

Human After All: An Exploration of Steven Galloway's The Cellist of Sarajevo

(by Steven Horvath)

"War . . . deforms not only the soul of the invader, but also poisons with hatred, and hence deforms, the souls of those who try to oppose the invader." -Boleslaw Micinski (qtd. in "Survival and Recovery")

The way in which people cope with war-the cultural uncertainty, the physical displacement, the economic chaos, and the constant testing of ethical and moral values-is what defines their humanity. In his novel, The Cellist of Sarajevo, Steven Galloway writes a historical fiction of the siege of Sarajevo during the Balkan war. However, the characters, and indeed the war itself, depicted in this book could have existed or taken place anywhere, at any time. The novel is less about the Balkan war or the siege of Sarajevo than it is about the way in which people can maintain their humanity in the face of such horrid atrocities happening around them. Galloway achieves this humanistically universal saga by telling the story through the eyes of everyday, common people; by having a complete lack of ethnic identification of characters and social groups throughout the novel; and by presenting the characters only through their basic human needs, desires and fears.

In choosing the setting of Sarajevo-and, indeed, the real life cellist of Sarajevo-to tell his story, Galloway has sparked debate and controversy throughout the world. Vedran Smailovic, the real cellist of Sarajevo who played his cello in the rubble filled crater left by an immense explosion which killed twenty-two people queuing to buy bread, was enraged when he was informed about Galloway's novel, claiming that his identity had been stolen: "It's not fair, it's not on. It's unbelievable . . . How can somebody steal your work, my, my sadness, my, my tragedy" ("Famous"). He was, in fact, so enraged that he threatened to return to the site where he played and burn his cello in protest (Sharrock). Others have said that Galloway's novel "distorts history with fiction and avoids a full measure of blame of those responsible for violating the principles of international law, contravening articles of war, and setting aside treaties when they proved to be an obstacle to the policy aims of powerful nations" (Trkla), suggesting that Galloway's omission of ethnicity throughout the novel takes away from the reality and horror of the siege of Sarajevo as an historical event, and allows the reader to blindly sympathise with the besieged characters without knowing the full background of the war.

This omission of ethnicity, however, has a profoundly universalizing effect. Galloway's focus in this novel was to tell a story of the effect that war has on the civilians-the "people for whom war is not their business" ("Interview"). Whether or not the novel is historically accurate is irrelevant; Sarajevo is simply a contemporary setting that is fresh in the minds of the world, one that the reader can draw on and remember. Taking ethnicity out of the picture allows the reader to put aside the historical context of the Balkan war and focus on the dehumanizing effect that such a gruesome siege can have on any society's people. Rather than taking sides in an

ethnic conflict, the reader is thus free to explore the myriad of cultural and moral consequences that Galloway puts forth throughout the novel.

The removal of ethnic boundaries also allows the triangular story to be drawn together through moral and cultural universals. Dragan (a Serb/Croat name) and Kenan (a Bosniak name) are so similar in characterization that they are virtually interchangeable as characters. Both characters face the same moral issue when each is confronted with a different violent situation. When his friend Emina is shot trying to cross the intersection, Dragan is frozen with fear and shock, and is unable to "move when the shots [are] fired. Not because he [thinks] anything through, but because he [is] afraid" (181). When the brewery is shelled, Kenan, like Dragan, finds that "[f]ear has paralyzed him as surely as a bullet to the spine, and he simply doesn't have what it takes to [help]" (168). By creating this minute, almost missable, ethnic identification of these two characters, and by placing them in virtually identical situations, Galloway shows that such moral issues transcend petty issues of ethnicity. Arrow, the novel's morally grey character, is confronted with a universal moral issue every time she places any human being—be they soldier or civilian—in the scope of her rifle. Meanwhile, there is the minute character of the Cellist, whose morose lament amongst the chaos of war binds the characters together with a cultural thread as each one of them experiences his concert and answers their own questions of why the cellist is doing what he is doing.

This cultural thread is also weaved in each of the characters' musings about their old lives. Dragan remembers a Sarajevo that held the Olympic games, a city with beautiful parks and cultural monuments such as "the Butmir settlement, where Neolithic humans lived five thousand years ago" (34). Kenan looks at the scorched remains of the National Library, "one of his favorite places in the city . . . the most visible manifestation of a city he was proud of" (111). These monuments to culture and society transcend ethnicity and universalize Sarajevo, which was an ethnic melting pot that each character was proud to be a part of.

The siege of Sarajevo is also universalized in Galloway's novel through the creation of characters that are not typical of war literature. It is more common in literature about war to tell the story through the eyes of a character that has been or is involved in the conflict or struggle. Seeing war through the eyes of frontline veterans can take away many of the myths surrounding war and stir up sympathy in the reader ("survival and Recovery"), but telling the story of war through the eyes of civilians pulls the reader in and allows the reader to parallel the situations faced by the characters in a much more personal way. A baker, a family man, and a university student are all characters to whom every person can relate. These are real-to-life characters that are placed in extreme circumstances, which allows the readers to ask themselves what they would do if placed in a similar situation. Galloway presents the characters in such a way that the reader can truly empathise with them, relating their lives to those of the characters.

This empathy comes not only from the common nature of the characters, but through their intrinsically human needs, desires, and fears as well. Dragan needs food and must confront his fears on route to the bakery where he works, while Kenan needs water for his family, and similar to Dragan, must confront his fears on his way to the only source of clean water in the city—the brewery. Arrow, whose needs are fundamentally different from those of Kenan and Dragan, must confront her inner demons as she vigilantly guards the cellist. Through the vantage point of

limited third person narration, the reader is able to experience the fears and desires of each character as they progress through the novel. This effect pulls the reader into the character and instills empathy as the reader relates the situations faced by the character to their own desires and fears. We all want the world to be a better place, so when Dragan decides to take the man with the hat's body out of the street, when Kenan goes back for Mrs. Ristovski's water, and when Arrow refuses to kill an enemy civilian, we can empathise with each character and their situation, and hopefully say that we would do the same.

Until we are placed in situations such as the ones that the characters in Galloway's novel are in, it is impossible for us to say how we would react. How we do react, how we carry on our lives and the actions we take is what defines our humanity. In his novel *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, Galloway writes a historical fiction that goes beyond the bounds of history. He gives us a story of how ordinary people can retain their humanity in the midst of war happening around them. This humanistic story is brought to us without ethnic boundaries, and is made accessible to the ordinary person through a presentation of characters who are ordinary people, with everyday needs, desires, and fears.

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." -Martin Luther King, Jr. (qtd. In "Martin Luther King, Jr.")

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