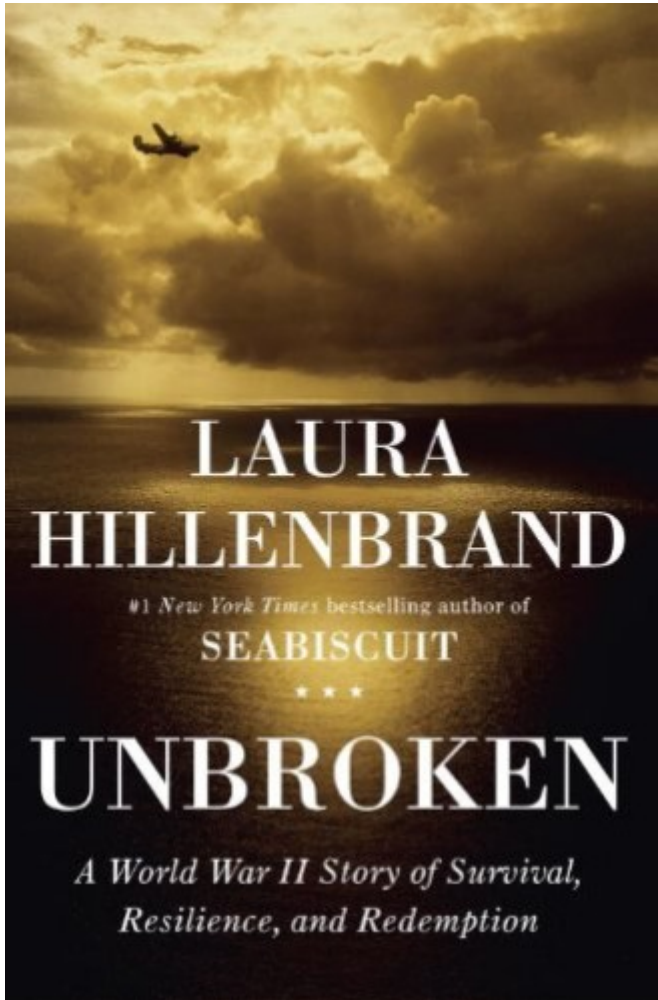


An astonishing life

By [Janet Potter](#)

December 8, 2010

In Review



Unbroken

by Laura Hillenbrand

Random House

A few weeks ago, on my way home on a crowded rush-hour train, I was slouched down in my seat trying to hide my uncontrollable crying. I was sobbing not for the lost souls of the world but because I had reached the end of *Unbroken*, a new book by Laura Hillenbrand. As embarrassing as my public display of emotion was, I could not stop reading.

Unbroken is the story of Louie Zamperini, who had (and is still having!) one of the most eventful, tragic, exultant, inspiring lives you'll ever hear of. Hillenbrand called his life "incomprehensibly dramatic." He was a maniacal troublemaker and thief as a child, a national high school track star, a 1936 Berlin Olympian, a WWII Army Air Corps bombardier, a veteran of many fierce battles, survivor of a plane crash followed by 47 days at sea, and a prisoner in a Japanese POW camp.

Reading *Unbroken* is an exercise in astonishment. There is not a single phase of Louie's life that doesn't touch the extremes of the human experience. Just as she did with *Seabiscuit*, her earlier bestseller, Hillenbrand writes with an engaged but calm voice, letting the drama of the story prove itself and letting you fall in love with Louie on your own. And you will fall in love with Louie, the rambunctious Italian who plays pranks on his Japanese prison guards, just as he did with Olympic teammate Jesse Owens.

Given the title--and the subtitle and the preface, in which Hillenbrand talks about interviewing Louie for the book--you don't have to worry about whether or not he survives. But after a while you start to worry about how he'll go on living. There is a moment, when his life raft is drifting into eerily calm waters at the equatorial doldrums, when Louie feels he is face to face with heaven. He vows that if he survives the war he'll dedicate himself to serving others, a vow that seems less and less likely to be kept after years of atrocious life in a POW camp.

Trying to keep hold of the conviction that he is or ever will be an unbroken person again--let alone the charismatic, selfless one he was before the war--is the real survival struggle of the book. If you are anything like me (or my dad--I quickly handed the book off to him without waiting for Christmas), it's a struggle you'll follow with devoted concern, and it will stay with you long after you close the book.