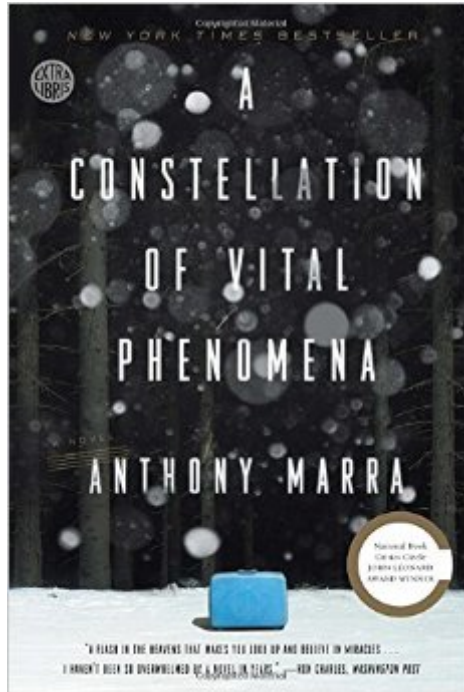


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# A Constellation Of Vital Phenomena: A Novel



## Synopsis

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. Now with Extra Libris material, including a reader's guide and bonus content from the author.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

If you read as much as I do (or even if you don't), you're bound to come across a book that is hailed by literary critics and readers as one of the greatest things ever, but no matter how much you try and read it and are determined to love it, it just doesn't click for you. I know that happens most often with the classics, but it certainly happens with "regular" fiction and nonfiction as well. Anthony Marra's debut novel, *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*, is such a book for me. Reviews have

hailed it as everything from "brilliant" and "haunting" to "a flash in the heavens that makes you look up and believe in miracles." One day, in a snowy village in war-torn Chechnya, eight-year-old Havaa hides as Russian soldiers abduct her father, Dokka, in the middle of the night. Their kindly neighbor, Akhmed, fears the worst when he sees the soldiers setting fire to Dokka's house as they take him away, but he rescues Havaa from her hiding place. Fearing she will be discovered, Akhmed takes Havaa to the local hospital, abandoned but for one doctor, Sonja, who alone (with the help of one cantankerous nurse) has been treating all of the victims of war and illness that enter the dilapidated hospital's doors. Akhmed, who was a medical student at the very bottom of his class, promises to work as a doctor with Sonja to ensure Havaa is provided for. Sonja comes with her own set of issues, most notably her sister, Natasha, who has continuously disappeared and reappeared in Sonja's life, but has been missing for some time. And Akhmed is caring for his own bedridden wife, and worrying about his neighbor and childhood friend, who is an informant for the Russians. But Sonja and Akhmed forge a reluctant partnership, one which opens both of their eyes to the surprising connections that tie them together. For me, while there's no doubt that Marra is a tremendously talented writer who has created some memorable characters and some beautiful sentences, this book just didn't click the way I hoped it would. It's a very dense story--in order to give gravity to his narrative, Marra packs a great deal of Chechen history and details that seemed to run on for far too long. The book takes place over a 10-year-period, and switches perspectives frequently and abruptly. And although he weaves all of his storylines together at the end, before that point I wondered why he spent so much time dwelling on certain details about secondary characters. I'm not usually an outlier in this fashion; I usually like books more than others. So if the story and people's reviews make this book sound like one you think you'd love, have at it. And then perhaps we can discuss what I'm missing.

Every now and then, a book comes along that restores my faith in the future of the novel all over again. *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* is such a book. How can a debut novelist write like this lyrically and searingly? Anthony Marra has "the gift" and his work is more assured than writers who have toiled for years. I'd like to say I was immediately captured by his novel, but alas, that wouldn't be true. My lack of familiarity with war-torn Chechnya - indeed, with Russian history - distanced me at first. A number of original and whimsical characters were woven into his rich tapestry of words, and for many pages, I wondered just why such-and-such character was being portrayed in great detail. But then it all started coming together, and - wow oh wow. The title comes from a description of life in a medical book: Life is a constellation of vital phenomena - organization, irritability,

movement, growth, reproduction, adaptation. A careful reading reveals that for this community of characters, the description is quite apt. The novel primarily takes place throughout a decade - from 1996 to 2004 - and a line graph at the top of each chapter centers the reader in the timeline. There are three key characters - Akhmed, an incompetent doctor with a good heart... Sonja, a bone-weary surgeon who labors each day at a bombed-out hospital that serves as the only respite for those who have been injured... and Havaa, an eight-year-old girl who has already been forced to endure and lose too much. Many other secondary characters populate this epic tale, including a beautifully-detailed portrait of a damaged man who has turned informer: Ramzan. All of these characters will become tied in an intricate web of connections that reveal how human fate is not just in our own hands, but in the hands of all humanity. The result is a haunting and original look into many universal themes. Ramzan says, "We're beyond obligation. We wear clothes and speak, and create civilizations, and believe we are more than wolves. But inside us there is a word we cannot pronounce and that is who we are." Or is it? Rather than embrace Ramzan's view of the world, this book shines a spotlight on the true meanings of love and sacrifice, and the lengths we will go to connect and endure. While heartbreaking at times, the book, at its core, is hopeful and proves that an "immense, spinning joy" can occur even when one's very humanity is threatened. I view this Constellation as a potential classic. It is that stellar.

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