



The Siege: A Novel

By Helen Dunmore

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Called "elegantly, starkly beautiful" by The New York Times Book Review, *The Siege* is Helen Dunmore's masterpiece. Her canvas is monumental -- the Nazis' 1941 winter siege on Leningrad that killed six hundred thousand -- but her focus is heartrendingly intimate. One family, the Levins, fights to stay alive in their small apartment, held together by the unlikely courage and resourcefulness of twenty-two-year-old Anna. Though she dreams of an artist's life, she must instead forage for food in the ever more desperate city and watch her little brother grow cruelly thin. Their father, a blacklisted writer who once advocated a robust life of the mind, withers in spirit and body. At such brutal times everything is tested. And yet Dunmore's inspiring story shows that even then, the triumph of the human heart is that love need not fall away. "The novel's imaginative richness," writes The Washington Post, "lies in this implicit question: In dire physical circumstances, is it possible to have an inner life? The answer seems to be that no survival is possible without one." Amid the turmoil of the siege, the unimaginable happens -- two people enter the Levins' frozen home and bring a kind of romance where before there was only bare survival. A sensitive young doctor becomes Anna's devoted partner, and her father is allowed a transcendent final episode with a mysterious woman from his past. *The Siege* marks an exciting new phase in a brilliant career, observed Publishers Weekly in a starred review: "Dunmore has built a sizable audience ... but this book should lift her to another level of literary prominence." "Dunmore's ... novel ... is an intimate record of an extraordinary human disaster ... a moving story of personal triumph and public tragedy." -- Laura Ciolkowski, San Francisco Chronicle "In Helen Dunmore's hands, this epic subject assumes a lyrical honesty that sometimes wrenches but more often lifts the spirit." -- Frances Taliaferro, The Washington Post "Dunmore unravels the tangle of suffering, war, and base emotions to produce a story woven with love ... Extraordinary." -- Barbara Conaty, Library Journal (starred review)

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

The Siege is one of those novels that is as redemptive as it is shattering, and they don't come much more shattering than this. The year is 1941, and the good people of Leningrad are squeezed between fear of Stalin's secret police and rumors that the Germans, despite the incredulity of military experts, are rapidly advancing on their great city. When the inevitable happens, 22-year-old Anna, an artist and the sole support for her young brother, invalid father, and the latter's former mistress, learns to survive the devastation and mass starvation that the siege brings. In the worst days of winter, Anna falls in love with a doctor, Andrei, who returns her passion, creating an oasis of emotional privacy within the hell of war. *The Siege* is expertly anchored in sometimes unbearable details of the assault on Leningrad; the book's sense of place and the author's great skill at pumping immediacy into the cold facts is something to behold. But this is, finally, a novel about extremes of experience, from rampant cruelty to the redemptive power of one person's love. --
Tom Keogh

From Publishers Weekly

In a novel whose every observation is so sharp the words almost hurt, Dunmore (*Talking to the Dead*) takes a giant step away from her praised domestic psychological dramas set in England. This urgent narrative brings shocking news, although the events Dunmore chronicles took place six decades ago, and mirror ancient, universal struggles. It's 1941; Leningrad is under siege by the German army and the relentless winter. Thousands will starve or freeze before the spring, but Dunmore shuns the moral numbness of numbers. She compels us to live inside the skin of Anna Levin, a 23-year-old artist and nursery-schoolteacher. In chaste yet shimmering prose, Dunmore conveys the sourness of Anna's hunger, her anguish over whether to eat an onion immediately or save it to sprout so that her five-year-old brother, Kolya, may have the precious vitamins in the shoots. Anna's mother died when Kolya was born, and Anna must also feed her ailing father, the writer Mikhail, who has fallen out of favor with the government. As winter closes in, his one-time mistress, the faded, gallant actress, Marina, joins their household, bringing her precious hoard of cloudberry jam. Andrei, a physician who loves Anna, stumbles home from brutal days at the hospital to help huddle Kolya against the interminable icy nights. Lauded by the British critics last year, the novel is a signal achievement, and Anna is a true heroine for our times - tender in love, passionate in art, unyielding in her will to survive. (Jan.)
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From Library Journal

Dunmore was awarded England's first Orange Prize for her debut novel, *A Spell of Winter*. Here, with exquisite precision, she explores the physical and emotional sensations experienced by aspiring artist Anna during the first winter of the siege of Leningrad. The story opens in the summer of 1941 with the city's inhabitants working brutally hard to shore up defenses against the invading Germans. As the noose tightens and winter comes, their only connection to the outside world is via the frozen-over Lake Ladoga; each slice of bread and each stick of kindling becomes more precious than gold. Anna, the main support for her brother, her father, and his aging mistress, observes her own fearful starvation but hangs on grimly. Sexual overtones arrive when Andrei becomes Anna's lover and joins the miserable household. That Dunmore unravels the tangle of suffering, war, and base emotions to produce a story woven with love, hope, and desire is a celebration of widely revered human values, made especially poignant in light of the tragedy of September 11. Any library with even a smattering of World War II material will want this extraordinary novel for its readers.

- *Barbara Conaty, Library of Congress*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Regina Rodgers:

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