



# Unbroken Reader's Guide

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Category: Biography & Memoir |  
World War II Military History

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## READERS GUIDE

### A Conversation with Laura Hillenbrand

Random House Reader's Circle: Louie Zamperini is a larger-than-life figure. He enjoyed a measure of fame in his youth—both during his running career and after surviving the POW camps—but was relatively unknown in the second half of the twentieth century. How did you first learn about Louie? When did you realize there was a book in his story?

Laura Hillenbrand: My first book was about the Depression-era racehorse Seabiscuit. While working on it, I pored over 1930s newspapers. One day I was reading a 1938 clipping about the horse when I happened to turn the paper over and find a profile of a young running phenomenon named Louie Zamperini. I started reading. Louie had not yet gone to war, but his story was already so interesting that I jotted his name down in my Seabiscuit research notebook.

Later, I came across Louie's name again, and this time I learned a little about his wartime odyssey. I was very intrigued, and when I finished writing *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*, I did some searching, found an address for Louie, and wrote him a letter. He wrote back, I called him, and I found myself in the most fascinating conversation of my life. He told me his story, and I was captivated.

So many elements of Louie's saga were enthralling, but one in particular hooked me. He told of having experienced almost unimaginable abuse at the hands of his captors, yet spoke without self-pity or bitterness. In fact, he was cheerful, speaking with perfect equanimity. When he finished his story, I had one question: How can you tell of being victimized by such monstrous men, yet not express rage? His response was simple: Because I forgave them.

It was this, more than anything, that hooked me. How could this man forgive the

unforgivable? In setting out to write Louie's biography, I set out to find the answer.

RHRC: You've written about two exceptional, unlikely running sensations of the first half of the twentieth century, weaving deeply moving, inspirational narratives around them. What, to you, is a good subject—what do you look for?

LH: In times of extremity, ordinary individuals must reach into the depths of themselves, and there they find the true content of their character. Some find emptiness, frailty, even dark impulses. But others find wondrous virtues—courage, resourcefulness, self-sacrifice, daring, ingenuity, the will to soldier on when will is all they have left. These are the virtues that turn history, and these are the virtues that enable individuals to prevail in the supreme trials of their lives. It is in times of superlative hardship that individuals live their epic adventures, stories that thrill, fascinate, inspire, and illuminate. These are the stories I'm drawn to.

I also think the best subjects offer the opportunity to use a small story to tell a much larger one. One could approach Seabiscuit as simply a rags-to-riches racehorse who lived seventy-five years ago. By itself, it's a marvelous tale. But in his remarkable life, and in the lives of his automobile magnate owner, his frontiersman trainer, and his former prizefighting jockey, lies the far larger story of America in the Great Depression. I gathered as much detail as I could about the intimate lives of my subjects, but also backed up to show their context, the era of tremendous upheaval in which they were living, and the way in which they embodied the spirit and struggle of that era.

Louie, like Seabiscuit, is just one individual. But his odyssey carried him into the greatest cataclysm in history, giving me the chance to tell a tale vastly broader in scope than that of any single athlete or soldier, one encompassing Hitler's Olympics, the Pacific war, and the experience of American military airmen, Japanese POW camp guards, prisoners of war, and veterans. You can't truly understand an individual unless you understand the world he or she inhabits, and in illustrating that individual's world, you will, hopefully, capture history in the accessible, tactile, authentic way in which the times were actually experienced. In *Unbroken* as in *Seabiscuit*, I tried to paint portraits not just of individuals, but of their times.

RHRC: After the publication of *Unbroken*, you received a number of letters from readers with family or friends—particularly fathers and grandfathers—who served in World War II. These readers frequently credited your book with giving them a new window into loved ones' experience and suffering. Were you surprised? How did these letters change your perspective on *Unbroken*?

LH: Many, if not most, veterans and former POWs came home with overwhelming emotional wounds, and many never recovered. Among Pacific POWs, post-traumatic stress disorder was almost ubiquitous. A quarter of them became alcoholics, and

some drank themselves to death. Many suffered from rage, anxiety, and depression; others isolated themselves. Some committed suicide. Louie, lost in alcoholism, rage, anxiety, nightmares, and flashbacks, was sadly typical.

