Discussion / Journal Questions
Adapted from: Random House Reader’s Guide and the University of Kentucky

General Response
1. What was your initial response to Zeitoun? Did you like or dislike it and why?
2. Why do you think this book was chosen for the Common Reading Experience? Do you think it is a good choice? Why or why not?
3. What lessons are we to learn from this book?

Critical Thinking Response
1. In the notes about this book, Eggers explains that the book is based on the accounts of Abdulrahman and Kathy Zeitoun. What does the story gain by reflecting only the Zeitoun family’s view of the events? What might be lost in such an approach?
2. What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of Eggers decision to present Kathy and Abdulrahman’s testimonies concurrently?
3. Evaluate Eggers’ use of research in his writing. Has he done adequate research? Is he a credible source for this story? What, if anything, could / should he have done differently?
4. For those of us who did not live in the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina and therefore did not experience its impact firsthand, we likely received most of our information and formed most of our opinions about the various issues surrounding Katrina by watching or reading the news. Now having read the book, do you think that the information you heard or read was accurate? How has your view of the event and its issues been affected?
5. While the story of Zeitoun, immediately after the hurricane, was one of peaceful meandering around the city, the media was focused on the hysteria. How does the media play a role in shaping the perception of crises?
6. There is room for debate on whether or not Abdulrahman should have stayed behind in New Orleans to protect his home and business. What do you think Zeitoun should have done?
7. Zeitoun takes the plight of the neighborhood’s abandoned dogs very seriously. Why do you think he feels such an obligation to and connection to these animals?
8. Compare and contrast the imagery of the trapped animals with the imagery of Zeitoun as a prisoner.
9. While Zeitoun helps the animals and people trapped in the flood, how does he feel about what he is doing? How does he think about these days after he has been imprisoned?
10. Discuss Kathy’s situation and actions during the storm and afterwards when she learns where her husband is. What do her actions say about her character?
11. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was difficult for Kathy, causing her health to suffer after the storm. She begins to experience 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?
12. If you had to pick one word to describe Abdulrahman Zeitoun, what would it be? Tell why you would pick that word to describe him. Give examples to support your word choice.
13. Describe the roles the sea has played in Zeitoun’s life. How have his experiences with the sea made him into the man he is today?
14. Describe the relationship between Zeitoun and Kathy, in marriage and in business. How do they “work” together before and after the storm?
15. Why has Eggers woven into the story accounts of Zeitoun’s past in Syria, his upbringing, and his family relationships, especially with his brothers Mohammad and Ahmad? What effect does this framework of family have on your perception of Zeitoun’s character, his ethics, and his behavior?
16. How does race and social class factor into the story?
17. The book begins by describing Zeitoun’s challenge to understand America and its values. For example, how did Zeitoun respond to reactions about his rainbow logo?
18. How did Kathy’s family, friends, and community respond to her conversion to Islam? Describe some of her experiences of prejudice and religious intolerance. Were you surprised by these reactions? Do you think they would be the same today?
19. Discuss the following quote and how it applies to Zeitoun and to your experience in today’s society: "Religious tolerance means to refrain from discriminating against others who follow a different religious path. Tolerance is more difficult to maintain when you know that your religion is true and their religion is wrong." – Anon
20. During times of distress our values are tested. Why do you believe so many American ideals (innocent until proven guilty/no false imprisonment/the right to representation) were breached?
21. Do you think it is possible to maintain law and order and protect civil liberties during a crisis?

Personal Response

1. How does the book and the story of the Zeitoun family make you feel? How did you respond emotionally? What made you feel this way?
2. Abdulrahman Zeitoun is admired for his strong work ethic. Provide examples of his strong work ethic. How would you define your own work ethic and what you want it to be?
3. Both Kathy and Abdulrahman Zeitoun are strong in the face of adversity. They persevere through many challenges from Katrina. Discuss an example of a time when you had to persevere through a hard time and what you learned about yourself in the process.
4. There were clearly times throughout Katrina and its aftermath that Zeitoun was wrongfully accused and was given little by way of apology or remedy once the truth was found. Have you ever been wrongfully accused or wrongfully accused someone else? What lessons did you learn from your personal experience and from reading about Zeitoun’s?
5. Discuss a time in your life when you have experienced persecution and/or prejudice based on your belief system, identity, and/or lifestyle. Or, discuss a time or situation when you have witnessed this done to others. How did this make you feel?
6. What, if anything, can be done to avoid stereotyping, prejudice, and intolerance?
7. What made you most sympathetic to the Zeitoun family?
8. What would you have done if you lived in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina hit? Would you have stayed if you were in Zeitoun’s position?
9. What news reports do you remember most vividly from Katrina?
10. Did Abdulrahman's story give you a new perspective on a Muslim family in America? Why?
11. In many ways, Zeitoun is a story about identity – how we see ourselves and others, and how our own identity can change over time. How has your own sense of self been affected by the impressions of others? Did this novel affect how you see the identity of the people of New Orleans? Did this novel affect how you see the identity of the United States?
12. Zeitoun has a strong sense of community and responsibly to his home – in Syria and in New Orleans. Describe what “home” means to you and what role it plays in your life.
13. The community of New Orleans came together to help one another during and after Katrina. How would you define “community?” What types of “communities” do you belong to?
14. How does Zeitoun affect your confidence in the American government and justice system?
Activities and Assignments

1. Use writing, poetry, song, dance, film, photography, art, collage, theatre, and/or another medium of creative expression to answer the question, “What does *Zeitoun* mean to me?”
2. Read the newspaper or watch the news, looking for current events about human rights issues. Come to class ready to present your current event with your class.
3. For Dave Eggers and cover artist Rachell Sumpter, the image of Zeitoun in his canoe traveling around a New Orleans submerged by water represented his story. Design your own book cover for *Zeitoun*. Explain how your image represents the story and your perspective on the book.
4. Choose a favorite passage from the book. Present it in class and explain why it is meaningful.
5. Many artists have created work in response to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath: journalism, fiction, nonfiction, poetry, music, film, television, and photography. Research, view, and/or discuss Katrina-related works.
6. Compare the tenets of Islam, as presented in *Zeitoun* and/or by doing research, to the basic tenets of another world religion (e.g. the Buddhist noble truths, the Judaic ten commandments, Christ’s sermon on the mount, etc). Present your comparisons to your class.

Oral History Project
*Zeitoun* is the result of Dave Eggers’ oral history project, “Voice of Witness,” a nonprofit book series that empowers those most closely affected by contemporary social injustice. Choose a social issue, such as poverty, homelessness, prejudice, racial profiling, etc. and interview people related to the problem and its solutions. You can gather your information via video, tape recording, and/or written notes. You will then present your project to your class.

Service Learning Project
As a group, either design your own service learning project or connect to an organization or project already in place that is related to *Zeitoun*. Here are some examples:

- Work with Habitat for Humanity to build houses
- Work with the Good Shepherd House
- Work with an Interfaith organization
- Work with an animal rescue group or shelter
- Red Cross

Group Presentations
Groups of four or five students will choose one of the following topics or another approved topic to prepare and present a presentation to the class. The presentations should be five to ten minutes, well-researched, well-organized, and include visuals (Power Point, multimedia, images, etc.).

- Economic effects of Hurricane Katrina
- Environmental effects of Hurricane Katrina
- Hurricane Katrina and the Red Cross or other relief organizations
- USA Patriot Act and Homeland Security
- Other natural disasters (Haitian earthquake, Chilean earthquake, etc)
- Military involvement in Hurricane Katrina