

Handout # 1 (Lesson 4): The Story of Zeitoun

In July, 2009 the book *Zeitoun* was published. In the book the author, Dave Eggers, tells the true story of a Syrian American who help save people during Hurricane Katrina, but is falsely accused of being a terrorist, and was held in detention for 23 days. He was unable to contact his family or obtain a hearing. During his time in prison he was questioned by the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, and the CIA. In the March 6, 2010 issue of *The Times* of London Ben Marshall summarizes the story in an article entitled: "Hurricane Katrina: Dave Eggers' story of the Zeitoun family."

By the time Katrina was moving inexorably up the Gulf of Mexico and towards New Orleans, Zeitoun had been resident in the city for 11 years. He lived with his wife, Kathy, their son, Zachary, and their three young daughters, Nademah, Safiya and Aisha. The girls were obsessed with their *Pride and Prejudice* DVD, as well as Harry Potter, video games and pop music, while he and Kathy ran a thriving painting and decorating business, worked long hours and were well-respected by their neighbours.

"They were an all-American family," says Eggers, "who just happened to be Muslim."

Zeitoun resolved to stay behind to look after his home and business, while Kathy and the children joined the thousands of other New Orleansians leaving Louisiana. After the levees broke on August 29, 2005, Zeitoun made his way around the sunken city in a second-hand canoe he had once bought on a whim, finding a sort of peace, then purpose, as he helped stranded local residents escape their homes and evacuate. He banded with neighbours and kept in contact with Kathy via his mobile phone, reassuring her that news reports describing armed gangs, looting and a breakdown of order were exaggerated. But after a week, he stopped calling. As the days passed, Kathy, unable to find word of him, could only conclude her husband was dead.

The reality was far more Kafkaesque. Zeitoun and his friend Nasser had been observed by the hotchpotch mix of National Guard, army combat veterans and local law enforcement drafted into the city. He was profiled as a security threat, arrested at gunpoint, denied a phone call and detained, along with hundreds of other citizens, guilty of nothing more than being in the wrong place at the wrong time. "You guys are terrorists," one guard told them as they sat inside Camp Greyhound, a makeshift prison in the city's bus station. "You're Taleban." (sic)

He was transported out of the city, to a maximum-security prison, complete with orange jumpsuits, concrete cells and bullying guards. No measures were taken to advance his case, his medical conditions were ignored and his pleas for a telephone call were denied. He prayed. He despaired.

Zeitoun was eventually released, coming out underweight, aged and broken.

Source: Marshall, Ben. "Hurricane Katrina: Dave Eggers' story of the Zeitoun family," *The Times* of London, March 6, 2010.

[http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/book_extracts/article7045756.ece]