



## A constellation of vital phenomena

By Anthony Marra

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### Genre & subject

Abduction fiction

Chechnia (Russia)

*New York Times Notable Book of the Year*

*Washington Post Top Ten Book of the Year*

### Synopsis

In a snow-covered village in Chechnya, eight-year-old Havaa watches from the woods as her father is abducted in the middle of the night by Russian soldiers. Their life-long friend and neighbour, Akhmed, has also been watching, and when he finds Havaa he knows of only one person who might be able to help.

### Author biography

Anthony Marra is an American fiction writer. He attended high school at the Landon School, and graduated from the University of Southern California with a BA, and the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa with an MFA. In 2009, he attended the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. He was a 2011–2013 Stegner Fellow at Stanford University.

Currently, Marra teaches at Stanford University as the Jones Lecturer in Fiction. He has lived and studied in Eastern Europe, and now resides in Oakland, CA. Anthony Marra has contributed pieces to *The Atlantic*, *Narrative Magazine*, and *MAKE Magazine*.

### Discussion starters

- 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?
- 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?

- 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.
- 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?
- 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?
- The book contains a fair amount of humour—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 humour...and why do you suppose the author included such moments in an otherwise dark story?
- 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?
- What do you find most shocking in the account of the war? What is most horrifying disturbing? Where do you find displays of human kindness to counteract the brutality? Is there anything hopeful in the book?
- What is the meaning and/or significance of the book's title?

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