

"Everything in my life has changed since I retreated into this sick world," says Laura Hillenbrand

Like the horse that went from long shot to champion "destroyed me"

Crippled by Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Laura Hillenbrand found the strength to write a best-seller about a racehorse who went from long shot to champion By Paula Chin

Laura Hillenbrand's illness hides in plain sight—unless you know where to look. It's in the air inside her row house in Washington, D.C., which is kept at arctic temperatures to prevent her from overheating. She sits on a hard, straight-back chair—never the invitingly plump sofa—because she needs support for her weakened back muscles. The endless glasses of water she drinks help replenish her body

after night sweats so bad she often wakes up with rivulets running down her chest. Then there's Hillenbrand herself—a slender blond with a strong voice and glowing cheeks. She seems fine. And that, says the 34-year-old author, is the singular burden of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS). "It's hard for people to believe that those of us with the condition are really sick because we don't look it. But it's because I'm

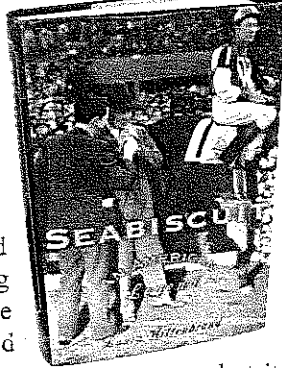
constantly running a low-grade fever that I have this nice flush."

Hillenbrand has had that fever for 14 years. It is one of the lesser symptoms of CFS, an illness so debilitating that its 800,000 victims—most of them women—often cannot perform the most basic daily tasks. Hillenbrand lives under virtual house arrest. Her morning shower leaves her staggering. She spends her days writing in her second-floor office, which is equipped with a mini-refrigerator, water, pills, snacks—even food for Fang, her tortoiseshell cat. When she is strong enough to get downstairs—at best every other day—she cooks dinner for herself and her live-in boyfriend, Borden *(continued)*

(continued) Flanagan, 36. She has not been to a restaurant, café or bookshop in years.

The latter fact is especially heart-breaking. Her acclaimed book, *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* (Random House)—an against-all-odds story of a runty, Depression-era racehorse and the three men who made him a champion—has been on *The New York Times* best-seller list for months, but she has never seen it on store shelves. Hillenbrand doesn't mind missing that pleasure. Just telling the triumphant tale of what she describes as a

"rough-hewn horse with a sad little tail and knees that wouldn't straighten" was wonderfully therapeutic. Hillenbrand also felt a special kinship with Red Pollard, a failing jockey who, despite broken bones and blindness in one eye, helped uncover Seabiscuit's dominant talent and ferocious will to win. "Red and I have something in common—the frailty of our bodies," she says. "I understood his frustration and pain and his willingness to sacrifice his well-being to achieve something." Hillenbrand says she did the same writing her book, which she likens to the baby she'll probably never have: "I ground myself down,



"Hardship can warm people, but not Laura," says boyfriend Borden Flanagan



"It was so freeing to step out of my body and attach myself to a powerful creature," says Hillenbrand of writing about Seabiscuit

but it was the thing I would leave behind in the world."

Growing up in Bethesda, Maryland, Hillenbrand was anything but fragile. She spent weekends and summers near Antietam on the family farm, a onetime hospital during the Civil War that her father, Bernard Hillenbrand, a Methodist minister, transformed into a haven for horses who were lame or bound for slaughter. The youngest of four children, Laura

started riding at 5. Horses would become both a passion and a comfort; long days in the saddle helped Hillenbrand cope with her parents' divorce when she was 9 and with the suicide of a boyfriend in high school. She played tennis, cy-

cled and swam competitively.

In March 1987, when she was a sophomore at Kenyon College, in Ohio, Hillenbrand's body went haywire. She came down with severe food poisoning, but two weeks later, she still couldn't keep down even bland foods. "One morning I couldn't sit up," she recalls. "I was never able to walk out of my apartment again." She dropped out, returned to Bethesda and moved in with her mother, Elizabeth, a psychologist. Over the next month, five-foot-four-inch Hillenbrand went from 120 to 98 pounds. Her hair fell out, her mouth filled with sores, her body ached, and she was wracked with a fever that spiked every 12 hours on the dot. Even her brain short-circuited: She'd walk into a room of the house and forget why she was there. "It was frightening because her symptoms didn't fit into any known category," (continued)

DOWN SLIDE

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) is often as hard on the mind as it is on the body. Depression and demoralization affects up to 50 percent of CFS sufferers, says Leonard Jason, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and CFS

researcher at DePaul University, in Chicago. "The depression results from the functional limitations imposed by the disease as well as having your friends, family and co-workers question the validity of the illness," says

Jason. Positive thinking can help CFS patients cope with the sense of loss and frustration. Instead of saying CFS has made you a useless person, "Focus on what you can do, acknowledge your limits and let others help," he says.