



The Invisible Bridge

Julie Orringer , Arthur Morey (Reading)

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A grand love story and an epic tale of three brothers whose lives are torn apart by war.

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 becomes involved with the letter's recipient, his elder brother takes up medical studies in Modena, their younger brother leaves school for the stage—and Europe's unfolding tragedy sends each of their lives into terrifying uncertainty.

From the Hungarian village of Konyár to the grand opera houses of Budapest and Paris, from the lonely chill of Andras's garret to the enduring passion he discovers on the rue de Sévigné, from the despair of a Carpathian winter to an unimaginable life in forced labor camps and beyond, *The Invisible Bridge* tells the unforgettable story of brothers bound by history and love, of a marriage tested by disaster, of a Jewish family's struggle against annihilation, and of the dangerous power of art in a time of war.

Length: **27 hrs and 51 mins**

The Invisible Bridge Details

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From Reader Review The Invisible Bridge for online ebook

Carlin Hauck says

I'm trying to remember if a book has ever made me cry this hard. The Book Thief, maybe.

As I assured my little brother when he crawled out of bed to make sure I was okay, I wouldn't be so upset if I didn't like the book. I only cry for characters that I love. My dog, who actually came to my aid before my brother, didn't seem to care what I was reading. He just climbed up onto my bed and snuggled up next to me and licked my tears away.

The Invisible Bridge by Julie Orringer begins in 1937 with 22-year-old Andras Levi departing Hungary for Paris to study architecture after securing a scholarship at the Ecoles Speciale. By chance, he is asked to carry a letter with him to France, addressed to C. Morgenstern, with whom he begins a rather complicated relationship as everything in Europe begins to disintegrate.

Okay, I'll admit this first: I have never heard anything about the Hungarian Holocaust before. I don't think I ever even realized that Hungary was involved in World War II. In school, you hear a lot about the French occupation and the Warsaw ghetto, but not a word about the devastation that was brought on Hungary too. Hungary, whose leaders allied themselves with Germany, and then enslaved their Jewish men and forced them to fight for the Nazi army while their wives and children back home were murdered.

Back to the story. The Invisible Bridge pulled me in to Andras's life in Paris. His mentors and friends and loves and enemies. The entire first half of this 600 page tome was hardly a light story, but it wasn't yet a description of the indescribable horrors that would come later. It reminded me almost of Anna Karenina, the way that the every day life of the characters was so fleshed out. They became real. You could understand the souls of these fictional characters.

By the time the events of second half of the story were unfolding in their horrifying detail, I was too invested in the lives of the characters to stop reading. I did, I admit, put the book down for hours at a time, too afraid to keep reading for what might happen, but I always went back and pressed onwards.

Tea Jovanovi? says

Super knjiga! Mnogo je volim... ?etiri godine sam pokušavala da joj na?em dom u Srbiji... Najpre uzme jedan urednik... napusti izdava?a, izdava? otkaže prava... Ubedim drugog, pošalje ponudu, odobre mu prava, do?e mu novi urednik i otkaže prava... Ubedim tre?eg, njemu po?nu da traže sumanute pare za prava, on odustane... I na kraju, kad sam po?ela da gubim nadu, uzme je Alnari...

Teresa says

This is an old-fashioned novel, even an epic, in the tradition of "War and Peace": great storytelling (set in a tumultuous time), developed characters and good writing. It's obvious that Orringer did a lot of research, and the time period and the places are alive with details that fill all the senses. I found it hard to ever put the book

down.

The writing is elegant: "... two tiny rabbits browsed the clover. The first light of day came through the delicate endive leaves of their ears" "the round blue tin that held a minestrone of buttons ..." "His [a baby's] hands opened into starfish." These are just passages I remember offhand; I didn't mark any.

If I have any complaint, it's that the love story (before the war) was too romance-y for me, though I understand why it was vital to the development of the characters and the hardships of the plot.

Chrissie says

NO SPOILERS

I absolutely LOVE this book! Put it at the top of your pile of books to read. Order it at the library NOW or buy it. You will not regret this purchase! Me, I wish I had bought a prettier edition. This book never lags and it is 600pages long. Lots happens, the plot is chock full with this and that. Me, I don't usually go for plot driven books, but this book has everything. History is so wonderfully interwoven into the primary characters' lives that the history book facts take on a personal dimension. You learn about what happened in Hungary before, during and immediately after WW2. You see, hear and smell Paris and Budapest. You learn about architectural names and theories. You learn about ballet in Hungary during this time period. Even though the writing is plot oriented it also sometimes focuses on the philosophical. What else? It felt authentic. What happened felt very real. The momentum builds and builds and you simply cannot put the book down. Even though much of what happens is horrendous, the book does not leave the reader feeling sad and without hope. There is humor. This book deserves all the hype that currently surrounds it! What a surprise! I loved it. Maude, you are the one who pushed me to read this book - THANK YOU!!!!!! I must pay attention when you tell me to read a book.

On page 367: Here is just one example of lines that get me thinking. Why am I so different?! To the question of whether perhaps a couple should emigrate to the US, the reply is:

"It is almost impossible to get an entry visa now. Even if we could I am not certain I'd want to. Our families are here. I can't imagine leaving my mother again, particularly now. And it is hard to imagine starting another life in a strange country."

So many people think this way. Why don't I? Although such a move IS very difficult it is also exciting and wonderful. I love learning about another culture. The best way to do that is to plop yourself down into that foreign place. Family relationships are strong enough to allow one to do this. You will always love each other, and correspondence is possible and then when you return there is so much to share.

Through page 356: I am STILL enjoying myself. This author knows how to tell a story. You are captivated; you want to know how each character is going to deal with what destiny throws at them! Secondly, ideas are expressed and they get you thinking..... The reader cannot help but ask himself what he would do in such a situation. Thirdly the description of cities is fantastic. You feel as though you are there too! You experience Paris and Budapest and I don't yet what other cities will be added! Finally there is an abundance of interesting information about architecture, history, dance..... to name but a few topics! How has the author collected such a wide span of ingredients? She seems to really KNOW each subject well. And lastly it is funny sometimes what she dreams up for these characters to do. They print a newspaper, but to know what is

in this paper you have to read the book. It is just too funny! You laugh and you cry and you hold your breath. It all seems believable!

