

The Cellist of Sarajevo by Steven Galloway. Atlantic Books 2008.

The Cellist of Sarajevo is one of the most beautiful novels I have read for a long time, and one of the most powerful. It is set during the siege of Sarajevo in the Balkan wars, a time of terrible cruelty and mindless internecine bloodshed.

The story is told through the lives of four individuals, the eponymous cellist, Kenan, a man struggling through dangerous streets to get water for his family, Dragan, a baker who has managed to get his wife and son out of Sarajevo to safety in Italy, and Arrow, a sniper.

Stephen Galloway writes sparsely, but his text is intensely evocative, and the reader feels the tension and terror of Kenan as he strives to fulfil his mission, the sadness of Dragan as he searches for purpose, the indomitable courage of the cellist and the focus of Arrow as she seeks to use her marksmanship to redress the balance for her Muslim brothers and sisters.

The Cellist of Sarajevo brings out once more the horror of the Balkan wars, and especially the siege of Sarajevo which the international community did so little to arrest until it was almost too late; but it is also eloquent testimony to the strength of the human spirit and the will to survive, no matter what.

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