

Zeitoun Study Guide

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Plot Summary

"Zeitoun," tells the story of Abdulrahman Zeitoun, a Syrian-American, who lived with his wife and children in New Orleans in 2005 when the city was hit by Katrina, the Category 5 hurricane that literally destroyed the city and changed it forever. Although he was thousands of miles away from his Syrian homeland, Zeitoun maintained a close relationship with his large family there, especially his older brother Ahmad. He often thought back to the time they spent together fishing as young men and then later as sailors together on the high seas.

Zeitoun eventually settled in the United States and made his way to New Orleans. Zeitoun was a family man and had a great desire to begin his own family. He met Kathy, an American woman who was a single mother and had converted to Islam after going through a bitter divorce. Zeitoun knew that Kathy was the right woman for him the second he set eyes on her. Kathy was not as quickly taken with Zeitoun, but slow and steady wins the raise and eventually she fell in love with Zeitoun after realizing he was everything she could want in a man. They married, had three daughters, and owned and operated a successful painting contractor business. They also owned multiple properties in New Orleans and ran a property management business.

When the news reports were ominous about the approaching hurricane, Kathy wanted to evacuate. Zeitoun, however, was determined to stay. The news always exaggerated about the severity of storms so he wasn't worried. Kathy stayed on for a while but as conditions worsened, she felt the need to get her children to safer ground. She hated leaving Zeitoun behind, but he was immovable. As everyone knows by know, the storm was worse than the news reports. Zeitoun did his best to keep his properties patched up and the leaks plugged. He had a aluminum canoe that he paddled around in to help others in need. He even fed the neighbor's dogs that were left behind. He brought people to safety and sent help for those he with his small canoe couldn't help.

But good intentions aren't always appreciated. One day while working at one of his properties, the door was knocked down by what turned out to be hired FEMA "soldiers." The armed soldiers arrested him and the companions he was with. No one would tell him what he was accused of doing. He was denied his basic right to make a phone call. Kathy and Zeitoun's brother Ahmad were frantic when they could no longer contact him by phone. During his unjust incarceration, Zeitoun was denied sufficient food and medical care and was never allowed to call Kathy. The authorities suspected that he might be involved in terrorist activities because he was an Arab-American.

A kind missionary who was visiting prison called Kathy to let her know that Zeitoun was alive, but in prison. Eventually, Homeland Security officials determined that Zeitoun had done nothing wrong and the charges against him were dropped. He was reunited with Kathy and his family some twenty pounds lighter and in ill-health after over a month of being illegally incarcerated.

Despite his ordeal, Zeitoun did not lose faith in the American dream. And although his properties were damaged and New Orleans was changed forever, Zeitoun didn't even entertain the thought of living anywhere else. He was ever grateful for the opportunities that America had given him and for his wife, children, and the family that he loved.



Part I

Part I Summary and Analysis

Friday, August 26, 2005

Zeitoun thought back to his childhood. On moonless nights, the men and boys of Jableh, Syria, set out in their fishing boats, formed a circle about a mile from the coast and dropped their nets. Plankton was attracted to the light of their lanterns and sardines were attracted to the plankton. The fishermen only went out on moonless nights because the moonlight would make the plankton visible everywhere to the sardines. Abdulrahman Zeitoun was just thirteen when he began fishing for sardines. After a large enough group of sardines formed, the fishermen would pull their nets. The catch would be taken to the market the next day. Abdulrahman and his brother Ahmad were both fishermen. Their father had died and their mother was fragile. They turned over all their earnings for the upkeep of the house and family.

Thirty-four years later and thousands of miles away in New Orleans, Abdulrahman and his wife, Kathy, laid in bed knowing that any moment one of their four children would wake up and then the other three would follow. The family house on Dart Street would be alive and sleep for them would be over. After 6:30 each morning, the calls for Abdulrahman, who was called Zeitoun because his first name was too difficult to pronounce, would start coming in. He was a painting contractor and his day started early. On this Friday, there were more calls than ever with the threat of a possible hurricane hitting the city. People wanted Zeitoun's help in boarding up their windows and other preparations for the storm. There seemed to be six or so named storms every year. This one was named Katrina.

Whenever Kathy wanted to get to Zeitoun, she would remind him that he "forgot" their oldest daughter. When Nademah was one day old, Zeitoun brought Kathy and the baby home. He helped Kathy up the steps but panicked when he remembered that he left the newborn on the sidewalk by the car. He felt guilty about that moment for years and could never understand his lapse.

Driving to work, Zeitoun often had thoughts of his childhood in Syria, wondering how his family was. He had many siblings and nephews and nieces spread throughout Syria. His was a family of high achievers, all well-educated and many doctors and business owners among them. The anchor on the radio was talking about Katrina. It wasn't expected to hit for several days. Kathy, driving the girls to school, heard the news reports as well but assumed, like always, they were exaggerating how bad the storm would be.

Kathy and Zeitoun worked hard. Not only did they have the painting business, they were property owners and landlords. They owned six properties and had eighteen tenants. There was always something to do but they loved the freedom their own business gave



them. They could always make time for their three daughters, Nademah, 10, Safiya, 7, and Aisha, 5, and Kathy's son Zachary, 15, from a previous marriage. Kathy and Zeitoun were close, keeping in touch by cell phone throughout every day.

Zeitoun was ten years older than Kathy. They met when she was twenty-one and just recently divorced. She had converted to Islam before she met him. She didn't have marriage on her mind, but Zeitoun was everything she had ever dreamed of in a man. While he worked that day, Zeitoun received a call from his brother Ahmad who lived in Spain with his family. He told his brother to watch out for the storm. It looked like it was going to be a bad one. Ahmad knew about storms. He had been a sea captain for thirty years. He told Zeitoun that they should evacuate. Kathy called later. The Weather Bureau had upgraded the storm to a Category 2. She'd keep watching, she told him. Zeitoun looked at the skies. Nothing looked particularly threatening. At noon, Zeitoun went to the Islamic Center for daily prayers. After he left the mosque, Kathy called to say that Katrina was upgraded to a Category 3 hurricane and was supposed to hit in a few days. Zeitoun dismissed her worries. The hurricanes usually raged across Florida and lost their power by the time they hit the Gulf. Close friends of Kathy and Zeitoun's were evacuating but he was determined to stay.

Zeitoun had met through a mutual friend, a Lebanese American named Ahmaad. His wife, a Japanese woman who had converted to Islam, thought that her friend, Kathy, would be perfect for Zeitoun. It didn't bother him that Kathy was divorced and had a two-year-old son. He was impressed though that she had converted to Islam. Zeitoun was smitten with Kathy from the moment he saw her. They knew each other on a casual basis but it took several years before they got serious.

All the TV channels had news of the hurricane. It was moving slowly, only eight miles an hour but was causing greater damage because the winds were sustained. Kathy was getting panicked and wanted to evacuate. Still Zeitoun was not convinced. Like always, it was almost impossible to drag him away from his work. Kathy decided to pick up some groceries in case they were stranded because of the storm. Zeitoun picked up Popeye's chicken for dinner. After dinner the girls watched their favorite movie "The Pride and Prejudice." All evening long, they kept switching back and forth between the movie and the TV news for updates on the storm. Everyone was safe and sound in their beds that night.