Through page 45: This book is like sinking into a cozy armchair and then into a whole other world. Pure enjoyment! You don't even have to make a list of character names b/c you are given enticing character descriptions that you cannot confuse or forget. Back to the book, back to Andras and Paris and the Quartier Latin!

Through page 30: I opened this book with trepidation – it is almost 600 pages long, a big hunk of a book. It has gotten rave reviews, but will I like it?! It is about the three Jewish Hungarian Lévi brothers and their paths across Europe through WW2. The eldest, Tibor, remains currently in Budapest awaiting a scholarship so he can begin medical studies in Modena, Italy. The youngest brother, Mátyás, remains at his studies in Debrecen, outside Budapest. Andras, the middle brother, is off to study architecture at the Ecole Spéciale on a scholarship. Already Andras has received a mysterious letter to deliver to a Monsieur C. Morgenstern on rue de Sévigné in Paris and has met Zóltan Novak who runs the theatre Sara-Bernhardt, also in Paris. At the moment Andras only wishes he had paid more attention during his two years studying French. Well, he has arrived in Paris. Paris is picturesquely described, its people, its streets and the high ceiling apartments adorned with ornate cast-iron balconies and zinc mansards.

"...he ventured out into the Quartier Latin and the artfully dishevelled students" (page 27)

"...he wrapped the orange silk scarf around his neck again and put on a loose jacket of smoke-colored wool." (page 27)

"To get to school he had to pass the Jardin du Luxembourg, past the elaborate Palais, past the fountain and the flowerbeds teeming with large snapdragons and marigolds. Children sailed elegant miniature boats in the fountain.....There were green benches and close-clipped limes, a carousel with painted horses....Andras walked down the rue de Vaugirard, with its art-supply shops and narrow cafés and secondhand bookstores, then down the wide boulevard Raspail with its stately apartment buildings. Already he felt a little more Parisian than he had when he first arrived. He had his apartment key on a cord around his neck, a copy of l'Oeuvre under his arm: He had knotted his scarf the way József Hász had knotted his, and he wore the strap of his leather bag slung diagonally across his chest, in the manner of the students of the Latin Quarter." (page 30)

What one would see in Paris and the Parisians themselves are brought to life by the author's words. Also well described is the mounting political tension, prior to WW2. It is now 1937.

j says

You know how those Holocaust movies come out every few years, and they are very serious-minded, and everyone gives them awards because, let's face it, it's pretty easy to make a compelling movie when you've got a story with this kind of dramatic weight to tell, but sometimes, if you're being honest, you think "oh man, not *another one*," which is horrible, because these stories were based on things that really happened, terrible things, and am I an asshole for thinking that I just can't sit through yet another movie with a scene of

a bunch of people crying and being shoved onto train cars, and you honestly can't even say if the movie is good or not anymore because at this point it's all just formulaic button pushing? This is that movie, but as a book. And instead of lasting two or three hours, it's however long it takes you to read 600 pages.

I feel a little bad about giving this book two stars. I mean: laudable topic (Holocaust, can't argue with that), impeccably researched (and it shows), epic in scope (I mean, 600+ pages!), first-time novel from an author with some chops.

Except. Except.

I really enjoyed about half of this book. It's an epic in the David Lean sense of the word. If it was published in the '50s, he would have directed it right after he made *Dr. Zhivago*. Wartime romance, and all that those words entail. And the first half, which is all setup, I actually really enjoyed. We meet our lead characters, architectural student Andras and his mysterious love interest Klara, who themselves meet cute (mysterious letters are involved) in Paris in 1938 and carry on a tortured romance for the ages. It's pretty much basically *Twilight*: "We must be together! We can't be together! I love you! We can never be! ~~Make me into a vampire!~~" It's totally cheesy, but it kind of works, mostly because Julie Orringer is so fabulous at creating a sense of place. Reading this so made me want to travel back in time and be a bohemian in Paris. You know, back when *poor people* could afford to live in the Latin Quarter.

Oh, but then the war starts, and you really start to feel those 600 pages. The first half covers a a bit over a year in 300 pages, but the last 300 cram in the entire war, and things quickly dissolve into one clearly factual, historically accurate outrage after another (work camp, worse work camp, even *worse* work camp, taken away on trains in the night, etc. etc.) and reading it is just... miserable. By the end, I honestly could not *wait* to be done with it.

Aside from Andras and Klara, the cast of characters is pretty flat, and reading all the horrors they suffer through is oddly numbing instead of provoking. I mean, I learned a lot about Hungary during the Holocaust, how the Jews were relatively safe most of the war (though the men were sent to labor camps, for the most part the population lived freely in the country and avoided the death camps), how things quickly became unimaginably horrible only a few months before Hitler's death. But all the repetitive *DETAIL*, ugh, it just totally removes all *feeling* from the story, which is odd because the epilogue makes it pretty clear this is the story of the author's family. The carefully crafted prose is so crammed full it feels turgid instead of poetic, and it's doubly distracting because you can feel it reaching for poetry, and getting a little purple in the process.

So yeah, 2 stars. Laudable. But I wouldn't suggest reading it or anything.

Ilse says

*It is
as though I lay
under a low
sky and breathed
through a needle's eye.*
(W.G. Sebald, Unrecounted)

However this lengthy debut novel with epic aspirations promisingly enough starts with a gripping quote by W.G. Sebald and despite the noble intentions of the author, partly inspired by her grandparents' experiences in their survival of the Holocaust, as a whole this book in the end frustrated and slightly exasperated me, even if my expectations on it actually were not very high. When I heard my real life reading group chose it as our opening read for the new reading year - assuming at that moment the novel entirely fictionalised – I admit wrestling with my own personal bias towards the book, thoughtlessly inclined to classify it as another book by a young American author having written a fictionalised Holocaust tale, with a syrupy love story at the centre - or another novel in the line of *The Book Thief* or *Everything is Illuminated*. Unfortunately, basically it turned out to be such a tale, be it maybe less sentimental than Markus Zusak's – and far more serious in tone than Jonathan Safran Foer's – less imaginative, also.

