

The Cellist of Sarajevo by Steven Galloway – May 2011 – Review Score 7.5

What a strange coincidence that Ratko Mladic was captured on the day that our Book Club met to discuss *The Cellist of Sarajevo*.

The Cellist in question was Vedran Smailovic. He witnessed the cold-blooded murder of 22 people in a bread queue outside his flat in Sarajevo. As a personal protest against this atrocity he proceeded to play Albinoni's Adagio for the following consecutive 22 days. After the siege of the town he went to live in Ireland and was angered when the author, without consultation, used this personal protest as the lynchpin of the book.

The book centres on three characters whose lives are threaded together, whose narratives crisscross and who are all affected in some way by the cellist's action.

We read how each coped with the longest siege of a city in modern times. The siege lasted from April 1992 to February 1996. Serbian forces killed some ten thousand people and destroyed 60% of the buildings while the rest of the world failed to take any effective action.

The character of Arrow is based on a real person; a young and gifted sniper in the defending army who is assigned to protect the cellist from enemy assassins. Arrow sees the gradual decay of law and order in her beloved city. She appears fearless and is determined to maintain her values. She analyses her motivation for killing, hoping that she will never kill through hatred. She has a horror of becoming de-sensitised to death and suffering, and determines to be true to herself and to focus on the normal life that could have been hers. Arrow eventually becomes a victim of the cruel in-fighting amongst her own army colleagues.

Dragan is a lonely middle-aged baker, whose wife and son escaped while there was still time. He regularly embarks upon a hazardous and potentially lethal journey across the city in order to obtain food for himself and his sister's family. He berates himself for harbouring what he regards as cowardly traits, which haunt him especially during his occasional conversations with old friends and acquaintances.

Kenan also takes regular horrific and exhausting trips across the city in order to obtain uncontaminated water for his family and an old neighbour. He too hates himself for his paralysing fear yet forces himself to repeat these traumatic journeys because there is simply no alternative.

The two men witness the inevitable breakdowns in human decency and the depressing rise of inhumane fat cats who take advantage of the siege to develop a booming and lucrative black market. The volatile situation, with its bullets, shells, horrific injuries and death is ever present, yet each dwells on happier memories and fondly remembers the city and their previous lives. They harbour optimism for a better future and desperately fight to maintain decency and dignity. All have a deep love of Sarajevo and a longing to trust friends and neighbours again.

Some of us thought that the characters were not sufficiently developed, perhaps because the book is a snapshot of their hellish lives; four years concentrated into a few weeks. They felt it would have been preferable to develop more character depth rather than dwell on somewhat repetitive descriptions of their trips.

Others felt the repetition echoed the repetition of their dreadful lives and that developing character depth was less important.

The book led into a long and interesting discussion on world politics, human motivations, drivers and failings.

Our final score was 7.5 out of 10.