



Guilt about the Past

Bernhard Schlink

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The six essays that make up this compelling book view the long shadow of past guilt both as a uniquely German experience and as a global one. Bernhard Schlink explores the phenomenon of guilt and how it attaches to a whole society, not just to individual perpetrators. He considers how to use the lesson of history to motivate individual moral behavior, how to reconcile a guilt-laden past, how the role of law functions in this process, and how the theme of guilt influences his own fiction. Based on the Weidenfeld Lectures he delivered at Oxford University, *Guilt About the Past* is essential reading for anyone wanting to understand how events of the past can affect a nation's future. Written in Bernhard Schlink's eloquent but accessible style, it taps in to worldwide interest in the aftermath of war and how to forgive and reconcile the various legacies of the past.

Guilt about the Past Details

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Angela says

"The world is full of guilt that has never been forgiven and which can now no longer be forgiven - unless by God" (74).

It took me forever to read this because, although understandable and short, I had to be in the right mood for the weightiness of thought it required. Only at the end of the book did I feel his argument start to wane.

I enjoy Schlink's ideas of guilt and forgiveness but as his point is to discuss collective guilt, it misses the individual level of forgiving self for injuries done to self. His ideas of forgiveness from God make me lean more toward believing God as a necessary (to most) myth.

"The grace of God consists of removing the burden of guilt by forgiving it when we cannot attain forgiveness from those whom we have hurt. For that we need God; that is what He is there for. Or, those who do not believe might point out, mockingly or enviously, that is why those who believe in God invented him. If a person does not believe in a forgiving God, then they have to live with their guilt when they can no longer obtain forgiveness from the person they injured" (68-69).

Ryan says

Quite an interesting little book. In *Guilt About the Past*, Bernhard Schlink converts six lectures into essays, which is why there are no notes. Schlink, in case readers forgot, authored *The Reader*, a powerful novel that was later adapted for an excellent film.

The first essay explores how guilt passes down across generations. At a certain point, guilt remains, but no one remains who can forgive it.

His final essay, which explores whether realism should remain the expected approach authors take in representing the Holocaust, was the most difficult one for me. I remain more conservative than Schlink on this question.

His anecdotes about his life as a lawyer in post-war Germany are consistently fascinating. He recalls working in a factory with older Germans. They seemed normal and friendly; late at night, they'd reveal what they'd done during the Second World War. Schlink, at another point in the book, argues that people who conform tend to conform. In other words, when the Nazis were in charge, these people conformed and led terrible lives, and afterward, they conformed and seemed entirely peaceful.

Recommended.

A.M. Dean says

This is an extraordinary little book. Composed of five essays, with a short introduction and conclusion, it represents Schlink's 'post hoc' reflections on how a culture deals with guilt — personal and collective — pondered and reflected upon after his writing of famous works (e.g. *The Reader*) that address such questions in the course of their plots.

These are actually lectures, delivered as a series on invitation at Oxford; and each is a stand-alone reflection

in its own right. But together they weave in and out of the questions that the author poses, and that so many people pose, with Schlink's typical poeticism, depth and perception.

This isn't fiction, mind you: these are studies, presented by a man who is a prominent legal mind, practitioner and academic, apart from being an internationally renowned novelist. And yet, there is something compelling about the writing, such that you can't really call it 'academic' either; or if you do, you do so in the most favourable, delightful way.

The obvious focal point for his considerations is the German 'need' to address the guilt associated with the Third Reich (I say this is obvious, given the author's background, writings and profession); but the texts speak to questions of guilt, of forgiveness, of conciliation, etc., that could apply to many areas. And we live in a world that has plenty to choose from.

Simply superb: short, powerful, yet somehow beautiful. This little book will make you think, it will make you ask new questions . . . it will make you recognise new depths to the reality of the human struggle.

I highly recommend it.

Friederike Knabe says

"For my generation the past is still very present..." states Bernhard Schlink, internationally known primarily for his novel *THE READER*, in the second of his six thought-provoking essays on "Guilt about the past". A highly respected jurist and law professor (emeritus) in Germany, he presents a number of philosophical arguments intended to advance the important debate on guilt about the past and its profound influence on all who follow, whether individuals, institutions or states and, whether directly associated with the perpetrators or the victims. Conscious of the criticism he received for his novel, his last essay, "Stories about the Past", touches on literature and other media. In the broader context he acknowledges that "his fiction and much of German literature has guilt about the past as a strong leitmotiv."