As apparently not sharing the positive consensus on this novel in the group discussion last week and bearing the rave ratings here on GR in mind, it seems unwise to expound further on the story itself, other readers have already substantially explained more eloquently than I can why reading Orringer's novel can be a frustrating experience. My thoughts pretty much concur with Wendy's and Katie's in depth analysis of the story and Orringer's style.

Wondering why this novel didn't work for me, I came across this quote.

'On the floor was a thick red rug that smelled of woodsmoke; on the bed, a butter-colored bedspread made from a torn theatre curtain. And beside the hearth was a deep low armchair of faded vermilion plush, a reject he'd found one morning on the sidewalk in front of the building. It had been lying facedown in a posture of abject indignity, as though it had tried and failed to stagger home after a night of hard drinking. The chair had a droll companion, a fringed and tufted footstool that resembled a shaggy little dog'.

Maybe it is just me cringing at such sentences – maybe other readers would too, as Orringer perseveres in this level of detailistic description throughout the whole novel, smothering the relevance of her subject, the pace of the story and the reader's willingness and ability to empathize with the protagonists in her oddly overwrought style, her adjectivitis, her extravagant use of colour, her adorning every ray of light with silver and gold, her unflinching illumination of the elegance of the hats and stylishness of her characters even when threatened by deportation and death. The novel painfully illustrates what distinguishes a lavish, delightfully lyrical or musical style from purple prose, vexingly spackling up every possible crack or crevice still left in the reader's imagination. Orringer's style and the supremacy of the mawkish love story are regrettably detrimental to her pursuit for verisimilitude notwithstanding her admirably thorough research on the persecution of the Jews of Hungary during WWII, the gradual deprivation of their rights, their forced service in labour camps (munkaszolgálat) and the eventual deportation to the extermination camps once Horthy couldn't resist the pressure of his Nazi allies any longer from March 1944 on (more on this on <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History...>).

In our reading group there was a certain irritation with the high degree of accidentalness to the story, the numerous lucky strikes saving some of the characters in the story, which however struck me as not such an uncommon viewpoint in the context of the Holocaust. Survival, even if not altogether random, after all in some respects was a matter of sheer coincidence, which is poignantly evoked by the famous poem **Any Case** by **Wisława Szymborska**, which Julie Orringer integrally includes to close the story and which could be seen as a poetical summary of the plot of the novel:

*It could have happened.
It had to happen.
It happened earlier. Later.
Nearer. Farther off.
It happened, but not to you.*

*You were saved because you were the first.
You were saved because you were the last.
Alone. With others.
On the right. On the left.
Because it was raining. Because of the shade.
Because the day was sunny.*

*You were in luck - there was a forest.
You were in luck - there were no trees.
You were in luck - a rake, a hook, a beam, a brake,
a jam, a turn, a quarter inch, an instant.
You were in luck - just then a straw went floating by.*

*As a result, because, although, despite.
What would have happened if a hand, a foot,
within an inch, a hairsbreadth from
an unfortunate coincidence*

*So you're here? Still dizzy from another dodge, close shave,
reprieve?
One hole in the net and you slipped through?
I couldn't be more shocked or speechless.
Listen,
how your heart pounds inside of me.*

(Translated by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh)

(The Shoes on the Danube Bank memorial in Budapest (by Can Togay and Gyula Pauer) to honour the people who were killed by a fascist Arrow Cross militia in Budapest during World War II. They were ordered to take off their shoes, and were shot at the edge of the water so that their bodies fell into the river.)

Observing that many other readers were deeply moved by Orringer's fictional Jewish-Hungarian family, I humbly admit I wasn't. If reading on the Holocaust I'd rather recommend *Tzili: The Story of a Life* by Aharon Appelfeld, *Austerlitz* by W.G. Sebald, *Mendelssohn is on the Roof* by Jiří Weil and *Vielleicht Esther*, Katja Petrowskaja's account on her family and the Babi Yar massacre (to be published in English in November).

Wendy says

I have a theory about why some people love this book and others, myself included, struggled to slog through it. First, I think it depends on your personal tolerance for sentimentality. Given that the first half of the book is a love story based on Love with a capital L, which itself is based on beauty, magical first glances, a forbidden element, and an ever mysterious woman, you'd better be content with a sentimentality meter reading that's over the moon. I have a number of reader-friends who would love to wrap themselves up in this kind of thing and take it home...and that's great. For them. If you're of the more cynical persuasion who raises an eyebrow at a college freshman professing his undying fidelity to the older woman who is his first love, wondering what kind of emotional backlash might ensue...don't bother ducking. There is no backlash. This is LOVE. If the main character Andras wrings his hat (and he does this a lot) in an emo fashion over his intended's perceived "infidelity", rest assured that all tension shall be based on complex yet innocent misunderstandings. Because this is LOVE.

And while we're on the subject of sentimentality, let's talk about the characterization. The large cast of co-protagonists in Andras' circle of family and friends are GOOD people, noble and innocent, with few exceptions. Even when the sky itself is on fire and raining down on them, they are insufferably selfless, starving themselves to feed children, nursing each other back to health and so on. They are even anachronistically Modern in their beliefs: of course only Fascists with a capital F would have the nerve to harass a perfectly harmless Gay character, while all our co-protagonists lovingly embrace him As He Is, no questions asked. As all the good non-fascists were wont to do in the late 30's... But the point of good characters is that we sympathize with them, right? Even if it makes them predictable and dull? I suppose, and yet somehow I resent being emotionally manipulated by this kind of forced sympathy: it's just too easy, when unspeakable horrors happen to good people for no reason, especially when children are involved. Of course I KNEW this was a holocaust saga going in, correct? Isn't that the very definition of the genre? What right do I have to complain about this, anyway? (I'll just mention that *Suite Francaise* was full of petty, ignoble, *interesting* characters, but somehow I cared about some of them anyway.)

One of the biggest barriers to my appreciation of the story was its relentlessly heavy tone of overwrought momentousness. Even in what should have been lighter moments the characters are wracked with angst and poetically purpled profound thoughts. The result, quite simply, is that it's exhausting. And repetitive. The characters are caught in a cycle of expressing their more dramatic emotions: shocked disbelief, breast-beating sorrow, ecstatic professions of love, misplaced tearful apologies for situations beyond their individual control. The few instances of attempted humor fell flat, and I *so* wanted them to work. Even an epic saga needs humor, needs the grit of sarcasm and understatement, needs to turn occasionally away from the epic before we are beaten over the head with it.

