

# Unbroken

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.

## Praise for the Book

"Ambitious and powerful... Hillenbrand is intelligent and restrained, and wise enough to let the story unfold for itself. Her research is thorough, her writing crystalline. *Unbroken* is gripping in an almost cinematic way."

— *The New York Times Book Review*

"[Hillenbrand] returns with another dynamic, well-researched story of guts overcoming odds... Alternately stomach-wrenching, anger-arousing and spirit-lifting—and always gripping."

— *Kirkus Reviews*

*Courtesy of Random House*

## About the Author

Title: Laura Hillenbrand

American Writer ( 1967 - )

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### PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born May 15, 1967, in Fairfax, VA; married Borden Flanagan (a professor), 2008.

Education: Attended Kenyon College. Addresses: Home: Washington, DC. Agent: Tina Bennett, Janklow/Nesbit Associates, 445 Park Ave., New York, NY 10022.

### CAREER:

*Equus*, contributing editor/writer, 1989--. Cofounder, Operation Iraqi Children; consultant, PBS documentary on Seabiscuit, 2002. Has appeared in *Remembrance* (video short), 2002, and on television, including *The American Experience* and ESPN.

### AWARDS:

Eclipse Awards for magazine writing, 1998, 2001; Booksense Nonfiction Book of the Year, 2001, William Hill Sports Book of the Year, 2001, and National Book Critics Circle Award finalist, 2001, second prize, Barnes & Noble Discover Award, all for *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*; National Magazine Award, 2003, for a *New Yorker* article.

### WORKS:

#### WRITINGS:

- *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*, Random House (New York, NY), 2001, special illustrated collector's edition, 2003.
- *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption*, Random House (New York, NY), 2010.

Contributor to periodicals, including *American Heritage*, *New Yorker*, *Blood-Horse*, *Thoroughbred Times*, *Backstretch*, *Turf*, *Sport Digest*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today*.

## MEDIA ADAPTATIONS:

Laura Hillenbrand served as consultant on the Universal Studios movie based on the book, *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*, 2003; the adapted screenplay by Garry Ross was published as *Seabiscuit: The Screenplay*, Ballantine Books, 2003. An audiobook version of *Seabiscuit* was released by Random AudioBooks, 2001. *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* has been optioned for film by Universal Studios.

## Sidelights

With her debut book, *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*, Laura Hillenbrand has written an exciting book that has already won the Triple Crown of publishing: runaway sales of a nonfiction sports book, nomination for the National Book Award Critics Circle Award, and a movie version from Universal Studios.

The first paragraph of the preface sets the tone of the book. "In 1938, near the end of the decade of monumental turmoil, the year's number-one newsmaker was not Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Hitler, or Mussolini. It wasn't Pope Pius XI, nor was it Lou Gehrig, Howard Hughes, or Clark Gable. The subject of the most newspaper column inches in 1938 wasn't even a person. It was an undersized, crooked-legged racehorse named Seabiscuit. In the latter half of the Depression, Seabiscuit was nothing short of a cultural icon in America, enjoying adulation so intense and broad-based that it transcended sport."

The heroes in Seabiscuit's story include the burned-out, knobby-kneed racehorse; his jockeys, Red Pollard, down and out and half blind, and George Woolf, cool and cocky but doomed; the aging western trainer Tom Smith, and horseman Charles S. Howard, a Buick dealer and self-made man. Their story played out against the backdrop of the Great Depression. One in four breadwinners were unemployed, foreclosure was common, thousands were hungry. Spectator sports, radio programming, and movie theaters offered an escape and created instant celebrity, even for horses. Enamored of the rags-to-riches myth, Americans were quick to idolize those who exemplified it. Driven by hunger, hope, and heart, Seabiscuit and his crew lived the rags-to-riches dream.

Between 1935 and 1940, Seabiscuit traveled over 50,000 miles by train and was mobbed at every whistle stop. Jim Squires, reviewing the book in the *New York Times*, wrote that "as the most popular and most watched personality in the world, he was the 30's era equivalent of Elvis or the Beatles, and, as a sports attraction, could draw bigger crowds than Tiger Woods."

