



# A Constellation of Vital Phenomena: A Novel

By Anthony Marra

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***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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## **A Constellation of Vital Phenomena: A Novel** By Anthony Marra Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #9216 in Books
- Brand: Hogarth
- Published on: 2014-02-04
- Released on: 2014-02-04
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x 1.10" w x 5.40" l, .84 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 416 pages

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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

**A *New York Times* Book Review Notable Book of the Year**

**New York Times Bestseller**

**National Book Award Longlist Selection**

**A *Washington Post* Top 10 Book of the Year**

***Washington Post* Bestseller**

**NPR Bestseller**

**Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Winner**

**An ALA Notable Book of the Year**

**A #1 Indie Pick**

**An Amazon.com Best Book of the Year**

**A *Publisher's Weekly* Top 10 Books of the Year**

**A *Kirkus Reviews* Best Book of the Year**

**A *Library Journal* Top 10 Book of the Year**

**NBCC John Leonard Prize Winner**

**Named one of the Best Books of the Year by:**

***New York Magazine* \* *Chicago Tribune* \* *Kansas City Star* \* *GQ* \* *NPR* \* *Christian Science Monitor* \* *San Francisco Chronicle* \* *Cleveland Plain Dealer***

“Brilliant.”

—*New York Times*

“A flash in the heavens that makes you look up and believe in miracles....Here, in fresh, graceful prose, is a profound story that dares to be as tender as it is ghastly, a story about desperate lives in a remote land that

will quickly seem impossibly close and important....I haven't been so overwhelmed by a novel in years. At the risk of raising your expectations too high, I have to say you simply must read this book."

—**Ron Charles, *Washington Post***

"Extraordinary....a 21st century War and Peace....Marra seems to derive his astral calm in the face of catastrophe directly from Tolstoy."

—**Madison Smartt Bell, *New York Times Book Review***

"A *Constellation of Vital Phenomena* is ambitious and intellectually restless....[Marra is] 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*."

—**Dwight Garner, *New York Times***

"Over and over again, this is an examination of the ways in which many broken pieces come together to make a new whole. In exquisite imagery, Marra tends carefully to the twisted strands of grace and tragedy....Everything in *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*...is dignified with a hoping, aching heartbeat."

—**Ramona Ausubel, *San Francisco Chronicle***

"The most moving book I've read in years. By writing so beautifully about a tiny village in Chechnya, this 28-year-old Washington native has produced a timeless tragedy about the victims of war."

—**Ron Charles, *Washingtonian***

"A powerful tale....The moment Akhmed walks into the hospital with Havaa...rivals anything Michael Ondaatje has written in its emotional force....There are many reasons to read *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*....to marvel at the lack of fear in a writer so young. To read a book that can bring tears to your eyes and force laughter from your lungs....But the one I kept returning to, the best reason to read this novel, is that this story reminds us how senseless killing often wrenches kindness through extreme circumstances."

—**John Freeman, *Boston Globe***

"[*A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*] pulls together blown-out bits of a world turned inside-out to create a brutal form of beauty from chaos....its prose is also ruefully funny in places and littered throughout with dazzling poetry."

—**John Barron, *Chicago Tribune***

"Amazing...brilliant...one of the most accomplished and affecting books I've read in a very long time....Though the lives lived in this novel can seem unbearable, what Anthony Marra has done is to diligently describe them in passionate, extraordinary prose."

—**Meg Wolitzer, author of *The Interestings*, for NPR**

"With remarkable pathos and a surprising amount of humor, Marra keeps the focus on the relationships, struggles, and tiny triumphs of an unforgettable group of characters....Marra creates a specific and riveting world around his characters, expertly revealing the unexpected connections among them....this novel, full of humanity and hope, ultimately leaves you uplifted. *Constellation* deserves to be on the short list for every major award. It's an absolute masterpiece."

—**Sarah Jessica Parker for *Entertainment Weekly***

"Marra is trying to capture some essence of the lives of men and women caught in the pincers of a brutal, decade-long war, and at this he succeeds beautifully....his storytelling impulses are fed by wellsprings of generosity....[the] ending is almost certain to leave you choked up and, briefly at least, transformed by

tenderness.”

—**Sam Sacks, *Wall Street Journal***

“Excellent.”

—***New York***

“My favorite book of the year....Many people can write beautifully, but few manage to create a whole that is more valuable than the sum of its parts. Marra does this in spades. It is a brilliant book.”

—**Ann Patchett, *New York Times* bestselling author of *State of Wonder* and *Bel Canto***

“Remarkable and breathtaking...a spellbinding elegy for an overlooked land engulfed by an oft forgotten war....Marra conjures fragile and heartfelt characters whose fates interrogate the very underpinnings of love and sacrifice.”

—**Adam Johnson, Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *The Orphan Master’s Son***

“Marra elegantly slides across time and perspective, mastering an omniscient voice that reveals each character’s future, present, and past....Marra’s characters are constantly aware of the transience of things, the frailty of their lives. This leads both to a resolve and poignancy that pervades the novel, as each character reckons with the inevitable.”

—***The Rumpus***

“Extraordinary...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.”

—***Booklist* (starred review)**

“Stunning, dazzlingly good....Marra takes us on an extraordinary journey into a world little known to many of us. He slowly unfolds his story with a balanced sureness and subtlety rare in a first novel, with a rhythm that is graceful and welcoming....beautiful, heartbreaking and filled to the brim with the vital ‘human matter’ of life. It may be the best new novel you’ll read this year.”

—***Shelf Awareness* (starred)**

“[A]n authentic, heartbreaking tale of intertwining relationships during wartime....As he shifts in time through the years of the two Chechen wars, Marra confidently weaves those plots together, and several more besides, giving each character a rich backstory that intersects, often years down the line, with the others....[T]he novel’s tone remains optimistic, and its characters retain vast depths of humanity (and even humor) in spite of their bleak circumstances.”

—***Library Journal* (starred review)**

“[Marra’s] ambitions are Tolstoyan, and he brings stylistic virtuosity to the prose, giving us lyric passages saturated with intelligence and psychological insight. By the end of the novel, we love the characters and grieve with them, and rejoice with the ‘immense, spinning joy’ that is the novel’s final note.”

—**2012 Whiting Writers’ Awards, Selection Committee**

“A complex debut...[Marra writes] with elegant details about the physical and emotional destruction of occupation and war.”

—***Publishers Weekly* (starred review)**

“Powerful, convincing, beautifully realized—it's hard to believe that *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* is a first novel. Anthony Marra is a writer to watch and savor.”

—**T.C. Boyle**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *When the Killing's Done* and *The Women*

“Both devastating and transcendent. The story of eight people (and a nation) navigating two brutal wars, it's a novel of loyalty and sacrifice and enduring love. You'll finish it transformed.”

—**Maile Meloy**, author of *Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want It*

“Anthony Marra's fine debut novel reaches tenderly, unflinchingly, into the center of the Chechnyan conflict of the late 1990s. This tale has its roots in shocking brutality, and its beauty in the human redemption that can come from unaccountable human kindness. Whimsies of circumstance, fate, and the ties of family and faith serve to guide the reader and the characters through a richly layered and deeply beautiful journey.”

—**Vincent Lam**, author of *The Headmaster's Wager*

## **Users Review**

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