Reader* deserves to be read as a book, not just viewed in its film version, and decoded in the light of Schlink’s more recent book. In *The Reader* we see the emergence of some of the themes explored more discursively in *Guilt about the Past*.

Apart from a certain professional interest, I have another, more existential interest in the problem of collective responsibility and guilt, and how we live with these after the event. My great-grandmother, my first Australian-born ancestor, was born in 1845. Her mother took the next five weeks to die in the heat of a fly-blown Melbourne February. It doesn’t do to imagine the details too vividly. The baby was collected by her aunt and brought to the landholding...
that her father had, as he might have put it, ‘taken up’, courtesy of the local representative of Her Majesty’s distant government, Mr C.J. LaTrobe. They had not brought much baggage with them, this brother and sister pair, but one thing they had brought to the far side of the world was in their heads. It was a certain theological worldview that included an unquestioning assuredness, if not exactly of salvation, then of a certain covenantal attitude to land. Land was there for the taking, mandated by the fierce and unrestrained deity of the Book of Joshua. And for me, my own twenty-first-century existential problem: what responsibility, what residual guilt about the past, do I carry for this act of dispossession? And how do I live with it? Now let me assure you I don’t wake up asking myself this question every morning. But it’s simply there, a shadow beyond the light of the camp-fire, like the Aboriginal figures in any number of Australian novels. It waits, silently, like the no doubt curious, silent observers as a lone Scotswoman on horseback with a five-week-old baby passed through their country.

The story of *The Reader* falls into three episodes: the affair between the young Michael Berg and the older Hanna Schmitz, in which Hanna demands that Michael read aloud to her; the trial, in which Hanna is charged with war crimes; and finally, the renewed correspondence in which Michael resumes his reader role, sending Hanna audiotapes of books he reads aloud. Against the background of intergenerational conflict, focusing on the questions of the older generation’s involvement in the Nazi past, Michael finds himself fascinated by Hanna. Hanna is an outsider: she has no friends or family, and she is an immigrant from Romania, presumably having been born into one of the old German settlements there. She expects Michael to read to her—he becomes the Reader—while all the time he conceals his affair from his family and friends. This is to take its toll on Michael’s own relationships. After Hanna’s precipitate departure, he abandons a girlfriend, Sophie (is there any significance in her name, suggesting he is also abandoning wisdom?), who tearfully demands to know: ‘What’s happened to you? What’s happened to you?’ Later Michael asks himself the same question: ‘The worst were the dreams in which a hard, imperious cruel Hanna aroused me sexually; I woke from them full of longing and shame and rage. And full of fear about who I really was.’

So what has happened to Michael, and who has he become in this context of guilt and accusation? By his obsession with Hanna, Michael has been lifted out of his own generation, represented by Sophie and their friends from whom he holds himself aloof in an attitude of haughty superiority, into his parents’ and Hanna’s generation, the generation not of youthful accusers, but of the accused. This is the source of his, and his friends’, bewilderment. During the trial, Michael attempts to decode Hanna’s behaviour, unaware she knows he is present. Only late in the trial when it emerges she has kept her ‘favourites’ in the camp as readers like himself does she turn and look directly at Michael, and he recognises his own role, recognises also her well-guarded secret, that she has never learnt to read. He has finally decoded her, in a way no-one else has. A conversation with his father leads Michael to a further understanding, that he has no moral right to betray Hanna’s secret, even though it would ensure her a lighter sentence. Human dignity—the very principle so denied by the camps and those who ran them—insists Michael respect Hanna’s secret
concerning her illiteracy. Indeed, it seems voyeuristic at this point to continue reading a novel about a woman whose illiteracy may have led to her own moral compromise.

Michael’s response is to send tape recordings of whatever he is reading to Hanna in prison. He is by now separated from his wife—he has been unable, as the daughter of Hanna’s accuser is later correctly to guess, to maintain any lasting relationship. A long-distance relationship with Hanna takes over, in which Hanna slowly and laboriously learns to read and write for herself. Michael never visits Hanna—until, eighteen years later, he is summoned by the prison governor shortly before Hanna’s release. He is her only contact. He meets her, now an old woman with ‘an old woman smell’, and arranges a flat and employment for her. But, as he discovers too late, she is unable to face the new world that awaits her. Michael carries out Hanna’s final requirement, personally delivering a bequest to the daughter of her erstwhile accuser.