Saturday, August 27

The next morning the storm had worsened. Predictions were now that Katrina could become a Category 5 by the time it hit New Orleans. Kathy wanted to go so Zeitoun told her to go without him. Kathy planned to leave around 4pm when the contraflow took effect. The contraflow would allow all four lanes of the major highways to lead out of the town. While Kathy tried to figure out what relative to stay with, Zeitoun announced that he was going to visit each job site to secure his equipment. While Kathy was packing the van, she heard the Mayor's voice on the radio telling everyone to leave the city. Those who chose to stay should expect massive flooding. They should have axes ready



to chop through to the rough if the water engulfed their houses. There were tears when Kathy and the girls said good-bye to Zeitoun.

As Zeitoun traveled through the city to his work sites, he found the city to be chaotic and the streets to be gridlocked with traffic much worse than he thought. He also saw hundreds of people walking toward the Superdome with coolers and blankets. It would all be over in a few hours he thought to himself. Kathy called a few hours later. She was stuck in traffic a few miles outside the city. She had taken a wrong turn and would have to loop around and cross over Lake Pontchartrain on the way to family in Baton Rouge.

Three hours later, Zeitoun called and Kathy had only gone a total of fifty miles. She was looking forward to a few days of relaxation but dreaded the comments her family would make about her religion and wearing the hijab—the head covering Muslim women were required to wear. She recalled things that had driven her away from Christianity including an irate pastor who demanded more donations from the congregation; and, when the pastor called her out in front of the entire church for reading about Islam. Her friend, Yuko encouraged her to learn more about Islam and Kathy began taking it serious.

Kathy and the kids finally arrived in Baton Rouge. The kids fell right to sleep. She called Zeitoun who reported that the storm hadn't hit yet.

Sunday, August 28

Kathy turned the TV on the next morning. Katrina was officially a Category 5 hurricane and still heading directly for New Orleans. Winds were over 150 mph. Meteorologists were predicting dire conditions: ten-foot surges, levee breaches, dangerous flooding and debilitating winds. Customers were still calling Zeitoun for help in securing their property. Since conditions weren't bad, Zeitoun spent part of the day helping his customers. Mayor Nagin issued a mandatory evacuation order in the late morning. Zeitoun saw lines of people waiting at bus stops. Conditions weren't great in Baton Rouge. There were high winds and dark skies and power outages. Kathy was temporarily unable to get through to Zeitoun either by cell or land phone.

Zeitoun was able to get through to Kathy later. He had been assessing the possible damage the house could sustain. Perhaps a large tree in the back yard would be uprooted; portions of the roof might fly off; and, there probably would be plenty of leaks he'd have to attend to. Just before midnight, the front end of Katrina hit the house. The winds were swirling and the rain was coming in relentless sheets. The power went out and leaks sprung out which Zeitoun tried to keep up with. Windows were breaking. Zeitoun worked endlessly for hours trying to keep up with the damage. He didn't think it would flood but prepared an old canoe he had in the garage just in case. He eventually fell into a fitful sleep.

Monday, August 29

Zeitoun got up late the next morning. The power was still out and the winds were strong but the rain was moderate. By the afternoon, the wind and rain decreased enough for



Zeitoun to go outside and explore. There was about 18" of water in the yard. His canoe was floating and ready to go. He paddled around the house and discovered that damage was minimal. He observed damage to other houses in the block. When the water began draining from the streets that evening, he called Kathy and told her to come home. She was tempted but it was too late. She'd return with the kids the next day. The mayor warned the people not to return. That night it was quiet. Zeitoun heard no wind, rain or sirens.

Tuesday, August 30

The next morning everything was quiet. Zeitoun felt fatigued from all his efforts to stay up with the leaks and other damage He fell into a half-sleep like state with thoughts of his childhood back in Syria. Suddenly, he woke up to the sound of water. It was not rain but a constant running, almost like a river. The sound of the water was displaced by a wild chaotic sound that he could not describe.

Part II

Part II Summary and Analysis

Part II

Tuesday, August 30

The sound of the rushing river continued. Was it a broken pipe somewhere? Maybe he could fix it. He looked out the bedroom window of his daughter's room and saw a wide sea of water. It was flowing into the yard, under the house and was rising rapidly. The day before the water had receded. What happened? Then he realized that the water was lake water, not sea water because it was coming from the north. That meant that the levees had been breached. He knew then that most of the city was flooded and new instinctively that the recovery would take months, even years. He let Kathy know in a brief conversation and got off to get to work. He began carrying everything from the first floor to the second floor. Kathy called to make sure he found her jewelry box and saved her fine china. She taunted him for his now obviously poor decision not to renew their flood insurance. He watched the water rise all day. By that night, the neighborhood was under nine feet of water and Zeitoun could no longer ascend to the first floor. He kept in constant communication with Kathy. They knew that their house would have to be completely gutted and renovated. Kathy had started to return but decided to turn back to her brother's house.

Zeitoun still refused to leave. With a small flashlight he looked around at the items he was able to salvage thus far including photos of his siblings and old pictures from his childhood. That night he could not sleep in his bed. It was sweltering and unbearably humid. How did anyone sleep in New Orleans in August without air conditioning, he thought. He found an old tent and crawled out the bedroom window to camp on the roof where it would be cooler. There were many dogs in his neighborhood and some were always barking. However, they were unusually quiet. The dogs had been left behind and their barks were angry and hurt.

Wednesday, August 31

Zeitoun crawled out of his tent the next morning. The sun was bright and the city was underwater as far as he could see. The sound of a helicopter interrupted his morning prayers. He noticed the canoe was still tied to the side of the house. He slid down into the canoe and began paddling around the neighborhood. As he moved through the streets, he saw cars and bicycles beneath him. He thought of all the animals that must have drowned -domestic and wild.

Zeitoun felt fairly certain that probably no one had died in his neighborhood since the water had risen so slowly. A neighbor, Frank, who was desperate for cigarettes climbed from his window and joined Zeitoun in the canoe. They found Frank's brand new truck



under five feet of water. They found an elderly couple who was waving a large white sheet from the second floor. They wanted to get out. Zeitoun promised he'd get someone to help them.

They heard the faint cry of a woman from a one-story house. Zeitoun swam to the front door. After repeated tries the door finally gave. He found the woman, in her seventies, clinging to the top of a bookcase, her head barely above the water line. She was a big woman and could not fit in the canoe. Zeitoun told her they'd be back with help. As they paddled on, they saw a large military fan boat. They tried to wave it down but it didn't even notice them. At least ten such craft by-passed them in the next twenty minutes. Finally, they flagged down a fishing boat with two men who followed them to the woman's house. It was difficult to get the large woman out of the house but the men eventually managed to save her. Zeitoun led the fishing boat back to the old couple who were able to lower themselves down into the fishing boat to safety.

Kathy could no longer get through to Zeitoun. She was worried. The news was all bad. Another ten thousand National Guardsmen were being dispatched to the New Orleans region. The media was reporting lawlessness and crime since New Orleans had descended into a third-world status. Things were getting more stressful for her at her brother's house. Her mother stopped by and told Kathy that she should "take off that thing" (the hijab) because "He's not here. Be yourself." (p. 116). For his part, Zeitoun was feeling enthusiastic - he had already saved a number of elderly people from certain death. He felt he had purpose. Zeitoun made his way to one of his properties, the house on Claiborne. The phone was working at one of his tenant's apartments so he called Kathy. She insisted he come home but he said he was staying. He wanted to see how things worked out with his own eyes and he felt he was there to help.