Which leads me to one of my biggest issues with this book: that the superfluous, overwrought prose waters down what is, deep down, a moving story. The author feels compelled to EXPLAIN everything, not counting on the reader to GET IT on her own. The author relies too much on interpreting for us every little quiver of body language, lest we somehow miss the point of their next unsubtle outpouring of emotion. The result of all this (unintentional?) telling is that it caulks up the hazy void where subtext tends to dwell. When an author insists on spelling out the meaning behind every little look, glance, and line of dialogue, we readers suspect our intelligence isn't trusted. Some of us don't mind, but some of us resent it. I noticed this sort of excessive interpretation in *The Invisible Bridge*, not just once, but consistently.

A prime example of this occurs when the willful Elisabet stays out all night while her mother Klara and the main character search for her: "but when they opened the door they found [Elisabet] on the doorstep, holding

a pair of evening shoes in one hand, a cone of spun sugar candy in the other. Klara, standing in the doorway, took a long look at her, at the shoes, the cone of candy; it was clear she hadn't come from an innocent evening with Marthe." I would argue that the entire second sentence, semi-colon and all, is unnecessary. The fact that she's carrying her shoes, that someone bought her candy, signals that she's been out dancing with a boy and not at Marthe's house. We don't need Klara's prolonged double take, the repetition of "shoes" and "candy" for this to sink in, and certainly not that patronizing phrase "it was clear." "It was clear" signals (to me) that the writer fears the opposite, that it is not clear at all (which it is), but instead of adding a few extra details to Elisabeth's appearance to bar any imagined confusion—smudged makeup or a man's handkerchief hanging from her belt or whatever—she lays everything out for us. "It was clear" reappears throughout the novel, and is always used to similar effect as in the following: "Now she held her back rigid while another woman leaned close to her ear; it was clear that the other woman was narrating the progression of Novak's tete-a-tete with Klara" or even "Soviet planes—or what had appeared at first to be Soviet planes, but might have been German planes in disguise—had bombed the Magyar border town of Kassa. The message was clear: Hungary had no choice but to send its armies into Russia."

To be fair, there were some very powerful moments in this book. In particular, I was emotionally struck by the part in which Andras and his friend are punished for creating a humorous reactionary newspaper in one of the labor camps and literally forced to "eat their words". During the scene Andras has a chilling realization that he hasn't even seen the worst of the horrors which are to come. But while this should have been a turning point for Andras in which he should have either been galvanized into action or frightened into complicity, neither comes to pass. Apart from a few quips that "you should have seen what they did to us", this scene may as well have never happened, for all the impact it has on Andras' characterization. He is still his same Good self, still willing to conduct a bit of passive resistance without holding his neck out too far.

I think I'm being a bit harsh. Few of us are aware of the Hungarian role in WWII, and Orringer's meticulous research into the details of everyday life in Paris and Budapest are laudable (although the wikipedia-esque summaries of battles and broad political developments that pop up every time a character sits down to read the paper could have been better incorporated). I'm still feeling more than a bit guilty about this review because I know the characters are based on the remarkable experiences of the author's family, and of course one never wants to show one's ancestors in a bad light unless they deserve it. At the same time, in FICTION I want to read about tortured, flawed characters who don't always think politically correct thoughts or are likewise always charitable and forgiving. And not for an unending 700 page slog.

Don't think that a short book could possibly do justice to a weighty subject like WWII? Then I recommend the tiny, incredibly powerful 85 pg novella "Closely Watched Trains" by Bohumil Hrabal about Czech resistance to the German Occupation. It's hilarious and brutal, and takes just one afternoon to read.

Spencer says

I read Orringer's "Pilgrims" for a fiction class several years ago and thought it was one of the best on the syllabus, so I'm disappointed that I found *The Invisible Bridge* so dependably awful. I guess I'll still try to read *How To Breathe Underwater* someday but it is now occupying a place on my 'to-read' shelf with considerably less urgency.

First, the good things. There were good things. I had to keep reminding myself how exceptional some of those good things were when I was literally groaning at the ceiling in my apartment after finishing another chapter with one of those R.L. Stine-esque howlers of final lines.

Julie Orringer is a good writer. She's almost a very good writer. She is clearly an intelligent one, one who values the rich narrative sprawl of a well-populated epic, and the research evident in this novel is remarkable. Her descriptive prose is top-notch--off the top of my head, I remember the infant's face as a pink asterisk, his hand a starfish; a woman's black shoes are a pair of quarter-notes. She would make a fantastic Imagist poet. She boasts a real command of diction, reminding me of Jonathan Franzen or Michael Chabon with her enviable ability to insert specific, intelligent vocabulary into passages without sounding affected. The use of architecture as a metaphor for her craft was always clever.

The bad?

Well, for starters, there's the dialogue, choppy and toneless. It sounds as though Orringer is trying to mimic 'foreign speech' by compressing her characters' thoughts into subtitles.

And then there are the characters. Oh Lordy Lord, those characters.

So, you've heard of the numinous Negro? Well, nearly every character in this novel was a sort of secularized, Judaistic rendition of that obnoxious and predictable trope. Let's review the dramatis personae:

ANDRAS: idealistic and naïve, wise, forgiving, noble, self-sacrificing

KLARA: devoted, occasionally sullen, wise, forgiving, noble, self-sacrificing

TIBOR: bright, reserved, wise, forgiving, noble, self-sacrificing

POLANER: sensitive, wise, forgiving, noble, self-sacrificing

There's a case to be made for Klara as a Manic Pixie Dream Girl, and Polaner—oh, Christ, Polaner. The depiction of homosexuality in this book was so insulting and dated you would think Orringer was a freshman in high school who just emerged doe-eyed with earnestness from a civics class on tolerance. Gay characters are sensitive, easily identifiable (They like silk!), meek and troubled, maternal, and seem to exist only so Andras and his crew (and by extension, the author) can impress us with how forward thinking they are. I would have paid anything (other than the list price for this damn book) for a full subplot with Ben Yakov weighing his homophobia against his sense of Jewish fraternity after the assault Lemarque made on Polaner and hence, their community. Because, you know, that would have been actually interesting. But Orringer seems so averse to making any of the earmarked-'Good' characters even a little unlikeable that they're all indistinguishably bland.

