

# **Stones from the River Short Guide**

## **Stones from the River by Ursula Hegi**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Stones from the River Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Adaptations.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>



# Characters

The changes in Germany from 1915 to 1952 are reflected in the lives of the inhabitants of Burgdorf. The village is a rich blend of characters: wealthy, poor, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, happy healthy families, and families with problems. Prior to the rise of Nazism, Burgdorf is a community that looks after its own. One resident, referred to as the "Unknown Benefactor," blesses individuals with gifts at the time of their greatest need. His secret identity gives the town a fairy-tale quality. Though there is some conflict and prejudice, friendships and marriages occur between Jews and Gentiles. As Nazism reaches its height, however, any alliance with Jews becomes illegal and potentially dangerous. The rise of Nazism, with its new laws and propaganda, divides the town. Those who join the party are suspicious of those who do not. Jews are becoming less involved as one by one their rights are taken away. When the full Nazi machine is in place, the very existence of people who do not fit in becomes at risk.

Harmless misfits like the mentally handicapped Gerda and the "Man Who Touches His Heart" are taken away. Other characters, like Herr Neumeier, tone down their eccentricities to avoid being taken away. By the end of World War II women outnumber men in Burgdorf and few Jews remain.

The book begins with Trudi and how she came to be. Her parents, Leo and Gertrud, are separated when Leo serves in World War I. This separation provides the opportunity for Gertrud's act of adultery with Emil Hesping. Coincidentally Leo is injured in the war on the very same day.

Gertrud feels responsible for Leo's injury because of her sin with Emil. When Leo and Gertrud are reunited, Trudi is conceived and born. Gertrud interprets the differentness of her baby as further punishment for her sexual transgression. She loses her sanity, rejecting the baby. Trudi is kept alive by the town women while Leo tries to care for a wife who keeps escaping her house and disrobing. He bears his wife's illness with bravery and calm. Eventually Leo puts Gertrud into an asylum, where she dies.

After Gertrud's death, Trudi's father is the rock in her life. He never remarries or enters into a close relationship with another woman. In a quiet way, he helps his neighbors. He is seen as a father confessor, and everyone seeks him out for advice and emotional comfort. Men can discuss their war experiences with him. Women likewise take their concerns to him. Commonly referred to as "Pope Leo" because of his chaste behavior, he seems unaware that he inflames the passions of the women of the town.

From a very young age, Trudi has many opportunities to meet the townsfolk because her father operates the pay-library.

People visiting the pay-library say things around Trudi that they would not say around other children. Through her visionary eyes we see characters as she does, not just the external but what is deep inside them.



Because Trudi cannot hide the fact that she's different, her differences define her.

As a child, Trudi spends a lot of time making sure she is not counted as one of the other "freaks" in the village, such as Gerda, the retarded girl who drools on herself.

Even as a schoolgirl Trudi is chided by the teachers for competing with the boys with correct answers instead of sitting docilely like the other girls. When Trudi is rejected by her classmates, and later by men, she often acts out with revenge, using her stories to cause harm. Being different gives Trudi more freedom than other German women have; she can make her own decisions and listen to her own counsel. Because she is not seen as desirable to men, she is not expected to marry and have the large family encouraged by the Fuehrer.

Her character develops as she uses her difference to make her way in the world.

After she spends time in jail, Trudi realizes that her dwarfism could make her interesting to the Nazis and that she must be more cautious. It is a long journey before Trudi accepts her dwarfism by recognizing that her difference can work to her advantage.

After World War II the characters left in the village go through another transition.

As the victorious Americans occupy Burgdorf, many former Nazi Party members quickly hide any evidence of party involvement.

They burn the portraits of Hitler that hung on their walls, get rid of party pins, and even go so far as to cut swastikas out of photographs. Often they rationalize, saying that Hitler meant well, or that everyone suffered just as much as the Jews. Only Trudi seems to see the truth, and only she realizes that no one can escape the responsibility of having lived in this time.

## Social Concerns

The ultimate social concern of Ursula Hegi is the question of what it means to be German after World War II. Born in Germany in 1946, she grew up relatively ignorant of the war and the Holocaust. Her emigration to America at age eighteen gave her an awareness of a different view of Germany. Hegi has done years of research, including visits to Germany to interview people who lived through the war. Her novel *Stones from the River* is an attempt to break the silence regarding the uglier aspects of modern Germany history.