Zeitoun stayed in his tent again that night. He used a small grill to cook his dinner from food that he was able to salvage and store in the still cool freezer. Unable to sleep, he crawled back inside and found more old photos from his childhood. He found pictures of his oldest brother Mohammed who wanted to be one of the best swimmers in the world. He followed his dream and came in first in a major competition. Mohammed died as a young man but had remained an inspiration to Zeitoun for his entire life including the challenges that he was facing from Katrina.

Thursday, September 1

Kathy could no longer take the pressures of staying with family in Baton Rouge. She could not return to New Orleans yet because it was too dangerous. She decided to take the kids for a week's vacation in Phoenix where her friend Yuko lived. Zeitoun awoke to the mournful howling of dogs. They sounded near and he was determined to find them. He paddled around and found the house where the barking was coming from. He had to climb to the second floor and make a bridge with a plank between a tree and the house to gain access to the house. He pried a window open and found the dogs who had no food or water. He returned home and was able to reach the freezer and grab several thawing steaks. He brought the steaks back to the dogs who immediately began



gnawing on them. On his way home, he noticed that the water was becoming more contaminated with debris and food and oil and gasoline.

As Zeitoun paddled around, he grabbed any uncontaminated food or bottled water and place it in his canoe and distributed it to anyone he encountered who needed it. People were wading through the water with laundry baskets full of personal items. He headed downtown and paddled up to one of the I-10 ramps where people were stranded. A helicopter had made a food drop for them. The people had extra so they gave Zeitoun a case of bottled water to hand out to people in need he may encounter. He didn't sleep well that night with the constant sound of helicopters overhead.

Friday, September 2

Zeitoun paddled toward downtown to see what had happened to the building where his small office was located. As he neared the building, he saw a group of eight or nine men with trash bags who were obviously looting. Zeitoun decided to steer clear of them and visit his office on another day. Zeitoun was getting pressure from his brother Ahmad to leave and join his family but Zeitoun was dug in and not about the leave.

A friend called Kathy asking Zeitoun to check on a building at Tulane University where the friend worked. Zeitoun was interested in seeing what damage had been done to the university. He was pleasantly surprised that there was very little flooding on the campus and he could actually walk around, not paddle around. Zeitoun ran into a friend, Nasser Dayoob, there. He left with Zeitoun because he wanted to see for himself the damage to the city and wanted to learn the status of his own home. He dropped Nasser off at his Claiborne property where he could make some phone calls.

On his way to one of his properties, Zeitoun heard someone calling to him. It was an elderly pastor that he knew. Alvin asked if Zeitoun could help get him and his wife, Beulah, out. The conditions would not allow them to evacuate the couple in the canoe. He told Alvin he'd get help and be back. Zeitoun paddled to the Memorial Medical Center, fighting the wind and rain all the time. There were armed soldiers guarding the facility who had no mercy. They aimed their guns at Zeitoun and told him to get help somewhere else. The soldiers even refused to telephone for help. He paddled to the intersection of Napoleon and St. Charles, which his aching soldiers told him was quite a distance, and found a military camp set up there. A soldier spoke with them and promised to send help for the couple, probably in about an hour. He let the couple know that help was on the way.

Zeitoun picked up Nasser and in their travels found a case of MREs in an abandoned military jeep. They soon gave these ready-to-eat meals to a family of five who hadn't eaten for a while. It was getting dark and they headed back to the house. On the way they went by Alvin's house to make sure they'd been evacuated. But they were sitting on the porch and had been waiting for four hours. Zeitoun was furious but told the old folks he'd figure something out. Zeitoun found one of his tenants, Todd Gambino, at the Claiborne house. He had found a motor boat he was using to help people. He happily agreed to go rescue the pastor and his wife.



Zeitoun let Nasser sleep in his tent that night. Zeitoun was restless and sat in his daughter's room. He really missed them. He spent some time looking at family photo albums of Kathy and the girls and older ones of him and his brothers. He recalled the days when his brother Ahmad was at sea and he was stuck home doing construction work. His mother sensed his dissatisfaction with the work and asked Ahmad to take him out on his next sea-going mission. Zeitoun was thrilled. It was the beginning of a career that would last ten years. That night he prayed on his daughter's floor—praying that he would soon be reunited with his family.

Saturday, September 3

The next morning, Zeitoun checked the freezer and his food was almost all gone. He was still sharing what he had with the dogs across the way and paddled over there to feed them. Zeitoun decided to go downtown and check on his office, hoping there were no thugs around. There were several helicopters overhead and a commotion up ahead. A bloated body had been discovered. Zeitoun continued paddling. If it was a friend or neighbor, he didn't want to see him that way.

On the roof that night, Zeitoun, Todd and Nasser barbecued the last of the meat. They talked about FEMA, the Superdome and the Convention Center. They had heard from a few people they encountered that things were bad at the Superdome. The men saw the glow of large fire off in the distance. Zeitoun determined that it was near his office. He thought of his large supply of paint and other equipment possibly being lost. He told the others that he had to go check on his property.

Todd started up the motor boat and they headed downtown to Zeitoun's office. Luckily, Zeitoun's office was unharmed but it was very close to the fire. The fire station was flooded and there were no firefighters in sight. There was no way to call for help. The fire would just have to run its course. The men sat in the boat and watched. The wind shifted away from Zeitoun's office and spared it from succumbing to the vicious fire. Watching the fire among all the flooding, Zeitoun could not help but think of the Qur'an and the story of Noah and the flood.

Sunday, September 4

Zeitoun took the canoe out alone. He experienced a surreal moment when he saw three horses eating grass in a dry section of an elevated area of the downtown area. A woman called to him from a second story asking if he could help her. As she made her way down, Zeitoun could tell from her heavy make-up and short skirt and heels that she was a prostitute. He dropped her off a short distance away. She said she was going to work. He came to the I-10 overpass where he had seen the people waiting to be rescued. They were gone but he thought he saw a dog. He climbed up the slight rise and was nauseated to see that a dozen dogs had all been killed, shot repeatedly. He called Kathy that evening to tell her about the cruelty he saw. Kathy and the kids were in Phoenix with Yuko. He told her to enroll the kids in school. It was important that they not miss any time in school. Zeitoun could not shake the haunting images of the



slaughtered dogs. His one weakness was for animals. As a child he'd collect lizards and crabs and once even a stray donkey.

Monday, September 5

He went to the Claiborne house and called Kathy. She heard on the news that two New Orleans police officers had killed themselves. The gangs, the toxic chemicals, flooding and the disease proved too much for them. A neighbor who had evacuated had called Kathy to see if Zeitoun could look for their cat. Zeitoun saw no sign of the cat when he passed by later.

Tuesday, September 6

Zeitoun and Nasser paddled down toward the post-office and found an orange helicopter that had crashed. There was no smoke and no one was around it. That night he talked to Kathy. She hadn't gotten the kids in school yet but more pressing matters were on her mind. He needed to leave. The mayor was ordering everyone still remaining to leave. Officials were concerned about the spread of disease including E. coli, typhoid fever, cholera and dysentery. The toxic waste and water were presenting grave health risks. But Zeitoun was unmovable. He felt it was God's calling that he stay and help.

