

the cellist of summart

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Overview

Steven Galloway's "The Cellist of Sarajevo" is a powerful novel set during the 1992-1996 Siege of Sarajevo. The story centers around a real-life event: a cellist who played Albinoni's Adagio for 22 days in the street where 22 people were killed by a mortar shell while queuing for bread. This act of defiance and beauty against the backdrop of brutal war serves as the emotional core of the narrative, around which the lives of three fictional characters unfold.

The book explores the profound psychological and moral toll of living under constant threat, depicting how ordinary people struggle to maintain their humanity, dignity, and sanity amidst unimaginable violence and deprivation. Through the perspectives of a young female sniper named Arrow, an older man named Dragan trying to navigate the city, and a family man named Kenan risking his life daily for water, Galloway paints a vivid and harrowing picture of a city under siege. The cellist's music becomes a symbol of hope, resistance, and the enduring power of art to transcend suffering, prompting the characters to confront their own fears, choices, and the meaning of survival.

Key Takeaways

- Even in the most dire circumstances, acts of beauty and defiance can offer profound hope and meaning.
- War strips away the familiar, forcing individuals to redefine their identity and moral boundaries.
- The simple act of survival can be an immense struggle, requiring daily courage and sacrifice.
- Humanity can be found in unexpected places and moments, even amidst widespread cruelty and dehumanization.
- Fear is a powerful, pervasive force that can both paralyze and motivate individuals.
- The choices we make under pressure reveal the core of who we are and what we value.
- Art and culture possess a unique power to connect people and provide solace when all else is lost.

Chapter Summaries

The Cellist's Vow

After a mortar shell kills twenty-two people queuing for bread, a cellist witnesses the carnage. In response to this atrocity, he makes a vow: for the next twenty-two days, he will play Albinoni's Adagio in the ruined street at 4 PM, honoring each life lost with a day of music. His act becomes a quiet, defiant protest against the senseless violence.

Arrow's Mission

Arrow, a young woman who has become a skilled sniper for the Bosnian forces, is tasked with protecting the cellist from enemy fire. She grapples with her identity, having shed her former self to become a weapon. Her mission forces her to confront the moral complexities of her actions and the fine line between protector and killer.

Kenan's Journey for Water

Kenan, a husband and father, undertakes a perilous journey across the city to fetch water for his family and an elderly neighbor. His daily trek is fraught with danger from snipers and mortar fire, forcing him to confront his fears and the constant threat of death. He struggles with the burden of responsibility and the erosion of his sense of self.

Dragan's Daily Survival

Dragan, an older man, attempts to navigate the war-torn city, trying to maintain a semblance of his former life. He struggles with the pervasive fear and the dehumanizing effects of the siege, finding it increasingly difficult to connect with others or recognize the humanity in those around him. A chance encounter at a bakery challenges his isolation.

The Weight of Choices

Arrow continues her vigil, protecting the cellist while wrestling with an order to kill a specific target she believes is innocent. Her internal conflict intensifies as she questions the morality of her actions and the nature of justice in wartime. She must decide whether to follow orders or adhere to her own moral compass, with potentially fatal consequences.

Moments of Connection

Kenan encounters a former friend, Ismet, during his water run, leading to a tense and revealing interaction about survival and morality. Dragan, meanwhile, has a brief but significant encounter with a woman and her child at a dangerous intersection, forcing him to momentarily overcome his fear and reconnect with his humanity. These moments highlight the fragility and power of human connection.

The Music Endures

The cellist continues his daily performance, his music echoing through the devastated streets. His unwavering commitment becomes a beacon for the city's inhabitants, a reminder of beauty and resilience. His act, though seemingly small, provides a profound counterpoint to the surrounding destruction and despair, inspiring quiet acts of courage.

A Glimmer of Hope

As the cellist's twenty-two days draw to a close, his music has subtly impacted the lives of Arrow, Kenan, and Dragan. Each character, in their own way, finds a renewed sense of purpose or a flicker of hope amidst the desolation. The cellist's final performance underscores the enduring power of art and the human spirit to resist oppression and find meaning.

Themes

- Humanity in wartime
- Resilience and hope
- Fear and courage
- The power of art
- Moral compromise
- Identity under siege

Notable Quotes

- "He will play for twenty-two days, one day for each person killed." — Describing the cellist's vow after the mortar attack.
- "She is no longer Alisa. She is Arrow." — Reflecting on Arrow's transformation into a sniper and her new identity.
- "He thinks of the cellist, and the music, and he knows that if he stops, it will be as if the music stops too." — Kenan's internal monologue during his dangerous water run, connecting his struggle to the cellist's music.
- "The men on the hills are not men. They are monsters. And the only way to fight monsters is to become one yourself." — Arrow's justification for her actions as a sniper, highlighting the dehumanizing aspect of war.
- "He has forgotten what it is like to be afraid, because he is always afraid." — Dragan's internal reflection on the constant state of fear during the siege.
- "The music is a reminder of what they have lost, but also of what they still possess." — A general observation about the impact of the cellist's music on the people of Sarajevo.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is The Cellist of Sarajevo about?

The Cellist of Sarajevo is a novel set during the 1992-1996 Siege of Sarajevo. It follows three fictional characters—a sniper, a man fetching water, and an older man navigating the city—whose lives are subtly impacted by a real-life cellist who plays music for 22 days in defiance

of the war. It explores themes of humanity, fear, and resilience amidst extreme violence.

Is *The Cellist of Sarajevo* worth reading?

Yes, it is widely considered worth reading for its poignant exploration of the human spirit during wartime. It offers a powerful and moving perspective on the Siege of Sarajevo, highlighting the struggles of ordinary people to maintain their dignity and hope. Readers interested in war fiction, human resilience, and the impact of art will find it compelling.

How does *The Cellist of Sarajevo* end?

Spoiler: The cellist completes his 22 days of playing, his music having served as a quiet act of defiance and a source of hope. Arrow, the sniper, makes a final, morally complex decision regarding her target, choosing to uphold her own sense of justice even if it means risking her life. Kenan continues his arduous journey for water, finding a renewed sense of purpose, and Dragan, after a moment of connection with strangers, finds a way to reclaim a piece of his humanity. The war is not over, but the characters have found ways to endure.

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. It appeals to those who appreciate character-driven narratives exploring themes of resilience, morality, and the power of art in adversity. It's a good choice for book clubs and anyone seeking a thought-provoking and emotionally resonant read.

How long does it take to read *The Cellist of Sarajevo*?

The Cellist of Sarajevo is a relatively short novel, typically around 272 pages. Most readers can expect to finish it in approximately 4 to 5 hours, depending on their reading speed.