*Stones from the River* follows the fates of the residents of a fictional town near Dusseldorf from 1915 to 1952. Burgdorf, Germany, is an average small town in which most of the residents know one another. It is a town where neighbors help one another through individual crises, rejoice in each other's happiness, and grieve together in times of sorrow. But it is also a town where children exclude a dwarf classmate from their school games, where young boys torture animals and gang-rape young girls, and where incest occurs in families. There are religious differences, but intermarriage is generally accepted, and close friendships cross lines of religion.

Through this work of fiction, Hegi examines what happens during the pre-World War II years that leads to the silence about Hitler and the Holocaust after the war ends.

Through each character, she shows how it is possible for ordinary Germans to deny or justify what is happening to their Jewish neighbors.

Beginning by exploring the lives of disabled and/or disenfranchised veterans and war widows and the national dissatisfaction with the Treaty of Versailles, Hegi shows how the lives of German citizens are fractured by World War I. Hitler's rise to power and the growing feelings of nationalism seem to heal the nation, at the cost of the freedom and rights of Jews. The new political climate changes Burgdorf by destroying the close interdependence of the members of this community. The influence of the Catholic Church is diminished; suspicion, silence, and propaganda replace open communication. The Holocaust and Nazism take their toll on Germany as the country suffers an even greater defeat in World War II. Not only is Germany defeated, but it earns a legacy of shame because of its attempt to annihilate the Jewish people in Europe.

Being "other" is another major social concern in this book. *Stones from the River* is told primarily through the eyes of Trudi Montag, a Catholic girl who happens to be a dwarf. Because she is excluded, she has a unique view of the people in Burgdorf and the events that are unfolding around her.

A new class of "others" is created by both wars. Some veterans come back from World War I emotionally deranged and unable to resume their former place in the community, like "The Man Who Touches His Heart." Formerly a biology teacher, he wanders the town performing the same wordless ritual with his hands. Other veterans come back



physically maimed, like Fritz Hansen, whose hideous disfigurement causes people to avoid him.

Being "other" means being at risk during the Third Reich. Responding to Hitler's emphasis on the superiority of the Aryan race, Nazis target Jews as the "other"; the mentally handicapped, homosexuals, and Gypsies are also sent to death camps.



# Techniques

This is a historical novel written in the third person. Historical events are accurately presented in chronological order. Incidents such as the Jewish boycott, Kristallnacht, and the bombing of Dresden become more personalized as they are worked into the fates of the characters.

Hegi, who lived in Germany from her birth in 1946 until 1964, sprinkles German words and phrases (with translations) throughout the book.

The opening line in *Stones from the River* is: "As a child Trudi Montag thought everyone knew what went on inside others."

*Stones* is told through the point of view of the "other," Trudi. She is a nearly omniscient third person. Her perception is heightened because she has always been on the outside. She foresees the future. She seems to have the ability to make her vengeful wishes toward others come true.

Throughout the book, Hegi uses stones and the river metaphorically. One of Trudi's earliest memories is of the fragments of gravel embedded in her mother's knee. Nobody but Trudi and her mother know they are there, because you cannot see them. But they can be felt under her mother's skin, if you know where to look. To Gertrud, these stones represent "secret kernels of sin."

Stones are like secrets, Trudi realizes. They disappear under the water after you throw them in. She feels that the people's silence about the war is like the rocks hidden by the river in the spring that become visible in the summer.

Trudi often goes to the river for enjoyment or solace. One day when she feels acutely the pain of rejection, Trudi makes a pile of stones, each one representing a separate loss or disappointment in her life. She returns periodically to the pile of stones because it makes her feel safe.

Trudi feels at one with the river. It is in the river that Trudi first feels long and graceful. Her insight into the lives of others is like the intrusion of the river when it floods and seeps into their houses. She identifies with the flowing river as it separates around rocks and becomes whole again; she learns that she too can flow beyond the disconnectedness she feels after the war.



# Themes

The power of secrets is a prevalent theme in *Stones from the River*. Trudi is a secret stealer—she barter for and uncovers people's secrets, which she then weaves into stories and spreads around the town. Some secrets are good secrets, like the identity of the "Unknown Benefactor"; even Trudi does not know who he is. Some secrets are known to all but not spoken about out of respect for the family, such as the drinking problems of Frau Weiler's husband. Trudi's introduction to the power of secrets comes at a very early age when her unbalanced mother unburdens her feelings of guilt by sharing her secret sin. It is at her mother's knee, literally, that she learns that secrets are "unspoken stories that lay beneath people's skins."