Throughout his essays, Schlink introduces a number of fundamental concepts that have characterized the debate about past guilt, especially since the end of the Third Reich and the Holocaust. Central for the first post-war generation and those since, are the concepts of 'collective guilt', 'mastering the past' (which is the author's translation for the German term "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" that has no equivalent term or phrase in English or in French), and 'reconciliation'. He explains these concepts in their context, aiming at a broad-based understanding of their application. For understandable reasons, his illustrations are taken from his own personal experience and professional background.

The concept of collective guilt is defined within this context and Germany after the Third Reich stands as a clear example for it. This analysis, he admits, has not necessarily been accepted readily by Germans of his generation. Nonetheless, especially Germans living outside their home country have been confronted with the notion of Germans' collective guilt for Nazi atrocities that their parents or grandparents may, or may not, have committed during that time. His arguments on the varied ways by which Germans have been implicated over several generations in the crimes of their parents are profound and convincing. They do not allow to take the easy route that many had preferred and embarked on following the collapse of the regime in 1945. We are, as Schlink contends "the generation [for whom:] the past is still very present..."

His central essay, "Forgiveness and Reconciliation" addresses the future relationships between descendants of perpetrators and those of victims over the next generation(s). It deserves to be read and absorbed slowly and deeply. He discusses such issues as the transference of guilt to another generation, the "political ritual"

that often accompanies forgiveness of actions in the past, committed by a previous generation, the need and potential for reconciliation, whether in the private or public spheres. "The perpetrator's children cannot ask for forgiveness [...] neither can the victim's children grant it. They are not each other's victim or perpetrators." However, he contends, they can reconcile. "Reconciliation means that further attempts to coexist should no longer fail on account of guilt and recrimination."

Especially of importance to me is Schlink's analysis of the notion underlying the term "mastering the past" (Vergangenheitsbewältigung). His contention implies an active process that has to be worked through, yet that, with effort, will end in a satisfactory conclusion, where the past has in fact been "mastered". Such a process will "bring the past into such a state of order that its remembrance no longer BURDENS [my emphasis:] the present." In this context, Schlink very persuasively argues the difference between remembering as opposed to forgetting or repressing. While he, understandably, relates his arguments to the Holocaust and the Third Reich, his positions are far reaching and much more widely applicable.

Based on a lecture series held at Oxford University in 2008, Schlink's six essays provide insights and arguments for a deeper assessment of own positions and behaviours when we ask ourselves how we and societies as a whole can learn from the events and mistakes of the past not to repeat them. He provides challenging ideas on how the past can be reflected in our thinking for better coexistence between individuals, communities and nations and, last not least, how this thinking can influence our literature and other fictional media.

Jeffrey says

Some interesting moments but too legalistic for me - I felt very distanced from the various threads that Schlink is discussing in these lectures about guilt on an individual, collective and global levels and was all too aware of Schlink the law professor who is engaging with the topic from a legalistic point of view rather than the novelist who has engaged with these ideas in more interesting ways in his fictions

Beatrix says

With "Guilt about the Past" Bernhard Schlink presents a collection of six essays to explore the question how the past can still loom over future generations, causing feelings of individual and collective guilt. As a German citizen of the younger generation, this is a topic very close to my heart and I was very curious to see how Schlink would develop his arguments for thoughts that I would have considerable difficulties to articulate.

The German experience, especially from the time of the Third Reich and the Holocaust, is at the centre of the debate. It is where Schlink's experience lies. But collective guilt can be found all over the world, in this century and in history. The British have India to think about, the Americans slavery, and the Canadians their First Nations – and the list goes on. These essays use German examples but parallels to other situations can easily be drawn. And this makes this book an important one for anybody to read.

Schlink develops the debate carefully, step by step. This makes it easy to follow even for readers with little legal or historic background. A few passages might be a bit too much legalese but overall this book is very readable. I loved Bernhard Schlink's concise and precise writing style in his novels and mysteries, it's equally as good in these essays.

The first essay defines individual and collective guilt and gives us a historical perspective. He then explains why “the past is still very present”, not just for a few but for many of us. I especially appreciated his essay on the concept of “Vergangenheitsbewältigung”, a word that has no equivalent in other languages. Bernhard Schlink describes it as the efforts of “mastering the past”. It’s a process that requires commitment and work but should also result in a tangible end. But there is no end in sight.

While Schlink explains how forgiveness and reconciliation can help over time he also makes clear that it will take several generations for the lingering effects of the guilt about the past to fade. The limitations are strong, within the legal realm as much as within the capability of individuals and collectives. Still, it leaves me with hope and a much better understanding of a complex issue that has been in my thoughts for many years and has now found a way to articulate itself.

