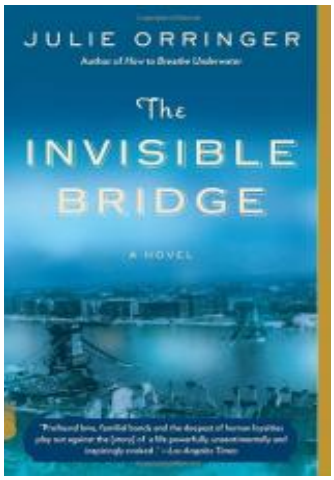
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

The Invisible Bridge

by Julie Orringer



About the Book

Julie Orringer?s astonishing first novel, eagerly awaited since the publication of her heralded best-selling short-story collection, **How to Breathe Underwater**, is a grand love story set against the backdrop of Budapest and Paris, an epic tale of three brothers whose lives are ravaged by war, and the chronicle of one family?s struggle against the forces that threaten to annihilate it.

Paris, 1937. Andras Lévi, a Hungarian-Jewish architecture student, arrives from Budapest with a scholarship, a single suitcase, and a mysterious letter he has promised to deliver to C. Morgenstern on the rue de Sévigné. As he falls into a complicated relationship with the letter?s recipient, he becomes privy to a secret history that will alter the course of his own life. Meanwhile, as his elder brother takes up medical studies in Modena and their younger brother leaves school for the stage, Europe?s unfolding tragedy sends each of their lives into terrifying uncertainty. At the end of Andras?s second summer in Paris, all of Europe erupts in a cataclysm of war.

From the small Hungarian town of Konyár to the grand opera houses of Budapest and Paris, from the lonely chill of Andras?s room on the rue des Écoles to the deep and enduring connection he discovers on the rue de Sévigné, from the despair of Carpathian winter to an unimaginable life in forced labor camps and beyond, **The Invisible Bridge** tells the story of a love tested by disaster, of brothers whose bonds cannot be broken, of a family shattered and remade in history?s darkest hour, and of the dangerous power of art in a time of war.

Expertly crafted, magnificently written, emotionally haunting, and impossible to put down, **The Invisible Bridge** resoundingly confirms Julie Orringer?s place as one of today?s most vital and commanding young literary talents.

Discussion Guide

1. What does the opening chapter establish about the cultural and social milieu of prewar Budapest? What do Andras?s

reactions to Hász household reveal about the status of Jews within the larger society? How do the differences between the Hász and Lévi families affect their assumptions and behavior during the war? Which scenes and characters most clearly demonstrate the tensions within the Jewish community?

2. Why do Andras and his friends at the Ecole Spéciale tolerate the undercurrent of anti-Semitism at the school even after the verbal attack on Eli Polaner (pp. 39?40) and the spate of vandalism against Jewish students (p. 94)? To what extent are their reactions shaped by their nationalities, political beliefs, or personal histories? Why does Andras agree to go to the meeting of Le Grand Occident (pp. 97?102)? Is his belief that ?they wouldn?t deport me?Not for serving the ideals of France? (p. 102), as well as the reactions of Professor Vago and Andras?s father to the German invasion of Czechoslovakia (p. 266) naïve, or do they represent widespread opinions and assumptions?

3. Andras and Klara?s love blossoms against the background of uncertainties and fear. In what ways does Andras?s infatuation with Klara, as well as his hesitations about pursuing her, follow an age-old romantic pattern? Is Klara?s initial lack of openness about her background justified by her situation? Why does she eventually begin an affair with Andras? Are they equally responsible for the arguments, break-ups, and reconciliations that characterize their courtship? Do Klara?s revelations (pp. 214?34) change your opinion of her and the way she has behaved?

4. Despite the grim circumstances, Andras and Mendel produce satirical newspapers in the labor camps. What do the excerpts from *The Snow Goose* (p. 331), *The Biting Fly* (pp. 360?61), and *The Crooked Rail* (p. 437) show about the strategies that helped laborers preserve their humanity and their sanity? What other survival techniques do Andras and his fellow laborers develop?

5. In Budapest, the Lévi and Hász families sustain themselves with small pleasures, daily tasks at home and, in the case of the men, working at the few jobs still available to Jews (pp. 352?55, pp. 366?77, pp. 405?10). Are they driven by practical or emotional needs, or both? Does the attempt to maintain ordinary life represent hope and courage, or a tragic failure to recognize the ever-encroaching danger? What impact do the deprivations and degradations imposed by the Germans have on the relationship between the families? Which characters are the least able or willing to accept the threats to their homeland and their culture?

6. What details in the descriptions of Bánhida (pp. 356?63, pp. 392?99), Turka (pp. 486?503), and the transport trains (pp. 558?66) most chillingly capture the cruelty perpetrated by the Nazis? In addition to physical abuse and deprivation, what are the psychological effects of the camps? rules and the laws imposed on civilian populations?

