

A Constellation of Vital Phenomena: A Novel

By Anthony Marra

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A Constellation of Vital Phenomena: A Novel By Anthony Marra

***New York Times* Notable Book of the Year * *Washington Post* Top Ten Book of the Year**

In a small rural village in Chechnya, eight-year-old Havaa watches from the woods as Russian soldiers abduct her father in the middle of the night and then set fire to her home. When their lifelong neighbor Akhmed finds Havaa 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 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. But over the course of five extraordinary days, Sonja's world will shift on its axis and reveal the intricate pattern of connections that weaves 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.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Q&A with Anthony Marra

Q. Where did you study in Russia? How did that pique your interest?

A. As a junior in college I studied in St. Petersburg. War journalist and human rights activist Anna Politkovskaya had recently been assassinated; wounded veterans of the Chechen Wars trawled the metro cars for alms; street gangs routinely attacked people from the Northern Caucasus. Yet as an American I knew little about Chechnya. As soon as I began researching its incredible history, I never looked back.

Q. The setting of your book takes place during the Chechen Wars. Why did you choose this period of history as the backdrop of your novel?

A. Chechnya is a corner of the world largely mysterious to most Americans, yet it's a remarkable place populated with remarkable people who have become accustomed to repeatedly rebuilding their lives. To quote Tobias Wolff, "We are made to persist…that's how we find out who we are." These characters commit acts of courage, betrayal, and forgiveness as they persist in saving what means most to them—be it their families, their honor, or themselves—from the destruction of war.

Q. The title of the book has a story. Can you please explain its meaning?

A. One day I looked up the definition of *life* in a medical dictionary and found a surprisingly poetic entry: "A constellation of vital phenomena—organization, irritability, movement, growth, reproduction, adaptation." As biological life is structured as a constellation of six phenomena, the narrative life of this novel is structured as a constellation of six point-of-view characters.

Q. Your writing style is unique in that you move back and forth between the present and the past. Was that a conscious choice?

A. Very much so. I wanted to write a novel expansive enough to cover the decade of the two Chechen Wars without losing the drama and suspense inherent in a more tightly coiled plot. By weaving the five-day story of a hunted girl through a larger backdrop, I hoped to combine the tension of a character-driven thriller with the richness of a historical epic. Also, moving through time shines a light on the seemingly trivial moments, relationships, and allegiances that affect characters in profound ways years down the line.

Q. What has had the greatest influence on your writing?

A. My mom has six siblings and my dad has four sisters and between them all there are more cousins than I count, which means that family events have always been filled with voices, stories, and laughter. From an early age I learned from them that stories are how we understand one another, how we preserve the past, and how we make meaning from the chaos of our lives.

An Amazon Best Book of the Month, May 2013: In *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*, Anthony Marra takes us to snow-covered Chechnya during the Second Chechen War. The novel, a remarkable decade-spanning debut, opens with eight-year-old Havaa looking on as her father is dragged off by Russian soldiers

for a crime he did not commit. The soldiers set fire to Havaa's home, and next-door neighbor Akhmed attempts to hide her at nearby hospital. Sonya, the doctor who runs the facility, is hesitant to harbor Havaa, as the child invites unnecessary risk to her barely functioning hospital, but both she and Akhmed realize that Havaa represents something greater than a single life: she is the key to maintaining humanity in an ethnic conflict that is absurd and unjust. "There are things a person shouldn't understand," Akhmed says. "There are things a person has a moral duty never to understand." But by the end of *Vital Phenomena*, we do understand--with deeply emotional characters and gripping depiction of wartorn Chechnya, Marra makes us understand. *--Kevin Nguyen*

From Booklist
Starred Review In this extraordinary first novel, Marra homes in on a people and a region that barely register with most Americans and, in heartrending prose, makes us feel their every misfortune. In rural Chechnya, during the second war, a small group of people struggle to survive in the bleakest of circumstances. A gifted surgeon works tirelessly in a crumbling hospital, hardening her heart so that she can perform her gruesome work. An eight-year-old girl who has already seen too much is being hunted by the government ever since the night her father was abducted by Russian soldiers. An incompetent doctor who longed to be an artist paints portraits of 41 neighbors who were killed by government forces and hangs them in the doorways and trees of his ruined village. And a lonely man, once brutally tortured, turns government informant to obtain the insulin needed by his diabetic father, who, in turn, refuses to speak to him. Marra collapses time, sliding between 1996 and 2004 while also detailing events in a future yet to arrive, giving his searing novel an eerie, prophetic aura. All of the characters are closely tied together in ways that Marra takes his time revealing, even as he beautifully renders the way we long to connect and the lengths we will go to endure. --Joanne Wilkinson

