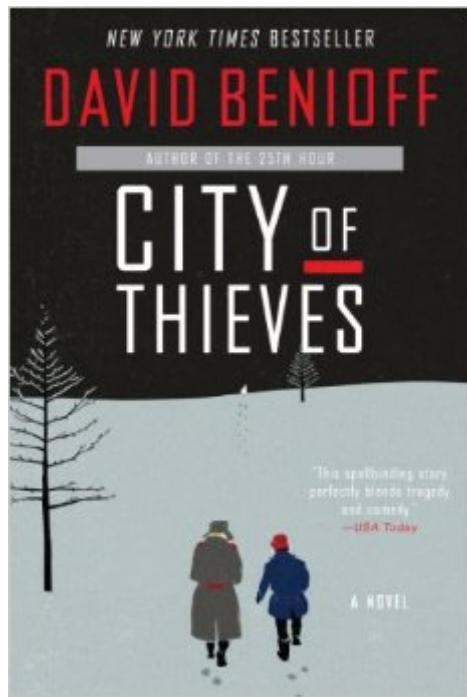


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City Of Thieves: A Novel



Synopsis

From the critically acclaimed author of *The 25th Hour*, a captivating novel about war, courage, survival and a remarkable friendship that ripples across a lifetime. During the Nazis' brutal siege of Leningrad, Lev Beniov is arrested for looting and thrown into the same cell as a handsome deserter named Kolya. Instead of being executed, Lev and Kolya are given a shot at saving their own lives by complying with an outrageous directive: secure a dozen eggs for a powerful Soviet colonel to use in his daughter's wedding cake. In a city cut off from all supplies and suffering unbelievable deprivation, Lev and Kolya embark on a hunt through the dire lawlessness of Leningrad and behind enemy lines to find the impossible. By turns insightful and funny, thrilling and terrifying, *City of Thieves* is a gripping, cinematic World War II adventure and an intimate coming-of-age story with an utterly contemporary feel for how boys become men.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I would never have dreamed that a story set during the WW II Siege of Leningrad could be as engaging and darkly humorous as this book, but the Author has done a fine job of bringing a diverse set of characters to life, two of whom have been given an impossible mission (find a dozen eggs!) in an unbearable situation (the Blockade of Leningrad, and its consequent famine). I have over a dozen books on the Siege of Leningrad (for a project I'm working on), and I have to say that the Author portrays the siege with accuracy, if not with full depth - in large part because the story is told from the viewpoint of Lev, a 17 year old boy. This doesn't give the reader an omniscient overview of "the big picture", but it certainly provides a very specific perspective on life in and around the city, and

one well worth reading. It's an "impression" of life during the city, and I have to say that with one exception - Lev would have been much hungrier and weaker in real life - a fairly accurate one. Readers of "The 900 Days" will recognize the inspiration for a specific scene, (Hint: Beware of well fed men in a famine) but how the characters react to what happens makes the action their own. And what characters! The two main characters that carry the book deserve to be remembered as a classic pairing. Their interactions, observations and the journey they take on their absurd quest are one that I will remember for a very long time. Lev, the narrator, will remind most adult men of their own awkward youth. Wry, dry, frustrated and a little plodding, he is enormously sympathetic, while seemingly always in the process of doing a "Straight Man's Slow Burn" in a comedy routine. Kolya, an accidental Red Army deserter, is overly confident, irresistably charming and scatologically minded.

I have read some good fiction lately, but this one is special like "Catcher in the Rye" or "The Curious Incident" or maybe "The Kite Runner". Instead of telling the story, I will make observations as to why I loved it:¹ 1. Many historical fiction novels are written from the perspective of the thinking of the time. Although it is interesting to observe how people think people thought in the past, it can be a little too un-modern and sometimes boring, like reading "Moby Dick" or some other great, but somewhat over the top book. Here, we are set back in time by the grandson who is just like us, telling the story his grandfather tells him, but with language and interpretations that are how we think about things today. Instead of finding this tool to be unrealistic and too Hollywood modern, I found just the opposite. I felt like I really was back in time and I related to the characters like they were my best friends and buddies. I loved this approach to history telling.² 2. The primary relationship in the book is between a shy, 17 year old Jewish boy who is intelligent, clever, educated and a great story teller. There is a running dialogue in his head describing his sometimes ridiculous and unimportant thoughts and observations as life threatening things are occurring. His older buddy is a young "man of the world" a college boy who is experienced with women, a writer and philosopher, a handsome and sometimes arrogant guy. He puts his arm around his younger shy friend's shoulder and starts to teach him about wine women and song. It is a touching and fun relationship that works as well as any friendship relationship I've ever read. The observations of the younger as to the older's sometimes graphic and raunchy statements and experiences are absolutely brilliant and spot on.

David Benioff's "City of Thieves" is something of a coming-of-age tale with a twist. The twist is the fact that the tale is set in the besieged city of Leningrad in January, 1942. It is a city at war

surrounded by the German army. The city is under martial law but its people are starving and fighting for food and even cannibalism is the inevitable result. The two 'heroes' of the story, Lev Beniov and Kolya Vlasov are each picked up by the Red Army for crimes against the state. Lev is caught looting (taking the knife from a dead German soldier). Kolya, already a soldier is picked up and accused of desertion. Both crimes are grounds for immediate execution but the two boys are thrown together and given a 'secret mission' by a Red Army officer, Colonel Grechko, who agrees to release them on the condition that they steal two dozen eggs in time for his daughter's wedding. The two dozen eggs are essential to make her a wedding cake. If they fail, they will be hunted down and shot. And with that bizarre quest ringing in their ears they are let go and sent out to scour Leningrad and the surrounding countryside in a quest for enough eggs to save their lives. I liked City of Thieves for a number of reasons. First, Benioff does an excellent job setting the story up. It begins as a narrative of his own life as a writer and then evolves into getting his grandfather Lev to tell him the story of his experience during the war. All the author knows is that "my grandfather, the knife fighter, killed two Germans before he was eighteen". The story unfolds as a narrative told to his grandson.

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