For many men, the horrors they had experienced were too painful to articulate. Quite a few of the veterans I interviewed said they'd never before told their stories, even to those closest to them. Some wept as they shared memories that were, even after more than seventy years, still searingly painful. The wife of one former POW told me that memories of the war were such a torment to her husband that after he discussed it with anyone he needed three weeks to regain his emotional equilibrium.

The residual pain of the war took an enormous toll not only on the veterans, but on their loved ones. The manifestations of the veterans' trauma was often destructive to their relationships, and because the veterans were so often unable to speak of what had happened to them, they were mysteries to those who needed them, and wanted to help and heal them. As Louie's wife discovered, they were often unreachable.

Since *Unbroken* was released, I've been deluged with correspondence from family members of POWs, airmen, and other men who served in World War II. Many have spent their lives trying to understand the troubled minds of these men. Many suffered terribly from the damage the war did to their relationships—a husband who was distant and brooding, an uncle prone to violent outbursts, a father who drank, a grandfather who was irretrievably sad. But because many veterans were silent about the war, their loved ones never knew what they'd gone through. For these family members, Louie's story was a revelation, a window into the pain their loved one carried out of that war. Over and over, their messages express compassion, newfound understanding, and, often, forgiveness. Reading these notes, which sometimes leave me in tears, is deeply gratifying.

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All of my life I wondered why my father loved alcohol more than he loved me. I loved him so much and tried so hard to save him but I could not. His disease killed him 36 years ago.

I have seen all the war movies and all the documentaries but until I read your book I had no idea what my father must have endured. For sixty years I have had a love/hate relationship with him. It is taking me a long time to write this because the waves of grief and loss are washing over me now and the tears won't stop. Maybe now I can finally forgive him and myself for what I could never begin to understand.

—Rev. Cheryl Hubbard (daughter of Irvin "Bill" Hime, Army Air Forces staff sergeant)

I feel like I discovered things about my Dad and why he did things he did. You see, he was a paratrooper in WWII, in the Philippines. He never wanted to talk about it. I feel that through Mr. Zamperini, he finally opened up and I am in awe. To say thank you

just doesn't seem enough, but it's all I can say.

—*Monica Meehan Berg (daughter of James L. Meehan, Army PFC)*

I am the namesake of my uncle. . . who was captured in the Philippines, made the 'Death March', survived that and imprisonment there. . . . As with most of the Greatest Generation he would not speak of his captivity. . . . Your book conveyed an incredible, almost unbelievable experience; about half-way through I simply broke down in tears and began to really understand. I thank you so much for the legacy you have given to my family and the world.

—*C. Ray Jones (nephew of Charlie R. Jones, Army sergeant)*

Thank you to Louie and to Laura for bringing this story to light for those of us who have never heard it from our fathers. It shook me to my soul and will stay with me for a very long time.

—*Lindi Clark (daughter of Richard Allen Marshall, Army sergeant)*

### **Questions and Topics for Discussion**

1. Louie's experiences are singular: It's unlikely that one person will ever again be in a plane crash, strafed by a bomber, attacked by sharks, cast away on a raft, *and* held as a POW. And yet the word most often used to describe him is "inspiring." What does Louie's experience demonstrate that makes him so inspirational to people who will never endure what he did? What are the lessons that his life offers to all of us?
2. Is Louie a hero? How do you define heroism?
3. In Louie's boyhood, he was severely bullied, then became a delinquent and hell-raiser. In these experiences, did he already display attributes that would help him survive his wartime ordeal? Did he also show weaknesses or tendencies that foreshadowed the struggles he would face postwar?
4. Do you think Louie's athletic career helped prepare him for what he would face in war?
5. Louie was especially close to his brother, Pete, who devoted himself to him. If Pete hadn't been there, what do you think would have become of Louie? Does Pete deserve credit for shaping Louie into a man who could endure and survive his Odyssean ordeal?

6. Hillenbrand explores the extraordinary risks faced by America's World War II airmen: 52,000 men killed in combat, 36,000 killed in noncombat aircraft accidents, and a stunning 15,000 killed in stateside training—at times, an average of 19 per day. Men faced a 50 percent chance of being killed during combat tours of only 30 to 40 missions. Were you aware of the dangers faced by airmen in the Pacific war? What facts and stories were most surprising to you?

