



# Bridging love and war

Romantic longings collide with the horrors of the Holocaust in Julie Orringer's sweeping novel

The Chain Bridge across the Danube River, one of the landmarks of Budapest

**THE INVISIBLE BRIDGE**, by Julie Orringer. Alfred A. Knopf, 602 pp., \$26.95.

BY MARION WINIK  
Special to *Newsday*

**M**ost authors, from Marcel Proust to Judith Krantz, explore the same territory — or even write the same book — over and over, and in the best-case scenario their readers never tire of it. So, having fallen in love with Julie Orringer's "How to Breathe Underwater," a 2003 collection of sharply written, morally complicated coming-of-age stories, I expected her second book to be along the same lines. I waited for it eagerly.

Well, I had to wait seven years, and the novel that she produced in the interim defeated my expectations to the degree that I was stunned, then awed. Out with the bad baby-sitters of California (a favorite species from the first

book) and in with a Tolstoyesque novel of the Holocaust, one that tracks the passage of quotidian life and the flutter of the human heart against the implacable roil of history. "The Invisible Bridge" brings the pre- and early-World War II period to life in a way I can only compare to "Suite Française," which was actually written at that time and left incomplete when its author, Irène Némirovsky, was carted off by the Nazis. Meanwhile, the love story that unfolds in Orringer's pages is as romantic as "Doctor Zhivago," and the seamless, edifying integration of truckloads of historical and topical research (architecture, ballet, midcentury Paris neighborhoods) brings to mind Michael Chabon's "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay."

So, yeah, I liked it.

Orringer's tale begins at the Royal Hungarian Opera House in Budapest in 1937. Brothers Andras and Tibor Lévi are spending a last night together watching "Tosca" from the cheap seats before Andras

leaves for France to study architecture at the *École Spéciale d'Architecture*. Soon after, Tibor will be off to Italy for medical school. At the end of the evening, a woman in a sable coat and diamond necklace excitedly approaches Andras in the lobby. "It was you at the bank the other day, wasn't it?" she says. "You were the one with the envelope of francs." He remembers bumping into her, spilling his freshly exchanged currency on the floor.

"You must do me a great favor," she continues. "My son is studying at the Beaux-Arts and I'd like you to take a package for him. Would it be a terrible inconvenience?"

Not an inconvenience, but a life-changing errand, one that

will shape the future of both brothers and many other people. Eventually, this errand, and other small accidents of destiny, will lead both brothers to the women they love — Andras' Klara, nine years older than he, a beautiful ballet teacher whose past contains a secret that explains why a 31-year-old woman has a 16-year-old daughter; and Tibor's Ilana, an Italian Jew who initially ran away from her parents' Orthodox home to marry one of Andras' school buddies. But these delightful fictions will collide with brutal historic reality: the twin disasters of anti-Semitism and world war.

As in the best historical novels, "The Invisible Bridge" thoroughly entwines its invented and real elements. For example, in Part Two of the book, "Broken Glass," Orringer leads up to the news of Kristallnacht, Nov. 9, 1938, with a growing sense of unease and difficulty. First, the theater where Andras works backstage is peremptorily closed because of money troubles. Then, one of his friends at the *École* is beaten

nearly to death. After an unhappy vacation in Nice, Andras and Klara are estranged.

Finally, in the last chapter of the section, Andras is at school when news arrives of a young man who has shot an embassy official to avenge the deportation of Jews from Germany, and the rioting and punishment that has ensued. The teacher comes in, turns off the radio and starts the critique. Andras turns to his drawing, which has slipped one of its pins. "He looked at it and thought, *That's right*. At that moment, everything seemed to hang at angle by a single pin: not just houses, but whole cities, countries, peoples."

Many times in my life I've felt that I could take in no more information about the Holocaust. But "The Invisible Bridge" sneaked under my radar, and I'm glad it did. Yes, again the injustice, the cruelty, the deaths, the unthinkable horror — but instead of reducing everything to that horror, "The Invisible Bridge" knits the horror back into the world.

