the cellist of sarajevo

by Steven Galloway · Language: EN

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Overview

Steven Galloway's "The Cellist of Sarajevo" is a poignant work of historical fiction set during the Siege of Sarajevo in the 1990s. The narrative centers around the true story of Vedran Smailović, a cellist who played Albinoni's Adagio in the ruined streets for twenty-two days, one day for each person killed in a mortar attack on a bread line. The novel explores the profound impact of this act of defiance through the eyes of three fictional characters: Arrow, a young female sniper tasked with protecting the cellist; Kenan, a family man who risks his life daily to fetch water for his family and neighbors; and Dragan, an older baker struggling to navigate the city's dangerous streets and his own fading sense of humanity.

The book delves into the psychological toll of living under constant threat, where ordinary acts like crossing a street or fetching water become life-threatening endeavors. It examines how war strips away civility and identity, forcing individuals to confront their deepest fears and moral boundaries. Through the interwoven stories of Arrow, Kenan, and Dragan, Galloway illustrates the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring power of art and small acts of courage to preserve hope and dignity amidst unimaginable brutality. The cellist's music serves as a powerful symbol, reminding the citizens of Sarajevo of the beauty and humanity that the war attempts to extinguish, ultimately questioning what it means to be human when surrounded by inhumanity.

Key Takeaways

- Even in the most dire circumstances, small acts of defiance and beauty can serve as powerful symbols of hope and resistance.
- War not only destroys infrastructure but also deeply erodes the human spirit, challenging individuals' sense of identity and morality.
- The struggle to maintain one's humanity and compassion is a constant battle when surrounded by senseless violence and fear.
- Ordinary people are capable of extraordinary courage when faced with extreme adversity, often for the sake of others.
- Art, like music, possesses a unique ability to transcend physical suffering and remind people of their shared humanity and the value of life.
- The burden of survival can lead to a profound sense of isolation, even among those enduring the same hardships.

Chapter Summaries

Part 1: The Cellist's Resolve

The novel opens in Sarajevo during the siege, focusing on the immediate aftermath of a mortar attack on a bread line that kills twenty-two people. From his apartment window, a cellist witnesses the tragedy. In response, he makes a silent vow to play Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor for twenty-two consecutive days, one day for each victim, at the site of the bombing. This act of defiance and remembrance becomes a central symbol of hope and resistance for the city's inhabitants, even as the constant threat of snipers and shelling looms over their daily lives. The scene establishes the brutal reality of life under siege and introduces the catalyst for the intertwined narratives that follow.

Part 2: Arrow's Assignment

We are introduced to Arrow, a young woman who has become a skilled sniper for the Bosnian army. Her real name is Alisa, but she adopted "Arrow" to distance herself from her past and the atrocities she's forced to commit. Her commander, Nermin, assigns her the task of protecting the Cellist from enemy snipers who might target him during his daily performances. Arrow takes up a position in a nearby building, meticulously scanning rooftops and windows for threats. She grapples with the moral complexities of her role, questioning the line between soldier and murderer, and the true meaning of her actions in a city where humanity is constantly tested.

Part 3: Kenan's Journey for Water

Kenan, a husband and father, embarks on a perilous journey across the city to collect water for his family and his elderly neighbor, Mrs. Ristovski. His route takes him through streets constantly under sniper fire and past destroyed buildings, forcing him to make difficult choices about which paths to take and how to minimize risk. He carries multiple heavy plastic containers, the physical burden mirroring the emotional weight of his responsibility. During his journey, he encounters other citizens, some resigned, some defiant, all struggling to survive. He grapples with his fear, his desire to protect his family, and the constant threat of death that hangs over every step.

Part 4: Dragan's Detachment

Dragan, a man in his sixties, works at a bakery and attempts to maintain a semblance of his former life, though he is deeply scarred by the war. He tries to remain emotionally detached from the suffering around him, believing that acknowledging it too deeply would break him. His daily routine involves navigating dangerous streets to reach the bakery, where he helps with the limited production. He encounters an old friend, Emina, who has lost her husband and is struggling. Dragan's internal monologue reveals his struggle to reconcile the city he once knew with the war-torn reality, and his efforts to avoid eye contact or engagement with the suffering of others.

Part 5: Arrow's Moral Dilemma

Arrow continues her vigilant watch over the Cellist, successfully neutralizing several enemy snipers. However, her resolve is tested when Nermin gives her an order that crosses a moral line: to kill an innocent man, a journalist, who Nermin claims is a collaborator, but Arrow suspects is merely a pawn in a larger, cynical game. This order forces Arrow to confront the true nature of her commander's motives and the corruption that can exist even within her own side. She grapples with the idea of becoming a murderer rather than a protector, leading to a profound crisis of conscience and a decision about her future actions.