Trudi develops a knack for getting people to reveal their secrets to her, and by collecting the stories of the townspeople, she has power over them. She can perceive the secret sadness and shame beneath each person's facade. She chooses which secrets to keep and which to divulge—while keeping her own secrets to herself. She uses what she learns to exact revenge on those who hurt or exclude her. She reveals Eva's hidden birthmark after Eva hurts her feelings by shunning her at school. As Trudi begins to accept herself, she learns to use secrets more kindly.

With the rise of Nazism, secrecy becomes an essential way of life. The people of Burgdorf learn to hide their true feelings if they do not conform to Nazi thinking. Even the family circle is not safe: schoolchildren are encouraged to report their parents. Helmut Eberhart turns in his mother without a trace of remorse. Comments have to be guarded because something overheard can cause you to lose your job or worse. An idle remark lands Trudi in jail. She uses her talent for extracting secrets to talk her way out of jail after perceiving her jailer's secret emotional pain. Hiding Jews and helping them escape to freedom demands perfect secrecy.

Because this book centers on Trudi, being "other" becomes a main theme. As a dwarf, Trudi is truly one of a kind in Burgdorf. She meets only one other dwarf when the circus comes to town. What Trudi eventually discovers is that all people have differences—it is just that when you are a dwarf, your secret is on the outside. Georg becomes Trudi's first friend because his difference is also on the outside. Because of Georg's mother's secret pain, she forces her only son to dress as a girl. One day Trudi liberates him by cutting off his curls, knowing that when Georg is accepted by the other boys he will no longer need her company. Trudi wishes that the remedy to her "otherness" could be as simple as Georg's.

Trudi's difference is the motivating force for everything she does. After the war she develops her own code of honor toward anyone who is considered "other."

Loss is a constant theme throughout the book. Germany loses two world wars. The close-knit community of Burgdorf is forever altered by its losses. Nobody escapes without some sort of wartime loss. Women lose their men in war. Jews lose their rights, possessions, and lives. Everyone loses peace of mind as they cope with air-raids. Trudi





in particular suffers many losses during her lifetime. Her first and most enduring loss is her physical stature. She loses her faith when her prayers do not make her taller.

Her mother and a baby brother die by the time she is four. She loses her dignity during a rape attempt. Her best friend, who is Jewish, is taken to a concentration camp; her lover goes to Dresden on the day it is bombed and she never sees him again. Her father dies. And finally she loses the feeling of pride in being German.

# Adaptations

An abridgment of *Stones from the River*, read and adapted for audio by Ursula Hegi, is available through Simon & Schuster Audio on four cassettes. Running time is approximately four and a half hours.

*Die Andere*, the German translation of *Stones from the River*, is now available in Germany.



## Key Questions

Hegi's novel *Stones from the River* examines modern German history, particularly how ordinary German citizens, through their silence, became participants in the Holocaust.

1. Why do you think the author chooses a dwarf to be the character through whose eyes we see the events and people of this book?
2. Why can Trudi see things that others cannot? How does her almost magical ability to foresee and influence the future tie in with the themes of secrecy and "otherness"?
3. What is it about Trudi's relationship with Hanna that makes Trudi uneasy?
4. Why is it difficult to accept someone who is different from everyone else?

Why is it so important to be accepted?

Would Trudi have been a different person if she had not been born a dwarf?

5. Organized religion seems to have a great influence on the people of Burgdorf as Trudi is growing up. How then can Burgdorf's Christians turn their backs on their upbringing and religious training when they witness the persecution of their Jewish friends and neighbors?

How does the role of the church change during the course of the book?

6. Several characters in *Stones from the River* join the Nazi Party and swear allegiance to Hitler. Do you think the average German citizen was aware of the extent of the killing at the death camps? Was it the responsibility of each person to find out? If they knew about the death camps, why did not more people resist? Use characters from the novel to illustrate your point.

7. The citizens of Burgdorf refuse to talk about the war when it is over. They tell Trudi that "It's not good to dwell on the things that were terrible." Why does Trudi disagree? What are the townspeople afraid of?

