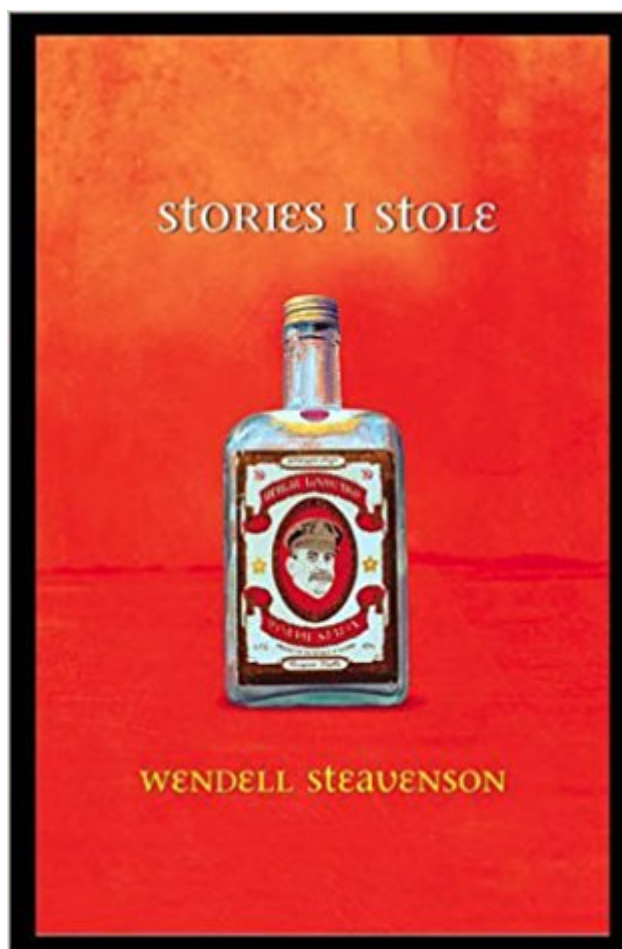


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# Stories I Stole From Georgia



## Synopsis

After working for Time magazine in London, Wendell Steavenson spent two years in the former Soviet republic of Georgia. *Stories I Stole* captures the exuberance of a fledgling nation of local despots, mountain tribes, blood feuds, and an unlimited flow of red wine. From President Shevardnadze's rigged elections to horse races high in the mountains; from the eerie roadside artifacts of the Soviet era to the farcical power outages in the dead of winter, here is Georgia: weird, invigorating, and still coming to grips with the legacy of its most famous son, Joseph Stalin. Far more than a travel book, this is a scintillating menagerie of true stories peopled by vivid -- and sometimes insane -- characters. In the beach resort of Sukhumi, once the destination of every fashionable Russian but now wrecked by civil war, Wendell plays hangman with a secret policeman. In the capital, Tbilisi -- ensconced in Levan's Magic Room or lounging in the steam baths -- she hears about the latest duel or kidnapping. In Khevsureti, the meadows are dotted with blue-painted beehives and yellow flowers, while just over the border there is war in Chechnya. *Stories I Stole* is a candid, engaging, and quietly lyrical book about a land and its people.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In this collection of wine-soaked stories, former Time journalist Steavenson recounts her adventurous two years living in the former Soviet republic of Georgia. Few journalists would have the gumption to do on assignment what the now 32-year-old Steavenson did on a whim-leave a job in Time's London office in the late 1990s for the relatively volatile region of the Caucasus. Her reward is a book, her first, that Chekhov himself would have admired. With a keen journalistic eye

and a poetic flair for capturing every detail of her surroundings, Steavenson adeptly renders a vibrant if rather depressed culture amid the detritus of a collapsed superpower. The book is replete with harsh winters, hot summers, rolling blackouts from a shortage of electricity and a crumbling infrastructure, plentiful vodka and bad cigarettes, hearty friends, and an endless number of LAOs (large abandoned objects): bits of rusting pipeline, tractors, half-built bridges, "the debris of the Soviets, the husk of an empire." While each story seems to contain within it several others, most compelling are Steavenson's encounters with Chechen refugees and fighters after the second Russian war in Chechnya broke out. A chapter on the fixed election of "career communist" turned "western media darling" Eduard Shevardnadze is also insightful. Despite its title, it's clear these stories are anything but stolen. And Steavenson returns the favor. After turning down a marriage proposal from her boyfriend, a photographer, he sends her 1,000 roses—a stunning gesture that is surely still recalled among Georgians. This is a remarkable first effort from a writer to watch.

