

**Unbroken: A World War II Story of  
Survival, Resilience and Redemption  
by Laura Hillenbrand**

**About the book:**

**On a May afternoon in 1943, an Army Air Forces bomber crashed into the Pacific Ocean and disappeared, leaving only a spray of debris and a slick of oil, gasoline, and blood. Then, on the ocean surface, a face appeared. It was that of a young lieutenant, the plane's bombardier, who was struggling to a life raft and pulling himself aboard. So began one of the most extraordinary odysseys of the Second World War.**

**The lieutenant's name was Louis Zamperini. In boyhood, he'd been a cunning and incorrigible delinquent, breaking into houses, brawling, and fleeing his home to ride the rails. As a teenager, he had channeled his defiance into running, discovering a prodigious talent that had carried him to the Berlin Olympics and within sight of the four-minute mile. But when war had come, the athlete had become an airman, embarking**

**on a journey that led to his doomed flight, a tiny raft, and a drift into the unknown.**

**Ahead of Zamperini lay thousands of miles of open ocean, leaping sharks, a foundering raft, thirst and starvation, enemy aircraft, and, beyond, a trial even greater. Driven to the limits of endurance, Zamperini would answer desperation with ingenuity; suffering with hope, resolve, and humor; brutality with rebellion. His fate, whether triumph or tragedy, would be suspended on the fraying wire of his will.**

**In her long-awaited new book, Laura Hillenbrand writes with the same rich and vivid narrative voice she displayed in *Seabiscuit*. Telling an unforgettable story of a man's journey into extremity, *Unbroken* is a testament to the resilience of the human mind, body, and spirit. *(From the publisher.)***

### **About the Author:**

**Laura Hillenbrand is an American author of books and magazine articles. Born in Fairfax, Virginia, Hillenbrand spent much**

of her childhood riding bareback "screaming over the hills" of her father's Sharpsburg, Maryland, farm. A favorite of hers was *Come On Seabiscuit*, a 1963 kiddie book. "I read it to death, my little paperback copy," she says.

She studied at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, but was forced to leave before graduation when she contracted Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. She has struggled with the condition ever since, remaining largely confined to her home. On the irony of writing about physical paragons while being so incapacitated herself, she says, "I'm looking for a way out of here. I can't have it physically, so I'm going to have it intellectually. It was a beautiful thing to ride Seabiscuit in my imagination. And it's just fantastic to be there alongside Louie Zamperini [hero of *Unbroken*] as he's breaking the NCAA mile record. People at these vigorous moments in their lives—it's my way of living vicariously.

She now lives in Washington, D.C, with her husband, Borden Flanagan, a professor of Government at American

**University. They were college sweethearts and married in 2008.**

**Hillenbrand's first book was the acclaimed *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* (2001), a non-fiction account of the career of the great racehorse Seabiscuit, for which she won the William Hill Sports Book of the Year in 2001. She says she was compelled to tell the story because she "found fascinating people living a story that was improbable, breathtaking and ultimately more satisfying than any story [she'd] ever come across." She first told the story through an essay she sold to *American Heritage* magazine, and the feedback was positive, so she decided to proceed with a full novel. Upon the book's release, she received rave reviews for her storytelling and research. It was made into the Academy Award nominated film *Seabiscuit* (2003).**

**Hillenbrand's second book is *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* (2010), a biography of World War II hero Louis Zamperini.**

**Her essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Equus* magazine, *American Heritage*, *Blood-Horse*, *Thoroughbred Times*, *Backstretch*, *Turf and Sport Digest*, and many other publications. Her 1998 *American Heritage* article on the horse Seabiscuit won the Eclipse Award for Magazine Writing.**

**Hillenbrand is a co-founder of Operation Iraqi Children.**

### **Book Reviews**

**Just as she demonstrated in *Seabiscuit*, Ms. Hillenbrand is a muscular, dynamic storyteller...Her command of the action-adventure idiom is more than enough to hold interest. But she happens also to have located a tale full of unforgettable characters, multi-hanky moments and wild turns. And if some of it sounds too much like pulp fiction to be true, Ms. Hillenbrand has also done a bang-up research job....**

**[*Unbroken*] manages to be as exultant as *Seabiscuit* as it tells a much more harrowing, less heart-warming story.**

***Janet Maslin - New York Times***

**From the 1936 Olympics to WWII Japan's most brutal POW camps, Hillenbrand's heart-wrenching new book is thousands of miles and a world away from the racing circuit of her bestselling Seabiscuit. But it's just as much a page-turner, and its hero, Louie Zamperini, is just as loveable.... In May 1943 his B-24 crashed into the Pacific. After a record-breaking 47 days adrift on a shark-encircled life raft with his pal and pilot, Russell Allen "Phil" Phillips, they were captured by the Japanese. In the "theater of cruelty" that was the Japanese POW camp network, Louie landed in the cruelest theaters of all: Omori and Naoetsu, under the control of Corp. Mutsuhiro Watanabe, a pathologically brutal sadist (called the Bird by camp inmates) who never killed his victims outright—his pleasure came from their slow, unending torment.... And Louie, with his defiant and unbreakable spirit, was Watanabe's victim of choice. By war's end, Louie was near death. When Naoetsu was liberated in mid-August 1945, a depleted Louie's only thought was "I'm free!"... But as Hillenbrand shows, Louie was not yet free. [he was] haunted in his dreams, drinking to forget, and**

