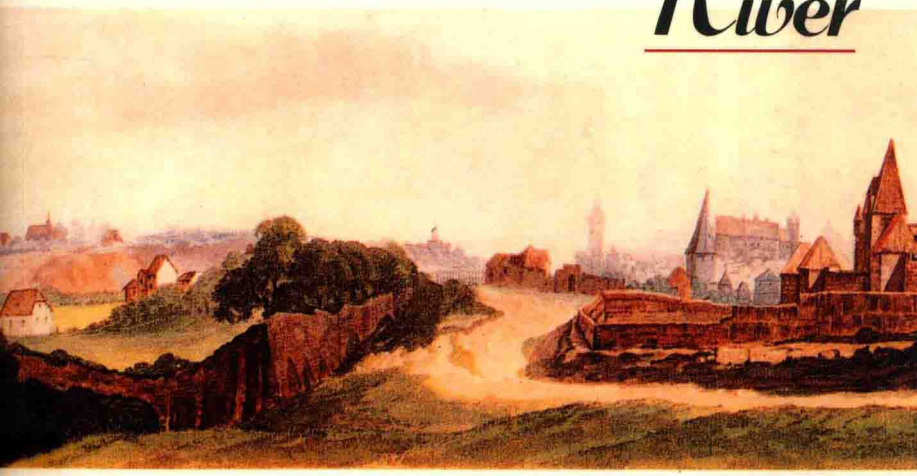
Stones from the River



"What a novel is supposed to be: epic, daring, magnificent, the product of a defining and mesmerizing vision.... It is, in a word, remarkable."
— Michael Dorris, *Los Angeles Times*

A NOVEL

URSULA HEGI

Stones from the River

Ursula Hegi

SCRIBNER PAPERBACK FICTION
Published by Simon & Schuster

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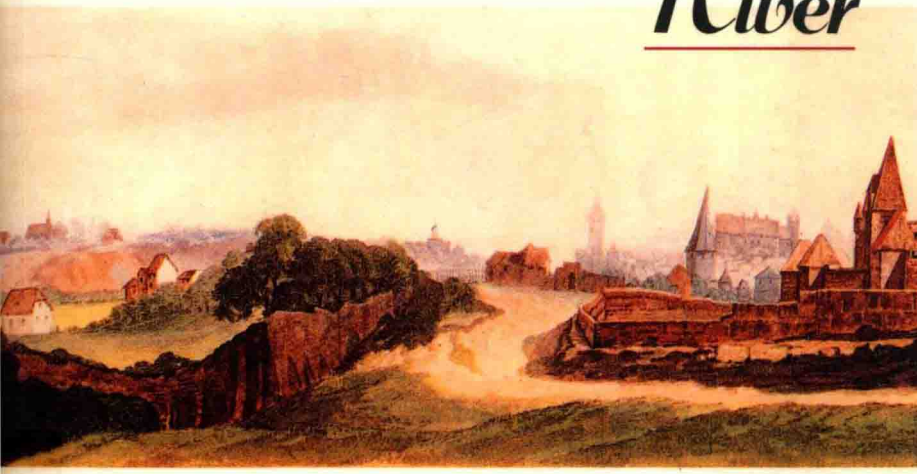

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—Laura Shapiro, *Newsweek*

From the highly acclaimed, award-winning author of *Floating in My Mothe*
ning novel about ordinary people living in extraordinary times.

Trudi Montag is a *Zwerg*—a dwarf—short, undesirable, different, t
has ever tried to fit in. Eventually she learns that being different is a secre
from her mother who flees into madness, to her friend Georg whose pare
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Ursula Hegi brings us a timeless and unforgettable story in Trudi and a small town, weaving together a profound tapestry of emotional power, humanity, and truth.

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—Mary Mackey, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"The personal histories of Hegi's characters and the political history they choose to remember or forget illuminate each other in this unforgettable book."

—Nancy Willard, *Washington Post Book World*

URSULA HEGI lived the first eighteen years of her life in Germany. She is the author of *Intrusions, Unearned Pleasures and Other Stories, Floating in My Mother's Palm, Salt Dancers,* and *Tearing the Silence: On Being German in America.* She lives with her family in the Pacific Northwest.

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for Gordon

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o n e

1915–1918

As a child Trudi Montag thought everyone knew what went on inside others. That was before she understood the power of being different. The agony of being different. And the sin of ranting against an ineffective God. But before that—for years and years before that—she prayed to grow.

Every night she would fall asleep with the prayer that, while she slept, her body would stretch itself, grow to the size of that of other girls her age in Burgdorf—not even the taller ones like Eva Rosen, who would become her best friend in school for a brief time—but into a body with normal-length arms and legs and with a small, well-shaped head. To help God along, Trudi would hang from door frames by her fingers until they were numb, convinced she could feel her bones lengthening; many nights she'd tie her mother's silk scarves around her head—one encircling her forehead, the other knotted beneath her chin—to keep her head from expanding.