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# The more the marrier

Life gets pretty sticky for a man with four wives in 'The Lonely Polygamist'

**THE LONELY POLYGAMIST,**  
by Brady Udall. W.W. Norton  
& Co., 599 pp., \$26.95.

BY MARION WINIK  
Special to Newsday

**G**olden Richards, middle-aged 6-foot-6 polygamist with an overbite, is one of the most appealing, original and brilliantly tragicomic protagonists to appear in American fiction in some time. We meet the guy mid-disaster — his four wives and 28 children are in chaos and turning against him, his construction company has been reduced to building a brothel in the desert (though Golden tells the family he's working on a senior center) and, his own neglected spouses notwithstanding, he has fallen in love with his boss' Guatemalan wife.

So hamstrung by these complications is he that, after a 200-mile drive from work, only "a need to pee that bordered on spiritual torment" can pry him from the cab of his truck. But inside his home things go poorly, and the one bathroom on the first floor is drastically overbooked. He ends up urinating in a mop bucket in the utility closet, joined by his dog Cooter ("a weasel-like creature with bulging Marty Feldman eyes and a hairless butt who had no idea how hideous he was") and Son #6, a 10-year-old named Clifton who has been bent



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over in urinary agony in front of the occupied lavatory down the hall. After being beckoned to the closet, he surveys his father and dog and asks, "Did Aunt Beverly lock you in here, too?"

Beverly is Wife #1, the mother of 10 of the kids, and queen of the family. Wives #2 and #3 are sisters, Nola and Rose-of-Sharon. Standing slightly apart from their tight little clique is latecomer Wife #4, Trish, only 27 — the other wives are in their 40s — and the most attractive. But Trish has given Golden only a stillborn child and is mother only to a creepy 10-year-old

daughter she brought with her from her abusive first marriage. Aching for Golden's attention, Trish is driven to research seduction techniques in *Cosmopolitan* magazine. It is here that she is advised that she give her husband added pleasure by

chewing a piece of minty-fresh gum before climbing into bed. This gambit goes terribly awry, creating a subplot that carries through the whole 602-page novel, as Golden can't understand how a wad of gum got stuck in his hair or how to get it out.

The narration of "The Lonely Polygamist" moves among three different vantage points: Golden's, Trish's and that of another attention-deprived family member, 11-year-old Son #5, Rusty. Outcast not only by his relations but by the world at large, Rusty provides a lucid perspective on what it means to be the child of

a "plyg" family. (Udall's own great-great grandfather was a polygamist; he was raised in a large but monogamist Mormon family.) A vividly written young anti-hero, Rusty seems as close to the author's heart as his father, Golden.

"Up in the Tower by himself he tried to count his blessings," Udall writes, "which was the easiest math problem ever, because the answer was a BIG FAT ZERO. And nobody cared, nobody would help him. He'd started to think he should just kill himself, stick a sharp pencil through his ear-hole or walk all the way to Iceland and float away on an iceberg. But last night, because his plans were ruined and he didn't know what to do, he decided to pray."

The tragedies of this novel range from the human-size (Golden's miserable childhood, the death of his beloved daughter, Glory, and Rusty's fate) to the epic (the testing of massive atomic bombs in Nevada in the 1950s and '60s). In fact, a mushroom cloud filled the sky and rained radioactive ash on the newlyweds the day of Golden and Beverly's marriage. Yet, as these disasters deliver their endless fallout, Udall manages to keep the reader thoroughly entertained, often in stitches. The ambition of the plot, the originality of the characters and the sheer fun of the book on the scene and sentence level qualify "The Lonely Polygamist" as one of the best novels I've read in a while.

As Golden's empire of misery and lies crumbles around him, it turns out that the solution to his problems is not less polygamy, but more. This underlines the completely nonjudgmental nature of the book with regard to the lifestyle it depicts. Full of loss and deceit, commitment and hope, the world of the Richards family seems no better or worse than any other of our bizarre American ways of life.

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