Let's not forget Lucia—a young African immigrant, she is beautiful, gifted, and kind. Other than that, we don't know much about her. She's whisked off to America, another minor character about the size of Novak's wife. Which wouldn't be a problem if Orringer didn't seem so insistent on racking up all of the liberal guilt pat-on-the-back points she could muster from this girl while simultaneously playing that same old tune, the "Not Actually Giving the Non-White Person a Personality Rag". Does Lucia ever get angry? Does she lie? Does she daydream? In white guilt land, we don't need to learn any of those things—we only smile about how wonderful it is that Orringer gave us a pretty, bright African woman whom everyone loves, and nobody knows.

Orringer never gets inside her characters. Not one of them feels like a living, thinking human. They don't inhabit any emotional states—instead they possess emotions like cheap baubles, distractedly passed from palm to palm, eventually misplaced and never missed. We're constantly told that Klara is sad, or that Andras is angry—but they never FEEL sad or angry. In the middle of any argument we're informed, bewilderingly, as though we need to be assuaged, that Andras realizes he's being irrational and the crisis dissipates. He's an emotional Forrest Gump of a protagonist, and following him through the horrors of WWII comes to feel

pretty quickly like you're trapped on a tour bus, and Orringer won't dare let you out to feel anything other than the mildest of dread. The evil takes place largely behind the scenes, and every military officer Andras encounters is the second coming of Oskar Schindler. This is a plot device that loses all emotional impact the eleventh time it happens.

Characters' values aren't challenged. They witness unspeakable events, but they don't change. They don't have flaws. They aren't impatient or unreliable or mean or self-righteous. How much realer Ilana would have seemed, how much more painful her death could have been to the reader, if we'd been told that she had a laugh that grated on Klara's patience or that she fought with another tenant of their ghetto. Instead, we're given a saint. Saints die, and in fact we expect it of them. Ilana, like every other major character in the book, came as ready made for canonization as though she'd dropped off an assembly line. Real saints have their passions, their madresses, their rages and inconsistencies. The characters of *The Invisible Bridge* are their illustrated counterparts in a Sunday School classroom.

Orringer wants to borrow the gravitas from the setting, from every other book or film or account we know about that wretched hell rotting near the center of the twentieth century without having the courage to show us anything truly dark, and the story becomes thoroughly suspenseless. At times the structure—with its hokey rhythms of obstacle-SUSPENSE?!-solution, obstacle-SUSPENSE???!-solution, SHOCKING FINAL LINE!—frustratingly resembled a young adult thriller, and was just as easy to predict. Does anyone doubt for a single page that Andras and Klara would end up together with both children, all healed and alive?? Or, and here's the big one for me: that Matyas was coming home? I could see that Color-Purple-rip-off of a tearful reunion coming from so far away it was like it was being ushered through the pages by a goddamned Mardi Gras parade. If I'd played a drinking game involving the number of times Matyas's absence is mentioned thick with wistful portent I would have woken up married in Las Vegas by now.

We realize very early that Orringer is a sucker for small acts of mercy against a backdrop of suffering, of powerful, 'unexpected' good news that becomes tiresomely predictable. She can't get enough of it. She puts it everywhere. When I think of scenes in literature that made me weep and cheer, I think of moments like the aforementioned Celie/Nettie scene in *Color Purple*, or the final scene of *The Known World* that had me crying so hard I couldn't read through my tears. Powerful moments that emerge from an ugly world where the author makes it clear she wouldn't think twice about offing the entire cast of characters. These scenes work if you get one or two of them. Orringer tries to milk one out of nearly every chapter. After a while I felt Pavlovically conditioned to expect good news whenever anything bad happened (Andras has to get a new dangerous job looking for mines? nothing bad happens, and he gets better food. Tibor loves Ilana? Conveniently, she doesn't love Ben and he doesn't love her and she loves Tibor too so no one has to get hurt or look like a bad guy). It's like getting a lollipop after a flu shot, and it truly never ceases. There are tragedies—Andras loses his parents, his brother, and his brother's family—but Orringer writes about them with a detached lyricism, as though she were already imagining the wide-angle, washed-out shot with the John Williams score in the film adaptation; as though she sort of wants us to find it beautiful. In Zadie Smith's essay on *Netherland*, she criticizes O'Neill's tendency to conceal the twin towers in literary language. I didn't know what she meant by that then, but I think I do now. It's what *The Invisible Bridge* does to the Second World War.

From the epilogue and acknowledgements, you learn much of the novel was based on Orringer's family's own experience, and maybe that explains why the characters felt flatly perfect. Beloved family members are the first people you learn to mythologize and the last people you see clearly. I'm certain Julie Orringer is lovely and her family is wonderful, and their true story is absolutely incredible, but we're talking about the craft of fiction here: I genuinely disliked this novel and couldn't wait for it to be over.

Suzanne says

I was 300 pages into this book, when I realized the four Jewish young men were still in Paris, nothing of significance was happening, and the war had not yet begun. I was so bored at this point that I found myself anxiously awaiting the Holocaust. I am totally missing something in this book. It is a standard, predictable Holocaust story, that manages to make even World War II look dull. I guess I don't find any of the characters more than cardboard, and the central love story unconvincing, and (dare I say it) silly. This book came highly recommended, and I had been very much looking forward to reading it, so I am all the more disappointed.

Elyse says

This book is WONDERFUL!!!!

Julie Orringer is both a great storyteller and a great writer. Excellent Historical Fiction.

UPDATE 2015: Here is another book I read 5 years ago... soooo good. I remember every detail. Read it when it first came out - then a couple years later with my Jewish book club.

I'm sitting here - today - reading. while on the bike at the gym at the moment and a GR's sent me a note about how much she loved this too...

Then - I had the pleasure to read many of my friends reviews ---(I'm not sure we had been friends on this site yet when I read it)

If you've not read it... You just won't be bored for a second. (actually reminds me of another book I finished just 10 minutes ago).

The Debt of Tamar... As far as lush storytelling ..

Treat yourself and read all the many great reviews..

Better yet... if in the mood for a page turning historical fiction.. You won't go wrong with this one.