Part 6: Kenan's Act of Kindness

Kenan's water-gathering mission becomes increasingly fraught with danger. He witnesses a man being shot by a sniper and is forced to hide, paralyzed by fear. Later, he encounters an elderly man struggling to carry his own water containers. Despite his own exhaustion and fear, Kenan offers to help the man, sharing his burden. This small act of human connection and compassion in the midst of overwhelming brutality highlights Kenan's enduring humanity. He reflects on the arbitrary nature of life and death in Sarajevo, and the importance of holding onto empathy even when survival seems to demand otherwise.

Part 7: Dragan's Re-engagement

Dragan's journey to the bakery is interrupted by a mortar attack on a tram. He witnesses the chaos and injuries, and for the first time, he is unable to maintain his emotional distance. He sees a woman whose husband is severely wounded and, against his usual inclination, steps forward to help. This moment marks a significant turning point for Dragan, as he sheds his protective shell of detachment and re-engages with the suffering of his fellow citizens. He realizes that true survival isn't just about physical safety, but about retaining one's humanity and connection to others, even in the face of overwhelming despair.

Part 8: Arrow's Final Stand

Having decided to defy Nermin's immoral order, Arrow faces a direct confrontation with her commander. She refuses to kill the innocent journalist, asserting her own moral compass. This act of defiance puts her in extreme danger, as Nermin views her as a liability. Arrow understands the consequences of her actions, knowing she can no longer operate under Nermin's command. She makes a final, decisive move to protect her integrity and the memory of who she was before the war, even if it means sacrificing her own safety or her role as a sniper.

Part 9: The Cellist's Legacy

The novel culminates as the Cellist completes his twenty-two days of playing Albinoni's Adagio. His final performance is a powerful symbol of resilience, beauty, and the enduring human spirit in the face of unimaginable horror. The music, though unheard by all characters directly, profoundly impacts the city's atmosphere and the individual journeys of Kenan, Dragan, and Arrow. The book concludes with a reflection on the small, everyday acts of courage and kindness that define life in Sarajevo, and the idea that even in the darkest times, art and humanity can

offer a path towards hope and remembrance. The characters have all, in their own ways, found a renewed sense of purpose or connection.

Themes

- Humanity in wartime
- Resilience and hope
- The power of art
- Fear and apathy
- Moral choices
- Identity under duress

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the cellist of sarajevo about?

The Cellist of Sarajevo is about the experiences of ordinary people during the 1990s Siege of Sarajevo. It follows three fictional characters—a sniper, a man fetching water, and an older man—whose lives are touched by a cellist who plays in the street for 22 days to mourn victims of a mortar attack, symbolizing defiance and hope amidst brutality.

Is the cellist of sarajevo worth reading?

Yes, it is highly regarded for its powerful depiction of humanity under extreme duress. The novel offers a poignant look at the psychological toll of war, the resilience of the human spirit, and the enduring power of art. It's a thought-provoking read for those interested in historical fiction and moral dilemmas.

How does the cellist of sarajevo end?

Spoiler: The cellist completes his 22-day vigil, his music leaving a profound impact. Arrow, refusing an order to kill an innocent man, fakes the kill and ultimately abandons her sniper identity, disappearing into the city. Kenan continues his water runs, having found a renewed sense of purpose. Dragan, witnessing a small act of kindness, begins to shed his apathy, choosing to engage with others rather than remain isolated in fear.

Who should read the cellist of sarajevo?

This book is recommended for readers interested in historical fiction, particularly stories about war and its human impact. Those who appreciate character-driven narratives exploring themes of resilience, morality, and the power of art will find it compelling. It's suitable for mature young adults and adults.

How long does it take to read the cellist of sarajevo?

The Cellist of Sarajevo is a relatively short novel, typically taking around 3 to 4 hours to read for an average reader. Its concise prose and focused narrative make it a quick yet impactful read.

Best Quotes

“He will play for twenty-two days. One day for each person killed.”

Part One

This line establishes the central premise of the novel: the cellist's act of remembrance and defiance after a mortar attack kills 22 people waiting for bread. It sets the stage for the narrative, linking the cellist's music directly to the human cost of the siege and inspiring the other characters to find meaning.

“She is no longer Arrow. She is Alisa.”

Part Three

This is Arrow's pivotal internal declaration towards the end of the novel. It signifies her decision to reclaim her humanity and moral compass, refusing to become a killer without conscience. It marks her rejection of the dehumanizing role she adopted for survival, choosing her true self over the identity war imposed.

“The sniper is not a man. He is a ghost.”