Late, while Zeitoun was on a phone call with his brother, Ahmad, who was still trying to convince him to leave the city, a group of armed men burst into the house.



Part III

Part III Summary and Analysis

Wednesday, September 7

Kathy was worried when Zeitoun didn't call at the time he had promised to. She kept trying to call the Claiborne house but there was no answer. She called around to different friends and family but no one had seen Zeitoun.

Thursday, September 8

Still no call from Zeitoun. Ahmad called and sent a plea to a Katrina relief organization asking for help in finding his brother. Soon every family member from Syria was calling Kathy. She was trying to stay calm for the sake of her children but it was difficult.

Friday, September 9

At breakfast, the kids asked about Zeitoun. Kathy felt she had no choice other than to say he called her late the night before. She tried the Claiborne house repeatedly all day but there was no answer. The girls knew their house was underwater. Kathy tried to put a positive spin on it by telling them they'd get all new bedroom furniture.

Saturday, September 10

Saturday was a repeat of the days before. Kathy was pacing and hoping that the phone would ring and calling the Claiborne house all day. All of Zeitoun's relatives were calling everyday. Yuko helped her in trying to find information about Zeitoun through the Red Cross. The children were beginning to realize that their father might be in big trouble. Aisha was taking it the worst. She was constantly asking about him. The stress was worse than Kathy thought. When she brushed Aisha's hair, big clumps came out.

Sunday, September 11

It has been six days since Kathy had heard from Zeitoun. She could no longer pretend that it was somehow normal that Zeitoun had not contacted her for such a long time. He must be injured or unconscious or worse or else he'd call. She heard on the news how bodies had been found floating in the water, unclaimed and unidentified. He was too smart to be hurt accidentally. Did someone murder her husband? How would she do without him? She found her house on a map on the Internet. She couldn't believe the foul water that it was submerged in.

Monday, September 12



Kathy enrolled the kids in school. They had missed two full weeks by then. Life had to go on. After dropping the kids off at school, Kathy heard on the radio that the death toll in New Orleans was now at 279.

Tuesday, September 13

With the kids in school, Kathy had more time to herself and more time to fret and worry. The death toll jumped to 423. Ahmad called Kathy everyday. He was looking into flights to New Orleans. His wife did not want him to go.

Wednesday, September 14

The death toll jumped to 648. Kathy checked in with the Red Cross on a daily basis. His name and photo were on every list that was available. Kathy and even the kids began to wonder where they would live. She thought of the suffering of his family in Syria . They were such a loving support system, Kathy wondered if she should take the kids and live there. The family members in Syria were, in fact, despondent and resigned to the loss of Zeitoun. They wanted his remains found.

Saturday, September 17

Kathy didn't want to find Zeitoun's name on any list but she couldn't resist looking on the Internet for it. She did find evidence of the violence and crime that was taking place there. Foreign mercenaries were allegedly being brought into the city. Some were from Israel which panicked Kathy because her husband was an Arab. There were so many armed soldiers and private security that Kathy became convinced that Zeitoun had been shot and killed.

Monday, September 19

It had been two weeks since Kathy heard from Zeitoun. Kathy wanted to return home. She was sure she could find Zeitoun. Just as the family in Syria asserted, Zeitoun had probably been killed by one of the roving gangs. She needed to find him and bury him. News reports indicated that another hurricane, Rita, was heading for New Orleans. The mayor canceled plans to reopen the city. The threat of another storm made Kathy reconsider her plans to travel back home. Kathy prayed on the living room floor with Nademah. As soon as they completed their prayers, the phone rang. A man asked if Kathy was Mrs. Zeitoun. Kathy's stomach dropped to the floor. The man said he saw Zeitoun. He's in prison, the man said. The man was a missionary who had visited the prison in St. Gabriel. Zeitoun gave the man Kathy's number and asked him to call. Kathy had dozens of questions but the man knew nothing else.

Part IV

Part IV Summary and Analysis

Part IV

Tuesday, September 6

The men who broke into Zeitoun's house were wearing mismatched military garb—nothing official looking. They were carrying M-16s and handguns. There were five white men and one African American woman. Zeitoun told the intruders that he was the landlord of the house. They asked for his ID but didn't look at it. They ordered him to get in their boat. Ronnie and Nasser were already in the boat, an enormous fan boat—a military craft. Todd arrived in his boat and the men forced him into the boat, too.

Zeitoun did not panic. He figured their actions were connected with the mandatory evacuation orders issued by the mayor. He needed a lawyer and wanted to call Kathy but Yuko's phone number was inside and he hadn't memorized it. The men would not let Zeitoun back inside to get the slip of paper with the phone number. The boat stopped at an intersection where there were dozens of soldiers had set up operations. Zeitoun was led off the boat and as soon as he touched land, he was attacked. He was shoved to the ground and his face was pushed into the mud. His hands were handcuffed behind his back and his legs were tied together. The same thing happened to Zeitoun's friends. They were all shuffled into a white van.

They were taken to a passenger terminal where trains and buses docked. He had taken and picked up many people at the terminal but now it looked like a military stronghold—soldiers and guns everywhere. Once inside the building, Zeitoun found it alarming that there were no other civilians. Zeitoun feared that he may get special "attention" from the soldiers because he was an Arab. It had been a constant worry since 9/11. One soldier passed by him and called him Taliban. His friends were being processed - fingerprinted and photographed. One of the soldiers opened Nasser's bag and found \$10,000 in cash. He was never able to convince them that it was his money and not stolen or intended for use in terrorist activities. The soldiers took a small memory chip from Todd who said he was just taking pictures of the flood.

Zeitoun had to surrender his wallet and was thoroughly frisked. He was taken to a small room by two armed soldiers where he was forced to strip searched for contraband. After processing was completed, they were taken outside. Zeitoun thought they were finally going to be evacuated and were heading for a bus. Instead, the area outside the depot had been turned into a prison. Zeitoun and his companions were shoved into cages. Zeitoun thought the impromptu prison resembled Guantanamo Bay.

Their new quarters was next to an Amtrak train track and the ear-shattering noise from the trains was endless, day and night. The guards called him Taliban and terrorists.



Zeitoun pleaded to use the phone but he was told the phones weren't working. They were given pork to eat. Zeitoun and Nasser couldn't eat pork, they told the guards. The guards told them not to eat it. Zeitoun and Nasser prayed which brought on more scorn from the guards. The presence of German Shepherd guard dogs was constant reminding the prisoners of Abu Ghraib. Floodlights came on at dark and stayed on all night.

Wednesday, September 7

Even though he got no sleep the night before, Zeitoun was sure that things would soon be straightened out. He would be allowed his rights of an attorney and a phone call and to learn why he was being detained. But his hopes were soon dashed when the only thing that changed was the addition of more confused prisoners. A Spanish TV crew came in and took a sweeping pan of the caged people. Zeitoun hoped that it would be aired in Spain and that his brother would see it. On second thought, however, Zeitoun did not want his family to see him in prison. He would be shamed before their eyes.

The guards sprayed one prisoner who was obviously mentally disturbed from head to toe with pepper spray which caused painful burns all over the man's body. Zeitoun was lamenting his decision to stay in the city. Kathy had been right all along. Zeitoun's spirit was waning. He would have normally taken up for the man who had been brutalized but he said nothing. He was hungry and all his thoughts were focused on escaping.