And WHY has the author not written another book yet? I'd read her in a second.

Liviu says

I will just copy my FBC Review here:

INTRODUCTION

As I mentioned in a recent review, sometimes books come out of nowhere, hijack my reading schedule and it takes a while until I can un-weave the magical spell they had exerted on me and leave their universe, usually

needing at least one complete reread as well as an immediate review.

The novelistic debut of the author, *The Invisible Bridge* attracted my attention by its fascinating cover in a Borders bookstore several days ago and the blurb below made me open it; I got hooked on the first page which you can read in the extract linked above and I stayed way, way too late to finish the novel since I really needed to find out what happens with the main characters, while rereading it at leisure during the next few days.

"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 becomes involved with the letter's recipient, his elder brother takes up medical studies in Modena, their younger brother leaves school for the stage - and Europe's unfolding tragedy sends each of their lives into terrifying uncertainty. From the Hungarian village of Konyár to the grand opera houses of Budapest and Paris, from the lonely chill of Andras's garret to the enduring passion he discovers on the rue de Sévigné, from the despair of a Carpathian winter to an unimaginable life in forced labor camps and beyond, *The Invisible Bridge* tells the unforgettable story of brothers bound by history and love, of a marriage tested by disaster, of a Jewish family's struggle against annihilation, and of the dangerous power of art in a time of war."

FORMAT/CLASSIFICATION: *The Invisible Bridge* stands at about 600 pages divided into five parts and 42 named chapters with an epilogue some decades later. The novel spans the turbulent years from 1937 to 1945 with action mostly in Paris, Budapest and various labor camps on or behind the Eastern front lines where Hungarian Jewish males were conscripted as forced laborers for the army instead of as soldiers, since they were considered unreliable to be given weapons and training to use them.

The novel follows the intertwined destinies of the lower-middle class Levi family from a village near Debrecen, of whom middle brother and architect-to-be, Andras is the main hero, though older brother Tibor and younger Matyas play important roles too and the rich Hasz family of Budapest, of whom early forties Gyorgy is a Bank President and his son Jozsef, a painter-to-be is studying - and partying, with more of the latter than the former of course - in Paris.

There is also mysterious early thirties Klara - Claire - Morgenstern who is a ballet teacher in Paris with a 16 year old strong willed daughter Elisabet, to whom Gyorgy's mother, the matriarch of the Hasz charges the twenty two year old Andras to secretly deliver a letter when he gets to Paris for his studies, in addition to carrying a huge package with goodies for Jozsef.

Romantic, epic, dark even painfully so at times, *The Invisible Bridge* is historical fiction of the highest caliber.

ANALYSIS: "*The Invisible Bridge*" succeeds so well because of three aspects:

1: The characters: Andras and Klara first and foremost are such extraordinary characters, the young idealistic student who cannot help himself but fall in love with the 31 year old woman with a 16 year old girl and a dark past we get hints about and who somehow managed to make a reasonably successful life for herself and Elisabet despite all; also Tibor, Andras' friends, the closet gay Polaner and the handsome Ben Yakov, the wastrel but good natured Jozsef, theater manager Zoltan Novak who is Andras' mentor and first employer and the rest of the Hasz and Levi families are all memorable and distinctive characters and you want them to succeed and later to survive, though of course the odds were what they were, so do not get overtly fond of anyone...

2: The writing style which is spellbinding; the book is a page turner end to end and it manages to combine the first half cautious optimism of the main characters even in face of the clouds of war and of rising antisemitism in France and violence in Germany and other places, with the day to day struggle to survival in the face of the tightening vise of the second half. "The Invisible Bridge" does not descend into melodrama in the first half, nor does it descend into despair and darkness without a light in sight, in the second half, but it maintains a "matter of fact" attitude throughout that kept me guessing almost to the end what will be the fate of the characters.

3: The world-building: as noted at the end of the novel, "The Invisible Bridge" is based on the author's family stories and real life experiences plus a lot of research and it shows. The feel of both Paris of 1937-1939 and of Hungary from 1939-1945 is pitch perfect and the Jewish traditions are vividly expounded. "The Invisible Bridge" feels to me "right" as a book set partly in Eastern Europe in a way few books by Western authors feel and the little details like recipes, names, ways of speech contribute mightily to that feeling.

There are several moments that descend a bit into farce like the story of Ilana, the Italian Orthodox Rabbi's daughter that Tibor helps elope to Paris to secretly marry Andras' friend, the handsome ladies' man Ben Yakov - who is actually in love with Black American student Lucia - and of course Tibor falls in love with Ilana, while Ben Yakov is desperately unhappy that he cannot marry Lucia so he hopes that Ilana's beauty will "cure him" of his "wandering eye" so to speak- all with predictable results of course, but the novel manages to surprise after that. But the lighter interludes work well as a balance to the increasing darkness that descends on the world and on our characters.

Another superb touch in the novel was how famous stories like Job's fate are weaved explicitly in the novel, first in the story of Andras' father nicknamed "Lucky Bella" in an ironic and tragic way as he lost everything in life - family, child, inheritance - by age 30 and was living in depression and despair on the community's charity until a wise rabbi convinced him to try and turn around his fortunes and then in the tragic story of one of novel's important characters, though for this one you have to read the book to find out what's what. The last meeting of Andras with the respective character in 1943 is one of the emotional highlights of the second half of the novel.

In turns, a wonderful love story, an epic historical saga in the grand traditions of yore and a dark story of destruction and survival, The Invisible Bridge (A++) is one of two awesome mainstream novels that will lead that category in my best of 2010 list.

Jennifer says

You know why books about WWII never get old? Because humanity *still* hasn't seemed to learn the most basic lessons: policies based on hate, evil, and intolerance never end well. Sigh...

This book was a bit too long, but told the story from the unique perspective of Hungarian Jews during WWII. Even if a person in Europe during the war years never saw a battlefield or an "official" concentration camp, life was nothing short of a living hell.

4 stars

Crumb says

Whew! What a book! This book was very, very good. This is **NOT** however, a book you would race through. If you want a book that is going to be a quick read, this is **NOT** it. However, if you want a **thought-provoking, beautifully-written** story that will wash over you like a warm bath..then this is for you. There were times in this book where I had to set it aside..because I just felt like I needed a break (this book was pretty lengthy). I am a very speedy reader, too. This book however, was not a book I wanted to rush through. It felt as if the author wanted to take me on a journey, and I was going to let her. I wanted to savor this book. **Take away:** Take your time on this one. Let the story sink in. You will be happy you did.