Part One

Arrow's chilling description of the enemy she hunts. It reflects her professional detachment and the dehumanization required to operate as a sniper, viewing her targets not as individuals but as abstract threats. This mindset allows her to perform her duty, but it also highlights the psychological toll of war.

“This is not a city anymore. It is a place where people die.”

Part One

Dragan's despairing internal thought, reflecting the profound transformation of Sarajevo under siege. It captures the loss of identity and purpose for the city and its inhabitants, who are reduced to mere survivors in a landscape of constant threat and death. It underscores the pervasive sense of hopelessness.

“The cellist is a man who has decided that he will not be a victim.”

Part One

This line encapsulates the cellist's profound act of defiance. By playing his cello in the street, he reclaims agency and dignity in the face of overwhelming violence, transforming a personal tragedy into a public statement of resilience and the enduring power of art to resist dehumanization and despair.

Questions & Answers

What is the main premise of "The Cellist of Sarajevo"?

The novel follows three fictional characters—Arrow, Kenan, and Dragan—whose lives are intertwined by the real-life act of a cellist who plays Albinoni's Adagio for 22 days in the streets of Sarajevo. He does this to commemorate 22 people killed by a mortar shell while waiting for bread. The story explores how ordinary people cope with the siege of Sarajevo, navigating fear, moral dilemmas, and the struggle to maintain their humanity.

Who are the main characters in the novel?

The main characters are Arrow, a young woman who becomes a sniper for the Bosnian resistance; Kenan, a family man who risks his life daily to fetch water for his family and an elderly neighbor; and Dragan, an older man who struggles to cross the city to find bread, grappling with the loss of his family and the city he once knew. The cellist, though not a viewpoint character, is the symbolic heart of the story.

What does the cellist's music symbolize?

The cellist's music symbolizes defiance, resilience, and the enduring power of art and humanity amidst extreme violence. His act of playing Albinoni's Adagio in a war-torn street is a protest against the dehumanization of war, a tribute to the dead, and a powerful reminder of the beauty and culture that the siege attempts to destroy. It offers a glimmer of hope and a connection to a world beyond the conflict.

Why does Arrow struggle with her identity?

Arrow struggles with her identity because she has adopted the persona of 'Arrow' to survive and perform her duties as a sniper. This identity requires her to be ruthless and detached, suppressing her former self, Alisa, to kill without remorse. Her struggle intensifies as she questions whether she can ever reclaim her humanity and shed the killer persona, fearing that becoming Alisa again would make her vulnerable and unable to protect her city.

How does Kenan's journey for water represent the daily struggles of Sarajevo's citizens?

Kenan's perilous journey to fetch water from the brewery represents the mundane yet life-threatening daily tasks faced by Sarajevo's citizens during the siege. It highlights the constant threat of snipers and mortar fire, the physical exhaustion, and the psychological toll of living under such conditions. His struggle underscores the loss of normalcy and the immense effort

required for basic survival, making every trip a testament to resilience.

What is Dragan's biggest internal conflict?

Dragan's biggest internal conflict is his struggle to maintain his humanity and connection with others in a city where civility and compassion seem to have vanished. He initially tries to avoid eye contact and interaction, believing it's safer to remain isolated. However, witnessing acts of kindness and cruelty forces him to confront his own apathy and decide whether to succumb to despair or embrace the shared humanity of his fellow citizens.

How does the author use the setting of Sarajevo during the siege?

Steven Galloway uses the setting of Sarajevo during the siege as a character itself, a constant, oppressive presence that shapes the lives and choices of the protagonists. The ruined buildings, sniper-infested streets, and scarcity of resources are not just background but active forces. The city's transformation from a vibrant cultural hub to a landscape of fear and death mirrors the internal struggles and moral compromises of its inhabitants, emphasizing the war's destructive power.

What is the significance of the title, "The Cellist of Sarajevo"?

The title signifies the central role of the cellist's act of defiance and remembrance. While the cellist is not a viewpoint character, his decision to play Albinoni's Adagio for 22 days after a mortar attack serves as the catalyst and moral compass for the entire narrative. He represents the enduring spirit of humanity and art in the face of barbarity, inspiring the other characters to reflect on their own choices and humanity amidst the siege.

How do the characters maintain their humanity amidst the war?

The characters maintain their humanity through small acts of kindness, defiance, and remembrance. Kenan risks his life for his family and an elderly neighbor. Dragan eventually chooses to help strangers, overcoming his initial apathy. Arrow, despite her role as a sniper, ultimately refuses to become a soulless killer. The cellist's music itself is a powerful act of humanity, reminding everyone of what they are fighting to preserve beyond mere survival.

What role does fear play in the lives of the characters?