Thursday, September 8

Zeitoun woke to another commotion. More prisoners were being sprayed with pepper spray. The gas was spreading all over and stinging the eyes and mouths of everyone. A splinter in Zeitoun's foot was becoming infected. Zeitoun and Nasser couldn't eat most of the meals they were given because they contained pork. Zeitoun got hold of a small sliver of glass and, enduring much pain, cut the metal splinter out of his foot. A man named Jerry was placed in their cage. He repeatedly asked Zeitoun and Nasser about their background. Zeitoun and the others figured he was a plant, placed in their cage to determine if Zeitoun and Nasser were terrorists.

Friday, September 9

Zeitoun and the others were placed on school buses which drove out of the city, heading north to the Hunt Correctional Center, a maximum security prison. They were processed, strip searched and were given orange jumpsuits to wear. Zeitoun was taken to a six feet by eight feet cell where Nasser had already been placed. He still hadn't been allowed a phone call but was certain that he soon would be able to make a call and would use that call to contact Kathy. Zeitoun waved a white napkin at the guards begging to make a phone call. They seemed to relish denying him the chance and told him he was FEMA's problem. FEMA was footing the bill for the incarceration. But why?

Zeitoun was having increasing pain in his back. Was it kidney problem perhaps from the toxins in the air just as Kathy warned? Maybe the pepper spray caused it. He found comfort in reading a passage in the Qur'an called "The Darkening."



Saturday, September 10

The ridicule continued with the guards suggesting that Zeitoun and Nasser were having gay sex. He was taken to a small room to be photographed again. The soldier behind the camera cursed and threatened him for unknown reasons. After he was back in his cell, a guard came by and explicitly told him that he could not engage in gay sex with Nasser. He taunted him further by reminding Zeitoun that gay sex was against his religion. Zeitoun had enough. He gave the guard a tongue-lashing. The guards were purposely accusing the two Muslim men of gay sex because they thought it was a way to wear them down.

Sunday, September 11

Four African American prisoners were added to the tiny cell. There was not room for all the men the guards had shoved in the small enclosure. All the men had been arrested for unknown reasons. One man was a fireman who was picking up debris in his own yard. Most of the FEMA prisoners had been arraigned in a makeshift court. They were told if they didn't demand a lawyer, their felony charges would be reduced to misdemeanors. The pain in Zeitoun's side was worsening. Zeitoun filled out a form to see a doctor.

Monday, September 12

The four African American prisoners were removed. Zeitoun and Nasser had nothing to do except stare at the walls. They didn't want to talk much in case they were being monitored.

Tuesday, September 13

Zeitoun was losing hope that he'd ever get to make a call. In fact, he was wondering if he's ever get out of the bizarre situation he was in. He began to fear that he would be taken to a jail in a foreign, undisclosed location since he wasn't native-born. Was this really America? He was being held without contact, charges, bail or trial. He was being held illegally—against the Constitution. But he was an honest and successful businessman—a house painter. But he had to be realistic. Worse things had happened to American Arabs who were professors, doctors and engineers.

Wednesday, September 14

The pain was so bad that Zeitoun could barely breathe. Nasser told him he looked sick. He had lost a lot of weight because he was barely able to eat any of the food. He began to think that his pain was from sorrow and depression.

Thursday, September 15

Zeitoun asked the nurse if the doctor would see him. She said he probably didn't get the form. Zeitoun should fill out another one. Later, several guards came in and handcuffed and shackled Zeitoun and took him to another cell where he was by himself. Zeitoun



was growing angry and bitter. Maybe Ronnie was a criminal and caused his arrest. Maybe Nasser's big bag of cash brought on suspicion. His girls would grow up without a father. If he was ever released, his reputation was ruined - he would be an ex-con. The pain in his side was incessant.

Friday, September 16

The prisoners were allowed to go outside. Zeitoun heard one bewildering tale after another. One man was moving furniture in his own home. Soldiers broke in, beat him up and left. When he went to the bus station to register a complaint about the incident, he was arrested and caged. A seventy-three-year-old woman was arrested for looting while she was simply in a convenience store purchasing food. She was held at the women's unit nearby. Later that day, SWAT officers burst into Zeitoun's cell. They shoved him into the hall as they ransacked his cell. He was strip-searched and then shoved back in his cell.

Saturday, September 17

Zeitoun was fatigued and still troubled by the strip-search. He was feeling guilty that he had put his family through so much. It was his fault. He shouldn't have stayed behind to help other people. He was being punished for thinking he was special, thinking he was being called upon by God. Perhaps he was driven by the memory of his brother to do something to match his accomplishments. Maybe he had an unhealthy envy over his brother and wanted to surpass him. The US was fallible after all. The political, military and governmental machines were not working. He needed to reconnect with the part of the world that was still working.

Sunday, September 18

A man, who was a missionary, was pushing a cart of Bibles down the hall. Zeitoun whispered to him, pleading with him to call his wife. The man was nervous but wanted to help. He found a pen and tore a cover page from one of the Bibles. Zeitoun quickly wrote his phone number down and gave it to the man who shoved it in his pocket. Zeitoun had hope again. He had found his messenger.

Monday, September 19

Guards came and got Zeitoun the next day. He was taken to a small room where two men in suits were already seated. They were from Homeland Security. They questioned him as to why he hadn't evacuated the city when the order was issued. He told them it had never been his practice to leave his house and business because a storm. He had multiple properties that he wanted to oversee. They asked him about the money Nasser had. Of course, Zeitoun knew nothing about the money. They were pleasant and didn't accuse him of terrorism. They promised to call his wife for him.

Monday, September 19



Soon after the missionary called, Kathy received a call from a man from Homeland Security who confirmed that Zeitoun was the the prison in St. Gabriel. He told Kathy that Zeitoun had been arrested for looting but that the charges would be dropped. Kathy praised and thanked God for his mercy. Now that Kathy knew where to go, it was also time for her to go. She would get the kids out of school and head to St. Gabriel which was an hour away from Baton Rouge. She called the prison but learned that those who had been arrested during the hurricane were not in the computer system. Yuko convinced her not to leave until she was sure he was at the prison.

Kathy called Zeitoun's family in Syria with the good news that he was alive. Ahmad was terribly upset that Zeitoun was in prison. He encouraged her to go to him immediately and get him out. Kathy's lawyer, Raleigh Ohlmeyer, told her he would get Zeitoun out but without a bail system, it would take a while.

Tuesday, September 20

Ahmad badgered Kathy to get Zeitoun out. He feared that the authorities would try to connect him to some terrorist activity. Kathy began to understand why Ahmad so urgently wanted Zeitoun out.

Thursday, September 22

Raleigh Ohlmeyer confirmed that Zeitoun was at the prison. Ahmad wanted to fly to New Orleans to get him. Kathy told him she'd find Zeitoun. She feared that Ahmad would be arrested himself if he came to New Orleans.

Sunday, September 25

The airport was desolate when Kathy landed in New Orleans.

Monday, September 26

Zeitoun had no idea about the steps Kathy and Ohlmeyer were taking. He wasn't certain that Kathy had been called. He was led to a room and introduced to his public defender. There was a judge and prosecutor present as well. Zeitoun was charged with possession of stolen property. His bail was set at \$75,000.

