

One New Book (and a Play) for the Preacher

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THE READER by Bernard Schlink. Translated by Carol Brown Janeway. New York: Vintage Books, 1997. 215 pages. (The Book)

COPENHAGEN by Michael Frayn. London: Methuen, 1998. 116 pages. (The Play)

As my century (having exceeded the four score and ten years within it, I increasingly felt I bore some responsibility for it) began to come to a close, I kept wondering if I didn't have a personal need to try to look at it again since it appeared that it was fast becoming a closed book with all issues decided. We knew what lessons had been learned and what would be valuable for living in the next century that could be garnered from this one. That conclusion continued to haunt me, and I kept picking at it; it would not let me rest.

It is clear that the decisive event of the century was World War II, that civilization as we knew it was hanging in the balance, and that we were on the side of virtue and crushed the real "evil empires" of Germany and Japan. But were we virtuous, and if we thought and think so, what impact has and does that conviction have on the way our century will relate to the world in the twenty-first century? That question first began to haunt me when my denomination, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), adopted the Theological Declaration of Barmen as one of its confessional statements. Were we thereby subtly and unconsciously proclaiming that we embodied the virtues of those embattled and courageous souls who wrote it in blood in 1933 in the face of the Third Reich? The question of our virtue was finally forced upon me when Tom Brokaw published last year, *The Greatest Generation*, the story of the lives of those Americans who fought World War II. Our virtue was acknowledged, proclaimed, and accepted as the fundamental truth of our time. And the consequence for our time and the century to come? Incalculable, but let me give just one possible hint. Brokaw says that two hundred ninety-two thousand Americans were killed in World War II. But we participated in a war in which sixty to seventy million died. What is the relationship between our virtue and the small number of Americans killed? Was Truman answering that question when he said why we dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima? Was Bush when so few Americans were killed in the devastation of Desert Storm? Clinton in the zero deaths in the bombing of Kosovo? If there is any truth in these rhetorical questions we need not speculate about the importance of our shining virtue in World War II for our stance in the world of the twenty-first century.

Two documents, *The Reader* and *Copenhagen*, appearing within months of one another and at the end of the old century, propitiously raise the question of our virtue by talking about the lives of two pairs of individuals during and after the war. The issue is moved from the world stage and the massive/abstract national forces to personal and private lives. I read *The Reader* in England in the spring of 1999 when its impact was sweeping Europe. In the same week I saw *Copenhagen* on the London stage. I have tried to arouse your interest by sharing the issue I think they raise for our time.

I will now try to introduce you to each to tantalize you to expose yourself to them, and be exposed, as I was, in my thinking about our “evident” virtue.

The Reader tells the story of a fifteen-year-old boy, Michael Berg, born in Germany during WWII who becomes sick on the sidewalk and is ministered to by a thirty-six-year-old streetcar conductor named Hanna Schmitz. An erotic affair follows when he returns two weeks later with a note of thanks from his mother. The affair continues for months and both consumes him and forces him to grow up. One of the features of their relationship is that Hanna insists that he read to her (thus the title) from the literary works he is studying in school. This delights her and gives him a sense of intellectual stature. Suddenly she disappears and is untraceable. He is devastated and on some level remains detached the remainder of his life.

Years later, when he is studying law at the university and is taking a course on World War II war crimes in which the students attend the trials, Michael discovers that Hanna is on trial because she was a guard at one of the subcamps of Auschwitz. She is accused of being the person responsible for not allowing prisoners to escape when their building caught on fire. She is relatively innocent but does not defend herself because, as Michael suddenly realizes, to do so would reveal something else about her that would be more embarrassing. (I will not reveal that secret and spoil the novel for you.) She will not defend herself, and Michael, though he knows information that would exonerate her of the charge, tells no one. He also witnesses her torture when the judges ask her questions about her actions. She replies with the agonized question: “What would you have done in my place?” And no one responds. Hanna is sentenced to eighteen years in prison. Possibly, as a gesture from their old relationship, he periodically sends her audio tapes of his reading from master literary works. The day before she is to be released from prison and he is to pick her up, having found her a flat and a job, she commits suicide.

This personalizing of World War II raises poignant questions about the absolute guilt of Hanna and the absolute virtue of Michael that will prevent sleep at night for this virtuous American.

Copenhagen raises moral questions about an issue that is strikingly different and more intellectually sophisticated. It portrays a three-way conversation among Niels Bohr, his wife Margrethe, and Werner Heisenberg. The play recreates the conversation as it may have taken place in 1941, as it may have taken place in 1947, and as it might have taken place after all three were dead. As most readers well know, Werner Heisenberg studied with Niels Bohr and others in the late 1920s and in the span of about three years created twentieth-century physics which served as the basis for the development of the atomic bomb. Bohr was the father of the movement, trained many of those who later came to the United States, and developed the bomb. He was revered by all and regarded as a humble and good man. He was not only the intellectual father of the important scientists but himself escaped from occupied Denmark during the war and contributed briefly to the development of the atomic bomb. Heisenberg, in contrast, became the head of the atomic program of the Third Reich. During his tenure in that position he made a trip to Copenhagen to talk to Bohr, and the play is a rehashing of what took place at that meeting. Literally, no one knows. Was Heisenberg trying to get atomic secrets from Bohr? Was he trying to persuade Bohr not to assist in the development of the bomb? No one knows. Suffice it to say, the Third Reich did not develop the bomb, and there is much evidence that Heisenberg prevented it. Suffice

it to say, Bohr and his students did, and Bohr had an overall major responsibility. These issues are confronted on the current stage for two and a half hours in lively debate among these three and raise in a gut-wrenching way the questions of virtue and evil and the ethical horrors of the atomic age.

If, when you read this issue, you believe, as I do, that you are living in the last few months of this century and millennium, you will have a few months left to puzzle about the meaning of virtue and our virtue of this century and the implications for the next. If you believe, as most do, that you are already in a new century and millennium, then you are running late for these considerations. Get with it.