

Book Review

Bringing Real Literature to the ESL/EFL Classroom: The Cellist of Sarajevo

Steven Galloway.

Toronto, Canada: Alfred A. Knopf Canada. (pp. 272)

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Steven Galloway's *The Cellist of Sarajevo* depicts the lives of three Sarajevans who managed to find moments of solace during their struggles to survive the atrocities of civil war. While ESL/EFL instructors often overlook such topical novels, with proper preparation teachers can make real literature more accessible to ESL/EFL readers.

The arrival of real literature to the ESL / EFL classroom can be a maturing and manageable learning experience for both student and instructor. *The Cellist of Sarajevo* by Canadian writer Steven Galloway, is a novel about the 1992-1996 civil war in Sarajevo. The two hundred and sixty four page novel, which is appropriate for high intermediate to advance level readers, uses simple language within a challenging context. While the novel provides opportunities for both language acquisition and cultural understanding, instructors can chose to focus on skills which are appropriate to the particular class level. The layout of the novel is also beneficial to the second language reader. Each chapter, with the exception of the first, is based on one of the three

characters: Kenan, Arrow, or Dragan. Classes could be divided into three groups with each group responsible for reading only the chapters that refer to their character. This method provides an opportunity for class discussion based on the similarities and differences in reference to age, family, living situation, employment or the character's psychological reaction to the environment of war.

A reader at any level is likely to be more comfortable if they possess a certain amount of knowledge about the content they are about to read. Before introducing the novel, background information such as maps, or brief explanation of the Sarajevan civil war, could help activate a student's schemata. A preliminary introduction of the characters can stimulate interest, allowing students to predict the development of the characters within the novel.

The character of the cellist is based on the personal experience of Vedran Smailovic, who witnessed a massacre in Sarajevo, which claimed the lives of twenty-two people. For twenty-two days, while situated at the site of the massacres Smailovic performed Albinoni's *Adagio in Gm* as a memorial to the victims. The theme throughout the book is based on how three different victims of civil war come to experience Smailovic's music.

Drawn to the sound of Smailovic, while surviving the horrors of civil war, the character of Kenan, comes to life. Every four days Kenan walks across the city to get water for his family and a most ungrateful neighbor. In spite of the bullets from ever-present snipers, Kenan refuses to evade his responsibilities. Another major character in the book is Alisa, a former student turned professional sniper who now calls herself Arrow. She is in her own personal Hades, as she remembers a different Sarajevo, when her father was still alive, and she and her grandmother could walk leisurely in places where people are now being murdered. During the siege, she is a guardian of her city and her mission is to protect the cellist. The most tragic of all the characters in the novel is Dragan. Just before the war started he watched his son and his wife leave

the city on a bus. He decided it would be best for him to stay and guard their apartment, certain the siege would not go on long. Eventually he lost all contact with his wife and son, his home is destroyed, and he is forced to live a beholding existence with his sister's family. Dragan, Arrow, and Kenan while fully aware of their grave situation, somehow manage to find moments of solace in a war torn Sarajevo.

The language of Galloway's characters may be simple yet it does provide a vivid depiction of events. In an effort to encourage reading for meaning, students could be asked to draw a picture of the following passage:

And then Kenan understands what happened to his washing machine, He hadn't thought about it at the time, but what would anyone want with an electrical appliance in a city that didn't have electricity? He sees, now, that the railcars that enter Sarajevo laden with goods bound for the black markets do not leave empty. Somewhere, in a city other than this hell, someone is washing their clothes in a machine they purchased for a song, knowing or not knowing that they are accomplices in the destruction of his city (Galloway, 2008, p. 205).

Throughout the novel there are several passages that could be communicated through drawing. Such an exercise requires visualization and encourages students to read beyond the mere vocabulary.

Depending on the students' speaking levels, and the class language requirements, the novel fosters several possible platforms for discussion and writing assignments; on personal, national and international themes. The life of each character unfolds in radically different fashions, offering a variety of conversation and writing opportunities. Discussion on the differences between civil and world conflicts is also a topic that could be addressed. Trotsky once said, "you may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you." This quote, which opens *The Cellist* of

Sarajevo, could be discussed in reference to the lives of each character in the novel as well as to the novel itself.

A novel, not unlike a musical piece, can be most inspiring if there is the presence of appropriate background and compassion for the subject at hand. The methods described in this paper could be applied to any book that an instructor is willing to bring to class, provided the book is presented in a manner that motivates the students. The cellist, in his recognitions of a tragic event, managed to give comfort to Sarajevans, still caught in the midst of war. The act of one man inspired others around the world to share his story. Reading a book in English, for many ESL/EFL students may well be a new and inspiring experience, an experience that may encourage a life long commitment to reading English literature.

References

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