Tuesday, September 27

Attorney Raleigh Ohlmeyer told her that a court date had been set. He told her to gather character witnesses for the hearing. She called the Baton Route District Attorney's office for the address of the court house. They didn't have a court house, she was told. They refused to tell her where hearings were being held. She was reaching the end of her rope. She called CNN to tell them her husband's story. Zeitoun finally met with his attorney. Zeitoun did not want to pay the \$75,000 bail. It was a ridiculous amount for petty crime - a crime which he didn't commit. He would use his property as collateral but would not pay the \$75,000.



Wednesday, September 28

Kathy went to the prison and met the character witnesses and thanked them all for coming. They waited for hours and Attorney Raleigh Ohlmeyer was finally notified that the hearing was canceled. Kathy would have to use their property as collateral against the bail. Zeitoun's cousin, Adnan, drove her back to the city. They were stopped by cops and detained for ten minutes before they were allowed to proceed. They drove right to the office. It had been badly damaged. They looked for the title for over an hour and finally found it. They faxed it to the bondsman and it was approved as a surety bond for his release.

Thursday, September 29

Kathy and Adnan waited outside the prison gates for Zeitoun the next morning. When he stepped off the bus, they were shocked at how thin he was. He had lost 20 pounds in three weeks. Zeitoun and Kathy held each other tightly. Zeitoun couldn't get away soon enough. As they drove, Zeitoun looked behind them, fearing that they were being followed. Ahmad called and was shocked when he was able to finally talk to his brother.

Part V

Part V Summary and Analysis

Fall 2008

Kathy was having memory lapses and times when she couldn't remember how to do the simplest tasks.

At times, she found herself holding the phone and calling someone but having no idea who she's calling or why. The family home was redone and expanded. The office was a total loss and they decided to replace it with a home office. Doctors could find no cause for the pain in his side. Zeitoun was convinced it had been caused by sorrow. It took him a year to regain the weight he lost.

The first place they drove to after Zeitoun was released was their house on Dart Street. The stench was overpowering. Without Zeitoun there to plug up leaks and keep things repaired, more water had seeped in. The interior was totally ruined. Zeitoun thought of the dogs. He ran over and used the plank to cross over to the window. He could tell by the odor that the dogs were dead. He found them together in one of the bedrooms. The Federal Emergency Management Agency notified them that they were authorized to receive a free two-bedroom trailer they could live in until the house was redone. The trailer was delivered but was never connected to electricity or water and months later was deemed unsafe by a government inspector. The time passed when they needed the trailer and after badgering the government, it was finally hauled away fourteen months later.

In addition to her memory problems, Kathy was having serious physical problems. Her stomach would swell after just eating a small amount of food. She choked on everything. She grew very clumsy and dropped things all the time. She was dizzy and her extremities would go numb at times. Doctors suspected MS or some other degenerative disease. But tests pointed toward post-traumatic stress syndrome. Kathy has learned to cope with her condition but has never fully recovered from it. Kathy and Zeitoun hired a lawyer to pursue a civil suit against the city and other agencies. They found the names of the arresting officers and named them in the suit but realized it wasn't the cops but the entire system that was corrupt. Camp Greyhound has been the subject of investigative reports.

Despite her physical problems, Kathy gave birth to a baby boy named Ahmad on November 10, 2006. Despite what happened to him, Zeitoun never entertained any thoughts of relocating to another city. He still runs his painting business and property management businesses in New Orleans. Todd spent five months at the prison and charges were finally dropped against him. Nasser spent six months locked up. All charges were eventually dropped. No one could find his \$10,000 and there was no record of it.



Some nights Zeitoun struggles to sleep, the thoughts of what happened to him run through his mind. The kids are afraid of water. The rebuilding of the city has been slow and frustrating. It has not yet fully recovered and may never. Zeitoun is happy to be free and back in his city. He thinks that his experience made him stronger. Zeitoun feels that those who survived and stayed in the city are stronger as well.



Characters

Abdulrahman Zeitoun

Abdulrahman Zeitoun, a Syrian-American, was known by his American friends and customers in New Orleans simply as Zeitoun since his first name proved too difficult to pronounce. As young boys, Zeitoun and his older brother Ahmad fished at night for sardines with the village fishermen. Zeitoun's father was deceased so Zeitoun and Ahmad turned over all their earnings to their fragile mother to help support the family.

Ahmad became a sailor while Zeitoun stayed in the family village of Jableh and became a construction worker. But his mother sensed Zeitoun wasn't happy and yearned to venture out into the world. She asked Ahmad to get Zeitoun a position on his ship and allow him to go on their next journey. Ahmad complied and soon Zeitoun was a sailor, a career he stayed with for the next ten years.

Eventually Zeitoun made his way to America and settled in New Orleans. It was there that he met his wife, Kathy, who was an American divorcee with one child. That she had converted to Islam was a plus for Zeitoun. The moment he saw Kathy he knew she was the one for him. The couple fell in love and married. At the time the Category 5 hurricane, Katrina, hit New Orleans the couple had three more children and a thriving painting business as well as the owners of multiple properties that they managed.

Kathy left with the children for higher ground when Katrina hit but Zeitoun refused to leave. He stayed behind to watch over his properties and, as it turned out, help people stranded by the floods. He used an old aluminum canoe he had in the garage to paddle around the neighborhood handing out food and giving people rides to safety. But no good deed goes unpunished! FEMA's hired guns weren't very bright and took Zeitoun for a looter, threw him into jail and stripped him of his civil rights. But Zeitoun was a strong person who just became stronger. He saw it through and instead of becoming angry or bitter, he appreciated his lot in life even more. He realized that a few bad apples don't necessarily spoil the batch.

Kathy Zeitoun

Kathy Zeitoun was the single mother of a two-year-old son when she met Abdulrahman Zeitoun. She had just gone through a difficult divorce and had only recently converted to Islam. She had been raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in a church-going Christian family. She began to become disillusioned in her Christian church when the pastor repeatedly scolded the congregation for not donating enough money. Her friend, Yuko was married to a Muslim man and converted to the religion before their marriage. When the pastor caught wind of Kathy's interest in Islam, he called her before the congregation and humiliated her for studying such an evil religion. That was it for Kathy. She learned more about Islam from Yuko and soon converted.



When she first met Zeitoun, it was not love at first sight like it was for him. But after knowing Zeitoun for several years, she began to appreciate him and realize he offered her everything she had ever wanted in a man. The two were married and over the years, added three daughters to their family. Kathy played an important role in the family business, fielding requests from customers, scheduling her husband's paint crews, managing their property and their business books.

Kathy's motherly instincts told her to take her kids out of New Orleans when Katrina was heading directly at the city. Zeitoun refused to go with her. He would stay and watch over their property. Kathy and her kids stayed with friends and family the month following Katrina. When days went by without hearing from Zeitoun, she feared the worse. When she learned that he had been falsely imprisoned, she did everything she could do to free him. Finally, they were reunited and their relationship had not only survived the ordeal, it had strengthened it.

Kathy suffered from post-traumatic syndrome as a result of the stressful time during Zeitoun's dilemma. She has learned to cope with the condition but it has never completely gone away.

The Zeitoun Children

Zachary, Nademah, Safiya, Aisha, and Ahmad are the children of Abdulrahman and Kathy Zeitoun. Zachary is Zeitoun's step-son and Ahmad is his youngest child and was named after Zeitoun's brother with whom it maintained a strong relationship over the years.

