

The Reader

This month (January 2009) brings two striking performance from one of cinema's current divas, Kate Winslet: *The Reader* (reviewed below) and the almost simultaneously released *Revolutionary Road*. Now 33, Winslet comes from acting stock: her parents both were stage actors, and one set of grandparents ran a repertory theater. She began performing at age 11 and had her first leading role at 17 (in *Heavenly Creatures*, directed by Peter Jackson). She has been nominated for an Academy Award 5 times in the last dozen years, a record no one of her relative youth has ever achieved. Well, Kate has a chance to extend that streak next year. Both her range and her potency as an actor are well highlighted in *The Reader*.

From a contemporary German novel by Bernard Schlink, *The Reader* tells the poignant story of an adolescent's affair with an older woman which turns into Holocaust revelation then culminates in a poignant, decades-long relationship between the same man and woman.

In Neustadt, Germany, in 1958, teenaged student Michael Berg (David Kross) becomes, to his utter amazement, the lover of a lowly tram cashier Hanna Schmitz (Kate Winslet), who humors the boy and offers him great sex as long as he reads to her from his school literary classics. The affair eventually ends, but eight years later, with Michael now a law student in Heidelberg, he discovers that his Hanna is on trial for being a camp guard at Auschwitz, attends the trial, and sees her convicted. Still harboring feelings for her, yet reluctant to intervene directly, the much older Michael (now played by Ralph Fiennes) keeps tabs on the imprisoned Hanna and finds a way to open her mind to a wider world.

(Spoiler alert.) At the core of Hanna's being is humiliation: she has never learned to read, difficult enough in any society but all the more significant in literature-loving, culture-conscious Germany. The shame of her illiteracy has kept her alone, kept her from advancing in society, and most crushingly, condemns her to conviction at her trial. She is, on the other hand, a lover of language, and her redemption comes when Michael slowly, exquisitely introduces her to the power of the word she cannot fathom on the page.

Kate Winslet earns that redemption in a fervent performance as Hanna. As the Hanna defending herself against the world of incomprehension, she both bristles and smolders as a hard-to-read Older Woman. On the stand at her trial, she is wide-eyed, anxious and unable to understand the forces acting upon her. She is even willing to confess to her participation in a horrible camp incident rather than conceal her flaw. Then as the mature inmate, we see her world open at the same time the bars entrap her; literature unleashes the untaught mind. This is one of the performances of the year for this reviewer, and I hope it sees recognition during the upcoming awards season.

The rest of the cast of *The Reader* is very fine, too, with solid character work by European veterans Bruno Ganz as Michael's avuncular law professor and Lena Olin as the testy daughter of a Holocaust survivor. The film is also ably put together by a classy team of British talent: director Stephen Daldry (*The Hours*), his screenwriter, the playwright David Hare (who collaborated on *The Hours*), and the masterful team of cinematographers Roger Deakins and Chris Menges. All of them do standout work in a standout motion picture.

("The Reader" is rated "R" for nudity, sexual action, and intense drama; running time is 123 mins.)

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