

# ELPL Lit Kits



## *Zeitoun* by Dave Eggers

When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, Abdulrahman Zeitoun chose to stay through the storm to protect his house and contracting business. After the storm, he traveled the flooded streets in a canoe, passing on supplies and helping those he could. A week later, Zeitoun abruptly disappeared.

**About the Author:** Dave Eggers is the editor of McSweeney's and a cofounder of 826 National, a network of nonprofit writing and tutoring centers for youth, located in seven cities across the United States. He is the author of four books, including *What Is the What* and *How We Are Hungry*.

### Discussion Questions:

1. “Notes About This Book” (xv) gives a sense of how the book was written, whose point of view it reflects, and Eggers’s efforts at accuracy and truth in his depiction of events. By choosing to portray the response to the hurricane through its effects on one family, what kind of story (or history) does he achieve?
2. The book opens with “Friday, August 26,” an expository chapter that introduces us to Zeitoun’s family life and his business life, the two very interconnected. What are some of the ways in which the descriptions here draw you in as a reader, and make these people and their situation real? Why is the timeline a good structural choice for this story?
3. Kathy has grown up as a Southern Baptist. Drawn to Islam through her childhood friend Yuko, she decides to convert. Why, when she comes to visit wearing her hijab, does her mother tell her, “Now you can take that thing off” (57)? Why does the prayer from the Qur’an quoted on page 51 have a strong effect on her? What does her reaction to the evangelical preacher who mocks Islam and says that Kathy’s temptation to convert was the work of the devil (65–66), say about Kathy’s character and intelligence?
4. Do Abdulrahman, Kathy and their children make up an unusual American family, or not? How would you describe the relationship between Zeitoun and Kathy, in marriage and in business? What effect does their religion have on the way others in the community see them?

5. Why has Eggers woven into the story accounts of Zeitoun's past in Syria, his upbringing, his brother Mohammed, the champion swimmer, his brother Ahmad, and their close bond? What effect does this framework of family have on your perception of Zeitoun's character, his ethics, his behavior?
6. The plight of the neighborhood's abandoned dogs comes to Zeitoun's attention as "a bewilderment, an anger in their cries that cut the night into shards" (93). The next day, he sets out in the canoe and tries to do what he can for animals and people trapped by the flood. How does Zeitoun feel about what he is doing? How does he think about these days after he has been imprisoned (262–64)?
7. Discuss what happens when Zeitoun and the others are forced to get into the boat and are taken into custody. Is it clear why they are being arrested? What assumptions are made about Zeitoun and the other three men (275–87)?
8. Part IV (203–90) tells the story of Zeitoun's imprisonment. Here we learn in great detail how Zeitoun is denied the right to call Kathy, how his injured foot is not attended to, how the other men are beaten, stripped, and starved, how he prays constantly, yet loses hope. What is the impact, as you read, of this narrative?
9. "*Zeitoun* is a more powerful indictment of America's dystopia in the Bush era than any number of well-written polemics" (Timothy Egan, *New York Times*, August 13, 2009). Would you agree with this statement? Can *Zeitoun* be read as a contribution to the history of hurricane Katrina and the failure of government to handle the disaster effectively?
10. Discuss Kathy's situation, and her actions once she learns where Zeitoun is. The aftermath is more difficult, and she still suffers from physical and psychological problems that seem to be the result of post-traumatic stress. What was the most traumatic part of her experience, and why (319)?
11. Given that the other men who were imprisoned with Zeitoun were held much longer than he was, and that Nasser lost his life savings, is it surprising that these men were not compensated in any way for their time in prison (320–21)?
12. What is Zeitoun's feeling now about what happened? How does he move forward into the future, as expressed in the book's closing pages (322–25)?
13. If you have read *What is the What*, Eggers' novel about Sudanese refugee Valentino Achak Deng, how does *Zeitoun* compare? Discuss Eggers' approach to writing about traumatic regional and political events through the lives of individuals impacted by them.