Ahmad Zeitoun

Ahmad Zeitoun is Zeitoun's older brother. As youngsters, they fished for sardines together to help support the family. They were both sea-faring sailors as young men. When Zeitoun was missing, Ahmad called Kathy daily, frantic for Zeitoun to be found.

Adnan

Adnan is Zeitoun's cousin. He was helpful when Zeitoun was in prison. He drove Kathy around and accompanied her on her quest to free her husband. Kathy was humiliated when her relatives refused to allow Adnan to stay at their house. She knew it was her family's racial bias that made him unwelcome.

Yuko

Yuko was Kathy's best friend and was instrumental in introducing Kathy to Islam. When Kathy grew discontent with Christianity she studied material about Islam supplied to her



by Yuko. Kathy and the kids stayed with Yuko and her husband in Phoenix during Katrina and the storm's aftermath.

Kathy's Family

When Katrina was on her way to New Orleans, Kathy decided to take the kids to Baton Rouge to stay with her relatives. She could only bear to stay a few weeks when the stress of too much togetherness became overwhelming. She took the kids and stayed with friends in Arizona. Her parents and siblings were never accepting of Kathy's conversion to Islam and often made derisive comments about it.

Nasser Dayoob

Nasser Dayoob accompanied Zeitoun on his rounds in the canoe after the flood. When he was arrested with Zeitoun, Nasser had a travel bag that contained \$10,000 in cash. The money was confiscated as "evidence" and could not be located after Nasser was released.

FEMA Soldiers

When Zeitoun was working at one of his own rental properties after Katrina struck New Orleans, he and his companions were arrested by FEMA soldiers on bogus charges. The soldiers were "bought" by FEMA and behaved in an unprofessional and even illegal manner.

Raleigh Ohlmeyer

Raleigh Ohlmeyer was Zeitoun and Kathy's attorney. He did his best to free Zeitoun but it was difficult because there was no bail system and no court house available. Everything was in chaos due to the destruction caused by Katrina.



Objects/Places

New Orleans, LA

Zeitoun and his family lived in New Orleans, LA, when the Category 5 hurricane, Katrina, struck and devastated the city.

Katrina

Katrina, a Category 5 hurricane, struck New Orleans, LA, on August 25, 2005. Zeitoun's wife took their kids to higher ground but Zeitoun stayed behind to watch over their property.

Zeitoun's Canoe

After the city of New Orleans flooded, Zeitoun took out an old aluminum canoe that he picked up somewhere and paddled around the neighborhood. He was able to get food and water to stranded people and pets and was able to take some people to safety.

Zeitoun's House

Zeitoun stayed at the family house on Dart Street in New Orleans. He carried as many items as he could up to the second floor of the house when the first floor was flooded. He slept on a tent on the roof because it was very hot and humid inside the house without air conditioning.

The Claiborne Property

The Zeitouns owned a lot of rental property one of which was on Claiborne Street. It was there that Claiborne and some friends were arrested for looting and possession of stolen property.

Jableh, Syria

Zeitoun was born and raised in Jableh, a fishing town on the coast of Syria. He would often recall the peaceful, idyllic days of his youth that he spent fishing for sardines with his brother.



Baton Rouge, LA

Kathy was from Baton Rouge and took her children there to stay with family when Katrina was threatening to hit and the mayor had issued an evacuation order.

Phoenix, AZ

Kathy began to feel stressed staying at her brother's house in Baton Rouge so she took the kids to stay at her friend Yuko's house in Phoenix, AZ.

Hunt Correctional Center

Hunt Correctional Center, a maximum security prison, was where Zeitoun was taken after he was arrested on bogus charges of looting and possession of stolen property.

Camp Greyhound

FEMA "soldiers" took Zeitoun and his friends to the bus station in New Orleans. They thought they were being evacuated but instead they were placed in cages. The station became known as Camp Greyhound and was the subject of investigative reporting in the aftermath of Katrina.

Themes

Perseverance

Abdulrahman Zeitoun endured an ordeal that many people would find difficult to do. Zeitoun, as he was known, was raised in a modest fishing village on the coast of Syria. By the time he was a young teenager, his father had died. He and a brother that was just a few years older than he got up early in the day, before sunrise, to go out with the village fishermen to cast their nets for sardines. When he was a young man, he took to the rugged seas as a sailor, a career he pursued for ten years.

Zeitoun learned that it was only on moonless nights that the plankton would be attracted by the lanterns of the fishermen and that it was the plankton that attracted the sardines. Although it was a tough life for an adolescent and really the job of grown men, Zeitoun knew that his fragile mother needed the money so that the family could survive. When Zeitoun was a sailor in the rough ocean waters, he learned to see the storms through because there was a calm waiting for him on the other side of it. It was on those moonless nights that Zeitoun developed a work ethic that would last a lifetime. It was his experiences as a young boy and man that taught him that life is not easy but that tenacity and patience will see you through.

One experience in life prepares a person for another and unusually more difficult challenge. When the merciless Katrina plowed her Category 5 presence into Louisiana's largest city on August 25, 2005, some thirty-four years from his days as a young fisherman, Zeitoun drew on the experiences of those early days to see him through. He had learned that he could make it through the most demanding and challenging of situations. That turning points in Zeitoun's life that involve the high seas is not lost on the reader.

Racism/Religious Bias

Abdulrahman Zeitoun was born in Jableh, a small fishing village in Syria. He eventually emigrated to the United States and settled in New Orleans, Louisiana. Eventually, he became a naturalized citizen who was an upstanding business and a positive presence in his community. None the less, always looming over him was the prejudice he felt from others about his origin, his dark coloring and his exotic and mysterious religion.

Zeitoun was very successful in America and that success was the result of his hard work, dedication and unyielding desire to make a happy and comfortable life for his family. He was the owner of a busy paint contracting company and he and his wife were the owners of multiple properties which they renovated, turned into rental property and managed. Zeitoun had never gotten into any trouble with the law, his neighbors or his community. However, after 9/11, he and the majority of Arab-Americans began to feel the volume had turned up on the xenophobia that had always been prevalent.



It was Zeitoun's experience that what American's found most distasteful about Arabs was their Islamic religion. The hijabs that Muslim women had to wear were a source of annoyance to many people. Kathy Zeitoun experienced this bias even from her own family—even her loving mother who told her that she could take "that thing" off her head when Zeitoun wasn't around. The guards at the prison where Zeitoun was taken were cruel and unkind to all the prisoners. But when Zeitoun knelt on the floor and faced Mecca to pray, the guards became even more derisive.

Zeitoun did not adhere to the evacuation order that was issued by the New Orleans mayor in the aftermath of Katrina. He chose to stay behind and watch his property and help people and even pets that were stranded and needed assistance. He was arrested for looting and was treated suspiciously not because of what the authorities thought he did; rather, it was for who they thought he was.

Strength through Adversity

Zeitoun, the subject of this eponymous book, was a strong person before he was met with the biggest challenge of his life. However, after going through his ordeal, his strength of character was not only in check but more robust than ever. The majority of people incarcerated for something they hadn't done and stripped of their civil and constitutional rights would have become bitter and defeated. Zeitoun became physically ill and depressed while falsely imprisoned but a spirit remained within him that told him he could make it through to a better place. Perhaps it could be partially attributed to his strong religious faith, or his close family ties or his loving wife and children waiting for him. But much of Zeitoun's courage and resolve came from an internal source, a flame that never flickered out.

