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KSBN – K-STATE BOOK NETWORK

Featuring *Zeitoun* by David Eggers

Information and suggestions for teachers who want to incorporate the book or references to *Zeitoun* in their classes

Zeitoun by Dave Eggers is an amazing true story about the lead up to and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and one man's attempt to help others amidst the terrifying and bizarre events that followed the disaster. A Syrian immigrant, Zeitoun is pursuing the American dream of building his own business and living with his family in one of our country's most unique cities. Deciding to stay in New Orleans during the storm to secure his many job sites while his family evacuates, he gets caught up in the drama, confusion, and events that surround Katrina. After the storm passes and the flooding begins, Zeitoun surveys the devastation from his canoe, helping everyone he can along the way. These charitable efforts come to an abrupt halt, however, when he is arrested and swiftly swept into a nightmarish, makeshift detention center. In vivid and compelling prose, *Zeitoun* raises numerous important social issues, from the problems and possibilities of the American Dream to the need for interfaith dialogue and understanding.



The Readers. All new students who attend Orientation and Enrollment in June will receive a copy of *Zeitoun* and will read it over the summer. The rest of the K-State Community – students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni – is also invited to read the book as part of the university-wide reading program. Copies of *Zeitoun* will be available at Varney's and the K-State Student Union Bookstore.

The Rationale. Common reading programs have become popular at universities across the country. They build community: incoming students immediately have something they can discuss with each other and the campus community as a whole. They also send the right academic message: students are asked to read a book and think about it critically at the very start of their undergraduate experience. Common reading programs function as a high-impact educational practice: common intellectual experiences are powerful, proven means of preparing students for success in college.

The Events. In the fall of 2011, KSBN will host a series of events focused on *Zeitoun*. Students will have opportunities to discuss the book inside and outside of class, to participate in a campus wide event series, and film screenings. These events will help provide a distinct K-State experience for first year students.

Questions

Religion

Religion plays an important role in the book. For Kathy, a convert to Islam, religion is a source of identity, comfort, and a source of social contention. How do you see religion functioning in the novel? (45, 66-67)

When you consider some of the virtues or characteristics often associated with religions (e.g., judgment, mercy, forgiveness, compassion, justice, love, hope, charity, etc.) How do you see virtues often associated with religion represented in *Zeitoun*?

Where do you see conflicts and/or resolutions that seem to emerge from religious virtues? What does this story suggest about the values and virtues influencing the actions of the characters?

Which people in this story seem to be most motivated by religious concerns? Describe your understanding of religion in the characters lives and how it influences their actions. Do you relate to their understandings of religion?

How do you understand the reasons for Kathy's conversion to Islam? What challenges does she face? What do Kathy's challenges mean to her? (45, 66-67)

If you were to sit with Kathy today to talk about her religious identity, what would you want to learn? What questions would you ask her?

Based on what is said in the book, describe how the Qur'an influences *Zeitoun's* and Kathy's understanding of their place in the world and responsibilities to others. Compare and contrast this with how you or other people interpret and apply sacred/scriptural writings from your/their religious traditions. Are there portions of some religious writings/scriptures that might be more problematic than others? (61, 158-159)

What principles ought to guide and govern our actions in diverse/pluralistic society? Is there anything/anyone to which we are all accountable? How do you imagine *Zeitoun* or Kathy would answer these questions today? Why? (66)

Books

New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape, by Peirce Lewis

An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature, by Craig Colten

Perilous Place, Powerful Storms: Hurricane Protection in Coastal Louisiana, by Craig Colten

Decision Points, chapter 10 – Katrina, by G.W. Bush.

Social Issues

After reading *Zeitoun*, what insights emerge for you about community, accountability, responsibility, law enforcement, ethics, race/ethnicity/culture, and religion? What questions do these issues raise for you?

How do you see race and/or ethnicity working in *Zeitoun*? Do you think the way that race and ethnicity function in *Zeitoun* speaks to larger social issues? (213-215)

Zeitoun is arrested while he is at his own property and is interned indefinitely without trial. How do you see justice functioning before and after Katrina? (207-209)

Based on your understanding of the story, what do you observe about how people of different religious traditions are living and working together? When people of different religious traditions live and work together in a common/civic endeavor, how might disagreements and/or conflicts in priorities and concerns be managed to everyone's benefit? (266)

How does the shadow of 9/11 impact Zeitoun and his family? Are there ways that you see the events of 9/11 affecting Zeitoun's treatment while he is interned? (46, 212)

Before Zeitoun was interned he experiences a much different post Hurricane Katrina New Orleans than what was frequently shown on television. Why do you think the news coverage of Hurricane Katrina differed so much with Zeitoun's experience? (118-120)

When Ahmed and Fahzia find out that Zeitoun is alive but in prison, they seem almost as worried as they were when they originally lost contact with Zeitoun. Why do you think this is? (272-273)

Why do you think that Zeitoun's family advises Kathy to tell the rest of his family that Zeitoun is fine, but not to tell them that he is in prison? Put yourself in Kathy's place. Would you have respected the families' wishes? Or would you have told everyone? What factors would influence your decision? (274)

Why do you think Zeitoun chose to stay in the New Orleans? Given what happens to him, do you think that Zeitoun would choose to stay in the city again? Given what you know about what happened to Zeitoun, would you choose to stay? (108)

Throughout the book numerous people make explicit and implicit assumptions about one another. How do Zeitoun and Kathy deal with assumptions made about them? How do you deal with people when they make assumptions about you? Do you find yourself making assumptions about other people? (11, 36-37)

Civics

Since Hurricane Katrina, the Department of Homeland Security and FEMA have drastically redesigned their response strategies. Given what happens in *Zeitoun* what changes do you think should have been made? In such situations, how should national, state, and local governments interact with one another as well as with non-governmental response agencies like the Red Cross? (243, 271)

Hurricane Katrina affected the image of the United States held by people living outside of the United States. How did foreign perceptions of the United States government shift after Hurricane Katrina? (273)

Greensburg, Kansas was recently struck by a major tornado that caused considerable damage. How did the response to Greensburg differ than the response to Hurricane Katrina? Why do you think there was a different response to Greensburg than to Katrina?

