

Mr. tough guy?: understanding kolya's character



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

It's impossible to determine all the complexity of a character just based on first impressions. This is especially true for the character Kolya in David Benioff's novel *City of Thieves*. On the surface, Kolya appears to be a fearless, comedic, womanizer who is careless and on the verge of being annoying. This becomes a conflict for readers who want to see a character with humanity, especially during the stressful times of WWII. However, Kolya does not disappoint; he becomes a central figure in helping Lev come of age and venture outside of his boundaries, later becoming his best friend. As the story progresses, a different side to Kolya appears: trustworthy and caring, and very different from the original narcissist character.

Throughout the novel, Kolya's character unravels to show a sensitive demeanor and care for others, even in a time of war. Kolya is introduced as a brazen, arrogant man who never notices how his actions frighten the protagonist, Lev. His dangerous jokes seemed to worry Lev more than Kolya himself. "You murdered me," Kolya declares to a petrifying vendor at the St. Petersburg blackmarket after drinking, as if it was a game(50). Or his jokes to the guards while he is in prison, which was of course followed by threats to Kolya's life, in which he showed no response of despair. In fact, when the guards responded by insulting Kolya, he responds with a harsh tone, as if his image was more important than his life (26). Timid Lev would never potentially risk his life just for a little laugh. Lev was astonished by Kolya's fearlessness and his nonchalant actions. No two people could be more polar opposite; Kolya is a jaunty character, while Lev over-evaluates every situation that is placed in front of him. However, Lev soon realizes that Kolya's power in his boldness is what made him valuable. Danger didn't give

Kolya fear, or excitement, nor the slightest rush of adrenaline. In fact it was the exact opposite, danger caused Kolya to become calm (51). These facts distress Lev even more, having to go on a life-or-death adventure with someone who was carefree in a time of war. How could two people with completely different lifestyles work together? The possibility of them becoming friends would require development beyond their first introductions to each other.

In order for Lev and Kolya to bond and work together, Kolya would have to grow to be more than his initial haughty character. his reckless behavior, Kolya performs continual acts of kindness, giving hope to readers and Lev. The first time Lev and Kolya meet in prison, they have their first exchange. Lev narrates, " This seemed like some sort of trap... But no offer of food could be refused, even in the least likely, so I stretched my hand into the darkness and waited. A moment later, a sliver of something cold and greasy sat on my palm" (21). Having their first interaction be food makes it even more dramatic. At a time when people were starving from the war, Kolya feeds Lev, initiating a bond of trust and intimacy between them. This bond of trust would shape the novel as well as the relationship of Lev and Kolya. If there had not been any faith between the two men, there would be a lack of empathy. However, that wasn't the only time Kolya showed kindness to a stranger. After meeting a boy who was dying from starvation and the cold, " He added [the library candy] to his last sliver of sausage and the three hundred rubles and placed them all on the boy's lap" (85). Kolya tried to save the boy's life when he didn't even know him, whereas someone else in that situation may have left him there to die. In war, most people were only

concerned about their own well-being, their own source of basic needs; Kolya refutes this way to thinking, since he shows solicitude towards the young boy. Kolya was introduced as being haughty, and now he was showing a compassionate and nurturing side.

As well as being sympathetic, Kolya began to display his heroic side, or rather his care for people close to him. Luckily, this is when his habit of being calm in danger become extremely useful. When Lev's life was in crisis because he was suspected to be a Jew, Kolya lied, "' Our little Jew! Makes him crazy. But look at that nose! If I didn't know his family, I'd swear he was a Yid'" (195). If the Germans didn't believe Kolya's lie, they could have killed both Kolya and Lev. Lev would never have survived without Kolya's help. As Benioff's novel continues, his carelessness is overshadowed by his concerns for others. A major aspect of the plot is Kolya's sensitivity with how people view him. Specifically, Kolya's multiple obsessions with the masterpiece, *The Courtyard Hound*, which later is revealed to be Kolya's own book and representation of his sensitivity. When Lev says the plot of the book reminds him a lot of Goncharov's literature piece, *Oblomov*, Kolya gets defensive, "' Every university fool knows that Goncharov wasn't half the writer Ushakovo was. *Oblomov* is nothing... Now Radchenko— Radchenko is one of the greatest heroes of the language'" (41). He is emotional about what other people thought and said about the novel.

When Lev finally had the realization that this sensitivity was a metaphor for Kolya's self-doubt in his own piece of writing, he wasn't mad. The fearless Kolya did have fear, fear of his composition being judged and made fun of (165). Even while he was dying, he wanted reassurance for his work, "' Lev?

You like the title?" (250). This was an extremely critical moment in the plot, Kolya's introduction of his sensitivity allowed Lev to be more empathetic. When Lev realizes Kolya's obsession of his self-image, he grows an even stronger bond to him. When Kolya is dying next to Lev, his heart crumbles, realizing that his new found best friend is leaving him (251). Kolya was suddenly much more than a fearless Russian soldier; Kolya had so much humanity, even in a dramatic and dangerous time of their lives. Layers of Kolya's character are revealed throughout the novel, demonstrating a more sensitive and caring side to his risqué and comedic display.

The tough-skinned Kolya that the readers originally meet, turned into a mysterious, sensitive, and likeable character. His multiple layers of emotion and characteristics make the novel exciting, while also creating a better bond and path to manhood for Lev. Benioff, as an author, created multifaceted characters and used character development to write a novel which demonstrates that there can be more to a character than meets the eye.