

The Cellist of Sarajevo

by Steven Galloway

(Atlantic Books)

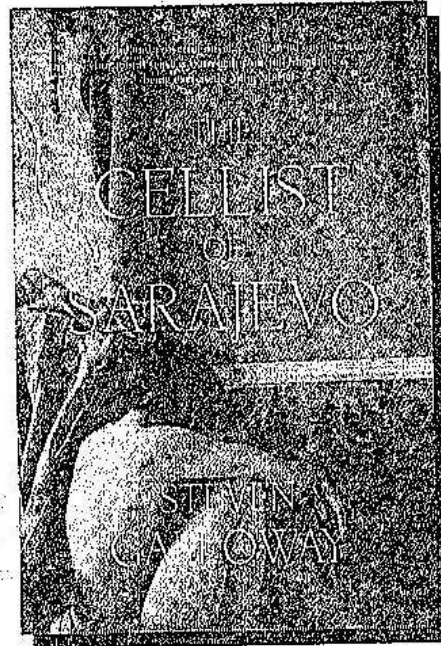
What is the importance of beauty and art in difficult times? Does it have a function despite the obvious fact that it won't feed the starving or cure the sick?

Steven Galloway's hopeful novel *The Cellist of Sarajevo* is an affirmative answer to this question.

Through the story we relive 22 days of the horror of the siege of Sarajevo, which took place between 1992 and 1995. As mortars explode, shells fall and most of the city lies in ruins, the remaining inhabitants – who were either unable to flee while it was still possible, or who don't want to flee so their families can return once the war is over – try to adjust to this extreme situation. The only way for these people to survive is to blend out the horrors going on around, losing the ability for empathy.

But the nameless cellist – and hero of the novel – is the one to start a slow revolution when he refuses to succumb to the general apathy and resignation that has befallen the other survivors of the siege.

He is seemingly unaware of the war around him; in an act of resistance, he plays in the middle of a street where a mortar killed 22 peo-



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ple. While queuing for bread, he plays the sad tune of Albinoni's Adagio every day for all of those innocents killed in the conflict.

Galloway describes the inhumanity of the place, the loss of human contact among the survivors as they struggle to get from day to day.

Only three other characters emerge from the ruins: Dragan and Kenan, two men who try to survive the siege and whom the reader follows in their tedious day-to-day tasks; and Arrow, the talented counter-sniper who finds himself in charge of protecting the cellist, who plays his tune in the open street where others start laying flowers, while Dragan and Kenan walk the city's streets to fetch water for their families, putting their lives at risk.

Each of them finally makes a change within their small scope of possibilities, displaying true moral courage.

Galloway evokes Sarajevo as a grey place, full of debris, and does a great job of capturing the bleakness and claustrophobic atmosphere of the city. However his language unfortunately does not live up to the intensity of his topic, especially during the first half of the novel.

With the similar premise of the city under siege, *The Cellist of Sarajevo* can be taken as a not-quite-successful modern take on Albert Camus' existentialist novel 'The Plague', although the hopeful and interesting topic that 'art can start a peaceful revolution' certainly makes for an interesting read.

Review by Isabel Roleff



Isabel Roleff is a member of the Irish Writers' Exchange, and has written articles and reviews for various magazines in her native Germany. More information can be found at www.irishwriters-exchange.com