Which characters make decisions that run contrary to civil law but seem morally permissible? How do you think these characters made these decisions? (266)

The Zeitoun family worked very hard to secure the "American Dream." In what ways does Zeitoun represent the "ideal" immigrant? In what ways does Zeitoun's experience challenge the notion of the "American Dream"? What can we learn about the "American Dream" from Zeitoun's experience? (6)

After all of Zeitoun's trials and tribulations, he refuses to pay the \$75,000 fine for petty theft as doing so would go against his conscience. How do you think that Zeitoun is able to stand strong in the face of adversity? What do you think first-year students can learn from Zeitoun's experience? (218-282)

YouTube Links

Kanye West's infamous claim: "George Bush doesn't care about black people"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pVTmxCZaQ>

A drive through New Orleans Lower 9th Ward four months after Hurricane Katrina

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubbjgLDKGyk>

CNN News Coverage of Hurricane Katrina

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpdWfaNACgE&feature=related>

Interview with General Honore

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8xZXmcCRnA>

News coverage of General Honore's famous statement: "weapons down!"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUFPHWwD028>

Family

Family plays an important role in *Zeitoun*. How do you see family functioning in the novel? Which characters seem to value family the most? (52)

Kathy's conversion to Islam was met with mixed reactions from her family. At times, her mother seems openly antagonistic while at other times she defends and supports Kathy. How would your family react if you made a similar life choice? How would you negotiate your place within your family? (57-58)

Zeitoun and Kathy seem to negotiate being away from one another in very different ways. How does Zeitoun cope with being separated from his family? How does Kathy cope with being away from Zeitoun? Is family important to first-year students? If so, how do successful students negotiate being away from their family for semesters at a time?

Immediately after Katrina made landfall many families found themselves separated from one another. If you were separated from your family and unable to communicate with your family for a long time how would you maintain your sense of yourself?

Leadership

What happens when organization breaks down? Where do you see examples poor organization in *Zeitoun*. Who is in charge? Who should be in charge? (209)



As a contractor, Zeitoun utilized many tools to get the job done. As a prisoner Zeitoun used many mental tools such as mental fortitude to survive his internment. What types of tools do successful college students need to succeed while studying at K-State? (27, 223)

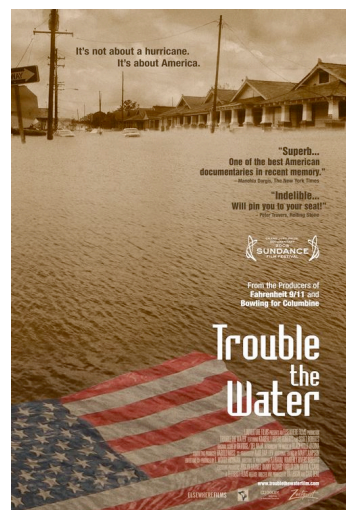
The response effort to Katrina was inhibited due to numerous reasons such as the massive influx of poorly organized professional and volunteer response workers. What can we learn about organizational/leadership theory from *Zeitoun*?

Zeitoun is placed and places himself in numerous leadership roles. What are they? How do you see Kathy? Is she a leader? Why or why not? How do you see leadership functioning at large in *Zeitoun*? (98-99)

Hurricane Katrina produced numerous ethically ambiguous situations. How do you make decisions where what is wise and prudent may not mesh with your moral values? (134, 156)

Films

Trouble the Water, directed by Carl Deal and Tia Lessin
From IMDB: “On the day before Hurricane Katrina--just blocks away from the French Quarter but far from the New Orleans that most tourists knew--Kimberly Rivers Roberts, an aspiring rap artist, turns her new video camera on herself and her 9th Ward neighbors trapped in the city. 'It's going to be a day to remember,' The couple returns to the devastation of their neighborhood in New Orleans, only to be met by the appalling repeated failures of the government.”



When the Levees Broke: A Requiem In Four Acts, a HBO documentary, directed by Spike Lee
From IMDB, “An examination of the U.S. government's role and its response to Hurricane Katrina.”

Wade in the Water, Children, Directed by Elizabeth Wood and Gabriel Nussbaum
From IMDB: “Through a passionate mixture of private videos, uncensored interviews and school-day adventures, the children of New Orleans' notoriously violent Central City neighborhood have created a riveting portrait of childhood at the heart of an ongoing American crisis. No one set out to make a film: six months after Katrina, filmmakers Elizabeth Wood and Gabriel Nussbaum moved to New Orleans with a free art program, devised to help students creatively express their thoughts in response to the chaos of the storm.”

Walking on Dead Fish, directed by Franklin Martin
From IMDB: “In the weeks after Hurricane Katrina, the tiny town of LaPlace was overrun with thousands of displaced New Orleans residents. Their already bursting-at-the-seams high school, East St. John, took in over 450 new students. Twenty of them were football players. In order to make them feel more welcome, the coach declared all positions were open (even those held by ESJ seniors).”

Kamp Katrina, directed by David Redmon and Ashley Sabin
From IMDB: “A woman converts her backyard into a tent city in which 10 displaced people live for 6 months. She provides construction jobs and basic resources to help rebuild the city. The situation gradually goes violently awry and she is confronted with an array of abuses amidst a broken city.”

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