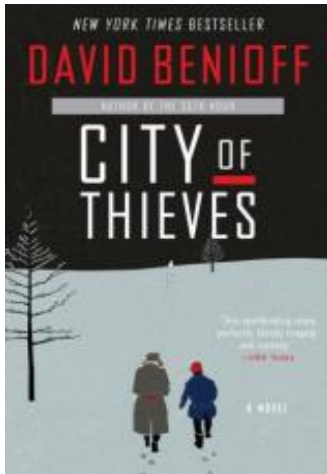


City of Thieves

by David Benioff



About the Book

At the age of thirty-four, David, an Los Angeles-based screenwriter specializing in mutant superhero films, is asked to write an autobiographical piece for a trade magazine. Unable to muster any enthusiasm for his easy and undeniably pleasant American youth, he hops on a Florida-bound plane to interview his Russian grandfather about life in Leningrad during World War II. Mild-mannered Lev Beniov is reputed --- by unspoken family lore --- to have killed two Nazis in a knife fight that cost him a single fingertip. David asks to hear the true story, so Lev reaches into the distant past to share the horrors, privations, and adventures that the famously besieged city offered one young boy on the brink of manhood.

A Jew and the son of a poet who was "disappeared" by the NKVD (the Soviet secret police), Lev was nonetheless an ardent patriot who believed in the justness of the Soviet cause and enough of a naïf to still believe in the romance of war. Although too young to join the army, Lev refused to flee with his mother and sister, and proudly serves as commander of his apartment building's volunteer fire brigade. "I was seventeen, flooded with a belief in my own heroic destiny," (p. 9) he remembers. But his youth might still have passed uneventfully had a dead Nazi paratrooper not fallen onto his street one night. Lev and his friends --- tempted by the prospect of chocolate or other contraband --- break curfew to loot the body.

Lev alone is caught, arrested, and thrown into Leningrad's infamous prison, the Crosses. His cellmate, Kolya, is a soldier who's just been arrested for desertion and together the two await the dawn and almost certain execution. Lev is petrified, but Kolya is everything that Lev is not; boisterous and bombastic, handsome and charming, and annoyingly optimistic. "They're not preserving us for the night just to shoot us tomorrow," (p. 23) Kolya says as he drops off into a seemingly untroubled sleep. Miraculously, he is right. In the morning, the two are granted a reprieve conditional upon their acquiring a dozen eggs for the wedding cake of a powerful NKVD colonel's daughter within five days.

The task is preposterous. It is January --- smack in the cold heart of a harsh Soviet winter --- and the city has been cut off from all supplies for months. Most of Leningrad barely staves off starvation with miserly portions of sawdust-filled

ration bread, but Lev and Kolya gamely set off to find their grail in a city where rats are hunted for their meat and the bindings of library books are boiled down for their nutrient-rich glue.

At first, Lev loathes Kolya, who teases him about being a Jew and whose every word and action he finds insufferable. Yet as they wend their way through Leningrad's black market underbelly and out into the battle-ravaged countryside, the timid, virginal Jew and his Cossack antithesis reveal themselves in ways that allow chinks of sympathy --- and, ultimately, friendship --- to grow.

A beguiling new novel from the acclaimed author and screenwriter of *The 25th Hour*, **City of Thieves** is a winning picaresque tale that illuminates the timeless struggles of growing up against the dramatic backdrop of Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union.

Discussion Guide

1. David wants to hear about his grandfather's experiences firsthand. Why is it important for us to cultivate and preserve our oral histories? Do you have a relative or friend whose story you believe should be captured for posterity?
2. Lev's father is taken --- and almost certainly killed --- by the NKVD, yet Lev himself stays behind to defend Leningrad. How do you think he reconciled his patriotism to his love for his father?
3. In the midst of a major historical moment, Lev is preoccupied with thoughts of food and sex. What does this tell us about experiencing history as it unfolds?
4. From the cannibals in the market to the sex slaves in the farmhouse, there are numerous illustrations of the way in which war robs us of our humanity. In your opinion, what was the most poignant example of this and why?
5. Kolya tells Lev that the government should "put the famous on the front lines" (p. 67) rather than use them as the spokespeople for patriotic propaganda. Do you agree or disagree? Can you think of any contemporary instances of this practice?
6. Aside from the sly pride that Lev notices, are there any other clues that give Kolya away as the true author of *The Courtyard Hound*?
7. Do you think Markov's denouncer should have remained silent about the partisan's presence? Did either of them deserve to die?
8. Even moments before Lev pulls his knife on the Sturmbannführer, he thinks: "I had wanted him dead since I'd heard Zoya's story. . . . [But] I didn't believe I was capable of murdering him" (p. 228). Do you think everyone --- given the right motivation --- is capable of killing another human being? Could you?
9. Lev takes an instinctive dislike to Kolya yet comes to consider him his best friend. What was the turning point in their relationship?
10. Lev says that Vika "was no man's idea of a pinup girl," (p.149) but he is instantly infatuated. Would he have been

drawn to her had they met in different --- safer --- circumstances?

Author Bio

David Benioff is an author and screenwriter. His first novel, **The 25th Hour**, was adapted into a popular feature film. His short story collection, **When the Nines Roll Over**, received critical acclaim. He lives in Los Angeles and New York City.

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