This chapter focuses on the reception of Bernhard Schlink’s controversial novel *Der Vorleser/The Reader* (1995). Beginning with a diachronic overview, the chapter illuminates different waves of responses to the text over time. The piece goes on to examine the dominant issues critics have raised, alongside the dialogues that have taken place between reviewers and/or academics over the past seventeen years. The chapter identifies key trends, arguments and critical contributions within *Der Vorleser/The Reader*’s reception, examining in particular the two key ‘text crimes’ of which the novel stands accused – ‘crimes against the history and memory of the Holocaust’ and ‘crimes against literature’.

Following the 1995 publication of his novel *Der Vorleser/The Reader*, and particularly the publication in 1997 of the English translation, Bernhard Schlink, a law professor, constitutional judge and author of a modestly successful crime series, became an international literary celebrity. A best-seller both at home and abroad, the commercial success of *Der Vorleser/The Reader* as an example of post-war German literature has been matched only by Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum* (*Die Blechtrommel*, 1959) and Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume* (*Das Parfum*, 1984). By 2002, *Der Vorleser/The Reader* had sold over 500,000 copies in Germany, 750,000 in the USA, 200,000 in Britain, and 100,000 in France, and it had been translated into a total of 25 languages. Sales in the United States were significantly boosted by the selection of *Der Vorleser/The Reader* for the Oprah Book Club in February of 1999 and Schlink’s appearance to discuss the novel on ‘Oprah’, whose average viewing figures were 7.4 million per show. *Der Vorleser/The Reader* subsequently became the first German novel to reach the top of the *New York Times* Best Seller List, remaining there for 15 weeks. 2008 saw the release of the Miramax film adaptation of the novel, scripted by David Hare and directed by Stephen Daldry, and starring Kate Winslet and Ralph Fiennes. The film received five 2009 Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, and Winslet won the Oscar for Best Actress. Sales of the novel, now reprinted as a movie tie-in, with pictures of the stars on the cover, received another boost: total sales in the UK exceeded 700,000 copies.
and by March 2010 it was back at second place on the *New York Times* Trade Paperback Best Seller List, remaining in the top 20 for 23 weeks.7

In common with Grass and Süßkind’s best sellers, which also enjoyed substantial international sales and film treatments, *Der Vorleser/The Reader* has been the subject of significant critical controversy. In the case of *The Tin Drum* and *Perfume*, the amoral, murderous figures of Oskar Matzerath and Jean-Baptiste Grenouille have both generated heated critical discussion, while in the case of *Der Vorleser/The Reader*, the depiction of Hanna Schmitz, a former SS concentration camp guard convicted of war crimes, has been a key focus of debate. As with *The Tin Drum* over 40 years earlier, the novel’s consideration of ‘ordinary’ German involvement in National Socialism and questions of guilt has resulted in a particularly passionate and polarised body of critical responses, and this polarisation of opinion has extended to wider issues such as the literary quality of the text. The contrast between Rainer Moritz’s declaration in the Swiss magazine *Die Weltwoche* – ‘Was für ein Glück, dass dieses Buch geschrieben wurde!’ (How fortunate that this book was written!)8 – and Frederic Raphael’s statement in a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* that ‘[i]f literature means anything, *The Reader* has no place in it’, typifies the diametrically opposed critical opinions regarding the novel.9

The primary focus of this chapter is the reception of the novel in the German- and English-speaking worlds. Beginning with a diachronic overview of the critical reactions to *Der Vorleser/The Reader*, it seeks to illuminate the different waves of responses to the text over time and to weigh the ratio of positive to negative assessments. Following a brief consideration of the novel’s thematisation of crime and criminality, the chapter examines the dominant issues critics have raised when evaluating the text, and the critical dialogues that have taken place between reviewers and academics over the past seventeen years. Given the enormous body of critical responses to the text – which in itself is an indicator of the novel’s continued ability to generate debate – this chapter will not attempt to evaluate everything written on *Der Vorleser/The Reader*. Rather, the aim is to identify key trends, arguments and critical contributions within the reception of the novel. In particular, the chapter will examine the two key ‘text crimes’ of which the novel stands accused – ‘crimes against the history and memory of the Holocaust’ and ‘crimes against literature’ – which also resurface in the critical responses to the film adaptation of 2008.