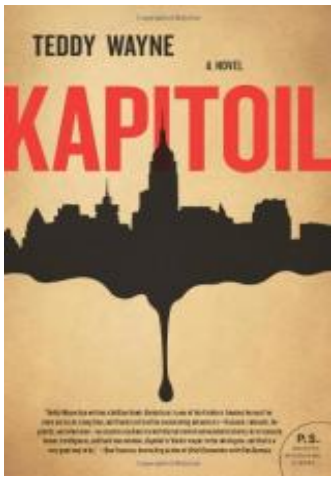
Kapitoil

by Teddy Wayne



About the Book

"Sometimes you do not truly observe something until you study it in reverse," writes Karim Issar upon arrival to New York City from Qatar in 1999. Fluent in numbers, logic, and business jargon yet often baffled by human connection, the young financial wizard soon creates a computer program named Kapitoil that predicts oil futures and reaps record profits for his company.

At first an introspective loner adrift in New York's social scenes, he anchors himself to his legendary boss Derek Schrub and Rebecca, a sensitive, disillusioned colleague who may understand him better than he does himself. Her influence, and his father's disapproval of Karim's Americanization, cause him to question the moral implications of Kapitoil, moving him toward a decision that will determine his future, his firm's, and to whom --- and where --- his loyalties lie.

Discussion Guide

1. Did Karim?s brand of English make you think differently about your own use of the language? Which of his recurring words or expressions felt most meaningful?

2. How can the Kapitoil program and Karim?s story be read as relevant to a post-9/11 world? Why might the novel be set in 1999 and not after 2001?

3. How is Karim childlike and how is he very adult? How might these contradictions have developed?

4. What do you think about Karim?s moderate approach to Islam? Did you identify with his conflict with his father over religious and social values?

5. Karim writes that ?Sometimes you do not truly observe something until you study it in reverse.? How can this statement apply to the entire novel?

6. In what ways does Rebecca give Karim something he?s missing? How does he do the same for her? How are their family dynamics similar?

7. How do sports and games function in the novel, especially as a means for men to bond? What does this say about the nature of competition in American society?

8. Mr. Schrub claims that Kapitoil ultimately helps people, but Karim believes it is a ?zero-sum? game, in which one party benefits at the expense of another. What do you think?

9. In what ways does New York City fail to live up to Karim?s expectations? How does it appeal to him in ways he might not have predicted?

10. How does Barron and Cynthia?s marriage function as a role model for Karim? How is theirs different from the Schrubs? and his own parents? marriages?

11. Karim states at the beginning of the novel that he believes ?life is ultimately predictable? --- that it is somehow destined, whether through divine intervention or science. What do you think?

12. What do you make of Karim?s final decision to work temporarily for his father? How has he changed from his comments about his father?s job in his initial journal entry?

13. Have your feelings about your own job ever changed as much as Karim?s does over the course of the novel?

Author Bio

Teddy Wayne is the author of seven novels and a winner of a Whiting Writers? Award and an NEA Creative Writing Fellowship as well as a finalist for the Young Lions Fiction Award, PEN/Bingham Prize, and Dayton Literary Peace Prize. A frequent contributor to *The New Yorker* and a former columnist for the *New York Times*, he has taught at Columbia University and Washington University in St. Louis. He lives in Brooklyn with his family.

Critical Praise

"Told through Karim?s journal entries, this wonderfully assured debut novel, at once poignant, insightful, and funny, details Karim?s passage through a new world of corporate sharks, Manhattan clubs, museums, Bob Dylan lyrics, and personal growth. Karim?s English, always grammatically correct but stilted with terms from science, mathematics, computing, and business, is a delight. Best of all, however, is simply being inside Karim?s head as he ponders Jackson Pollock?s paintings, baseball, programming, and the mysteries of love and life in the U.S."

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