

Meeting: Sept 13, 2011 — 7:30 pm @ Laila's

What makes this book so un-put-down-ably terrific?

great story, but this isn't enough by itself

www.awesomestories.com Unbroken - Louis Zamperini Story

Zamperini, *Oral History*, Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles

great story telling — four strands interwoven: the bigger picture story; Louie's story; Louie's family's story; Louie's friends' and mates' stories

the bigger picture story

e.g. "As Louie blazed through college, far away, history was turning." P43

clearly stated well organized recitation of timelines, statistics, etc. whatever material is pertinent to the topic

wide-ranging rich treasure trove of background detailing including historical description (the Graf Zeppelin), explanations of theories of human psychology, explanations of the differences between Japanese culture and American culture, descriptions of shark behaviour, facts about survival at sea, health and disease, human anatomy, aircraft design and operation, warfare, bombing raids, the chronology of the war

Louie's story

despite consistently maintaining a reportage style — a told story that still manages to take the reader inside the characters

bits of carefully described experiences that because they are so carefully written draw attention to themselves as potentially symbolic, as potentially recurring themes in Louie's life or patterns of experience. —Trust the writer that no detail is unnecessary to the overall story.

e.g. "In the back bedroom he could hear trains passing. Lying beside his sleeping brother, he'd listen to the broad, low sound: faint, then rising, faint again, than a high, beckoning whistle, then gone. The sound of it brought goose bums. Lost in longing, Louie imagined himself on a train, rolling into country he couldn't see, growing smaller and more distant until he disappeared." p12

... then Louie leaves Naoetsu on the train arranged by Commander John Fitzgerald who was done negotiating: "He hauled back and punched the station official, to the delight of Ken Marvin. The next morning, the train was there, right on time." p318

"The tent was hushed. From someplace outside came a high, beckoning sound. Louie had known that sound since his boyhood, when he'd lain awake beside Pete, yearning to escape. It was the whistle of a train." P372

weaving together of experiences that suggest an order and pattern in Louie's life: —After Funafuti...on Palmyra Atoll, 'Louie took a hot shower and watched *They Died with Their Boots On* at the base theatre. It was the movie he'd been working on as an extra when the war had begun, a lifetime ago. 'P112

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clear, coherent description of complex chronology of events — Louie's surviving the crash of the Green Hornet

Louie's family's story

carefully detailed character sketches

Louie's friends' and mates' stories

carefully detailed character sketches

a **deft sprinkling of foreshadowing** — a literary device in which an author suggests certain plot developments that might come later in the story.

You know Louie survives if only because the book itself is so solid but each stage of his story is suspenseful. A poetic treatment that spirals the reader down with Louie through the various stages of hell that he endures. We know he is redeemed—we are given lots of hints that he will be—but when it comes it still manages to be a huge welcome release.

e.g. “At the last minute, the officers had decided not to kill him. It would be a long time before Louie learned why.” P188

Headline like chapter titles echoing the spirit and style of the times and foreshadowing

big events dramatized — e.g. bombing of Pearl Harbour

“Oahu was beginning to stir. At Hickam Field, soldiers were washing a car...” P46-47

carefully crafted verb tenses — time-line

“Louie would long remember sitting there with his eyes wide, his mind floundering, America was at war. He grabbed his hat and ran from the building.” P47

It would be a long time before Louie learned why.” P188

good placement of graphics

my only criticism — NEED MORE MAPS!

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What I learned

—**the Norden bombsight** — “an extremely sophisticated analog computer that, at \$8,000, cost more than twice the price of the average American home. On a bombing run with the Norden sight, Louie would visually locate the target, make calculations, and feed information on air speed, altitude, wind, and other factors into the device. The bombsight would then take over flying the plane, follow a precise path to the target, calculate the drop angle, and release the bombs at the optimal moment. Once the bombs were gone, Louie would yell “Bombs away!” and the pilot would take control again. Norden bombsights were so secret that they were stored in guarded vaults and moved under armed escort, and the men were forbidden to photograph or write about them “ p53

—**Loss rate from accidents**—“IN WWII, 35,933 AAF planes were lost in combat and accidents. The surprise of the attrition rate is that only a fraction of the ill-fated planes were lost in combat. In 1943 in the Pacific Ocean Areas theater in which Phil's crew served, for every plane lost in combat, some six planes were lost in accidents. Over time, combat took a greater toll, but combat losses never overtook noncombat losses” p80.

—**the challenge to rescue at sea and how ineffective were the efforts** —“In mid-1944, in response to the dismal results of Pacific rescue searches, the AAF implemented a vastly enhanced rescue system. Life rafts were stocked with radios and better provisions, boats were set out along the paths flown by military planes,,. These advances improved the odds of rescue, but even after their advent, most downed men were never found.”...fewer than 30 percent of men whose planes went missing between July 1944 and February 1945 were rescued.”...In January 1945, only 21 of 167 downed XXI Bomber Command airmen were rescued—just 13 percent.” P87

—**Rape of Nanking (p88)**—a 2 paragraph summary that also foreshadows Louie's story

—survival qualities:

dealing with fear — “Before Louie had left the States, he'd been issued an olive-drab Bible. He tried reading it to cope with his anxiety, but it made no sense to him, and he abandoned it. Instead, he soothed himself by listening to classical music on his phonograph. He often left Phil...to run off his worries on the mile-long course that he had measured in the sand around the runway. He also tried to prepare for every contingency...He took classes on island survival and wound care, and found a course in which an elderly Hawaiian offered tips on fending off sharks. (Open eyes wide and bare teeth, make football-style stiff-arm, bop shark in nose.) And like everyone else, Louie and Phil drank.” p89