**obsessed with vengeance.  
Hillenbrand...writes movingly of the  
thousands of postwar Pacific PTSD  
sufferers [who had] no help for their as  
yet unrecognized illness.... The book's  
final section is the story of how...Louie  
found his path. It is impossible to  
condense the rich, granular detail of  
Hillenbrand's narrative of the atrocities  
committed...against American POWs in  
Japan, and the courage of Louie and his  
fellow POWs.... Hillenbrand's triumph is  
that in telling Louie's story (he's now in  
his 90s), she tells the stories of thousands  
whose suffering has been mostly  
forgotten. She restores to our collective  
memory this tale of heroism, cruelty, life,  
death, joy, suffering, remorselessness,  
and redemption. —*Sarah F. Gold*  
*Publishers Weekly***

**The author of *Seabiscuit* now brings us a  
biography of World War II prisoner of war  
survivor Louis Zamperini (b. 1917). A  
track athlete at the 1936 Munich  
Olympics, Zamperini became a B-24  
crewman in the U.S. Army Air Force. When  
his plane went down in the Pacific in**

**1943, he spent 47 days in a life raft, then was picked up by a Japanese ship and survived starvation and torture in labor camps. Eventually repatriated, he had a spiritual rebirth and returned to Japan to promote forgiveness and healing. Because of the author's popularity, libraries will want this book both for general readers who like a good story and for World War II history buffs; however, it's not essential reading for those who read Zamperini's autobiography, *Devil at My Heels*, with David Rensin, in its 2003 edition.**

***Library Journal***

## **Discussion Questions**

**1. Readers and critics alike have described *Unbroken* as gripping, almost impossible to put down. Was that your experience as well? How do you account for the page-turning quality given the grim subject material? Also, would your reading experience have been different if you didn't know that Zamperini survived? (Or didn't you know the outcome?)**

**2. Laura Hillenbrand gives us a moving story, one that brings to life the suffering**

**and courage of not just one man but thousands, whose stories are untold. What is it about Hillenbrand's writing that saves her book from becoming mired in bathos and melodrama?**

**3. What do you admire most about Zamperini? What enables him to survive the plane crash and POW ordeal? Does he possess special strengths—personal or physical? Did his training in track, for instance, make a difference in his resilience?**

**4. How do the POW captives help one another survive? How are they able to communicate with one another? What devices do Zamperini and others use not only to survive but to maintain sanity?**

**5. What do you find most horrifying about Zamperini's captivity?**

**6. Does this book make you wonder at mankind's capacity for cruelty? What accounts for it—especially on the part of the Japanese, a highly cultured and civilized society? (The same question, of course, has been applied to the Nazis.)**

**7. Hillenbrand devotes time to the difficulty of veterans' re-entering life after the war. She says, "there was no one right way to peace; each man had to find his own path." What is Zamperini's path? How does his conversion under Billy Graham help him? What role does his wife, Cynthia, play?**

**8. Follow-up to Question 7: Why, after World War II, did the medical profession fail to acknowledge Post Traumatic Stress Disorder? After all, this was the mid-20th century, and psychiatry was a fairly established discipline. Plus, the horrors of World War I were only one generation behind. What took so long?**

**9. *Unbroken* is a classic inspirational story, but it lies somewhat on the surface, offering little in the way of psychological depth. Do you wish there were more introspection in Zamperini's account? Or do you feel this story is rich enough as it is?**

***Questions by LitLovers***

**Conduct under fire : four American doctors and their fight for life as prisoners**

## **of the Japanese 1941-1945 by John Glusman**

**Glusman has written a compelling account of courage and sacrifice from the perspective of the doctors who sought to keep their fellow captives alive under conditions that amounted to a mass sentence of death. To survive, the POWs functioned as a family. John A. Glusman chronicles these events through the eyes of his father, Murray, and three fellow navy doctors captured on Corregidor in May 1942.**

## **Strength in What Remains by Tracy Kidder**

**If you are interested in gripping stories of unbelievable survival, try this story of Deogratias, a young man from Burundi. He was on the run for six months, trying to escape the violence in his country and Rwanda, before finding a way to the U.S., where he arrived with only \$200, not able to speak English. Trying to survive in New York City is as harrowing as his escape, which makes his return to Burundi after graduating from Columbia University and**

**becoming an American citizen all the more incredible.**

**Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen by Christopher McDougall**

**McDougall traveled to Copper Canyon in Mexico to learn about the amazing running abilities of the Tarahumara tribe but ended learning much more. He eventually co-organized a thrilling and heart-warming showdown between Tarahumara and top American ultramarathoners.**

**The Survivors Club: The Secrets and Science That Could Save Your Life by Ben Sherwood**

**The author tries to answer the question why people die in circumstances that should be survivable. Fascinating read from the first few pages involving a mishap with a knitting needle, through**

**planes crashes, and a particularly haunting scenario aboard a sinking ship.**

**Devil at My Heels: A World War II Hero's Epic Saga of Torment, Survival, and Forgiveness by Louis Zamperini**  
**Read the story of Lou Zamperini, the subject of Hillenbrand's Unbroken, from his own perspective. Zamperini's original biography was published in 1957, and this updated version includes his participation in the 1998 Winter Olympic Games ceremonies in Japan.**