

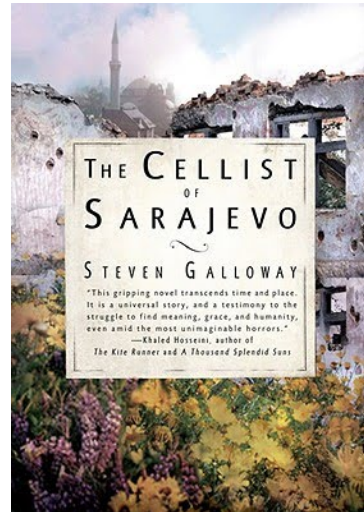
Maureen Langloss

Stuck in Parenthesis: *The Cellist of Sarajevo*

I have a confession. This weekend I sat my two eldest children in front of *Looney Tunes* for two full hours so I could finally read Steven Galloway's 2008 novel *The Cellist of Sarajevo*. I left my baby in her crib until she had napped and then some. She was pretty much wailing by the time I read the last page.

While I'm confessing, I have another secret to share. At several points during my brief legal career, I shut the door to my office, turned my back on my desk and read a novel I simply could not put down. Have you ever called in sick to hide under the covers and read? Have you ever kept a Kindle camouflaged inside a big work file you were pretending to pore over? If you haven't made these kinds of transgressions before, I highly recommend them. It's like going for a massage – of your brain.

I'm sure many of you are like me – retreating to books only in the dark recesses of the night, after work is over, the kids tucked tight, the last of the day's duties put to bed. By this point, you try to outwit your eyelids, but they grow heavier and more determined. This is not the best time to read a book that is itself weighty. It is not the time to read a book about the Bosnian War and the Siege of Sarajevo.



Yet I found it pressing to read Galloway's book. I find reading in general to be pressing. A good book will always make me understand something better, make me more connected to someone, make me feel something deep and unexpected. Lift me to a higher note. After gazing at *The Cellist* on my nightstand for months and months, I finally got fed up with myself for letting it slip so low, for relegating this book about the longest city siege in the history of warfare to a frail parenthesis in my own life.

Hence, the cartoons. The average *Looney Tune* is only ten minutes. And then that awful, yet mesmerizing music repeats before the next cartoon loop begins. Da da da da da da ... You know the one. So the *Looney Tune* theme became the prelude and recessional, the sticky parenthesis, to each chapter I read of *The Cellist of Sarajevo*. This felt ironic and dirty. After all, the book is about a concert cellist who risked life and limb to play Tomaso Albinoni's *Adagio in G Minor*, in plain sight of snipers, for 22 days at the location of a 1992 Serb bombing. The bomb killed 22 people who had simply been waiting in line to buy rationed bread.

Albioni's Adagio was a deeply symbolic choice of music, for it is a seventeenth-century composition that was itself rescued from the rubble of the Dresden Music Library after the building was firebombed in 1945. My kids' laughter as Coyote was beaten to a pulp (only to be resurrected in the very next scene) mostly drowned out all attempts I made at conjuring *Albioni's Adagio* in my mind's ear. But I'll take what I can get.

And, in some ways, the cacophony in the room coexisted appropriately with this book that is about so much competing noise. I loved how Galloway played with sound and rhythm in the book – the “rattle of gunfire” against the waxing and waning of the cello, the “wail” of air-raid sirens amidst the ringing of ears, the total silence after the detonation of a shell, the simple counting a man does inside his head to steady himself against fear. “You never hear the shell that kills you,” Galloway writes.

So what did I think of the book, you ask? Was it worth subjecting my kids' brains to bad music and violent cartoons? Of course. Even if the book had been terrible, it would have been worth it. Ah! To read in daylight hours! It's a few years old, but I encourage you to try *The Cellist*. It's not long. It's spare and restrained. I've read many articles and seen many news reports about the Bosnian War, but it was not until this book that I imagined myself in that setting, imagined what it would be like to need to forage for food and water in a blockaded city, to perhaps get killed by a shell along the way.

My favorite thing about *The Cellist of Sarajevo* was the female soldier, Arrow, who is charged with protecting the cellist from Serbian snipers. She is smart and tough and full of belief. She may remind you of Lisbeth from *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (though the books are otherwise quite different). I was especially moved when, after finding the sniper in her sights, she refrains from shooting him, for she realizes that he, too, is listening to the cellist's music. “[S]he doesn't want to pull her trigger. All because she can see that he doesn't want to pull his.”

I found Galloway's ultimate message quite compelling – that even in war, even when you have nothing and are consumed by fear for your own life, the choices you make still matter. It is still important to choose to act ethically, generously, courageously even when human life is degraded all around you, even when there is mostly rubble. Music can exist where the shell explodes.

Unfortunately, Galloway's most interesting character, the cellist himself, hovers too distantly in the background of this ultimate message. We are only faintly inside his head for the first fleeting chapter. And in the last chapter it is up to Arrow to observe him “cradling the body of the cello” before setting it down for good. He is himself a parenthesis.

Yet, the cellist's story, his song, was the one I most wanted to roll around in. Indeed, his story was the very reason I bought the book and resorted to *Looney Tunes*. Sure, I enjoyed how the other characters were drawn to him, how they came to internalize his notes, how it was left to them to wonder why he might be playing. To prevent something else? To

honor? To change something? Or was he merely playing for himself? Had his story broken free from the background, *The Cellist of Sarajevo* would have risen above the *Looney Tunes* – drowning out the laughter and music and maimed Coyote. It would have raised me to that higher note.

But I still thank Galloway for a wonderful afternoon, and now I will put on [Albioni's Adagio](#) for my kids, which will give me almost nine minutes to slip away for a chapter of *The Interestings*.

That's all folks...

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To hear Albioni's Adagio, please visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMbvcp480Y4>