7. What are your feelings about Mac? Do you feel sympathy for him? Anger? If you endured the trauma of a plane crash and were placed in a situation that you knew very few men survived, might you have reacted as he did? In the end, do you think he redeemed himself?

8. When Louie, Phil, and Mac were on the raft, a key factor in their survival was optimism. All three men were young and able-bodied, veterans of the same training, experiencing the same hardships and traumas, yet Louie and Phil remained optimistic while Mac was hopeless, seemingly doomed by his pessimism. Why are some people hopeful and others not? How important are attitude and mind-set in determining one's ability to overcome hardship?

9. What did you find most remarkable about the things Louie and Phil did to survive on the raft?

10. After more than forty-seven days on the raft, the men lost half their body weight and were rendered mere skeletons. Yet they refused to consider cannibalism, which had not been uncommon among castaways before them. Would you, in the same situation, ever consider cannibalism? If it could ensure that two men survived, when otherwise all three would almost certainly perish, would it be a moral decision?

11. Louie believed he was the beneficiary of several miracles, among them his escape from the wreckage of his plane, the fact that he and the other men were not hit with bullets when their rafts were strafed, and the appearance of the singers in the clouds. What is your interpretation of those experiences?

12. The POWs took enormous risks to carry out thefts, sabotage, and other acts of defiance. Men would risk their lives to steal items as trivial as pencil boxes. What benefit did they derive from defiance that was worth risking death, or severe beatings?

13. In the 1930s and 1940s, Germany and Japan carried out what are arguably among the worst acts of mass atrocity in history. What leads individuals, and even whole societies, to descend to such a level? What motivated the notoriously sadistic POW camp guards in Japan, particularly the Bird? Do you think we all carry the capacity for cruelty?

14. After the war, Louie would say that of all the horrors he witnessed and experienced in the war, the death of the little duck, Gaga, was the worst. Why was this event especially wrenching for him and the other POWs?

15. Louie, Frank Tinker, and William Harris planned to escape from Ofuna, walk across Japan, steal a boat, and make a run for China. It was a plan that very likely would have ended in their deaths. Was it foolish, or did it offer a psychological benefit that was worth the enormous risk?

16. Louie joined a plot to kill the Bird. Was he justified in doing so? Would it have been a moral act? Do you think Louie could have found peace after the war had he killed the Bird?

17. *Unbroken* reveals that, under the “kill-all order,” the Japanese planned to murder all POWs, a plan that was never carried out because of the dropping of the atomic bombs. The book also explores the lengths to which the Japanese were prepared to go to avoid surrender. How did the book make you feel about America’s use of the atomic bomb on Japan?

18. “Anger is a justifiable and understandable reaction to being wronged, and as the soul’s first effort to reassert its worth and power, it may initially be healing,” Laura Hillenbrand wrote in an article for *Guideposts* magazine. “But in time, anger becomes corrosive. To live in bitterness is to be chained to the person who wounded you, your emotions and actions arising not independently, but in reaction to your abuser. Louie became so obsessed with vengeance that his life was consumed by the quest for it. In bitterness, he was as much a captive as he’d been when barbed wire had surrounded him.” Do you agree?

19. Many of us struggle to forgive those who have wronged us, especially since forgiveness is often so difficult to find. What makes it so hard to let resentment go?

20. “What the Bird took from Louie was his dignity; what he left behind was a pervasive sense of helplessness and worthlessness,” Hillenbrand continued in her *Guideposts* article. “As I researched Louie’s life, interviewing his fellow POWs and studying their memoirs and diaries, I discovered that this loss of dignity was nearly ubiquitous, leaving the men feeling defenseless and frightened in a world that had become menacing. The postwar nightmares, flashbacks, alcoholism and anxiety that were endemic among them spoke of souls in desperate fear. Watching these men struggle to overcome their trauma, I came to believe that a loss of self-worth is central to the experience of being victimized, and may be what makes its pain particularly devastating.” Do you agree?

21. Hillenbrand wrote that among the former POWs she interviewed, forgiveness became possible once each POW had found a way to restore his sense of dignity. Was this what Billy Graham gave to Louie? If so, what was it about that experience, and that sermon, that gave Louie back his self-worth?

22. Do Louie Zamperini’s wartime and postwar experiences give you a different perspective on a loved one who was, or is, a veteran?

23. Why do you think most World War II literature has focused on the European war, with so little attention paid to the Pacific war?

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