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In 1998, bored with her life in London, Steavenson, a journalist whose CV lists Time magazine in her credits, set out for Tbilisi, the capital of the former Soviet republic of Georgia, where life is anything but comfortable. The Georgian economy was in such a shambles that it made Russia seem prosperous. Her portraits of the Georgians she befriended are sharply drawn, witty, and convey perfectly the different aspects of "Georgianess." Her portraits of those she interviewed, whether Georgian, Abkhazian, or Chechen, are also finely written pieces, well integrated into the larger story. Steavenson also does a good job of explaining the internecine conflicts in the area. Least interesting is Steavenson's account of her romantic pursuits. A section at the end titled "Ethnic Glossary" sorts out the different peoples of the area. The bibliography, for a change, is actually fun to read. Frank Caso

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Former Time magazine writer Steavenson hits upon a nice variation to the armchair travel genre with this wonderful little book on the former Soviet Republic of Georgia. Rather than trying to systematically detail the small country's tangled web of ethnicities and chaotic recent history, she recounts her time there through twenty chapters/stories. These loosely connected and loosely chronological stories provide a remarkably nuanced portrait of a country where nothing works, government seems largely irrelevant, and the people are remarkable. Weaving in many of her own friendships and a relationship with a photojournalist, she covers rigged elections, ethnic tensions, the nearby war in Chechnya, and mainly daily life with remarkable sensitivity. The nice thing is that

she doesn't do so with the usual world-weariness of the foreign correspondent, but with a depth of feeling that never falls into sentimentalism or condescension. It's a curiously individual work in that there's no real reason for her to be there, there is no larger theme she hangs her stories on, and no gimmicks. Just honest stories about a country where a strange civil war and two secessionist wars over the last decade have utterly destroyed the economy and left the country with little hope. A definite must read for anyone interested in the Caucasus or the fate of post-Soviet republics.

This is an absolutely delightful book, both for people who have been to the Caucasus and to those who simply want to read an enchanting fusion of attentive observation and personal reflection. In some ways I think this book even should find its way onto reading lists of university courses on this region, because it is so rich in rendering the texture of life in Georgia, its metaphysical quality. The former Soviet Union can be a profound shock. The typical western mindset is to improve, to think of solutions, to think "if only they started to...". This makes much writing about the personal experiences in the former Soviet Union (and, in particular, the Caucasus) into a report from a narrow frontline of friction between incompatible perspectives. Wendell Steavenson is much more sophisticated, suspending the typical perspective, allowing her a fuller, more comprehensive account. You will definitely enjoy the book.

Wendell Steavenson impresses me. Two years in the Caucasus with the intent of writing a book and having an adventure has proved to create an enjoyable travel journal/diary/reflective study. Having lived in the Caucasus and as a young foreign female, many of the stories resonated with me. I'd be curious to read reviews from people who have not had the pleasure of wandering through the post-Soviet world to see if the stories are as vivid to them as they are to me. Special points of interest to me: \* Steavenson's relationships with Georgians: both those Intelligentsia whom she befriends and the "common folk" \* Steavenson's relationships with other ex-pats especially journalists \* adjustments to conditions in Georgia. In each of these categories, I found Steavenson to be honest, funny and respectful. Steavenson has an impressive resume (as she is possibly tired of hearing) and I cannot wait to see her next work.... After getting to know her in "Stories" I appreciate her perspective.

Knowing virtually nothing of the Caucasus I felt a little overwhelmed at first; but Steavenson quickly won me over with her absorbing writing and storytelling. I felt like I was right there with her. She has an incredible insight into human nature. I can't wait to read it over again, and expect to like it even

better the second time around.

I felt like I was right there with her seeing what she saw, drinking all that alcohol, and having adventures in Georgia! this book gives you an idea of how Georgian people really are.

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