One Community, One Book: Zeitoun Discussion Questions

1. How did including the perspectives of both Kathy and Abdulrahman affect the way you read the book? Does the story of what happened to Zeitoun have more impact as it is told by both of them and by Dave Eggers in a rather matter-of-fact narrative instead of a histrionic tabloid style piece? Do you believe Eggers’ motivation was to tell one family’s Katrina story or to tell about the failure of the government to handle the disaster effectively?

2. Both in the book and in media reports, residents of New Orleans affected by Hurricane Katrina were referred to as “refugees.” The United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a person who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside of the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” Others criticized the use of terms such as “evacuees” or “displaced” as too clinical to convey adequately the dire situations of Katrina’s survivors. Another term which often was used was “internally displaced people.” This is a term defined by the United Nations Guiding Principles which draws on international law and outlines human rights protections for those displaced by events including natural disasters through three phases: before displacement, during displacement, and in the return, reintegration and resettlement of those displaced. Words matter. They can and do shape how we look at the world and how we treat everything and everybody in it. What word or words would you use to describe the storm victims and why? Is there, indeed, even a need for such a term?

3. The aftermath of Katrina gave rise to unimaginable rights violations. What were some of the rights violations identified or described in the book? Which ones were moral wrongs? Which ones were legal wrongs?

4. As citizens, we expect our government and its public services to care for us in times of emergency. Is there a right to a certain level of care in emergency situations? Does government have a duty to provide such care? What should this standard of care look like? What kind of social contract exists between citizens and the government?

5. The mayor of New Orleans commented on how the desperate situation and strain on resources had put people in an “animalistic state.” How and why could this be so? And how does this description of the situation reflect the mayor’s understanding and analysis of the situation? Was this a fair assessment in your opinion?

6. Though there were many searing images in the media and in Zeitoun, some of the most evocative for many people were images of animals struggling to survive after the storm. Zeitoun clearly feels compelled by the vulnerability of animals, as he tries to save his neighbor's dogs. People seem to feel particularly compassionate or sympathetic toward animals in times of disaster, but why? Were people not equally vulnerable? Should government resources be spent on saving animals?

7. Zeitoun, though not born in the United States, has a great sense of pride and patriotism. Contrast this with those who work for law enforcement or the military/armed forces, specifically those dispatched to New Orleans after the hurricane. What does it mean to be patriotic? How did characters display acts of patriotism? What makes you feel patriotic? Is it a sensibility that is compatible with the idea of human rights? Consider the opening words of the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaiming “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family [as] the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” Or Article 1: “All human
beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” What are your thoughts?

8. What role does faith play in the lives of Kathy and Zeitoun? How would Zeitoun’s story change if he were not Muslim? Did their story give you a new perspective on a Muslim family in America? What did you think of the description of Kathy’s reasons for converting to Islam and changes in her life after she did so?

9. Early in the book, we are made aware that Kathy wore a hijab. What did Kathy’s mom suggest when she told Kathy she could take off the hijab when Zeitoun wasn’t around? How does this reflect a common Western perception of Muslim women? Does that perception implicate human rights in any way? What is your perception of Muslim women who wear the hijab? Do you have a different perception after reading Zeitoun than before?

10. 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?

11. What is the significance of Abdulrahman not being permitted one telephone call? How would his experience have been different if he had been allowed this call? How was his family impacted by his inability to make this one telephone call?

12. Public officials defended the wrongful arrests by citing the danger of looters and lawlessness, and by asserting that “cracking down” was a necessary means of maintaining order and public safety. Discuss the struggle of striking a balance between maintaining peace and public safety while safeguarding individual civil and political human rights. Which rights may be suspended, and which ones may not? Is suspension ever warranted? Should it be? If so, which rights?

13. The conditions that Zeitoun was forced to endure while in detention were shocking to say the least. He was denied medical attention, proper food, and basic privacy. In what ways was the treatment he experienced a violation of his human rights? Are incarcerated persons entitled to basic human rights in all situations?

14. Kathy reflected that the most difficult aspect of Zeitoun’s ordeal was when she called Hunt prison but was told by the prison officials that they would not disclose information about her husband’s case. Why do you think this was the most difficult part for Kathy? Should she have a right to this information? Why would it be in the interest of the government to withhold his information from her?

15. Do you believe that Jerry, Zeitoun’s cellmate in detention, was working for the government to recover information? If so, what are your opinions on the legality and effectiveness of such a tactic?

16. Accountability seemed to be a huge obstacle in Zeitoun’s ability to exercise his rights. The guards at Hunt claimed that they had no control over him because his detention was funded by FEMA. How might the government have structured the law enforcement system differently to strengthen accountability?

17. In the final chapter, Eggers informs the reader that the Zeitouns had commenced a lawsuit against varying levels of public officials. Some criticize the United States as being an overly litigious society, eager to sue in court to remedy every wrong. Others believe that it appropriately checks state power. South Africa used a process of reconciliation after apartheid—would this kind of process be more suitable? Should some sort of reparations be required? Do you think the best remedy for the offenses against Zeitoun is to sue the public
officials? If not, what alternative is there to a lawsuit? Should there be some alternative? If so, what?

18. Many have speculated that racism exacerbated the aftermath of Katrina. How, if at all, is this evidenced in what we see through Zeitoun’s experiences and contacts? Might this be an inaccurate assessment?

19. Save for select groups that were in New Orleans at the time of Katrina, the vast majority of us relied exclusively on media reports to understand what transpired after the hurricane. On two occasions, Kathy uses the media as a way to check the power of the government. The first time was when she and Zeitoun returned to Camp Greyhound to recover his wallet; and again when she encountered problems with FEMA and the trailer. How does the media help, and how can it worsen the situation for victims?

20. Former Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis once famously stated: “Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants.” Discuss this quotation in the context of Zeitoun, and whether you agree and why.

21. Zeitoun’s siblings made comments regarding the danger of New Orleans and how shocked they were at the desperation of Katrina’s aftermath and the government’s response. They claimed that Syria was safer. This is a prospect that many Americans would refute, especially today. What parallels can we see between New Orleans and Syria? Consider the communications blackout, and how exasperated Kathy was when she could not access information on her husband.