Schlink’s own extended gloss on his novel comes in the six essays collected in *Guilt about the Past*. Here he asks: Is there such a thing as collective guilt? How is it that guilt can be attributed to (and felt by) not just the immediate perpetrators, but also their associates—families, friends, contemporaries, fellow citizens? How should a person live with a guilt-laden past, and can such guilt be overcome? Who can forgive, and does forgiveness have a place in reconciliation? How does an action, or inaction (and Hanna’s crime has been a crime of inaction), in the past have real effects in the present? All these are questions Schlink has grappled with through the action of writing his novel, and all need to be taken into account in reading *The Reader*.

It was the growth of individualism, according to Schlink, including individual responsibility, that did away with much of the historic legal exercise of collective responsibility. But while it may no longer be a function of law (we no longer fear our children may be drowned with us for our personal civil disobedience—at least where rule of law is effective), it is still a psychological reality. ‘Collective liability has its foundation in freely chosen solidarity.’

This is the problem of the fictional Michael Berg: he freely chooses to associate with Hanna Schmitz, so the realisation of her culpability burdens him with guilt by association. His friends also carry a sense of a similar guilt, but they can and do dissociate themselves from their parents’ generation, at least to some degree. Michael cannot. He has slept with an older woman who is not only of the guilty generation but also a perpetrator herself—so he has been drawn into that generation and its guilt by default. ‘The price of establishing and maintaining solidarity’, says Schlink, ‘is of course that one is regarded and treated equally when one would rather not be. As long as the ties of solidarity are not severed, all the behaviour of the one will also be credited to the other.’

He notes a reduction of guilt over generations that accounts for why, for example, most non-Aboriginal Australians feel less guilt about the Aborigines who were systematically dispossessed of their land in the 1850s, whom we have never met, than we do about members of the stolen generations of the 1950s and later, many of whom are still alive and some of whom, chances are, we know personally. But this distance does not apply to Michael, and this is his problem: he cannot sever his solidarity with Hanna, and this solidarity becomes more and more evident, both to the reader and to Michael’s friends,
as the trial goes on. This is a ‘new sort of guilt’,\(^7\) by association. Avoidance of it by dissociation would, of course, create yet another new sort of guilt: could I dissociate myself from someone I love without feeling the guilt of disloyalty? And no-one can dissociate themselves from their history without impoverishment or loss of identity. This is what Christian theology knows under the often maligned notion of original sin. Not whether we somehow inherit guilt, but why do we feel guilt on behalf of our forebears? Not whether we should feel guilt, but why we do feel guilt—‘even to the third and fourth generation’.

What is it then that binds Michael to Hanna, even after the trial? He has long ceased to be motivated by sexual desire, so what is it that brings him to resume his reading? Michael has put himself beyond any longing for ‘an undamaged sense of self’. There is now ‘something wrong’ with his biography that cannot but affect his identity and relationships—and we the readers (as well as the daughter of Hanna’s accuser) see the consequence of this in his failed marriage. Michael has seen and understood the reality that Hanna had hidden so carefully, and which no-one at the trial had guessed: she is illiterate, and, more importantly, ashamed of her illiteracy.

What takes over for Michael at this point is not desire, or even individual morality, but a bourgeois sense of civic virtue, even a code of honour that for Schlink has shown itself more effective in overcoming evil than any publicly espoused moral positions. The avoidance of moral compromise in the future does not depend on ‘constant evocations of morality . . . Properly functioning institutions embody morality without constantly preaching it.’\(^8\) This is perhaps why Schlink has chosen to explore these moral questions, at least for a start, not professionally as a lawyer but through writing fiction. Michael is a product of bourgeois culture; instinctively he recognises and understands from the inside what Schlink sees as the ‘perverted form’ of that same culture.\(^9\)

So how do human beings deal with this inherited culpability, this past guilt that stretches its icy fingers around the present? How does Michael deal with it? How does the daughter of Hanna’s accuser deal with it, when she asks Michael if it’s absolution for Hanna (and indeed for himself) that he’s looking for? If the daughter has read Dostoyevsky, she will know Ivan Karamazov’s opinion that a mother cannot forgive her child’s tormentor on her child’s behalf; she can only forgive for her own suffering. Absolution can sometimes be given only by the dead, or perhaps by a God in whom the dead might find their peace.