How she prayed. And every morning, when her arms were still stubby and her legs wouldn't reach the floor as she'd swing them from her mattress, she'd tell herself that she hadn't prayed hard enough or that it wasn't the right time yet, and so she'd keep praying, wishing,

believing that anything you prayed for this hard surely would be granted if only you were patient.

Patience and obedience—they were almost inseparable, and the training for them began with the first step you took: you learned about obedience to your parents and all other adults, then about obedience to your church, your teachers, your government. Acts of disobedience were punished efficiently, swiftly: a slap on your knuckles with a ruler; three rosaries; confinement.

As an adult Trudi would scorn the patient fools who knelt in church, waiting. But as a girl, she'd go to mass every Sunday and sing in the choir; during the week she'd sometimes slip into the church on her way home from school, taking comfort in the holy scent of incense as she whispered her prayers to the painted plaster saints that lined the sides of St. Martin's Church: St. Petrus next to the confessional, his eyebrows perpetually raised in an expression of shock as if he'd overheard every sin the people of Burgdorf had whispered to generations of weary priests; St. Agnes with her mournful eyes rolled up and her fingers clasped to her bosom as if rehearsing to withstand countless other attacks on her purity; St. Stefan with a pile of chocolate-colored rocks hiding his feet—except for one pasty toe—his bleeding arms extended as though inviting his enemies to hurl even larger stones at him and ensure his eternal salvation.

To all of them Trudi prayed, and her body grew, but—as though her prayers had been twisted in some horrible joke—her body did not stretch itself upward as she'd presumed it would, yet had failed to specify in every single prayer, but expanded into a solid width that would eventually make her forearms as massive as those of Herr Immers, who owned the butcher shop, and her jaw as formidable as that of Frau Weiler, who ran the grocery store next door.

By then Trudi had come up against that moment when she knew that praying for something did not make it happen, that this was it: that there was no God-magic; that she was as tall as she would ever be; that she would die some day; and that anything that would happen to her until that day of her death would be up to her to resolve. She knew all this with a stunning clarity that chilled her to the core that April Sunday in 1929 in the Braunmeiers' barn, when the circle of boys closed around her—those boys who spread her legs, who spread her soul until it felt as if that dried snot on her face would always be there, tightening her skin like spilled egg whites—and she

saw herself as a very old woman and, simultaneously, as an infant, as if her past and future were at opposite ends of a taut rubber band that someone had let go of for just an instant, causing her entire life—every minute she had lived and would live—to coil in on itself and touch where she was that moment in the barn, and she knew that she'd be able to see that way again: she watched herself pull her mother from the earth nest beneath the house; dismantle a section of the stone wall in the cellar and dig a secret dirt tunnel to the Blaus' house; stroke her lover's back with both hands, and feel the fine oval of hairs at the base of his spine as the night sky swirled around them; recoil from the heat of the flames that spurted from the broken windows of the synagogue and showered the school and the Theresienheim with sparks the color of the fabric star, *Judenstern,* that her friend, Eva Rosen, would have to wear on her coat.

For months after Trudi Montag's birth, her mother wouldn't touch her at all. From snatches of gossip the girl would later conjecture that her mother had taken one glance at her and had covered her face as if to shut out the image of the infant's short limbs and slightly enlarged head. It didn't help that Frau Weiler, upon peering into the wicker carriage, had inquired: "*Hat das Kind denn einen Wasserkopf?*"—"Does the child have water on the brain?"

Trudi's eyes seemed older than those of other infants, as if they held the experiences of someone who'd already lived a long time. The women in the neighborhood took turns keeping her alive and clean. They were the ones who brushed her silver-blond hair into one wispy curl on top of her head and secured it with a dab of pine honey, who boiled goat's milk and fed it to her in a bottle, who whispered as they compared her shape to that of their own children, who sat next to the bed of Trudi's mother and guarded her restless sleep whenever she was carried home after running away from her house on Schreberstrasse.

It was the summer of 1915, and the town belonged to the women. With their husbands fighting on the Eastern front for the past year, they had relearned to open even the most difficult snaps on their salmon-colored corsets; they had become accustomed to making decisions—like which repairs to do themselves and which to leave until after the war; they continued to sweep their sidewalks and to remind their children to practice the piano; they persuaded Herr Pastor

Schüler to invite an old chess champion from Köln to give their children lessons for one entire week after school; they banned the trick images of their husbands' faces below the earth when they watered the plants on their families' graves. At times, when they forgot their hunger and their revulsion to turnips, which had become their major nourishment, it seemed odd that, all around them, a celebration of life persisted as if there were no war: the blossoms of the cherry and apple trees, the singing of the birds, the laughter of their children.

In this small town that was encumbered by centuries of tradition, women without husbands did not fit in: they were objects of pity or gossip. But the war changed all that. Without men, the barriers between the married and unmarried woman blurred: suddenly they were more alike than different. No longer did respect come to them because of their husbands' positions, but because of their own abilities.

It was something the old widows had figured out long ago. They were the ones who truly governed the town but were wise enough to keep this a secret. They defined the boundaries of the community with an invisible chain of their linked hands as they filtered their advice to their children and told ancient fairy tales to their grandchildren as if they'd never been told before.