“Guilt about the Past” is a thin book with just over a hundred pages. But there is more than enough food for thought in it to keep the reader engaged well beyond the last page. It’s one of the few books I wouldn’t mind buying even after I’ve read a borrowed copy. It provides a good reference, something to go back to in order to check on some thought provoking quotes, to continue my own reflections.

Jennifer (JC-S) says

‘The past is unassailable and irrevocable.’

The six essays contained in this book were originally presented as the Weidenfeld Lectures by Bernhard Schlink at Oxford University in 2008. Bernhard Schlink is a professor of law, and a writer. Professor Schlink explores the phenomenon of guilt based on the German experience after World War II.

‘The lesson we drew from the past was a moral one rather than an institutional one.’

Professor Schlink argues that when some members of a collective commit crimes, other members have a duty to identify and exclude them. By not doing so, they become caught in the crimes themselves and share their guilt. However, responsibility for not punishing a crime is not the same as being responsible for the crime in the first place and this guilt should be confined to their inaction about identifying and expelling Nazis not an assumption of the guilt for the original actions of the Nazis.

This is an important distinction: it is up to the original perpetrators to seek (and perhaps be refused) forgiveness. Those who were not directly involved cannot be contrite for acts they did not commit. The children of perpetrators may not owe the children of victims an apology but respect is essential. How else is it possible (and it is surely desirable) to seek reconciliation as a way of acknowledging and moving on from the past.

These six brief essays raise a number of different issues, perspectives and possibilities, including: How does the legacy of the past impact on different generations? Can the past be dealt with through law, is retroactive punishment a possibility? (And, should it be?)

What are the problems surrounding literary representations of the past, especially fictional treatments of the Holocaust?

I found these essays thought-provoking and far broader in application than to post-war Germany. We each live in some form of tribal society and thus thinking about the possibility of collective guilt in some circumstances and its consequences is worthwhile.

‘The future of the presence of the past is history.’

Jennifer Cameron-Smith

Alison says

Really interesting book of essays based on six lectures Schlink gave. The first, *Collective Guilt?*, centered on the topic of the offspring of the World War II generation feeling collective guilt for the Holocaust and the war. I thought it was a great meditation on the subject. The second essay built on that, in that the past is still present today, especially the Holocaust past's presence in Germany.

Mastering the Past through Law?, the third essay, was probably the hardest for me. One probably really needs to be a legal scholar to understand it all.

The fourth essay, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, dealt with the different ways that victims can deal with the past: through forgiveness, reconciliation, judgment, and forgetting. Prudence and Corruption talked about the 1960s and 1970s and how the past looked then, how people dealt with the past, what was remembered, and how it affected people. Very interesting.

The last essay, for me, was the best: *Stories of the Past*. It dealt with the question of whether or not fiction can talk about the Holocaust. Or rather, how it can, and is it right to. I thought he tackled some huge questions, and did so very well.

If you've read Schlink's fiction and enjoy other fiction about World War II or the Holocaust, this is really a great read. He has fantastic insight into Germany, German history, and fiction in general. I'm sure it would be interesting from a legal standpoint, too, but my interest lies in the latter ideas.

I couldn't find the book at a library, but found it very cheap online. Worth it!

Johann Guenther says

SCHLINK, Bernhard: „Vergangenheitsschuld. Beiträge zu einem deutschen Thema“, Zürich 2007
Wer sich einen seiner spannenden Romane erwartet wird enttäuscht. Dieses Buch ist mer ein wissenschaftliches, ein juridisches Werk. Hier tritt Schlink nicht als Dichter, sondern als Jurist, als Universitätsprofessor auf. Es geht um die Schuld der Deutschen im Zweiten Weltkrieg.

