

---

## Ken Kalfus

**A Disorder Peculiar to the Country**  
**ISBN13: 9780060501419**

**Q: What were some of the challenges you faced in writing a novel that addresses many of the most urgent matters in recent American life?**

A: These urgent matters—terrorism, war, the future of our country—have thrust themselves in our faces so rudely it would be difficult not to address them. To do so, I had to take some trouble to remember how people thought and behaved just a few years ago: in the 9/11 aftermath, in the run-up to the war, etc. We've had our minds changed so many times about so many things that it's a challenge to recall what any given character may have thought about, say, going to war against the Taliban or invading Iraq. Recreating those recent mindsets required some thought and research.

**Q: Why did you decide to pair domestic tragedy (divorce) with national catastrophe (9/11, anthrax scare, war, etc.) in this novel?**

A: My idea for the novel began with a grim observation in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, at a time when, in our grief, we were glorifying the victims of the attacks, calling them heroes, as well as beloved, perfect husbands and wives. My view is that through cliché we were dehumanizing the dead and robbing them of the particularness of their normally messy lives. Given what we know about the contemporary rate of divorce, and the extreme bitterness that often accompanies it, is it cynical to suppose that if 3,000 people were killed in the WTC that morning, then there must have been, say, at least three spouses relieved and gratified by the end of the day?

Starting there—and after arranging for Marshall and Joyce to be disappointed by each other's survival—I wanted to take them through the other garish events of our recent history, again making them experience current events in unexpectedly personal ways. As terrible as the news may be and highfalutin the rhetoric, their personal lives take precedent. The point is satirical, of course, a rebuff to our assumed national piety.

**Q: You didn't lose a loved one on 9/11. You haven't been divorced. This novel essentially makes fun of other people's tragedies. Don't you think there's a limit to what can be ridiculed and what can be laughed at?**

A: No. I think the artist needs to have full license to make sense of the worst things that happen to people: death, grief, bottomless disappointment, romantic love replaced by bitter hatred, ruined childhoods... Satirists are license-carrying members of that guild too. And sometimes it's through humor that we can identify the sanctimony and hypocrisy that lead us into error. Perhaps if we had seen through some of the clichés that settled around our national life in recent years, we may not have responded to the tragedy of 9/11 by perpetuating the greater, even more long-ranging tragedy of Iraq.

**Q: The end of the novel envisions the capture of Osama bin Ladin. At what point in the composition of your book did you arrive at this idea for the ending?**

A: Perhaps halfway through writing the novel I had to stop and rethink its narrative arc, especially as the chapters involving stock market manipulation and the suicide bomb gave the book an increasingly fantastic quality. I knew I wanted to get back to Ground Zero. I suppose I also wanted something upbeat, and what could be more upbeat than catching Osama and, in Iraq, accomplishing the stated war aims of the Bush Administration? At the same time, I wanted to suggest that these successes were as chimerical as Marshall and Joyce's moment of amity after Osama's capture—I wanted, in the last paragraph, to leave the reader with an appreciation of the terror that still threatens us all.