

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

The Mortar Attack and the Cellist's Vow

The novel opens with a devastating mortar attack on a bread line in Sarajevo, killing twenty-two people. A cellist, witnessing the carnage, vows to play Albinoni's Adagio in the street for twenty-two consecutive days, one day for each victim. This act of public mourning and defiance becomes a focal point for the city's besieged inhabitants, inspiring both hope and fear in a city under constant sniper fire and shelling.

Arrow's Assignment

Arrow, a young, skilled sniper, is tasked by her commander to protect the cellist from enemy snipers who might target him. She embraces this role, seeing it as a way to fight for her city's soul and to preserve the fragile symbol of humanity the cellist represents. Her internal struggle revolves around maintaining her own humanity while performing acts of violence necessary for survival and protection.

Kenan's Daily Ordeal

Kenan, a husband and father, undertakes a perilous journey across the city each day to fetch water for his family and an elderly neighbor. His route takes him through sniper alleys and past bombed-out buildings, forcing him to confront his fear and the constant threat of death. He grapples with the moral weight of his responsibilities and the psychological toll of living in a city where basic necessities are luxuries.

Dragan's Path of Apathy

Dragan, an older man who used to work at a bakery, struggles with the pervasive apathy and fear that has consumed him since the war began. He attempts to cross a dangerous intersection to attend a friend's funeral, a journey that highlights his internal conflict between self-preservation and the desire to reconnect with his former life and sense of community. He observes the cellist from afar, feeling a mix of admiration and detachment.

The Cellist's Enduring Music

As the cellist continues his vigil, his music becomes a silent challenge to the snipers and a source of solace for the citizens. His presence in the ruined square forces the characters to reflect on their own lives and choices. Arrow continues her watch, Kenan endures his water runs, and Dragan slowly begins to shed his apathy, each touched by the cellist's unwavering commitment to beauty amidst destruction.

Confronting Humanity and Choice

Each character reaches a turning point. Arrow faces a moral dilemma when ordered to kill an innocent man, forcing her to choose between her identity as a sniper and her humanity. Kenan

finds unexpected connection and resilience during his water runs. Dragan, after witnessing an act of kindness, begins to reclaim his empathy. The cellist's final performance marks a symbolic end to his personal protest, leaving a lasting impact on those who witnessed it.

Themes

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

Notable Quotes

- "They can kill us, but they can't kill the music." — A sentiment expressed by the cellist, reflecting his belief in the enduring power of art and humanity over violence.
- "My name is Arrow. I am a sniper. And I am not a murderer." — Arrow's internal mantra, as she struggles to reconcile her role in the war with her sense of self and morality.
- "He has forgotten what it is to be a human being. He is a man who is afraid to die." — Dragan's internal reflection on the dehumanizing effect of fear on himself and others in Sarajevo.
- "The war had changed the city, but it had not changed the people. It had merely revealed them." — A thought reflecting on how extreme circumstances strip away pretenses, exposing true character.
- "The music was not a protest, it was a statement. A statement that life, even in the face of death, was still beautiful." — A reflection on the cellist's performance and its deeper meaning beyond mere defiance.

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.