

Vital Phenomena

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Last night I was reading a book with an impossibly unwieldy title...A Constellation of Vital Phenomenaand I kept turning to the back flap to look again at the author photograph because he looked so impossibly young to have written such a mature and complex novel. 28, one reviewer described him.

OKay, then. 28. I thought back to myself at that age, in 1965. I had majored in writing in college, had wanted...had intended, had hoped, had aspired...to be a writer.

Why wasn't I, at 28? Well, I had four children by then, and in 1965 they were 3, 4, 6, and 7. I also had a dog, a cat, and a husband. I remember myself perpetually at the sink...why is that? Ah, I remember: I had no dishwasher.

I had a sewing machine, though, my mother's old Singer portable. I made my own clothes as well as my two daughters'. Those were the days of dresses.

To get out of the house, for my own sanity, I worked one night a week, 7-12, as a volunteer at the local hospital. (It strikes me now as illogical that I would escape the chaos and bedlam of home for the chaos and bedlam of an emergency ward. But at least they were someone else's kids who had smashed their motorcycles, blown up their fingers with fireworks, or played with daddy's chainsaw.)

I read. I am quite sure I read when I had time. But what did I read, aside from bedtime stories to the kids? I remember John Fowles's *The Magus* (and indeed, I just looked at the publication date: 1966. I was 29). But I don't remember much else except

The Feminine Mystique

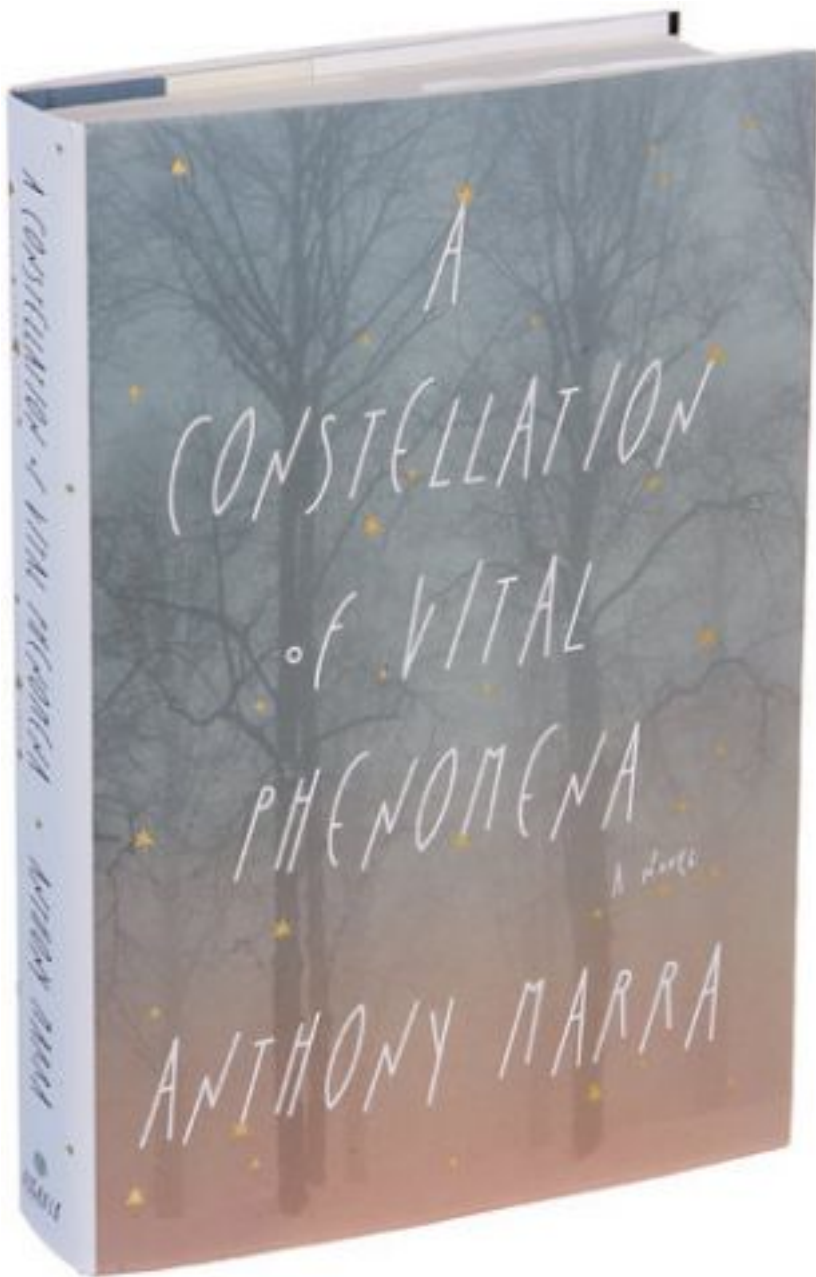
(just checked that one as well: 1963) which left me vaguely anxious, along with many other

young woman, I would guess.

A writing professor of mine at Brown, Charles Philbrick, had told me that I could become a writer. He also told me that I needed to experience more, first.

So that explains what I was doing at 28. I was collecting experience. And it worked. It just took me a while.

Apparently Anthony Marra—that *wunderkind!*—did not need to spend years gathering experience. His novel is amazing.





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