They felt suspicious of the few men who had stayed in Burgdorf and they gossiped about them—like Emil Hesping, a skilled athlete, who managed the gymnasts' club and claimed to be unfit for military service because of weak lungs, and Herbert Braunmeier, who insisted that no one else could possibly take care of his dairy farm. Selfish, the old women said, but they coddled those men who'd been wounded in the war, like Leo Montag, the first soldier to return; they knitted woolen vests for him and brought him canned plums from their meager reserves to make up for his injury.

Two months after the battle of Tannenberg, in October 1914, Leo Montag had limped into Burgdorf, a steel disk in place of his left kneecap, wearing a long seal coat that used to belong to one of the Russian prisoners. It was on that silver-gray fur coat—spread on the floor between the shelves of the hastily closed pay-library—that Trudi Montag was conceived the afternoon of her father's arrival. He had only been away from home for a few months, but he clung to his wife as though he'd been gone for years. Gertrud's face, which often looked feverish when she got excited, was almost transparent in its

loveliness, and she laughed and cried as she held him. People in Burgdorf said about her that she absorbed the joys and pains of others as if they were her own.

It wasn't like her, most agreed, to refuse her child. And it wasn't like her to run away from home. But a few would claim to have sensed that seed of craziness in Gertrud long before it flourished: they spoke of that summer when she was four and had stopped talking for an entire year, and they reminded each other of her first communion, when she'd refused to open her lips to receive the sacred host, making the other children wait at the altar railing until the pastor had finally agreed to absolve her from sins that had attached themselves to her in the hours since her last confession.

It was three days after Trudi's birth that Gertrud Montag fled from her bedroom and from the cries of the infant that caused her breasts to sting with unspilled milk. Blood from her hollowed womb had blossomed through the front of her batiste nightgown by the time Herr Pastor Schüler found her behind St. Martin's Church, her arms spread across the door of the sacristy as if to keep him from entering. Without thinking, he crossed himself as though compelled to imitate the contour of her body. While he tried to loosen her hands from the door and pull her into the sacristy to protect her shame, one of the altar boys ran to summon Trudi's father, who quickly hobbled the two blocks from the pay-library, where the people of Burgdorf continued to borrow those trashy romances and detective novels that Herr Pastor Schüler preached against in his Sunday sermons.

Leo Montag carried his wife home, wrapped in one of the altar cloths. Her blood seeped into the ancient lace, and although the pastor's housekeeper would soak the cloth in salt water, the stains would merely fade into rose-colored clouds. Soon Gertrud was back at the sacristy door—properly dressed—was the priest's first thought when he discovered her in her wool dress and her husband's gray cardigan, even though the air was moist and much hotter than he liked it. Already he felt the itch of his sweat on his chest and beneath his private parts, a sweat he detested yet was unable to restrain with anything except medicated foot powder that left bone-colored rings on his garments and a chalky trace of dust on the tops of his shoes.

The pastor—whose round face made you expect a heavy person when you initially met him—stood at a safe distance from Gertrud Montag, his slight body bent toward her. Pigeons picked at the

ground around his feet and scattered when he reached into his pocket to disentangle his handkerchief from his rosary. He blotted his neck.

"Why are you here?" he inquired.

She raised her eyes to trace the path of a white stork that glided on lazy wings across the open market and headed for the roof of the *Rathaus*—town hall—its long amber legs trailing across the clay tiles before it landed next to the chimney. From the open windows of the bakery, a block away, drifted the yeast scent of warm bread. Two dachshunds yipped at the hooves of the ragman's horse.

"Why are you here?" the pastor asked again.

But she wouldn't reply, this tall woman with the blazing eyes that seared right through him, and because he didn't know what else to do and liked to consider himself a merciful man, the Herr Pastor blessed Gertrud Montag, much in the same way he would administer last rites. And when that didn't have any impact, he informed her that he absolved her from all her sins because, after all, that had appeased her once before, on the day of her first communion. While he kept peering over his shoulder, anxious for her kind and bewildered husband to appear, he even—without knowing—forgave her the one sin she would never forgive herself.

Long after her breasts had stopped leaking milk, Gertrud Montag kept running away from home, but she did not always hide behind the church. Sometimes she'd settle herself in the lilac hedge in back of the Eberhardts' house. Renate Eberhardt had the lushest garden in town: snapdragons, roses, geraniums, and daisies grew abundantly, huge splotches of color—not orderly as in most of the other gardens—and a magnificent pear tree produced golden-yellow fruits. She'd let Gertrud pick a bouquet of her flowers before leading her home, and she'd stay and settle her in bed, her cool fingers on Gertrud's flushed forehead. Renate's slender neck seemed too long to carry the heavy braids that she wore pinned around her head.

Gertrud's favorite hiding place was beneath the elevated section of her house which was set against a slight hill, level with the street in front where the entrance to the pay-library was, and raised in back on old pillars of wood and gray boulders. Near the opening hung the rack where Leo kept his bamboo rake and garden shovels. Beyond was a place where black bugs with hard-shelled bodies fused with the darkness, and lacy spider webs swung from rafters, rocked by a wind