



Special Topics in Calamity Physics

By Marisha Pessl

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This mesmerizing debut, uncannily uniting the trials of a postmodern upbringing with a murder mystery, heralds the arrival of a vibrant new voice in literary fiction

Special Topics in Calamity Physics is a darkly hilarious coming-of-age novel and a richly plotted suspense tale told through the distinctive voice of its heroine, Blue van Meer. After a childhood moving from one academic outpost to another with her father (a man prone to aphorisms and meteoric affairs), Blue is clever, deadpan, and possessed of a vast lexicon of literary, political, philosophical, and scientific knowledge—and is quite the cineaste to boot. In her final year of high school at the elite (and unusual) St. Gallway School in Stockton, North Carolina, Blue falls in with a charismatic group of friends and their captivating teacher, Hannah Schneider. But when the drowning of one of Hannah's friends and the shocking death of Hannah herself lead to a confluence of mysteries, Blue is left to make sense of it all with only her gimlet-eyed instincts and cultural references to guide—or misguide—her.

Structured around a syllabus for a Great Works of Literature class and containing ironic visual aids (drawn by the author), Pessl's debut novel is complex yet compelling, erudite yet accessible. It combines the suspense of Hitchcock, the self-parody of Dave Eggers, and the storytelling gifts of Donna Tartt with a dazzling intelligence and wit entirely Pessl's own.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Pessl's stunning debut is an elaborate construction modeled after the syllabus of a college literature course—36 chapters are named after everything from *Othello* to *Paradise Lost* to *The Big Sleep*—that culminates with a final exam. It comes as no surprise, then, that teen narrator Blue Van Meer, the daughter of an itinerant academic, has an impressive vocabulary and a knack for esoteric citation that makes Salinger's Seymour Glass look like a dunce. Following the mysterious death of her butterfly-obsessed mother, Blue and her father, Gareth, embark, in another nod to Nabokov, on a tour of picturesque college towns, never staying anywhere longer than a semester. This doesn't bode well for Blue's social life, but when the Van Meers settle in Stockton, N.C., for the entirety of Blue's senior year, she befriends—sort of—a group of eccentric geniuses (referred to by their classmates as the Bluebloods) and their ringleader, film studies teacher Hannah Schneider. As Blue becomes enmeshed with Hannah and the Bluebloods, the novel becomes a murder mystery so intricately plotted that, after absorbing the late-chapter revelations, readers will be tempted to start again at the beginning in order to watch the tiny clues fall into place. Like its intriguing main characters, this novel is many things at once—it's a campy, knowing take on the themes that made *The Secret History* and *Prep* such massive bestsellers, a wry sendup of most of the Western canon and, most importantly, a sincere and uniquely twisted look at love, coming of age and identity. (Aug.)

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

With a murder that occurs in the opening pages and a narrator who joins an elite clique of students, *Special Topics* bears resemblance to Donna Tartt's 1992 classic, *The Secret History*—as the novel's publisher is more than happy to remind us. Critics call this comparison a publicity coup, as the two novels differ greatly in narration, orchestration, and tone. Organized as a "Great Books" course, the novel requires careful attention (and literary knowledge) from its readers, especially when Blue spouts esoteric tidbits. Although most critics were utterly compelled by Marisha Pessl's debut novel, a few thought it mean-spirited and too smart for its own good. "A 500-page headache is as possible as a bracing joyride," notes the *New York Times*.

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From [Booklist](#)

After 10 years of traveling with her father, a perennial (and pedantic) visiting lecturer at various, obscure institutions of higher learning, Blue Van Meer finally settles in as a senior at the St. Gallway School in Stockton, North Carolina. There she is bemused to find herself part of a charmed circle of popular kids called the Bluebloods and the protege of the mysterious film-studies teacher, Hannah Schneider. When a friend of Hannah's dies at a party the kids have crashed, this extravagantly arch and self-conscious coming-of-age novel turns into a murder mystery that—although never as Hitchcockian as its publisher claims—is, nevertheless, *almost* compelling enough to warrant its excessive length. Intriguingly structured as a syllabus for a Great Works of Literature class, Pessl's first novel is filled with references to invented books—and to some real ones, too, including several by Nabokov. Overkill? You bet. But, as a result, the novel is generating a great deal of buzz that will excite the curiosity of readers who enjoy postmodern excesses and indulgences of this sort. *Michael Cart*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Lori Whitten:

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