Zeitoun had an older brother who had become a national hero in his native Syria. He was one of the top swimmers of the time but he tragically died at a young age. Zeitoun who was his much younger brother held up that brother as his ideal, as a model that you can accomplish anything you set out to do if you believe in yourself and work hard.

Nobody said life would be easy and Zeitoun, coming from a backward country ruled by a cruel dictator, was more aware of the fact than most. When he came to America, he knew it was the land where dreams come true but he also knew that as an Arab-American, as unfair as it may be, there was an aura of suspicion that would always accompany him.

While the prejudice against him and the ridicule of his religion hurt deeply, it did not destroy him or make him believe in himself less. It made him stronger and believe in himself all the more.

Style

Perspective

"Zeitoun" by author Dave Eggers, is written in the third-person narrative and from a limited omniscient point of view. The book is the true story of Abdulrahman Zeitoun, his battle with Hurricane Katrina, and his subsequent struggles with the FEMA soldiers who arrested and incarcerated him on bogus charges that were later dropped. Although the work is non-fiction, the story is written in a style that is completely sympathetic to Zeitoun. In a note before the beginning of the book, the author explains that the events and incidents described in "Zeitoun" are based in the main on the accounts of Zeitoun and his wife Kathy. By this statement, the author is acknowledging that there could be other versions of this story.

The author also points out that conversations were reconstructed to the best of his ability but that all dates, locations and other provable factors were confirmed by the author. The author is also careful to point out that this book, in no way, pretends to be an expert on Katrina and that it is not the definitive book on the hurricane and the impact it had on the city of New Orleans. Eggers underscores the fact that the book was written with the cooperation of Zeitoun and his wife and that it is their views that are presented in his work.

Tone

"Zeitoun" by author Dave Eggers, is written in a clear, matter-of-fact style that shows no bias or judgment. Although it presents an overall sympathetic account of the ordeal that Zeitoun went through in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, emotions are evoked by the story itself as opposed to the words or interpretation of the author. The story is told in the style of an investigative report, presenting facts and events in a chronology that provides a clear description of Zeitoun's story that is not overly burdened by a deluge of detail and is captured in a pace that is fast moving and engaging.

Perhaps the stoicism of Zeitoun, the man himself, shines through the storytelling. The reader gleans from the story that Zeitoun, an Arab-American, is a rather subdued, unemotional type of person who is practical and not easily led to fits of joy or misery. He takes life as it comes and tries to do his best. Even in the portions of the book that describe the horrific days that Zeitoun spent falsely imprisoned, Zeitoun's thoughts are rarely angry or bitter. He approached his dilemma like he did his life. What could he do to improve his situation? What was the best way to get out of the hell hole he was in and get back to his life.

The book has a positive, though mostly subtle, spirit that runs throughout the story. In fact, it is the heart and soul of the book. Zeitoun's spirit may have been suppressed by



his experience but it was never defeated. That sense of survival is a message that casts a golden glow over the entire account.

Structure

"Zeitoun" by Dave Eggers, is separated into five main parts. Each part is segmented by date. The story is told in a mainly chronological order. However, there is a generous use of flashbacks that tell the story of Zeitoun's childhood in Syria and Zeitoun and Kathy's early relationship and life pre-Katrina.

Part I describes the days leading up to Katrina, the Category 5 hurricane that was heading directly to New Orleans. This part includes Kathy's struggle in deciding what to do about the monster storm heading their way. She is forced to deal with the conflicted feelings of taking her children to safety and leaving her husband behind. Part II deals with the challenges that face Zeitoun during and after Katrina struck land. Zeitoun felt that God had was calling to him to stay behind and help people at risk. He defended his own property and he took people who were stranded to safety.

Part III describes Kathy's frantic search for Zeitoun after he stopped calling for her. Was he alive or had he drowned or been killed by one of the roving gangs of thugs she heard about on the news? Part IV describes Zeitoun's ordeal after he was wrongfully incarcerated by FEMA soldiers who stripped him and many others of their basic rights as citizens. Part V provides an update of the aftermath of the storm and Zeitoun's incarceration.



Quotes

"Once the sardines were ready, tens of thousands of them glistening in the refracted light, the fisherman would cinch the net and haul them in." (Part 1, p. 14).

"If a sailor finds the right port or the right woman, he'll drop anchor." (Part I, p. 41).

"In minutes the boat was gone into the darkness. He was alone at sea for two days, with sharks below and storms above, clinging to the remnants of the barrel, when he finally washed ashore." (Part I, p. 34).

"I want to make her smile like that, he thought. I want to be the one. I want to be the reason. He liked her more with every step she took toward him. He was sold." (Part I, p. 43).

"In Syria we have a saying, 'The crazy person talks, the wise person listens.'" (Part I, p. 46).

"Zeitoun was surprised. Previous experiments using the stadium as shelter had failed. As a guildler, he worried about the integrity of the stadium's roof. Could it really withstand high winds, torrential rain? You couldn't pay him enough to hide there [the Superdome] from the storm." (Part I, p. 65).

"He couldn't tell when the hurricane made landfall, but the day barely brightened that morning. It went from black to a charcoal gray, the rain like pebbles thrown against glass." (Part I, p. 83).

"Governor Blanco, in a statement directed to would-be criminals, warned that war-hardened US soldiers were on the way to New Orleans to restore order at any cost. 'I have one message for these hoodlums. These troops know how to shoot and kill, and they are more than willing to do so if necessary and I expect they will.'" (Part II, p. 128).

"Zeitoun had never imagined that the day would come that he might see such a thing, a body floating in filthy water, less than a mile from his home." (Part II, p. 158).

"He did not want it to be true that his wife and children were fifteen hundred miles away and might by now presume him to be dead. He did not want it to be true that he was now and might always be a man in a cage, hidden away, no longer part of the world." (Part III, p. 266).

"Kathy has lost her memory. It's shredded, unreliable. The wiring in her mind has been snapped in vital places, she fears, and now the strangest things have been happening." (Part V, p. 303).

"He has watched the progress of the rebuilding of the city. The first few years were frustrating, as legislators and planners bickered over money and protocols. New

Orleans, his home, needs no speeches, no squabbling, and no politics. It needs new flooring, and new roofing, new windows and doors and stairs." (Part V, p. 332).



Topics for Discussion

Why did Zeitoun decide to stay out the storm in New Orleans? How was Zeitoun able to navigate around the flooded streets of New Orleans?

Why did Kathy leave New Orleans? How did Kathy feel about Zeitoun staying behind?

What were possible reasons behind Zeitoun's incarceration? How was Zeitoun's religion used against him by the prison guards? What did authorities possibly suspect about Zeitoun's activities?

What wasn't Zeitoun able to eat much of the food he was given in prison? How did Zeitoun's incarceration impact his health?

What impact did Zeitoun's dilemma have on his wife and children and family in Syria? Why didn't Zeitoun call Kathy for almost a month after he was imprisoned? What did she think when he didn't call?

What health did Kathy suffer from after Zeitoun's ordeal was over? Why could her problems be connected to what happened to her husband?

Where did Zeitoun decide to live after he was released from prison? What are Zeitoun's feelings about America and New Orleans after going through his experience?