Charles Howard embodied the entrepreneurial spirit of the age. A one-time bicycle repairman, he became a millionaire selling "horseless carriages" to the western United States. He fell in love with racehorses and hired Tom Smith, a closed-mouthed old

mustang breaker from the High Plains, as his trainer. It was Smith who saw something in this horse that had run seventeen races before he won. Small, mud-colored and knock-kneed, Charles Howard bought him at auction in 1936 for 8,000 dollars and hired Red Pollard, a one eyed, over-the-hill boxer, as his jockey.

"Silent" Tom Smith set about transforming an animal everyone else called lazy, awkward, and hostile into a great racehorse. Even if no one from the Eastern establishment world of thoroughbreds had ever seen his frontier style of training, everyone agreed that the "Lone Plainsman," as Smith was called, could "talk horse." A newspaper reporter once quipped that "Tom Smith says almost nothing, constantly." Hillenbrand describes Smith, who'd trained rodeo horses and learned his craft from Plains Indians, "[as having] the ethereal quality of hoof prints in windblown snow."

Hillenbrand interviewed aging jockeys and horsemen to give the book plenty of local color. Racing scenes in California in the '30s and her characterization of Pollard and George Woolf were especially praised by the critics.

Pollard is remembered as the poet laureate of jockeys, known for his seemingly telepathic understanding of difficult horses and his love for Emerson's poetry. Hillenbrand's description of Pollard's tumble, which kept him out of a great match race, is especially good: "Jockeys say there is a small, bright sound when hooves clip against each other, a cheery portent of the wreck that is likely to follow. ... Pollard must have heard it. Fair Knightess' forelegs were kicked out from under her. Unable to catch herself, she pitched into a somersault at forty miles per hour ... Pollard went down with her, his helpless form following the line of her fall, over her back and neck and vanishing under her crashing body. She came down onto him with terrific force and skidded to a stop."

George Woolf was no less competitive as a jockey: In one race, recounts Hillenbrand, "the wire was looming overhead, and Ligaroti was lunging for the lead. Woolf could not move Seabiscuit up. With just a few yards to go, Woolf was frantic. ... He had to move Ligaroti back. With twenty yards to go, Woolf tore his hand free, threw out his right arm and grabbed Ligaroti's bridle, just above the bit. Just as the wire passed overhead, he pulled back, lifting the horse's head up and to the left as Seabiscuit's head bobbed forward. Seabiscuit flew under the wire." As Jane Smiley wrote in the *Washington Post*, Hillenbrand's "effort shows in the details and the energy of her story; her historical figures, horses and people, live and breathe in a lively, lovely way."

All of America was listening to the long-awaited race between Seabiscuit and his arch rival, War Admiral. It was a classic match-up. Seabiscuit was the new West, War Admiral represented the Eastern establishment. The country had waited for more than a year to see them race. In the climax of the book, Hillenbrand recounts "the greatest race in history," run at Pimlico Race Track in Maryland on November 1, 1938, with all the excitement of first class sports reporting.

That *Seabiscuit* was written at all is a story of courage all its own. In 1987, a virulent case of food poisoning left Hillenbrand bedridden for ten months, fighting fevers, chills, and

profound exhaustion. Doctors could not make a definitive diagnosis: some thought she had contracted AIDS, others suspected multiple sclerosis. Since there was no clear diagnosis, some doctors, as well as some friends, thought it was merely psychosomatic. Finally she was diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS).

CFS is a disease that leaves many of its victims completely disabled and unable to take care of themselves. In a *Washington Post* interview, Jennifer Frey wrote that "she is thirty-three years old and can't walk a block without becoming incredibly tired. Her morning shower exhausts her. Vertigo causes the words on the computer screen to dip and weave as she types."

Hillenbrand's efforts to write *Seabiscuit* caused her condition to worsen, but as her health began to improve, Hillenbrand started looking for a new writing project. She eventually decided to tell the life story of Louis Zamperini, an Olympic runner who went on to serve as a bombardier during World War II. During the war, Zamperini and two of his crewmates survived a plane crash, drifting together on a raft for over two thousand miles. One of the men died during this time, and Zamperini and the remaining survivor were ultimately captured by Japanese forces and interred in a POW camp. There, Zamperini endured years of torture before he was finally returned to the United States.