—**importance of mind control** — **p145** — storytelling —past, present and future (envisioning) as a survival mechanism — “For Louie and Phil, the conversations were healing, pulling them out of their suffering and setting the future before them as a concrete thing. As they imagined themselves back in the world again, they willed a happy ending onto their ordeal and made it their expectation. With these talks, they created something to live for.” P146

—“It remains a mystery why these three young men, veterans of the same training and the same crash, differed so radically in their perceptions of their plight. Maybe the difference was biological; some men may be wired for optimism, others for doubt. As a toddler, Louie had leapt from a train and watched it bear his family away, yet had remained cheerfully unconcerned about his safety, suggesting that he may have been a born optimist. Perhaps the men's histories had given them opposing convictions about their capacity to overcome adversity. Phil and Louie had

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survived Funafuti and performed uncommonly well over Naura, and each trusted the other. “If there was one thing left, he'd a given it to me,” Phil once said of Louie. Mac had never seen combat, didn't know these officers, and was largely an unknown quantity to himself. ...For Phil there was another source of strength...Phil was a deeply religious man...” p147

p166 “Given how badly the men's bodies were faring, it would seem likely that their minds, too, would begin to fail. But more than five weeks into their ordeal, both Louie and Phil were enjoying remarkable precision of mind, and were convinced that they were growing sharper every day. They continued quizzing each other, chasing each other's stories down to the smallest detail, teaching each other melodies and lyrics, and cooking imaginery meals.”

The raft as Louie's “unlikely intellectual refuge” p167 “In his head he could roam anywhere, and he found that his mind was quick and clear, his imagination unfettered and supple. He could stay with a thought for hours, turning it about.”

— **cannibalism** —“the “custom of the sea” p149

— **shark liver** —the only edible part of a shark p162

— **the challenge of communicating interculturally** —“The captives and their guards came from cultures with virtually no overlap in language or custom. Louie and Phil found it almost impossible to understand what was being asked of them.” P182

—**dignity as a necessity of life** — “on Kwajalein, the guards sought to deprive them of something that had sustained them even as all else had been lost: dignity. This self-respect and sense of self-worth, the innermost armament of the soul, lies at the heart of humanness; to be deprived of it is to be dehumanized, to be cleaved from, and cast below, mankind. Men subjected to dehumanizing treatment experience profound wretchedness and loneliness and find that hope is almost impossible to retain. Without dignity, identity is erased. In its absence, men are defined not by themselves, but by their captors” p183 —and later how stealing from their captors helped them restore their sense of dignity p.244

— the “**fatal poison of irresponsible power**” —p196

—the **Japanese “kill all” rule** p198

—**workers waging guerrilla war** — p242 — interesting contrast to the Bridge on the River Kwai —[Nicholson conducts an inspection and is shocked by what he finds. Against the protests of some of his officers, he orders Captain Reeves (Peter Williams) and Major Hughes (John Boxer) to design and build a proper bridge, despite its military value to the Japanese, for the sake of his men's morale. The Japanese engineers had chosen a poor site, so the original construction is abandoned and a new bridge is begun 400 yards downstream.]

war statistics — “In its rampage over the east, Japan had brought atrocity and death on a scale that staggers the imagination. In the midst of it were the prisoners of war.

— 132,000 POWs from American, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, Holland, and Australia. Of those, nearly 36,000 died, more than one in four.

— 215,000 POWS from other countries and untold thousands of forced laborers — death rates unknown p 315

LEM Notes for Best Book Club reading: **Unbroken, Laura Hillenbrand**
Random House, New York: 2010

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— “the paradox of vengefulness” — p366 – it makes men dependent upon those who have harmed them, believing that their release from pain will come only when they make their tormentors suffer.

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What I don't understand:

how Louie survived physically and there aren't, for me, any convincing answers to this. It's like he's a cartoon character constantly being beaten to a pulp and yet staying alive. How is this possible?

“For several weeks, Louie was deaf in his left ear. The Bird continued to beat him, every day. “
p252

why my knowledge of the war with Japan is comparatively so much less than my knowledge of the war with Germany

unless it's that:

—for political reasons— Japan quickly became a cold war ally— Japanese war criminals quickly given amnesty

— the story isn't as clearly told by both sides for similar reasons — American guilt about Hiroshima and Nagasaki —Japanese guilt about their actions

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Why is this story being told (re-told) and being so listened to (a best seller!) now? How is it resonating with the zeitgeist?

The Wall Street Journal

The Defiant Ones

In her new book, the author of 'Seabiscuit' turns to the unimaginable ordeal of an Olympic athlete and WW II hero. Because of her own debilitating illness, they struck a special bond.

Mr. Zamperini's internal battles and ultimate redemption point to a key difference between "Unbroken" and Ms. Hillenbrand's previous book. "Seabiscuit's story is one of accomplishment," she says. "Louie's is one of survival. Seabiscuit's story played out before the whole world. Louie dealt with his ordeal essentially alone. His was a mental struggle." That struggle, she adds, feels particularly resonant in 2010. "This is a time when people need to be buoyed by something, and Louie blows breath into people by making them realize that they can overcome more than they think."

He has transformed what he learned as a POW into parables ("Hope has to have a reason. Faith has to have an object") that he feels can reduce stress and are perfect for an anxiety-filled time.

—Survivor reality show — survivor skills