

# Books by the Stack



## ***A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* by Anthony Marra**

This debut novel by Pushcart Prize-winning author Anthony Marra is set in rural Chechnya during the region's war with Russia. Though events shift in time, the main focus is a five-day period in 2004, when an eight-year-old girl witnesses her father's abduction by Russian soldiers. Swearing to protect the girl, local doctor Akhmed (whose true passion is portraiture), brings her to a crumbling hospital, run by a hardened but dedicated surgeon, for safety. - Description by Shauna Griffin.

**Why you'll like it:** Atmospheric. War stories. Descriptive. Character driven.

**About the Author:** Anthony Marra is the winner of a Whiting Award, Pushcart Prize, and the Narrative Prize. *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* won the National Book Critics Circle's inaugural John Leonard Prize and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in fiction, as well as the inaugural Carla Furstenberg Cohen Fiction Award. Marra's novel was a National Book Award long list selection as well as a shortlist selection for the Flaherty-Dunn first novel prize. In addition, his work has been anthologized in *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2012*. He received an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and was a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, where he teaches as the Jones Lecturer in Fiction. He has lived and studied in Eastern Europe, and now resides in Oakland, CA. *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* is his first novel.

### **Questions for Discussion**

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. A 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. 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?
9. Why are the Feds so intent on finding Haava? What do they want with her?
10. 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?
11. 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?
12. What is the meaning and/or significance of the book's title?

(Questions by LitLovers)



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