

Kate Winslet, Ralph Fiennes Make ‘The Reader’ a Worthwhile Adaptation

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 25, 2008 - 10:52am

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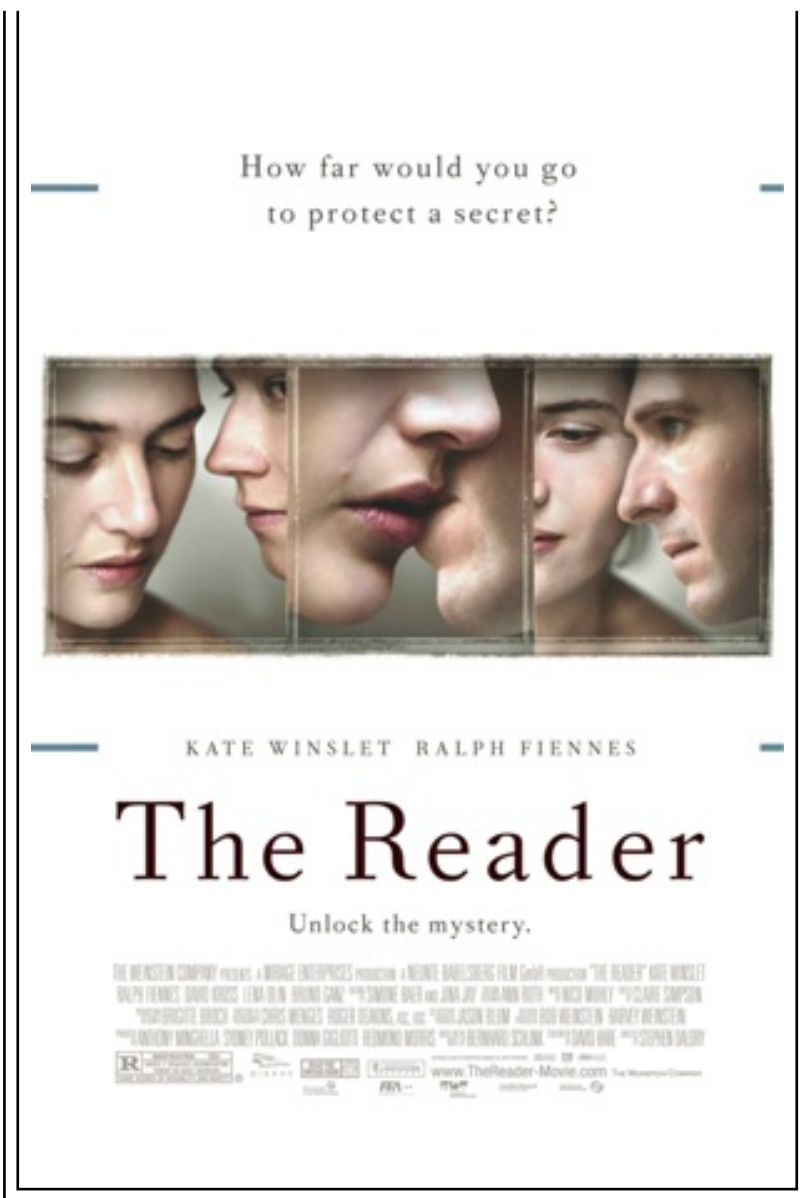


CHICAGO – Two of the best actors working in film today, Ralph Fiennes and Kate Winslet, offer enough to make “The Reader” a cinematic book worth reading, even if it’s not the masterpiece it could have been with a few different choices by its director and writer.

“The Reader” is a surprisingly ineffective film when approached on an emotional level, as if director Stephen Daldry and adapter David Hare are very consciously trying to keep the viewer at arms length, but Fiennes and Winslet are doing such quality work that it merits recommendation just as an acting exercise. Just as the great work by Michael Sheen and Frank Langella elevate “Frost/Nixon” to a recommendation despite the film’s flaws, “The Reader” could have been a better film but its two leads are perfect.



Part of the problem with “The Reader” is that its lead character, Michael Berg (David Kross) is such a non-entity. The adult Michael is played by Fiennes, but the majority of the film is a flashback to Berg’s teenage years in post-WWII Germany. When he was only fifteen, Michael met the stunningly open Hanna, who introduced him to the world of sex. Hanna and Michael would spend days bathing each other, making love, and the young man would read to the illiterate older woman.



Michael reads “The Odyssey”, “The Lady with the Little Dog”, and “Huck Finn” to his lover, until she disappears one day with no warning. Years later, while in law school, Michael sits in on a Nazi trial and discovers that Hanna had a dark, dark secret. Michael knows something about Hanna’s past that could affect the trial, but he stays quiet. “The Reader” is about how we deal with defining moments in our lives, both individually and as a nation.

It could be a flaw of the source material (a hit book by Bernhard Schlink that I’ll admit that I’m unfamiliar with) or Hare’s adaptation of it, but I never felt like I knew the young Michael, a fatal flaw that never allowed me to react to the film on more than an intellectual level. Winslet bares more than just her soul in a physically and emotionally open role but Michael is always a mystery. It could be argued that the adult Michael is trying to come to terms with an important chapter of his life, one that he fully doesn’t understand himself, but instead of the three-actor showcase that “The Reader” could have been, I merely found Kross to be the connection between Fiennes and Winslet. The actor and character gets lost.

What’s unusual about “The Reader” is that this is clearly a story about emotionally raw and complex issues like forgiveness, retribution, first love, passion, and a country’s coming to terms with its dark past. Those are the issues that made the book such a phenomenon. And yet it’s a film that never hits the emotional chords that could have elevated it from an “interesting” film to one that could have been truly memorable. It’s an acting exercise instead of the commentary on humanity or even the believable character study that it could have been.



There’s a nagging sensation that, other than some of the daring decisions by Winslet, the team involved in adapting “The Reader” are going through the motions. There’s a passion missing from the storytelling that would have elevated the film to another level. Of course, it could

have been worse, as Daldry and Hare do avoid the melodrama that could have easily seeped its way into a story like "The Reader" and turned it into an overly emotional mess.

Kate Winslet gives one of the best performances of the year - don't be surprised if she finally gets her long-deserved Oscar - and Fiennes continues to be one of the most interesting actors alive with his third great turn of the year after "In Bruges" and "The Duchess", but that's the extent of the praise for "The Reader", a movie that's never bad but too easy to forget by the time you move on to the next book on your list of cinematic adaptations.

'The Reader' stars Kate Winslet, Ralph Fiennes, David Kross, Bruno Ganz, and Lena Olin. 'The Reader,' which was written by David Hare and directed by Stephen Daldry, opened in Chicago on December 25, 2008.



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