Review

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER
FINALIST 2013 – Flaherty-Dunnan First Novel Prize
LONGLISTED 2013 – National Book Award
WINNER 2013 – NBCC John Leonard Prize
FINALIST 2014 – Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Award
WINNER 2014 – ABA Indies Choice Award for Book of the Year—Adult Debut

“The book encompasses torture, infidelity, heartbreak and human trafficking, but also love, friendship, family and humour. Marra doesn’t gloss over the horrors of the Chechen wars. But he doesn’t dwell either, and despite the subject matter, this is not an exclusively dark book. In his afterword, Marra acknowledges a debt to Michael Ondaatje. Like Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*, *Vital Phenomena* is about the gaps left behind by the forcibly disappeared. It’s a difficult subject for fiction, but one Marra manages with a voice that approaches something like the gauzy beauty of Ondaatje’s prose.”
—*Maclean’s*

“The simplest life cannot precisely be put down in details or marks on a page—the spirit fundamentally escapes language, if only because we can’t pronounce the words. Nonetheless, *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* proves that if anything, it’s better, more beautiful and necessary to keep trying.”
—Emily M. Keeler, *The Globe and Mail*

“Some good novels catch fire immediately, as if a writer had simply opened a Zippo lighter. Others come into being more gradually. The author cautiously tends to his or her kindling. Anthony Marra’s first novel, *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*, belongs to the second category. It’s a slow burn…. The strange and

invigorating thing about Mr. Marra's novel…is how much human warmth and comedy he smuggles, like samizdat, into his busy story. At heart he's a satirist, a lover not a fighter, a prose writer who resembles the Joseph Heller of *Catch-22* and the Jonathan Safran Foer of *Everything Is Illuminated*. Mr. Marra's humor floats most freely in his dialogue, which is both acidic and surreal. If novel writing does not work out for him, he might easily become a world-class playwright…. Mr. Marra is a lovely writer about families…. He is, in fact, a lovely writer about many things…. *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* is ambitious and intellectually restless. It's humane and absurd, and rarely out of touch with the Joseph-Heller-like notion that, as Mr. Marra puts it, 'stupidity was the single abiding law of the universe.'"
—Dwight Garner, *The New York Times Book Review*

"A complex debut.... [Marra writes] with elegant details about the physical and emotional destruction of occupation and war."
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Eva Byrd:

Why don't make it to be your habit? Right now, try to prepare your time to do the important behave, like looking for your favorite guide and reading a e-book. Beside you can solve your problem; you can add your knowledge by the book entitled A Constellation of Vital Phenomena: A Novel. Try to face the book A Constellation of Vital Phenomena: A Novel as your friend. It means that it can for being your friend when you truly feel alone and beside that course make you smarter than previously. Yeah, it is very fortuned in your case. The book makes you more confidence because you can know anything by the book. So , we should make new experience and knowledge with this book.

Pamela Bradley:

The book untitled A Constellation of Vital Phenomena: A Novel contain a lot of information on it. The writer explains your girlfriend idea with easy means. The language is very straightforward all the people, so do certainly not worry, you can easy to read the idea. The book was published by famous author. The author will take you in the new era of literary works. You can easily read this book because you can continue reading your smart phone, or program, so you can read the book with anywhere and anytime. In a situation you wish to purchase the e-book, you can open up their official web-site and also order it. Have a nice examine.

Christopher Gobert:

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reading that.

Keith Mayo:

As a college student exactly feel bored in order to reading. If their teacher expected them to go to the library or to make summary for some book, they are complained. Just very little students that has reading's spirit or real their interest. They just do what the trainer want, like asked to the library. They go to presently there but nothing reading significantly. Any students feel that looking at is not important, boring as well as can't see colorful pics on there. Yeah, it is to get complicated. Book is very important to suit your needs. As we know that on this period of time, many ways to get whatever we really wish for. Likewise word says, many ways to reach Chinese's country. Therefore , this A Constellation of Vital Phenomena: A Novel can make you sense more interested to read.

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