



Commissioner's Book Club: Stones from the River

Discussion guide

Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics—take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out [the Book Club How-to resource](#).

Author Bio

Ursula Hegi is the author of *The Worst Thing I've Done*, *Sacred Time*, *Hotel of the Saints*, *The Vision of Emma Blau*, *Tearing the Silence*, *Salt Dancers*, *Stones from the River*, *Floating in My Mother's Palm*, *Unearned Pleasures and Other Stories*, *Intrusions*, and *Trudi & Pia*. She teaches writing at Stony Brook's Southampton Campus and she is the recipient of more than thirty grants and awards.¹

Summary

Stones from the River is an exploration of personal courage, collective responsibility and the shadows cast by injustice. Trudi Montag, a woman with dwarfism, uses her unique position in her community to collect and reveal secrets, creating a web of human connection. During the war, she and her

¹ Simon & Schuster. 2025. "Ursula Hegi." <https://www.simonandschuster.ca/authors/Ursula-Hegi/2316>.

father shield Jewish neighbors from the Nazis. After the war, the community turns away from the horrors it overlooked. Readers are invited to reflect on denial and complicity. These themes resonate deeply within human rights work—advocating for disability rights, confronting injustices or emphasizing how critical it is to have access to the truth.

Trudi's story invites us to think about the ways we might resist tyranny when it comes, and challenge complicity with—and denial of—injustice in our communities and our homes. The question of how we might learn the lessons of the past to prevent oppression in the present or future is one that remains highly relevant, and is one I find myself increasingly contemplating.

—Commissioner Govender

Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

Trudi's story highlights the lived experience of someone who is often treated differently and with cruelty. Her journey reveals what happens when people are targeted, silenced or erased simply for who they are. Through her resistance and her deep awareness of how silence can serve injustice, the book speaks to core human rights principles: dignity, equality and the responsibility to speak up when others are under threat ([UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), articles 2, 3, 1²).

Beyond historical context, Trudi's story connects powerfully to present-day B.C. efforts on disability rights and the responsibility to speak up against injustice. BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner's [Let's #RewriteTheRules](#) campaign (launched October 2022) spotlights everyday ableism—hidden societal rules that disadvantage and/or harm people with disabilities—and calls on all residents to reshape systems for inclusion. The campaign, created in partnership with disability advocates, encourages self-reflection and action to challenge systemic and structural barriers.

² United Nations. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.



The [United Nations’s Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) reaffirm the universality, indivisibility, interdependence and interrelatedness of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and the need for persons with disabilities to be guaranteed their full enjoyment without discrimination, Canada’s *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* protects equality (section 15) and security of the person (section 7), and [B.C.’s Human Rights Code](#) prohibits discrimination based on disability and other grounds.

Speaking up when injustice arises

Stones from the River powerfully illustrates the importance of speaking out when injustice occurs. Trudi Montag finds her voice—first by collecting the secrets of her community, and later by using that knowledge to protect Jewish neighbours during the Holocaust. Her story is echoed in B.C.’s Human Rights Commissioner’s call for individuals not just to notice wrongs, but to *act* by speaking up and intervening.

Kasari Govender, B.C.’s Human Rights Commissioner, has also urged people to speak up specifically to confront rising hatred. In a [November 2023](#) statement, Commissioner Kasari Govender responded to a surge in antisemitism and Islamophobia in B.C., asserting:

“Peaceful demonstration and protest are essential ... because they allow us to speak up against injustice and violence, even when such views are controversial.”³

And her statement on [May 6, 2024](#):

“There must be no place in B.C. for antisemitism, anti-Palestinian racism, Islamophobia or public incitement or wilful promotion of hatred against any group.”⁴

³ BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner. 2023. “Statement: Human Rights Commissioner calls for action to counter rising antisemitism and Islamophobia.” <https://bchumanrights.ca/news-and-events/news/statement-human-rights-commissioner-calls-for-action-to-counter-rising-antisemitism-and-islamophobia/>.

⁴ BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner. 2024. “Statement: ‘Rights and responsibilities do not end at campus gates’ says B.C.’s Human Rights Commissioner”.



These present day calls for action echo Trudi's moral commitment. The novel shows us not only the cost of remaining silent during times of crisis, but also the transformative impact that speaking up can have—for individuals, communities and society.

Discussion guide questions and prompts

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the book and human rights. The provided prompts are not the only or complete answers, but some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:

1. **What did you learn from following Trudi's narrative as person of short stature?**
 - Answers will vary.
2. **How do people in Burgdorf treat Trudi's difference?**
 - Many children bully her, teachers ignore her and adults are uncomfortable. This reflects how society often excludes those who don't fit social norms.
3. **What drives Trudi to collect and share other people's secrets?**
 - She craves connection and control—sharing secrets gives her influence when others ignore her. It helps her feel seen. As the story progresses, her storytelling becomes a way to hold people accountable or comfort them, showing her growth.
4. **Why does Trudi hide her Jewish neighbours?**
 - Through her own experience of discrimination, Trudi understands what it means to be excluded, threatened and harmed. Helping Jews is both moral and personal—she identifies with their plight. This act of resistance shows the power of individual agency even in dangerous times.
5. **What does hiding books say about freedom of thought?**
 - Banning books is a tool of tyranny; hiding them protects ideas and free expression. Trudi's library becomes an act of resistance. In human rights terms, this echoes article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—the right to freedom of opinion and expression. The library is a space for storing and sharing knowledge, mirroring Trudi's role as a keeper

<https://bchumanrights.ca/news-and-events/news/statement-rights-and-responsibilities-do-not-end-at-campus-gates-says-b-c-s-human-rights-commissioner/>.



of truths. It's a refuge from censorship during Nazi rule. Symbolically, it shows how preserving stories is vital to resisting oppression.

6. Why do townspeople deny their Nazi involvement after the war?

- They want to escape guilt, avoid punishment and return to normal life. But this silence harms reconciliation and prevents healing. Recognizing wrongdoing is essential for building a just society and preventing future abuses.

7. How does silence help injustice thrive?

- Silence hides truth and allows harmful behavior to continue unchecked. By speaking, witnesses challenge lies and open the way for accountability. This echoes the work of truth commissions in exposing past abuses.

8. What is collective memory, and why does it matter?

- Collective memory is the shared understanding of past events. When a community refuses to remember, it risks repeating mistakes. Remembering past crimes—such as acknowledging the Holocaust—is critical for preventing future human rights violations.

9. How do women in the novel face unique threats?

- Women endure sexual violence, pregnancy and widowhood stresses, and betrayal from family. This reflects how gender, sex, race and disability can intersect, creating multiple layers of discrimination.

10. Can you identify ways Canada is remembering and learning from past human rights failings? Is collective denial still a problem today? What are the key lessons from past human rights abuses that should be guiding our policies and practices now?

- Answers will vary. Potential points of discussion: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, residential school apology, human rights tribunals, foreign policy.

11. How does storytelling help heal injustice?

- Telling stories gives voice to pain and restores dignity. It challenges silence and denial. Trudi's work as a "living library" is a metaphor for truth-telling, essential in human rights.

