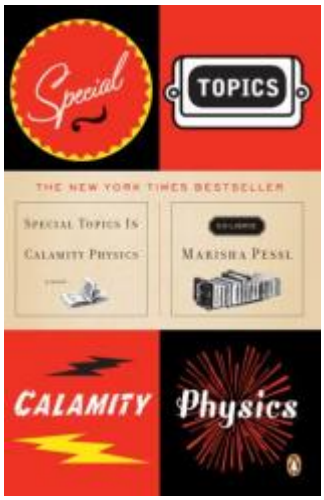
Special Topics in Calamity Physics

by Marisha Pessl



About the Book

Special Topics in Calamity Physics, the dazzling debut of Marisha Pessl, is a buoyant combination of comedy, tragedy, mystery, and romance, a story of disturbing secrets and the eccentric high school student who uncovers them. In vivid prose sprinkled with literary and cultural references, Pessl weaves a complicated tale of self-awakening in a postmodern world.

Blue van Meer is the precocious only daughter of a dashing and scholarly father. After her mother's death in a car accident when Blue is six, they hit the road together, traveling between her father's ever-changing teaching positions in obscure college towns. While Blue's intellectual gifts have been nurtured by her devoted father, she has never had a real home or friends. Instead, she has been raised on her father's voice and on the literature and political history that he thrives on.

Enter Hannah Schneider and the Bluebloods, an enigmatic clique at St. Gallway, the private school Blue enters for her senior year. Hannah is the gorgeous, mysterious mentor to a select group of St. Gallway seniors, and she invites dutiful and shy Blue to join them. A film studies teacher, Hannah is alluring and unconventional, "the lone bombshell slinking into a Norman Rockwell," who treats the students as friends and equals. For the first time in her life, Blue finds herself drawn out of the insular family world she and her father have created, and into the lives of these maverick and beautiful peers.

But after a suspicious death at Hannah's house, this new world raises some disturbing questions, and Blue's life begins to come "unstitched like a snagged sweater." Who is Hannah Schneider and why is she so interested in Blue? Does Blue's narcissistic father really love constant travel, or is he running away from more than the ghost of her mother? What really happened the day her mother died? Who can Blue really trust?

In one life-changing year, Blue will unveil a mystery bigger than her own life. Along the way she will learn to act like a teenager, to love unexpectedly, and to think for herself. **Special Topics in Calamity Physics** is a coming-of-age tale and a disturbing mystery, a snapshot of the dark relationship between ideology and violence but also the poignant tale of a young woman learning to stand on her own. Pessl is a virtuosic writer, energetic and erudite, perceptive about relationships, history, and politics, and able to paint a portrait of contemporary youth alongside a complicated picture of the political battles waged by their parents' generation. Starting with a "Core Curriculum," and complete with citations, Web sites, footnotes, and even a final exam, Pessl guides us through the dynamic evolution of Blue van Meer, named after a butterfly, from cocooned caterpillar to free-flying individual.

Discussion Guide

1. Blue describes herself as a "Jane Goodall," an observer not a main actor. She is quiet, in thrall to her

father, bookish, and solitary. What did you think of her when we first meet her? How does she change over the course of the novel? At the end, what new characteristics has she acquired?

2. Her father, Gareth van Meer, is her opposite: charming and callous, verbose and secretive. He dazzles women, is adored by his students, and is completely committed to his daughter. Yet there are clues that all is not right with Gareth. Go back to some passages in the book where Blue hints that he is hiding something, such as when she describes her frightening apprehension, at the age of eleven, that he is a “terrifying, red-faced stranger bearing his dark, moldy soul” (p. 33). What is your opinion of him at the novel’s conclusion?

3. The relationship between Blue and her father changes over Blue’s senior year. At the start she loves and trusts him unconditionally, but at the end she has hard questions for him. How does Blue’s attitude toward him begin to change? Does he alter the way that he treats her? Try to imagine their future relationship; how might they feel toward each other?

4. The death of Hannah Schneider, movie-star beautiful and charismatic, is the mystery at the heart of the novel. Who was Hannah Schneider? What does Blue learn about her past, and about how they are linked? Do you have sympathy for Hannah? Was she well-intentioned or do you think she was disturbed and dangerous?

5. Hannah takes Blue under her wing and includes her in the group of students, the Bluebloods, that she has befriended and mentored. Why is she so interested in Blue? How does she encourage Blue to act? Try to think of what she provides for each of them that they wouldn’t otherwise have, the way she “reads” each of them “so you thought you were her favorite paperback” (p. 322). Is she a good influence on Blue and the others?

6. Small-town America is also a subject of this book; Gareth is a “perennial visiting lecturer,” who raises Blue in a series of obscure towns throughout America. Think back to some of the places that they have lived, and the accompanying Americana—the Wal-Marts, chain restaurants, and suburbs that Blue and her father drift through. How would you describe this America? How is it different from other, more mainstream, depictions of the country? Do you recognize these places? What do you think Blue thinks of them?

7. Zach Soderberg seems to Blue at first to be bland and simple, a regular guy who does not attract her as the wild and nonconformist Bluebloods do. But what does Zach offer that the others cannot? What do you think he sees in Blue? Why do you think the Bluebloods are so disparaging toward him? What role does he play in Blue’s transformation?

8. Blue calls her father’s endless stream of romantic conquests “June Bugs,” saying “Dad picked up women the way certain wool pants can’t help but pick up lint” (p. 29). What is her relationship to some of these women like? Does she grow more sympathetic to them? Consider some of the specific encounters Blue has with women Gareth is involved with. What does the incident with “Kitty,” in particular, teach her?

9. The Bluebloods are mesmerizing but merciless and are at first cruel even to Blue. How would you describe them as a clique? Individually? Which of them grow more sympathetic, and which become kinder toward Blue? Are any of them redeemed by the end of the story?

10. The relationship between ideology and violence is a subtext that turns into a main theme. Who is particularly ideological or political in this book? What do they believe in and advocate for? Try to trace Gareth van Meer’s beliefs, in particular, by returning to earlier passages in the novel where Blue mentions his ideas, reading material, or lectures.

11. At the end of the book, Blue is faced with a hard choice about the information she has uncovered. How does she act and why? Though he never says, do you think her father is proud of her ultimate decision about the secret she uncovers? What does her decision, which costs her plenty, tell you about Blue’s morals and inner strength? What would you have done?

12. Much of the investigation that Blue undertakes depends on her interpreting various clues and events correctly. Sometimes she succeeds, sometimes she fails. Who attempts to mislead her, and how do they do it? What enables her to grow better at understanding the machinations of the adults around her? Do you agree with her final assessment of the mystery at the heart of her origins and of the novel? Or do you agree with Gareth that “we are under an invincible blindness as to the true and real nature of things” (p. 261)?

Author Bio

Marisha Pessl's bestselling debut novel, SPECIAL TOPICS IN CALAMITY PHYSICS, won the John Sargent Sr. First Novel Prize (now the Center for Fiction's Flaherty-Dunnan First Novel Prize), and was selected as one of the 10 Best Books of the Year by *The New York Times Book Review*. Pessl grew up in Asheville, North Carolina, and currently resides in New York City.

Critical Praise

"Donna Tartt goes postmodern in this eclectically intellectual murder mystery ... The writing is clever, the text rich with subtle literary allusion ...Sharp, snappy fun for the literary-minded."

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