The book centers on **Andras Levi**, a young Jewish man living in **Hungary** at the start of **WWII**. This book spans throughout the entirety of the war. We meet different characters that are pertinent to Andras Levi's life, such as **Klara**, a love interest.

What I liked most about this book was the character development between Andras and Klara. They were characters you just want to love and root for.

Ultimately, this is a book I will not soon forget. If you are a lover of historical fiction, than this book is for you. Further, I'd recommend this to fans of *We Were the Lucky Ones*.

Sue says

Excellent for my first read of the year. An epic story of WWII, building on the coming of age tale of a young Hungarian man about to travel to Paris to begin his studies to become an architect. The year is 1937. He is Jewish. So much is about to happen, is actually in the initial stages of development throughout Europe. These changes will alter history for this student, Andras, his family, his friends, his nation, and ultimately much of the world. Orringer provides a wonderfully full story, rich in detail new to me in spite of prior knowledge of the era. Her writing is up to the challenge and was, at times, spellbinding. I found myself thinking of *Dr Zhivago* as I read of some of the descriptions of Hungarian towns and rural camps.

All in all, *The Invisible Bridge* is one of those rare books that has lived up to the advance rave reviews I'd read and heard in the past. I highly recommend it.

K says

The Twelve Days of Reading *The Invisible Bridge*: A Novel

On the first day of reading this, the thought occurred to me...

It starts off engagingly.

On the second day of reading this, the thought occurred to me...

Mary Sue personas

But it starts off engagingly.

On the third day of reading this, the thought occurred to me...

Unrealistic plot twists
Mary Sue personas
But it starts off engagingly.

On the fourth day of reading this, the thought occurred to me...

Way anachronistic
Unrealistic plot twists
Mary Sue personas
But it starts off engagingly.

On the fifth day of reading this, the thought occurred to me...

This...is...a...HARLEQUIN!
Way anachronistic
Unrealistic plot twists
Mary Sue personas
But it starts off engagingly.

On the sixth day of reading this, the thought occurred to me...

Jewish inconsistencies
This...is...a...HARLEQUIN!
Way anachronistic
Unrealistic plot twists
Mary Sue personas
But it starts off engagingly.

On the seventh day of reading this, the thought occurred to me...

Two-dimensional villains
Jewish inconsistencies
This...is...a...HARLEQUIN!
Way anachronistic
Unrealistic plot twists
Mary Sue personas
But it starts off engagingly.

On the eighth day of reading this, the thought occurred to me...

Excess detail
Two-dimensional villains
Jewish inconsistencies
This...is...a...HARLEQUIN!
Way anachronistic
Unrealistic plot twists
Mary Sue personas

But it starts off engagingly.

On the ninth day of reading this, the thought occurred to me...

Cringe-worthy humor

Excess detail

Two-dimensional villains

Jewish inconsistencies

This...is...a...HARLEQUIN!

Way anachronistic

Unrealistic plot twists

Mary Sue personas

But it starts off engagingly.

On the tenth day of reading this, the thought occurred to me...

Wikipedia history

Cringe-worthy humor

Excess detail

Two-dimensional villains

Jewish inconsistencies

This...is...a...HARLEQUIN!

Way anachronistic

Unrealistic plot twists

Mary Sue personas

But it starts off engagingly.

On the eleventh day of reading this, the thought occurred to me...

Holocaust exploitation

Wikipedia history

Cringe-worthy humor

Excess detail

Two-dimensional villains

Jewish inconsistencies

This...is...a...HARLEQUIN!

Way anachronistic

Unrealistic plot twists

Mary Sue personas

But it starts off engagingly.

On the twelfth day of reading this, the thought occurred to me...

Why did I slog through this?

Holocaust exploitation

Wikipedia history

Cringe-worthy humor

Excess detail

Two-dimensional villains

Jewish inconsistencies
This...is...a...HARLEQUIN!
Way anachronistic
Unrealistic plot twists
Mary Sue personas
Well, it started off engagingly.

Jen says

This is not just another wwII holocaust read. Although, I did hesitate to pick it up but only for a moment as I read several stunning reviews that suggested I better take a look at it. I'm so grateful I did.

This is an epic story. It's 1937 pre war Hungary. Three brother's lives are diverging. At the core, is the story of one brother, Andras, who goes to Paris to study. On arrival he finds friendship, love, and passion. Then the horrific war begins. The atmosphere is heavy - laden with sadness, grief, devastating loss and yet, the impossibility of hope and faith.

Beautifully and stylistically written, this is a valuable read to add to the wwII era of unforgettable novels. It is remarkably well written whose 600 pages read as 300.

Highly recommend but know this will be an emotional one. 5 ★

Rebecca Foster says

It's all too easy to burn out on World War II narratives these days, but this is among the very best I've read. It bears similarities to other war sagas such as *Birdsong* and *All the Light We Cannot See*, but the focus on the Hungarian Jewish experience was new for me. Although there are brief glimpses backwards and forwards, most of the 750-page book is set during the years 1937–45, as Andras Lévi travels from Budapest to Paris to study architecture, falls in love with an older woman who runs a ballet school, and – along with his parents, brothers, and friends – has to adjust to the increasingly strict constraints on Jews across Europe.

A story of survival against all the odds, this doesn't get especially dark until the last sixth or so, and doesn't stay *really* dark for long. So if you think you can't handle another Holocaust story, I'd encourage you to make an exception for Orringer's impeccably researched and plotted novel. Even in labor camps, there are flashes of levity, like the satirical newspapers that Andras and a friend distribute among their fellow conscripts, while the knowledge that the family line continues into the present day provides a hopeful ending.

This is a flawless blend of family legend, wider history, and a good old-fashioned love story. I read the first 70 pages on the plane back from America but would have liked to find more excuses to read great big chunks of it at once. Sinking deep into an armchair with a doorstopper is a perfect summer activity (though also winter ... any time, really).