Es geht um die Anwendung des Rechts. Kann man Leute, die während des Krieges nach geltendem Gesetz gehandelt haben nach dem Krieg mit dem neuen Gesetz verurteilen? Sind die Kinder der Täter des Krieges schuldig? Gibt es eine Sippenhaftung? Manche Schuld kann nicht ein Gericht, sondern nur der Psychiater behandeln. Die Deutschen haben einen speziellen Zugang zur Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Die Amerikaner haben nach dem Südstaatenkrieg Niemanden verurteilt. Fast alle Ostblockstaaten sind gegen ehemalige Kommunisten rechtlich nicht vorgegangen. Deutschland gegenüber so manchen DDR Bürgern sehr wohl. Sie sind gründlicher. Sowohl im Schlechten bei der Vernichtung der Juden, als auch in der Aufarbeitung der Schuld. Schlink meint, dass das Recht „nicht das vergangene, sondern nur das gegenwärtige und zukünftige Leben gestalten und in Ordnung bringen Kann“ (Seite 81)

Mit einer Geschichte aus seiner Kindheit erklärt er den Sinn des „Vergebens“ und „Versöhnens“. Seine Großmutter sagte, wenn man sich bei der Person, bei der man sich verschuldigt hat nicht entschuldigt hat, kann man Gott auch nicht um Vergebung bitten. „Eine Versöhnung braucht mindestens zwei Beteiligte.“ (Seite 179)

Nimish Sawant says

Guilt About The Past is a series of six essays that tries to answer, rather opens the discussion, on a very sad chapter from history - the Holocaust.

I had seen this documentary film couple of weeks ago - Hitler's Children - which had reflections from the grand children of the Nazi top rung, and how they are dealing with the guilt of their forefathers. It was quite an intense film as it asked the current generation about their forefathers. That one segment where Rudolf Höss's grandson comes face to face with a Holocaust survivor, was particularly moving.

This book takes that same theme and tries to address it from a collective German perspective. The themes touched upon include forgiveness, reconciliation, the legal aspects and uprisings in the later decades. The second chapter explains how the past is still present for a lot of the post war generation and the following generation. The parts where Schlink touches upon forgiveness and reconciliation, is a lot philosophical, making you think a lot on those themes after reading that essay.

Finally, Schlink ends with an essay on how Holocaust and other historical events when portrayed in fictional accounts - literary books, dramas, films - could become a double edged sword. Schlink argues that it is important for Holocaust to be looked at through multiple lenses in order to increase awareness. But at the same time there are ground rules to how you depict the victim and perpetrators. It's not one single black or white argument, but certainly has multiple layers.

Personally speaking, the film's I've seen which are inspired by real life events (Schindler's List) or even fiction (Das Leben der Anderen or even Goodbye Lenin) have definitely prodded me on to dig deeper into the history. But at the same time if victims raise objection to any aspect of the said depiction of events, one isn't in a position to make judgement as an outsider looking in.

All in all a great examination of the aspect of a shared past guilt of a nation.

Emma says

In a global political climate where "alternative facts" have become the new norm, Schlink's collection of essays becomes essential reading. Anti-Semitic attacks have been on the rise in Europe for the past few years and the refusal of key political leaders to engage with human rights violations is common. The survivors of WWII are gradually slipping away from us and along with them a collective memory of the past and the lessons that come with it.

Schlink examines the tension between the individual and the political landscape, both sculpted by the ghosts of their pasts. He navigates long-held debates of comparing the Holocaust with contemporary events, whether diplomacy or protest is the best method to the opposition, and the complexities of representing the Holocaust within fiction. This book doesn't pretend to have answers to these questions, but does offer well-

considered opinions and insights. Schlink poses important questions for his readers on how past events shape a nation's future - questions which, especially in this day and age, should not be ignored.

Calzean says

It was interesting to read Schlink's six essays on how societies' deal with collective guilt. To hear his legal mind in action provided me with a better understanding into his novels.

Kris McCracken says

Now, readers of Schlink's fiction will know that most of his books are in some way about reconciling the past with the present. This book is a series of essays (based upon a series of lectures) that explores the concepts of collective guilt; how we might use history to motivate individual moral behaviour; how to reconcile a guilt-laden past; the role of the legal process in all of this; before settling on how the theme of guilt influences fiction.

Written in an authoritative but accessible style, it should be read by anyone keen to explore the concepts of remembering and forgetting in the aftermath of terrible events and how we might forgive and reconcile the various legacies of the past. Highly recommended!

Phoenix says

Good Beginning, Not Enough

The book is a collection of six talks given at St. Anne's College, Oxford, in 2008 given by noted author and jurist Bernhard Schlink. I'm a great fan of the form whereby an accomplished individual takes the time to crystallize their thoughts and present them to a lay academic audience - the Massey Lectures in Toronto are just one such example.