Hillenbrand relates these astounding events in *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption*. She discussed her decision to write about Zamperini in a *New Yorker* interview. "I found Louie while researching my first book subject, the great Depression-era racehorse Seabiscuit. As I hunted for information on the horse, I kept coming across stories about this kid runner named Zamperini, who took the 1930s track world by storm and went on to endure an incredible odyssey in World War II. I wanted to know more." She added: "After *Seabiscuit* was released, I tracked down Louie's address and wrote him a letter. When I got a friendly letter back, I called him, and he began telling me about his life. ... As he spoke of the abuses he had endured as a POW, there was no anger in his voice." She continued: "I asked him how he could speak so painlessly of men who had driven him to the edge of physical and emotional destruction. He replied that he had forgiven them. That conversation hooked me. There was more than enough in Louie's life to obsess me for seven years."

Applauding the book in *Newsweek*, Malcolm Jones found that "it takes only a few pages of *Unbroken*, Hillenbrand's marvelous account of Zamperini's adventures in and out of wartime, to see why his story so captured her imagination--and to see how well her seven years of work have paid off." He added: " *Unbroken* is wonderful twice over, for the tale it tells and for the way it's told. A better book than *Seabiscuit*, it manages maximum velocity with no loss of subtlety. With a jeweler's eye for a detail that makes a story live, Hillenbrand compresses pages of explanation into a paragraph and sometimes just a line." Roland Green, writing in *Booklist*, declared: "This book has an impossible-to-put-down quality that one commonly associates with good thrillers."

## FURTHER READINGS:

## FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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## Author Interview

'Seabiscuit' Author's New Hero 'Unbroken' By War  
Courtesy NPR.org by NPR Staff  
November 20, 2010

Laura Hillenbrand has written two great big books about exceptional athletes and inspiring survivors that the world somehow managed to forget for a while. The first was *Seabiscuit*, the tale of the Depression-era racehorse.

Now she offers up the saga of Louis Zamperini, a former Olympic runner who became an American airman — and whose true laurels were the result of trials, endurance and will far from any stadium.

*Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience and Redemption* follows Zamperini as a bombardier during World War II. When a plane he is piloting disappears into the Pacific Ocean, years of starvation, imprisonment and brutality follow.

Hillenbrand tells NPR's Scott Simon that when Zamperini was a kid in Torrance, Calif., he was known for his unbridled energy. That verve would one day make him an Olympic athlete; at the time, it simply made him spirited to the point of delinquency.

"He was the Artful Dodger of his hometown from a very early age," Hillenbrand says. "He was a serial runaway; he was a brawler; he was a prankster."

Zamperini's delinquency often manifested itself in the form of theft, Hillenbrand says; the kid would steal anything edible he could find, even breaking into kitchens to make off with a family's meal moments before it was to be served.

When Zamperini took up track and field at the urging of his older brother, he finally had somewhere to channel his pent-up energy. He would go on to become the fastest high-school runner in history and an American record holder in the mile.

"Running saved him," Hillenbrand says. "He had the one thing that a good thief has — getaway speed. And it turned out Louis had world-class, historic speed."

He eventually competed at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Adolf Hitler took notice, and complimented him on his speed.

After Pearl Harbor, Zamperini would become a bombardier, serving in the Pacific theater during World War II. The bombers of the time had technical problems and limited navigation abilities, and as a result Zamperini was at high risk even when he wasn't in combat.

"It was extremely deadly just to fly in these things, much less to go into combat," Hillenbrand says. "Fifteen-thousand Air Corps trainees died in training, stateside. Once you got into the combat theaters, 36,000 airmen died in noncombat accidents."

In May of 1943, those realities would turn Zamperini's life upside down. Zamperini and his crew were flying a rattletrap B-24 called the Green Hornet — their usual aircraft was grounded for repair — to look for yet another plane that had already gone down. When the Green Hornet began to fall apart, they ditched the plane in the ocean — a move that Hillenbrand says almost certainly should have guaranteed the crew's demise.

"The odds of being rescued if you ended up on a life raft were terrible," she says. "The rafts were very poorly equipped. The raft that Louis ended up on was especially poorly equipped."

