

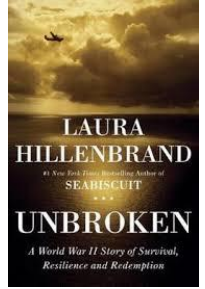
Name _____ ELA 8 – Excerpts from Ch. 1

Date _____ **Unbroken** by Laura Hillenbrand

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Excerpts from Chapter 1

Introduction of Louie Zamperini, main character and some struggles he experiences as a POW. Ch. 1 gives some background on Louie's childhood.



The boy's name was Louis Silvie Zamperini. The son of Italian immigrants, he had come into the world in Olean, New York, on January 26, 1917, eleven and a half pounds of baby under black hair as coarse as barbed wire. His father, Anthony, had been living on his own since age fourteen, first as a coal miner and boxer, then as a construction worker. His mother, Louise, was a petite, playful beauty, sixteen at marriage and eighteen when Louie was born. In their apartment, where only Italian was spoken, Louise and Anthony called their boy Toots.

From the moment he could walk, Louie couldn't bear to be corralled. His siblings would recall him careening about, hurdling flora, fauna, and furniture. The instant Louise thumped him into a chair and told him to be still, he vanished. If she didn't have her squirming boy clutched in her hands, she usually had no idea where he was.

In 1919, when two-year-old Louie was down with pneumonia, he climbed out his bedroom window, descended one story, and went on a naked tear down the street with a policeman chasing him and a crowd watching in amazement. Soon after, on a pediatrician's advice, Louise and Anthony decided to move their children to the warmer climes of California. Sometime after their train pulled out of Grand Central Station, Louie bolted, ran the length of the train, and leapt from the caboose. Standing with his frantic mother as the train rolled backward in search of the lost boy, Louie's older brother, Pete, spotted Louie strolling up the track in perfect serenity. Swept up in his mother's arms, Louie smiled. "I knew you'd come back," he said in Italian.

In California, Anthony landed a job as a railway electrician and bought a half-acre field on the edge of Torrance, population 1,800. He and Louise hammered up a one-room shack with no running water, an outhouse behind, and a roof that leaked so badly that they had to keep buckets on the beds. With only hook latches for locks, Louise took to sitting by the front door on an apple box with a rolling pin in her hand, ready to brain any prowlers who might threaten her children.

There, and at the Gramercy Avenue house where they settled a year later, Louise kept prowlers out, but couldn't keep Louie in hand. Contesting a footrace across a busy highway, he just missed getting broadsided by a jalopy. At five, he started smoking, picking up discarded cigarette butts while walking to kindergarten. He began drinking one night when he was eight; he hid under the dinner table, snatched glasses of wine, drank them all dry, staggered outside, and fell into a rosebush.

On one day, Louise discovered that Louie had impaled his leg on a bamboo beam; on another, she had to ask a neighbor to sew Louie's severed toe back on. When Louie came home drenched in oil after scaling an oil rig, diving

into a sump well, and nearly drowning, it took a gallon of turpentine and a lot of scrubbing before Anthony recognized his son again. Thrilled by the crashing of boundaries, Louie was untamable. As he grew into his uncommonly clever mind, mere feats of daring were no longer satisfying. In Torrance, a one-boy insurgency was born.

If it was edible, Louie stole it. He skulked down alleys, a roll of lock-picking wire in his pocket. Housewives who stepped from their kitchens would return to find that their suppers had disappeared. Residents looking out their back windows might catch a glimpse of a long-legged boy dashing down the alley, a whole cake balanced on his hands. When a local family left Louie off their dinner-party guest list, he broke into their house, bribed their Great Dane with a bone, and cleaned out their icebox. At another party, he absconded with an entire keg of beer. When he discovered that the cooling tables at Meinzer's Bakery stood within an arm's length of the back door, he began picking the lock, snatching pies, eating until he was full, and reserving the rest as ammunition for ambushes. When rival thieves took up the racket, he suspended the stealing until the culprits were caught and the bakery owners dropped their guard. Then he ordered his friends to rob Meinzer's again.

It is a testament to the content of Louie's childhood that his stories about it usually ended with "... and then I ran like mad." He was often chased by people he had robbed, and at least two people threatened to shoot him. To minimize the evidence found on him when the police habitually came his way, he set up loot-stashing sites around town, including a three-seater cave that he dug in a nearby forest. Under the Torrance High bleachers, Pete once found a stolen wine jug that Louie had hidden there. It was teeming with inebriated ants.

To get even with a railcar conductor who wouldn't stop for him, Louie greased the rails. When a teacher made him stand in a corner for spitballing, he deflated her car tires with toothpicks. After setting a legitimate Boy Scout state record in friction-fire ignition, he broke his record by soaking his tinder in gasoline and mixing it with match heads, causing a small explosion. He stole a neighbor's coffee percolator tube, set up a sniper's nest in a tree, crammed pepper-tree berries into his mouth, spat them through the tube, and sent the neighborhood girls running.

Only one thing scared him. When Louie was in late boyhood, a pilot landed a plane near Torrance and took Louie up for a flight. One might have expected such an intrepid child to be ecstatic, but the speed and altitude frightened him. From that day on, he wanted nothing to do with airplanes.