The first essay on the balance between individual and collective punishment compared to individual and collective responsibility is positively brilliant. Schlink looks at the historical evolution of these concepts in the West and gets the reader to view these not as universal truths but as cultural values. Equally cool and enlightening is the second essay "The Presence of the Past" which examines the inherited responsibility of the generation after a genocide, noting different processes aids in the psychic healing of a nation, citing the effect of the South African Truth and Reconciliation meetings as well as German volunteers on kibbutzim, in effect filling in the labour that the victims of the Holocaust would have done had they lived. I liked his observation that when a people victimizes member of it's own group, as happens in the case of tyrannies such as the GDR (and I can think of a number of other examples) there is not the same exploration of guilt and healing - but I'm not sure how true that really is.

The third essay is solid examining the necessity at Nuremberg of applying new law against crimes that occurred in the past, where the law of the land at the time was insufficient. Some societies, such as post Stalinist Russia take the route of repressing the memory and ignoring the past. Rehabilitation is not the only reason for prosecution - Schlink notes that many former Nazis were found post war living normal lives and getting along with their neighbours, arguably not likely to commit further harm. Nor could full justice be

done for the dead. However it was deemed to be necessary to prosecute the guilty so that at least some measure of justice be carried out and as a warning to the future that evil has consequence.

Unfortunately the remaining essays are not quite as thought provoking. Essay four, "Forgiveness and Reconciliation" is fairly short and ask if the descendants of perpetrators can ask for forgiveness from the descendants of the victims, neither of which were there. The short answer given is no, but they can help heal each other. The fifth essay, "Prudence and Corruption" was about an series of episodes between a leftist student and a professor which the author was an observer and also in part a mediator. The incident didn't seem to be that emblematic of the title - what does comes closer to the end when Schlink discusses the acquiescence of his Law school to the quiet expulsion of Jewish faculty in 1933. Wrong focus IMHO. And the final essay "Stories about the Past" meanders in its exploration of what might and might not be appropriate in historical fiction with respect to the memorialization of the victims of moral calumnies - the examples did not have a great range and there is a great more than could be said. IMHO.

This book is worth picking up as a library read and I recommend the first three essays as offprints for upper level high school and college discussion. Schlink is an interesting writer - for purchase I'd have preferred a fuller book with a longer gestation time. I should add that I have neither read his recent book "The Reader" nor seen the movie created from it. If you have read his other works then your impressions may differ.

Grady says

Bernhard Schlink From the Podium

For those readers captivated by the extraordinary prose and gift for relating involving stories ('The Reader', 'Flights of Love: Stories', 'Self's Punishment', 'Self's Deception', 'Homecoming', 'Self's Murder') this book of essays from the writer who also happens to be a professor law. Presented as a series of lectures in 2008, they are such fine reading that deserve publication in book form. These six short but pungent essays explore Guilt - both as a personal feeling and as a collective shroud. Grouped together they comprise some of the more enlightening book on the subject, using of course the German people and the aftermath of WW II.

In both his introduction and the first essay Schlink appropriately delves into history going back to the 1300s when law were in force that punished members of families for something one member of a family did; entire families could be by law put in a sack and drowned for the malfeasance of one person. He then rather quickly reminds us of the collective guilt of the British in India, of Americans and slavery, of Canadians and First Nations and so on. According to Schlink 'when some members of a collective commit crimes, its other members have a duty to identify them and expel them from the group. If they don't, they become "entangled" in the perpetrators' crimes and share their guilt; the behaviour of the few is then credited to the many. After 1945, Germans should have identified the Nazis in their midst and severed ties with them. When they didn't - when they preferred to forget Nazism - they became guilty as a collective for what had been done.' It is the courage to accept the past and at the same time investigate how to restore pride in a nation bludgeoned by the world for atrocities for the past.

Schlink discusses moral consequences in his fourth essay addressing how ridiculous for politicians to apologize for things done in the past 'when it's not them who should bear any guilt for anything, and perhaps those being apologised to are not there to offer forgiveness. Given racial slaughters, of course, some reconciliation is always beneficial.' When members of a collective (such as Germany in WW II) commit crimes as in the Holocaust it is the onus, the obligation to identify the perpetrators and segregate them from the collective: those who did not come forth share the guilt and become equally guilty as a collective.

In the final chapter of this book the author addresses the books and films that he believes to be accurate and responsible and also points out those he considers inferior and misleading. Being a writer of one of the more popular of these books gives him an edge in critiquing the writings of others. And even in this role Bernhard Schlink remains a figure of fairness, a man of opinions that matter. This book is a reliable survey of Guilt about the Past, whether that be counted in centuries, in decades or in days. It is pertinent information for us as well as a fine documentation of the philosophy of collective guilt.

Grady Harp
