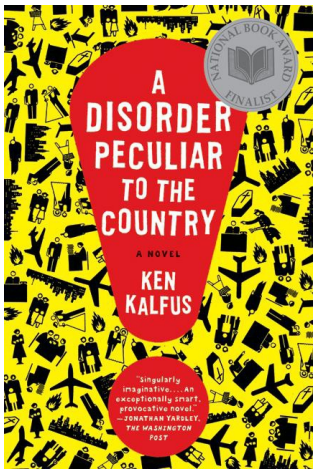
Reading Guide



A Disorder Peculiar to the Country

By Ken Kalfus
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Introduction

Terrorism, anthrax, the stock market collapse, war. Are we having fun yet? Marshall and Joyce Harriman aren't. The couple is attempting to divorce—and destroy each other—while sharing the same cramped Brooklyn apartment.

A small glimmer of hope appears one late summer morning. Marshall goes to work in the World Trade Center; Joyce has booked a flight out of Newark. On that grim day, when their city is overcome by grief and shock, each thinks the other is dead, and each is visited by an intense, secret, guilty satisfaction. Both manage to survive, only to continue their struggle against each other, a virtual clash of civilizations, while every other weird public misfortune of our nation's recent history indirectly involves them as well.

A Disorder Peculiar to the Country is a brilliant, withering satire of American life during the years of the Bush administration that establishes Ken Kalfus as one of the most daring and talented writers at work today.

Questions for Discussion

1. What do Joyce's and Marshall's individual reactions to the catastrophic events of September 11 suggest about the nation's grief on that day?

2. "If you isolate each of our betrayals and self-indulgences, the mean things we've said to each other . . . on their own, they're quite heinous. Yet neither of us did anything to the other that wasn't in the context of something else." Why *is* Marshall and Joyce's divorce so bitter? Does it suggest anything about conflicts in contemporary world affairs?

3. To what extent do Joyce and Marshall treat each other fairly in their divorce settlement negotiations, and how does their behavior impact Victor and Viola? Why are the children referred to as "civilian casualties"?

4. Joyce finds herself fascinated by the Afghan war and our country's new intimacy with Southwest Asia. "It was commonly held that September 11 had changed America forever. Joyce wondered if the real transformation would come now, in America's close embrace with warlords and peasants, fundamentalists and mercenaries." How is her seduction (if that's what it is) of Marshall friend's Roger a satiric commentary on certain Afghan mores?

5. Why does Marshall interfere in Flora's and Neal's wedding preparations? How might the interference reflect certain aspects of the Afghan war, especially the manipulation of the US military by feuding tribal elements?

6. Why do you think the author chose to depict Joyce and Marshall's failing marriage against the backdrop of some of the most painful moments in recent American history?

7. How is Marshall's suicide bomb another example of the Middle-Easternization of American life? Is it in some way prophetic? Does Marshall really make a suicide bomb or is he simply imagining it? In literature, is that a useful distinction? Compare and contrast with Gregor Samsa, the insect in Franz Kafka's story, "The Metamorphosis." What are some of the other fantastic elements in this novel?

8. In the argument Marshall provokes with Joyce's Jewish future brother-in-law, he declares, "What do you think makes people anti-Semites? It's that every dissent from Israeli policy provokes an accusation of anti-Semitism. It's the fact that we're not permitted to talk about Israel in this country, even though it's our number one foreign policy problem..." Marshall has said this only to stir up the party, but do you think there's any justification in his remarks? Why does he make comparisons with Somalia and Kosovo?

9. What elements of this novel define it as a dark comedy and is this kind of humor justified by recent current events?

10. How did the capture of Osama bin Ladin, and the Harrimans' brief moment of reconciliation on the perimeter of Ground Zero, deepen and enlarge your understanding of the main themes of the novel? What happens to the fantasy as the novel comes to a close?

About the Author

Ken Kalfus is the author of a novel, *The Commissariat of the Enlightenment*, and the story collections, *Thirst* and *Pu-239 and Other Russian Fantasies*. He lives in Philadelphia.