8. How might the current generation of Germans deal with the "guilt" of their country's transgressions against Jews?

How does this compare with the feelings of white Americans toward slavery and Jim Crow? How does this compare with the feelings of white Americans toward the treatment of Native Americans?

## Literary Precedents

A novel that may have set a precedent for *Stones from the River* is *The Tin Drum* by Gunter Grass. Grass, born in 1927 in Danzig, became the literary spokesman for the German generation that grew up in the Nazi era. When *The Tin Drum* was published in 1959 (as *Die Blechtrommel*), it created a furor in Germany. Like *Stones*, *The Tin Drum* brings to life average people living under Nazi rule as seen through the eyes of the "other," a dwarf named Oskar. Oskar registers his protest at the horrors of German/Polish society in Danzig during the reign of Nazism by refusing to grow after the age of three. By banging on his tin drum and shrieking with a voice so shrill that it can shatter glass, he registers his objections to the horrors and injustices of German occupation. The book has become a postwar classic that offers a profound perspective on both German history and the larger human condition.

Hegi, born in 1946, may well be the literary spokesperson for the generation that grew up in Germany after the war.

Through her novel, Hegi attempts to break through the silence about the Holocaust and the war that she experienced in Germany in the forties and fifties. Initially published in English, *Stones from the River* is now available in German. Hegi believes that many Germans are not yet ready to face this topic. She presents a story of the events of the Nazi era that would lead to feelings of guilt and shame for many Germans. In *Stones from the River*, when a neighbor accuses her of losing pride in her Vaterland, Trudi answers, "I am burdened by being German. We all are."



## Related Titles

Ursula Hegi has written two other works of fiction connected with *Stones from the River*: *Floating in My Mother's Palm* (1990) and *The Passion of Emma Blau* (2000). In addition to having interrelated characters from the same small town of Burgdorf, each novel features one very strong woman as a central or important character—Trudi in *Stones*, Hanna in *Floating*, and Emma in *Passion*. These women are independent thinkers who take pride in forging their own destinies regardless of society's limited expectations of women.

*Floating in My Mother's Palm* is the continuing story of *Stones from the River*. It features the next generation of characters in postwar Burgdorf. Much of what happens is seen through the eyes of Hanna, born in 1946. Though it was written and published before *Stones from the River*, *Floating in My Mother's Palm* is an accurate and satisfying sequel. Hegi expands a minor character from *Floating in My Mother's Palm* (Trudi) and creates *Stones from the River* around her life. Hanna makes an appearance in the last chapters of *Stones from the River*.

America from 1894 to 1990 is the setting for *The Passion of Emma Blau*. Stefan Blau runs away from Burgdorf at thirteen to build his fortune in the United States. After he establishes himself, he visits Germany in order to bring back a German-born bride, Trudi's Aunt Helene. This novel depicts the struggles and joys of immigrant life in America. The Blau family worry about their relatives and friends in Germany throughout two world wars, while experiencing anti-German sentiment at home. The characters ultimately must decide whether to hide or honor their German heritage.

In addition to her novels, Hegi has written a nonfiction work, *Tearing the Silence: On Being German in America* (1997). This work is a collection of interviews with people of her generation (born between 1939 and 1949) who emigrated from Germany to America. Hegi writes: Although our individual experiences are different, we have several things in common. We were raised by the generation that lived the war, fought the war, killed, fled. And we left our country of origin to come to America. Some of us chose to emigrate as adults; for those who were children, it was a decision made by their families. Our German heritage does not define us entirely—it rather is a significant thread that weaves itself throughout our lives.

Each chapter is devoted to one person (names changed) who shares the German-American experience. She includes an essay about her own experience as well. These are the questions she asks: When did you find out about the Holocaust? Did your family speak about it?

Your community? Did you dare to ask questions as a child? As an adult? How afraid were you of the answers? Did you find out more when you came to America?

How do you live with the knowledge of the Holocaust? How has that silence affected your life? How does it affect your life now? Do you encounter prejudice against



Germans in America? Do you have any prejudices against others? Why did you leave Germany? Do you feel connected to America? How do you regard your German background now? Do you think there is a collective burden of shame? Is that different for those of us who were born after the war? What can we, as German-born Americans, do now?

Hegi sometimes works the experiences and memories of these real people into her novels.

Tearing the Silence is also available in German translation (Das Schweigen durchbrechen. Ueber das Deutschsein in Amerika).

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