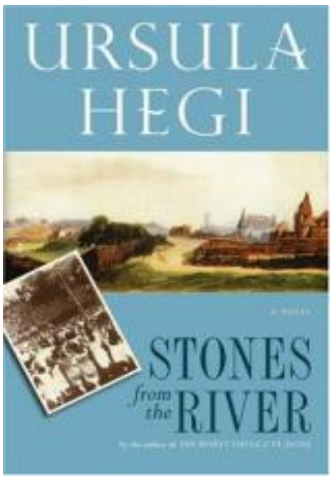
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Stones from the River

by Ursula Hegi



About the Book

Stones from the River is a daring, dramatic and complex novel of life in Germany. It is set in Burgdorf, a small fictional German town, between 1915 and 1951. The protagonist is Trudi Montag, a Zwerg -- the German word for dwarf woman. As a dwarf she is set apart, the outsider whose physical "otherness" has a corollary in her refusal to be a part of Burgdorf's silent complicity during and after World War II. Trudi establishes her status and power, not through beauty, marriage, or motherhood, but rather as the town's librarian and relentless collector of stories.

Through Trudi's unblinking eyes, we witness the growing impact of Nazism on the ordinary townsfolk of Burgdorf as they are thrust on to a larger moral stage and forced to make choices that will forever mark their lives. **Stones from the River** is a story of secrets, parceled out masterfully by Trudi -- and by Ursula Hegi -- as they reveal the truth about living through unspeakable times.

Discussion Guide

1. Why did Hegi choose a dwarf as her protagonist? How do the other characters respond to Trudi's "otherness"? How do you?

2. What compels Trudi to unearth people's secrets? She uses these stories as a means of exchange and a tool for bartering, disclosing some secrets while holding back others, enhancing where she sees fit. What drives her to repeat and embellish the stories she hears? What need in her does it fulfill? Why, in contrast, does Trudi keep her own secrets hidden? How does her desire to possess secrets and her urge to tell stories change as the story progresses?

3. Hegi portrays Trudi as a woman capable of both enormous rage and great compassion. The same woman who takes Max Rudnick a note which reads "I have seen you, and I find you too pitiful to consider," risks her life when she hides Jews in her cellar. How does Hegi reconcile these differences in her main character?

4. When Trudi is fourteen years old, four schoolboys drag her into a barn and molest her. Trudi is profoundly affected -- in what ways does this immediately change her? How does it continue to shape her in the coming years? Is Trudi ever able to overcome it? How?

5. During the war, Trudi risks her life and her father's by hiding Jews in their cellar. How does this forever transform her relationship to people? What impact do her actions have on the town, and how does it change her standing in Burgdorf? How does Hegi develop the character of Leo? He is a constant support beam to the townspeople and to Trudi -- how does he tie the story together? How are Leo and Trudi different from each other, and in what ways are they similar?

6. How does Hegi develop the character of Leo? He is a constant support beam to the townspeople and to Trudi -- how does he tie the story together? How are Leo and Trudi different from each other, and in what ways are they similar?

7. As Nazism encroaches on Burgdorf, Hegi's characters are confronted with moral dilemmas that go far beyond their ordinary experience. What are the different ways in which the townspeople react? What reasons does Hegi suggest for their varying emotions and actions? What do you think you might have done differently in their place?

8. After Michael Abramowitz is taken away and beaten by Nazis, his wife has a thought that she never voices: "Given a choice, she would rather be the one who was persecuted than the one who did the persecuting." Do you think this is a feeling shared by other Jews during the war? By ordinary Germans? How would you choose?

9. We do not learn until late in the story that Emil Hesping is the unknown benefactor. We discover that all the years he has been giving gifts to the people of Burgdorf, he has been embezzling money from the gymnasium. How do you feel when he is killed for removing Hitler's unwelcome statue from the town square? The unknown benefactor symbolically counteracts some of the pain Hitler's tyranny has caused. What is Hegi saying about the relation of good deeds to justice?

10. After the war, many of Burgdorf's townspeople refuse to speak of the war years, pretending that they took no part in the war's evils. What compels them to participate in this complicity of silence? What do you believe can happen to a people when they collectively bury a memory? What purpose does it serve to bring out the truth and to never forget it?

11. What is the significance of making Trudi and her father the town librarians? Why do you think Hegi uses a library as her novel's principal setting?

12. How are Burgdorf's women affected by their country's history? Think of Renate Eberhardt, who is turned in by her Nazi son; Ingrid, the young woman searching for divinity; Jutta, the strong and beautiful wife of Klaus Malteri Hanna, the -- baby Trudi loves too much; Eva Sturm, who was not protected by her husband, Alexander. What pain and atrocities are visited on the women specifically?

13. What vision of human nature does **Stones from the River** express? Does Hegi perceive human beings as fundamentally good, evil, or indifferent? As immutable or capable of transformation?

14. In **Stones from the River**, Hegi uses both stones and the river symbolically. What significance does the phrase "stones from the river" acquire in the course of the novel, both for Trudi and the reader? How does Trudi use the stones as a means of self expression? What does the river mean to Trudi, and how does Hegi develop it as a metaphor?

Author Bio

Ursula Hegi is the author of THE WORST THING I'VE DONE, SACRED TIME, HOTEL FOR SAINTS, THE VISION OF EMMA BLAU, TEARING FOR SILENCE, SALT DANCERS, STONES FROM THE RIVER, FLOATING IN MY MOTHER'S PALM, UNEARNED PLEASURES AND OTHER STORIES, INTRUSIONS and TRUDI & PIA. She teaches writing at Stonybrook's Southhampton Campus and is the recipient of more than 30 grants and awards.

Critical Praise

Rich and lively...This moving, elegiac novel commands our compassion and respect for the wisdom and courage to be found in unlikely places, in unlikely times.

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