Favorite lines:

"He felt the stirring of a new ache, something like homesickness but located deeper in his mind; it was an ache for the time when his heart had been a simple and satisfied thing, small as the green apples that grew in his father's orchard."

“[It] seemed to be one of the central truths of his life: that in any moment of happiness there was a reminder of bitterness or tragedy, like the ten plague drops spilled from the Passover cup, or the taste of wormwood in absinthe that no amount of sugar could disguise.”

“For years now, he understood at last, he’d had to cultivate the habit of blind hope. It had become as natural to him as breathing.”

Originally published on my blog, Bookish Beck.

Katie says

For a long time I thought the author was writing about members of her own family so idealised and sentimentalised were the depiction of all the relationships in this novel. When she isn’t writing about relationships she writes really well so it was the only explanation I could find for this relentless alienating sentimentality. Further enhancing this idea was the strange structure – the first 300 pages are set in Paris. Then, suddenly, the entire cast is uprooted to Hungary. Paris, the equivalent of a central character, is completely dropped.

Sometimes you have to wonder if setting a novel during WW2 and employing Jews as central characters isn’t just an easy way for an author to shoehorn into the narrative a huge amount of pre-supplied dramatic tension. Klara and Andras’ rather clichéd romance only held my interest because I knew the Nazis were coming.

The Invisible Bridge is an old fashioned, conservative and somewhat predictable novel. The prose is weighty, the narrative is chronological and loaded with long descriptive passages. Every character is intensely earnest, always guarding his or her dignity. We never see any character with his or her trousers down; we never see any character mucking about. Those moments that reveal the vulnerable and touching humanity of characters are completely absent in this novel. At the same time it bears all the hallmarks of romance fiction. He’s poor, she’s rich; she has a mysterious secret; he is more passionate than most; they are both beautiful and uncommonly gifted. Andras’ relationship with his professor is ideal, Andras is the best student, his relationship with his brothers is ideal, his love for Klara is ideal, Klara is the best dancer in her company. Everyone in this novel is uncommonly gifted. They weren’t like real people; more like automatons programmed to always behave in an idealised way.

Also, I can’t think of a single reason why this novel needs to be 758 pages long. It takes ages to get going and then it takes ages to end. When war begins for real the author has no further need of emotional melodrama and the novel massively improves as a result. Unfortunately, for me the damage had already been done. I didn’t like the two lead characters at all. I was weary of all the rather crude manipulation the author had resorted to in order to make them loveable. When she isn’t writing about relationships she writes really well. So I was left bewildered why she focused so heavily on the corny romance theme. Basically you’d have to be a diehard romantic to enjoy this and I’ve discovered I’m not.

Esil says

I had read great review of this book and waited a long time with anticipation for this book to come out as a trade paperback. I was not disappointed. I had trouble putting it down, reading its over 700 page in a week--a busy work week at that. I liked the characters and the story. But mostly I thought Orringer did a great job of conveying what it must have felt like to be Jewish and in Hungary during World War II. I did not know much about Hungary's role during the war other than that many Jews had been killed. Orringer conveyed the horror and absurdity of the war from a specific historical point of view and from a very human point of view.

Krok Zero says

Romance! Persecution! War! Tragedy! More romance! Bloated length in surplus of 500 pages!

The Invisible Bridge is a WWII epic like every other WWII epic you've ever encountered, the kind of big-ass tale that David Lean or Anthony Minghella would've loved to get their cinematic mitts on—*Dr. Zhivago* as imagined by a hip Brooklyn cutie. Reviews have been hyperbolically ecstatic, but why? I guess there's stuff to admire here: the heavy-duty plotting is assured and largely engaging, and there's enough superficial gravity for a dozen Oscar-baiting film adaptations. Indeed, *literary Oscar-bait* is the most succinct phrase I can think of to describe Orringer's book: a technically accomplished but bloodless epic, conducted with the utmost *politesse*, that reaches straight for the middle.

At all times, this book is about its surface story and nothing else. We follow the travails of a young Jewish Hungarian man as he moves to Paris to study architecture, falls in love with an older woman (a woman with a *mysterious past!*), gets called back to Hungary to serve in labor companies during the war, endures various shades of Holocaust-related hardship, and is reunited with (the surviving members of) his family, all of whom move to America where they live happily ever after. U-S-A! U-S-A! U-S-A!

OK, so you can glibly reduce any narrative to its barest plot outline and make it sound silly. But in this case, that's pretty much all there is—the rest is an endless barrage of details rendered in blandly utilitarian prose. No subtext, all text—and so goddamn much of it! Every major character is kind and well-behaved, while unkind characters are relegated to marginal villainy; Orringer has no room for moral ambiguity. Look, I know I'm being harsh, but the fact is that you've heard this story before, and when Orringer drags out the old "we must tell the stories of the Holocaust so future generations will understand" chestnut, well—sure, that logic is unassailable vis-a-vis education and intra-family storytelling, but it doesn't necessarily apply to art anymore. If you're going to tell a story about the suffering of Jews during WWII, you had better find a fresh angle. One reason why Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* was such a breath of fresh air was QT's refusal to treat his sacrosanct material with kid gloves—the movie plays more like a Spaghetti Western than a respectable middlebrow product, and that unexpected perspective allowed him to tell a story with more verve and poignance in any one of its five chapters than in the whole of *The Invisible Bridge*. To cite just one example, Orringer seems afraid of actually writing about death, despite her chosen milieu; she shoehorns nearly all of the story's tragic events into a single brief chapter, glossing over them quickly on the way to the forthcoming happy reunion. Contrast this with the unforgettable scene in *Basterds* where Shoshanna and Zoller meet their fates in the projection booth. An unfair comparison? Well, I'm talking about works from two different mediums here, so yeah, kind of. But Tarantino's film ought to be the standard-bearer for any contemporary artist who wants to tell a story about Jews in World War II. And this book doesn't measure up.

Listen, I'm not heartless, and the Jews are my people. Identity-related empathy is probably what kept me reading to the finish line. Scattered moments and passages in this book affected me. But that has virtually nothing to do with Orringer's artistry and everything to do with being made to face some of history's ugly

truths. Which I don't need a mediocre 600-page novel to remind me of, really.

BTW, full credit for that "Mittelbräu" joke goes to Michael Sicinski. What, you thought I was clever enough to come up with a gem like that myself?