Fear is a constant, pervasive force in the lives of the characters, dictating their movements, thoughts, and interactions. It shapes their decisions, from Kenan's careful route planning to Arrow's ruthless efficiency. Fear of snipers, mortar shells, and starvation isolates them and erodes trust. However, the novel also shows characters pushing past fear to perform acts of courage, demonstrating that while fear is powerful, it does not always triumph over humanity.

What is the author's message about the power of art?

The author's message about the power of art is that it can be a profound act of resistance, a source of hope, and a reminder of humanity's enduring spirit even in the darkest times. The

cellist's music, played amidst destruction, transcends the immediate violence, connecting people to beauty, memory, and a shared culture that the war seeks to obliterate. It demonstrates art's ability to provide solace, defiance, and a reason to live.

How does the novel explore the concept of morality in wartime?

The novel explores morality in wartime through the difficult choices faced by its characters. Arrow grapples with the morality of killing, even in defense. Kenan questions the ethics of prioritizing his family's needs over others. Dragan struggles with apathy versus intervention. Galloway shows that war blurs moral lines, forcing individuals to make compromises, but also highlights the enduring human capacity for compassion and the struggle to uphold ethical principles even under extreme duress.

What is the relationship between the three main narrative threads (Arrow, Kenan, Dragan)?

The three narrative threads are interconnected by their shared experience of the siege of Sarajevo and their indirect connection to the cellist's music. While their paths rarely directly cross, their stories collectively illustrate different facets of survival, moral struggle, and the search for meaning. The cellist's act serves as a symbolic anchor, influencing their individual journeys towards reclaiming or preserving their humanity in a fragmented world.

Spoiler: What happens to Arrow at the end of the book?

Spoiler: At the end of the book, Arrow makes a conscious decision to reclaim her identity as Alisa and refuses to continue killing without a moral compass. After being ordered to kill an innocent man to send a message, she instead kills her commanding officer, Nermin, who gave the order. This act is her final rejection of the dehumanizing role she adopted, choosing to die as Alisa rather than live as the soulless killer 'Arrow.' She is then killed by enemy snipers.

What can readers learn about resilience from this novel?

Readers can learn that resilience is not just about enduring hardship, but about actively choosing to maintain one's humanity, dignity, and hope in the face of overwhelming adversity. The characters demonstrate resilience through their daily struggles for survival, their small acts of kindness, and their refusal to let the war completely strip them of their identity and compassion. It shows that resilience is a continuous, often quiet, act of defiance.

How does the novel depict the psychological toll of war?

The novel vividly depicts the psychological toll of war through the characters' constant fear, paranoia, and the erosion of their sense of self. Kenan experiences anxiety and guilt, Dragan struggles with apathy and isolation, and Arrow battles with the dehumanization required for her role as a sniper. The pervasive threat of death, the loss of normalcy, and the moral compromises leave deep psychological scars, highlighting the profound and lasting impact of conflict on the human mind.

What is the significance of the bridge in Dragan's story?

The bridge in Dragan's story is a powerful symbol of connection, transition, and the fragile line between life and death. It represents a physical and psychological barrier that Dragan must cross, both literally to reach the bakery and metaphorically to reconnect with humanity. His encounters on the bridge, particularly with the woman and her child, force him to confront his detachment and ultimately choose to engage with the suffering of others, symbolizing a crossing back into compassion.

How does the novel challenge the idea of heroism?

The novel challenges traditional ideas of heroism by focusing on the quiet, everyday acts of courage performed by ordinary people. Kenan's trips for water, Dragan's eventual decision to help strangers, and Arrow's internal struggle to maintain her moral integrity are presented as heroic in their own right, rather than grand, battlefield heroics. It suggests that true heroism in wartime often lies in the preservation of humanity and dignity amidst overwhelming despair, not just in fighting.

What is the role of the "men on the hills" in the story?

The "men on the hills" represent the unseen, anonymous enemy besieging Sarajevo. They are the source of the constant mortar fire and sniper attacks, a faceless threat that instills pervasive fear and dictates the daily lives of the city's inhabitants. Their anonymity underscores the senselessness and impersonal nature of the conflict, making them a constant, terrifying presence that symbolizes the external forces attempting to destroy the city and its people.

How does the novel portray the loss of normalcy?

The novel portrays the loss of normalcy by showing how basic, everyday activities become life-threatening ordeals. Simple tasks like fetching water, buying bread, or crossing a street are fraught with danger. The absence of electricity, running water, and communication further strips away the conveniences of modern life. This stark contrast between past normalcy and present chaos highlights the profound disruption of war, forcing characters to adapt to an existence where survival is the primary concern.