Zamperini's raft had just a few cans of waters, a few bars of chocolate, screwdrivers, and a set of pliers. Staying alive would require resourcefulness, and a bit of audacity.

Zamperini and his crew *were* audacious, though, and they did all manner of things to survive. For hydration, Louis made rain catchers out of air-pump cases. For food they caught birds. Louis snagged fish with a hook made from his lieutenant's pin, and once with a fish hook tied to his finger.

Sometimes the crew wrestled sharks onto their raft, then killed them with the pliers.

Washington Post/Getty Images

Laura Hillenbrand is also the author of *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*. The book inspired the Academy Award nominated film, *Seabiscuit*.

After 47 days, Zamperini and his crew made landfall, and were picked up by a Japanese boat. And after a short period of decent treatment, they were sent to hellish prison camps. Their only food: a ball of rice thrown onto a filthy floor.

"There were feces on the floor, and there were maggots and they would have to pick the rice out," Hillenbrand says. "Their water was a tiny cup of tea every day."

Zamperini and his men were also subjected to much physical brutality, Hillenbrand says — and to medical experiments. Much of that cruelty was inflicted at the hands of Mutsuhiro Watanabe, known among his prisoners as "The Bird."

("Watanabe didn't want to be spoken about, so they chose fake names for all of their captors," Hillenbrand explains.)

Watanabe was handsome, wealthy, young and prominent in Japanese society. But he had failed to make officer himself, and resentment was part of what fueled his brutality toward prisoners of war, and especially toward Zamperini.

"He had an obsession with POWs who had made officer, with those who were prominent in civilian life, with those who were defiant," Hillenbrand says. "Louis was an officer, he was a lieutenant, he was a world-famous Olympian, and he was a ferociously defiant man. Once these two met, it was more or less a showdown for the rest of the war."

Watanabe singled Zamperini out for terrible brutality, Hillenbrand says, and eventually Zamperini and his fellow prisoners hatched a murder plot against their captor. That plan, Hillenbrand says, was critical for the prisoners — as a means, not an end.

"There was a lot going on with the prisoners of war in terms of maintaining their dignity and finding ways to push back," she says. "One of the ways they did that was they hatched a murder plot against this man."

Whether the plan succeeded or not was almost beside the point; the goal was to maintain their dignity.

### **'A Deeply, Deeply Haunted Man'**

Zamperini survived. But when returned to California, he found himself in a new battle: overcoming the impact of his experiences.

"Louis came home a deeply, deeply haunted man," Hillenbrand says. "Terrible, terrible nightmares where Louis would wake up screaming ... fighting with The Bird, being beaten by The Bird or trying to strangle The Bird."

Today Zamperini's struggles would be recognized as post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

"Once the war is over physically, it's not over emotionally," Hillenbrand says. "Not nearly."

Living in the midst of war, Zamperini knew exactly what he had to do to survive. Living in peace, however, was another story.

"What he was dealing with when he was in crisis, in the war, these were all physical things that he had to get over," Hillenbrand says. "He had to figure out how to get water on the raft; he had to figure out how to catch that next fish. Meanwhile, the damage was being done to him emotionally. It was something, I think, a lot of these men could kind of put off at the time, in the crisis, but once the crisis was over, that's when it all kind of exploded inside them."

Yet Zamperini prevailed. He's still alive today. He found closure, in part, in 1998, when he returned to Japan to carry the Olympic torch during the Nagano Winter Olympic games.

He carried the torch through Noetsi, a town where he had been held prisoner. This time, he arrived to cheers and clapping.

"It was a beautiful experience for him to come back and have that closure, and have all of that hatred behind him," Hillenbrand says.

Despite Zamperini's astounding triumphs, Hillenbrand rarely refers to him as a hero in her book. She wants his story to stand as just one example of its kind.

"Louis is definitely a hero," she says. "What he did for this country is something that really moves me. I don't, though, want to separate him from all the other men around him who did the same thing. They're all extraordinary. I want him to be representative of all of them, rather than somebody who stands apart from them."

Retrieved November 29, 2011 from <http://www.npr.org/2010/11/20/131452279/an-olympian-battered-but-unbroken-by-war>

## 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?

*Courtesy of LitLovers.com*