The only point at which Schlink refers directly to his own novel comes in the final chapter of \textit{Guilt about the Past}. Here the author responds to some of his critics who accuse him of humanising the monstrous: ‘I understand the desire for a world where those who commit monstrous crimes are always monsters,’ he begins.\(^10\) But reality isn’t quite like that. ‘Germans were perpetrators and also victims, the people in the occupied countries were suppressed and also collaborated, Jews suffered and were also involved.’\(^11\) Tolstoy makes the same point in \textit{War and Peace}—the past is always more complex and confusing than any simple Manichean division of good and evil. The problem for those of us removed, either by nationality or generation, from the particular instance of guilt about the past that Schlink is concerned with is it may sound like another attempt at Holocaust denial. But this is not at all Schlink’s purpose.

\(^7\) Schlink, \textit{Guilt about the Past}, p. 15.


He is voicing a concern for speaking the whole truth, while pointing out the ultimate impossibility of ever succeeding in this. 'What does it mean to find truth within a work of fiction?' he asks. His answer: 'We don’t want fiction just for the facts being presented to us. We want reality to be presented to us and explained to us and turned into something that, even though it is not our reality, we can imagine ourselves into. We read because we want to share the lives of those we read about, we want to empathise with them, fall in love with them, train our hatred on them, and ultimately learn about ourselves from them.' Schlink refers to an epistemological distinction between ‘the context or logic of discovery and the context or logic of justification’. Schlink’s fictional work is an example of the former: he writes to discover.

A recent Australian reflection on the same problem is provided in Justine McGill’s essay on the trial of Radovan Karadzic: ‘obviously Karadzic did not commit these crimes on his own’. Had every French corporal gone on strike, as Tolstoy hypothetically surmises, Napoleon’s invasion of Russia could never have taken place (and if in doubt as to whether Bonaparte counts as a war criminal, just read War and Peace). These are by definition systematic crimes, McGill points out, involving many individuals, and this colours our responses to them, to how we feel about them in hindsight. We want to make a monster of Karadzic, to train our hatred on him, because this act somehow assuages our own sense of guilt about the past, whatever our personal involvement, or perhaps equally culpable non-involvement, may have been. McGill concludes: ‘It is not hard to judge Karadzic. And for those who enjoy such things, it’s no more difficult to direct a sweeping self-flagellating judgement against ourselves for complicity . . . What would require real discipline and responsibility would be to break the cultural habit of rapid moral judgement . . . in favour of the slower, more open-ended process of understanding.’ This is exactly what Schlink is attempting to do.

Critical responses to The Reader have tended to focus on the scandalous idea that illiteracy may be experienced as more shameful than complicity in crimes against humanity. Consciousness is a component of guilt, and literacy supposedly raises consciousness. But George Steiner, in Language and Silence, taught us that humane learning, refined literacy, is no safeguard against becoming a mass murderer. Schlink shocks his reader by asking about a corresponding possibility, whether illiteracy somehow makes becoming a mass murderer more understandable, or even less culpable.

Is Hanna less culpable because of her illiteracy? Schlink recognises in the process of reconciliation a dialectic of remembering and forgetting, of understanding and not understanding. In the fictional trial, a trial that seeks to apply retrospective justice to a crime that was not on the statute books when committed, the court struggles to understand how anyone could have acted as Hanna did. Hanna’s struggle is exactly the opposite: how could anyone have acted differently? At a dramatic moment in the trial, Hanna transgresses convention to question the judge directly: ‘I . . . I mean . . . so what would you have done?’ The court holds its collective breath while the judge fumbles to make his reply, and fails. And that is perhaps the point. What would any of us have done, in the absence of moral guidelines and in the context of a legal system that not only failed to prevent crimes against humanity, but actively rewarded
disregard for the lives of others? Schlink does not answer this uncomfortable question, but leaves it hanging before us.

And in the end perhaps there is no satisfactory answer, either, to the bigger question-complex, including my own existential question, about why we feel guilt about the past and how we live with it. The past is, to cite Mary Turner Shaw, a historian who knew my great-grandmother’s country well, ‘as disturbing as to find that there has been a stranger standing quietly in the shadows at the back of a familiar room. He has gone away without saying a word, but is that the end of it all?’\textsuperscript{17} 