

A Constellation of Vital Phenomena

Anthony Marra

Marra's debut novel places readers in Chechnya during its decadelong conflict with Russia and offers up an authentic, heartbreaking tale of intertwining relationships during wartime. The narrative centers on three people: eight-year-old Havaa, whose father has been "disappeared" by Russian forces; her neighbor Akhmed, a failed doctor who tries to hide her in the only operational hospital he knows; and Sonja, the area's last remaining surgeon, who is trying desperately to find her missing sister. 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. Though sometimes difficult to digest—episodes of casual violence and savage brutality punctuate the otherwise graceful prose—the novel's tone remains optimistic, and its characters retain vast depths of humanity (and even humor) in spite of their bleak circumstances. VERDICT Marra's moving novel will appeal to admirers of Tea Obreht's similarly war-torn novel *The Tiger's Wife*, but his story relies less on magical realism and more on the seemingly random threads binding us together. Highly recommended for all readers of literary fiction.

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