In a childhood of artful dodging, Louie made more than just mischief. He shaped who he would be in manhood. Confident that he was clever, resourceful, and bold enough to escape any predicament, he was almost incapable of discouragement. When history carried him into war, this resilient optimism would define him.

Louie was twenty months younger than his brother, who was everything he was not. Pete Zamperini was handsome, popular, impeccably groomed, polite to elders and avuncular to juniors, silky smooth with girls, and blessed with such sound judgment that even when he was a child, his parents consulted him on difficult decisions. He ushered his mother into her seat at dinner, turned in at seven, and tucked his alarm clock under his pillow so as not to wake Louie, with whom he shared a bed. He rose at two-thirty to run a three-hour paper route, and deposited all his earnings in the bank, which would swallow every penny when the Depression hit. He had a lovely singing voice and a gallant habit of carrying pins in his pant cuffs, in case his dance partner's dress strap failed. He once saved a girl from drowning. Pete radiated a gentle but impressive authority that led everyone he met, even adults, to be swayed by his opinion. Even Louie, who made a religion out of heeding no one, did as Pete said.

Nothing about Louie fit with other kids. He was a puny boy, and in his first years in Torrance, his lungs were still compromised enough from the pneumonia that in picnic footraces, every girl in town could dust him. His features, which would later settle into pleasant collaboration, were growing at different rates, giving him a curious face that seemed designed by committee. His ears leaned sidelong off his head like holstered pistols, and above them waved a calamity of black hair that mortified him. He attacked it with his Aunt Margie's hot iron, hobbled it in a silk stocking every night, and slathered it with so much olive oil that flies trailed him to school. It did no good.

He was a marked boy. Bullies, drawn by his oddity and hoping to goad him into uttering Italian curses, pelted him with rocks, taunted him, punched him, and kicked him. He tried buying their mercy with his lunch, but they pummeled him anyway, leaving him bloody. He could have ended the beatings by running away or succumbing to tears, but he refused to do either. "You could beat him to death," said Sylvia, "and he wouldn't say 'ouch' or cry." He just put his hands in front of his face and took it.

Frustrated at his inability to defend himself, he made a study of it. His father taught him how to work a punching bag and made him a barbell from two lead-filled coffee cans welded to a pipe. The next time a bully came at Louie, he ducked left and swung his right fist straight into the boy's mouth. The bully shrieked, his tooth broken, and fled. The feeling of lightness that Louie experienced on his walk home was one he would never forget.

Over time, Louie's temper grew wilder, his fuse shorter, his skills sharper. He socked a girl. He pushed a teacher. He pelted a policeman with rotten tomatoes. Kids who crossed him wound up with fat lips, and

bullies learned to give him a wide berth. He once came upon Pete in their front yard, in a standoff with another boy. Both boys had their fists in front of their chins, each waiting for the other to swing. "Louie can't stand it," remembered Pete. "He's standing there, 'Hit him, Pete! Hit him, Pete!' I'm waiting there, and all of a sudden Louie turns around and smacks this guy right in the gut. And then he runs!"

As Louie prepared to start Torrance High, he was looking less like an impish kid and more like a dangerous young man. High school would be the end of his education. There was no money for college; Anthony's paycheck ran out before the week's end, forcing Louise to improvise meals out of eggplant, milk, stale bread, wild mushrooms, and rabbits that Louie and Pete shot in the fields. With flunking

grades and no skills, Louie had no chance for a scholarship. It was unlikely that he could land a job. The Depression had come, and the unemployment rate was nearing 25 percent. Louie had no real ambitions. If asked what he wanted to be, his answer would have been “cowboy.”

When Louie was in his early teens, an event in Torrance brought reality home. A kid from Louie’s neighborhood was deemed feebleminded, institutionalized, and barely saved from sterilization through a frantic legal effort by his parents, funded by their Torrance neighbors. Tutored by Louie’s siblings, the boy earned straight A’s. Louie was never more than an inch from juvenile hall or jail, and as a serial troublemaker, a failing student, and a suspect Italian, he was just the sort of rogue that eugenicists wanted to cull. Suddenly understanding what he was risking, he felt deeply shaken.

The person that Louie had become was not, he knew, his authentic self. He made hesitant efforts to connect to others. He scrubbed the kitchen floor to surprise his mother, but she assumed that Pete had done it. While his father was out of town, Louie overhauled the engine on the family’s Marmon Roosevelt Straight-8 sedan. He baked biscuits and gave them away; when his mother, tired of the mess, booted him from her kitchen, he resumed baking in a neighbor’s house. He doled out nearly everything he stole. He was “bighearted,” said Pete. “Louie would give away anything, whether it was his or not.”

Each attempt he made to right himself ended wrong. He holed up alone, reading Zane Grey novels and wishing himself into them, a man and his horse on the frontier, broken off from the world. He haunted the theater for western movies, losing track of the plots while he stared at the scenery. On some nights, he’d drag his bedding into the yard to sleep alone. On others, he’d lie awake in bed, beneath pinups of movie cowboy Tom Mix and his wonder horse, Tony, feeling snared on something from which he couldn’t kick free.