7. The German general in Bánhida (pp. 399?402), the surveyor Captain Erdó, and the famous General Vilmos Nagy in Turka all display kindness and compassion. Miklós Klein engages in the tremendously dangerous work of arranging emigrations for fellow Jews (pp. 422?23). What motivates each of them to act as they do? What political ideals and moral principles lie at the heart Nagy?s stirring speech to the officers-in-training (pp. 506?7)? (Because of his refusal to support official anti-Semitic policies, Nagy was eventually forced to resign from the Hungarian army; in 1965, he was the first Hungarian named as a Righteous Among the Nations by the Yad Vashem Institute.)

8. Why does Klara refuse to leave Budapest and go to Palestine (p. 510)? Is her decision the result of her own set of circumstances, or does it reflect the attitudes of other Jews in Hungary and other countries under Nazi control?

9. ?He could no sooner cease being Jewish than he could cease being a brother to his brothers, a son to his father and

mother? (p. 46). Discuss the value and importance of Jewish beliefs and traditions to Andras and other Jews, considering such passages as Andras?s feelings in the above quotation and his thoughts on the High Holidays (pp. 201-?3); the weddings of Ben Yakov and Ilana (pp. 255?56) and of Andras and Klara (p. 317); the family seder in wartime Budapest (pp. 352?55); and the prayers and small rituals conducted in work camps.

10. The narrative tracks the political and military upheavals engulfing Europe as they occur. What do these intermittent reports demonstrate about the failure of both governments and ordinary people to grasp the true objectives of the Nazi regime? How does the author create and sustain a sense of suspense and portending disaster, even for readers familiar with the ultimate course of the war?

11. Throughout the book there are descriptions of Andras?s studies, including information about his lessons and the models he creates and detailed observations of architectural masterpieces in Paris. What perspective does the argument between Pingsson and Le Corbusier offer on the role of the architect in society (pp. 273?74)? Whose point of view do you share? What aspects of architecture as a discipline make it particularly appropriate to the themes explored in the novel? What is the relevance of Andras?s work as a set designer within this context?

12. Andras?s encounters with Mrs. Hász (p. 6) and with Zoltán Novak (pp. 19?20) are the first of many coincidences that determine the future paths of various characters. What other events in the novel are the result of chance or luck? How do the twists and turns of fortune help to create a sense of the extraordinary time in which the novel is set?

13. Does choice also play a significant role in the characters? lives? What do their decisions (for example, Klara?s voluntary return to Budapest; György?s payments to the Hungarian authorities; and even Józef?s attack on Andras and Mendel (p. 492)) demonstrate about the importance of retaining a sense of independence and control in the midst of chaos?

14. The Holocaust and other murderous confrontations between ethnic groups can challenge the belief in God. ?(Andras) believed in God, yes, the God of his fathers, the one to whom he?d prayed?but that God, the One, was not One who intervened in the way the needed someone to intervene just then. He had designed the cosmos and thrown its doors open to man, and man had moved in?The world was their place now? (p. 432). What is your reaction to Andras?s point of view? Have you read or heard explanations of why terrible events come to pass that more closely reflect your personal beliefs?

15. What did you know about Hungary?s role in World War II before reading **The Invisible Bridge**? Did the book present information about the United States and its Allies that surprised you? Did it affect your views on Zionism and the Jewish emigration to Palestine? Did it deepen your understanding of the causes and the course of the war? What does the epilogue convey about the postwar period and the links among past, present, and future?

16. ?In the end, what astonished him the most was not the vastness of it all --- that was impossible to take in, the hundreds of thousands dead from Hungary alone, and the millions from all over Europe --- but the excruciating smallness, the pinpoint of which every life was balanced? (p. 558). Does **The Invisible Bridge** succeed in capturing both the ?vastness of it all? and the ?excruciating smallness? of war and its impact on individual lives?

17. Why has Orringer chosen ?Any Case? by the Nobel Prize?winning Polish poet Wislawa Szymborkska as the coda to her novel? What does it express about individuals caught in the flow of history and the forces that determine their fates?

Author Bio

Julie Orringer is the author of the novels THE INVISIBLE BRIDGE and LUNA, PHOENIX, QUEEN, the award-winning short story collection HOW TO BREATHE UNDERWATER, which was a *New York Times* Notable Book. She is the winner of *The Paris Review*?s Plimpton Prize for Fiction and the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, Stanford University, and the Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. She lives in Brooklyn.

Critical Praise

"To bring an entire lost world?to vivid life between the covers of a novel is an accomplishment; to invest that world, and everyone who inhabits it, with a soul, as Julie Orringer does in The Invisible Bridge, takes something more like genius."

The Invisible Bridge
by Julie Orringer

Publication Date: January 25, 2011
Paperback: 784 pages
Publisher: Vintage
ISBN-10: 140003437X
ISBN-13: 9781400034376