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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Constellation of Vital Phenomena by Anthony Marra

Summary

A resilient doctor risks everything to save the life of a hunted child, in this majestic debut about love, loss, and the unexpected ties that bind us together.

In his brilliant, haunting novel, Stegner Fellow and Whiting Award winner Anthony Marra transports us to a snow-covered village in Chechnya, where eight-year-old Havaa watches from the woods as Russian soldiers abduct her father in the middle of the night, accusing him of aiding Chechen rebels.

Across the road their lifelong neighbor and family friend Akhmed has also been watching, fearing the worst when the soldiers set fire to Havaa's house. But when he finds her hiding in the forest with a strange blue suitcase, he makes a decision that will forever change their lives. He will seek refuge at the abandoned hospital where the sole remaining doctor, Sonja Rabina, treats the wounded.

For the talented, tough-minded Sonja, the arrival of Akhmed and Havaa is an unwelcome surprise. Weary and overburdened, she has no desire to take on additional risk and responsibility. And she has a deeply personal reason for caution: harboring these refugees could easily jeopardize the return of her missing sister.

But over the course of five extraordinary days, Sonja's world will shift on its axis and reveal the intricate pattern of connections that weave together the pasts of these three unlikely companions and unexpectedly decides their fate. A story of the transcendent power of love in wartime, *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* is a work of sweeping breadth, profound compassion, and lasting significance. (From the publisher.)

Discussion Questions

1. Talk about each of the characters—Akhmed, Haava, Sonja, Natasha, Khassan, and Ramzan. Do you care about any of them? Whom do you find particularly sympathetic? Do your opinions of any of the characters change over the course of the novel?
2. One of the book's themes is our inability to know the depths of another being. In a beautiful paragraph (end of Chapter 3) Sonja ponders Haava who is lying next to her—Haava possesses 206 bones, 606 muscles, 2.5 million sweat glands, and 100 billion cerebral neurons; all this

Sonja can know. She cannot fathom, however, "the dreams crowding [Havva's] skull" or "the mystery the girl would spend her life solving." Do you find that to be true in real life—how deeply can we know another being? Does fiction, perhaps, allow us insights into other beings that we cannot attain in our own lives? Do you feel you know the loved ones closest to you?

3. Follow-up to Question 2: The narrator frequently jumps ahead by years, even decades, to inform readers of what happens to various characters—whether they live...or die...or grow senile.... What effect does this create on you, the reader?
4. An emphasis on art runs throughout the novel. Akhmed draws portraits and posts them throughout the village; Haava "rebuilds" the body of her childhood nemesis, Akim, using Akhmed's portrait of him; Natasha recreates the view of a cityscape blown away by shelling, and Maali is nearly as invested in Natasha's project as Natasha herself. Why is art so significant in this book? What role does art play in Akhmed's and Natasha's lives—and in the lives of others.
5. Talk about the characters' religious beliefs or lack of beliefs? How does the war affect the faithful...and nonfaithful alike? How would your faith be affected?
6. In interviews author Anthony Marra has said he chose to write about Chechnya after spending his junior year in St. Petersburg during the time of the Chechnyan war. While there, he was fascinated by accounts of how ordinary people behaved in extraordinary situations—the kinds of moral choices they had to make. Talk about the characters in *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* who dramatize the tough moral choices Marra refers to...especially Ramzan and Khassan. Are there others? What choices do they make and why? How might you have responded in such horrific circumstances? Does morality change depending on the context?
7. SPOILER ALERTS! Follow-up to Question 6: Should Khassan have killed his son—is such an action just or moral? Does learning Ramzan's backstory, change your opinion of him...perhaps justify his later actions?
8. Trace the six-degrees-of-separation between the characters, their actions, and final consequences. In other words, how are the characters interconnected? What might the author be suggesting by such connectedness—both within the confines of the novel and, perhaps, in the real world outside the scope of the novel? What kind of worldview does Marra seem to project? Do the coincidences feel contrived? Or do you see them as organic, part of the gradual unfolding of the novel?
9. A great deal is made in the novel of the desire for characters to be buried at home. Notes with names and addresses are sewn into clothing so families can be notified and thereby claim the body of the loved one. Why is burial at home so important? Is it a tradition peculiar to that culture...or a universal desire?
10. The book contains a fair amount of humor—the banter between Akhmed and the nurse Deshi, the reference to Barbie Doll's emaciated waistline, Akhmed's confusion over Ronald Reagan and Ronald MacDonald, and his astonishment at how the U.S. elections transfer power from one president to the next—"It makes me wonder how [Russia] lost the Cold War." Where else do you

find humor...and why do you suppose the author included such moments in an otherwise dark story?

11. Think about the structure of the novel, as it moves back and forth through time, and the inclusion of timelines at the head of each chapter. Why might Marra have devised a disjointed structure for his story? What might it suggest about the fractured lives of his characters? What do you, as a reader, think is gained—or lost—using such a structure?
12. Why are the Feds so intent on finding Haava? What do they want with her?
13. What drove the two Chechnyan wars? What were the conflicts involved? What have you learned about the war that you were unaware of before reading *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*? While the Chechnyan war was ongoing, how much attention did you pay to it?
14. What do you find most shocking in the account of the war? What is most horrifying or disturbing? Where do you find displays of human kindness to counteract the brutality? Is there anything hopeful in the book?
15. What is the meaning and/or significance of the book's title?

Discussion Questions from www.litlovers.com