



Special Topics in Calamity Physics

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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.

Special Topics in Calamity Physics Details

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Author : Marisha Pessl

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From Reader Review Special Topics in Calamity Physics for online ebook

Jessica says

This is a story told through books themselves, a whodunnit, a coming-of-ager. Some will find this book too gimmicky...the use of a syllabus outline, the visual aids, the fact that the first word of the book is dad and the last word is me (thus encapsulating the entire story arch), the final exam. But this book made me feel the way I did during a college lecture on Lolita, where the professor broke down Lolita by numbers, the numbers of the license plates, the hotel room numbers, etc. They all swirled and anagrammed their way into a ridiculous formula at the end. And so it turned out, that not only was Nabokov churning out a literary masterpiece, but a mathematical formula as well. Who knew? Certainly not 21-year-old Me. It might be gimmicky, but these sort of books are the literary equivalent of walking while chewing gum while playing the cello - the authors are strange maestros of many art forms. And so I've concluded that Nabokov is the silent, invisible uncle of "Special Topics", Pessl's patron saint, and not just because of the butterflies and the old professor/precocious girl pairing.

Sarah says

There's a special cold black place in my heart for writers under thirty who come out of nowhere with a best-selling much-praised first novel for which they receive huge advances and instant fame. The feeling is called jealousy - deep, shoulda-been-me jealousy that clouds my ability to judge the book itself.

Which brings us to Marisha Pessl and Special Topics in Calamity Physics. Every big review I read of it was glowing and every writer under thirty I talked to said it was a piece of steaming shit (but that I should totally read the novel they're working on). Turns out that my opinion falls somewhere squarely in the middle.

The parts of the book that failed were the overly-quirky bits and the gimmicky bits. Although the narrator is characterized as smart and scholarly, much of the book is over-written, especially during slow periods. What do I mean by over-written? Describing a pair of boots as being "the shape of Italy" or someone's face being shaped like "a box of Valentines Day candy." Say the boots were shaped like boots! Say the woman had a heart-shaped face!

Pessl leans hard on the simile and the metaphor in this book, many times at the expense of simple, straightforward description. By having a complex, intelligent narrator, she's trying to say, "I'm doing it on purpose!" but it still seems indulgent and silly and, ultimately, keeps us holding her world at arm's length.

Pessl also struggles with dialogue and realistic characters - often I found myself thinking, that high school student would never say that or that gas station attendant would never say that. All of the characters tended to sound the same and think the same. Sure, if it was a high school student, Pessl would add some "likes" and a reference to J-Lo, but mostly, the person would sound like the voice of the narrator, a voice which I am guessing is the voice of Pessl herself.

But there is some beautiful writing in the book. Entire chapters were - I'll say it - riveting. Without exception, the riveting chapters were the chapters with a lot of action in them - chapters where it felt like Pessl forgot that she was a writer trying to impress people with her first novel. In these chapters boots were

boot-shaped, the language was natural, and the characters got to act like themselves.

These good chapters led me to the conclusion that Pessl's problem might be discipline. She doesn't know when to cut out the cute or overly-wrought stuff yet. The Writing Buddha says, kill your children and Pessl, time and again, couldn't manage to do that. The result is a book filled with things that made the author smile, dalliances, and clever asides that don't do much except make the book longer. I suspect she also lacked an editor who could kill those children for her.

The plot was 'aight. It was a pretty basic murder mystery formula and I guessed the end 150 pages before the end happened even though I'm not good at guessing endings. It would have been much better and much more fast-moving if, again, someone - author or editor - had cut it down to a more manageable length.

Where does that leave us? I think Pessl's got some talent. I think that, for a first novel, this was an achievement. On the other hand, she's got a ways to go and I hope all of the praise does not set her more firmly in some of her ways. Talent is something you're born with and being born with talent is easy. Now she's got some hard work ahead of her - about learning when to hold back and about learning about the human condition outside of her own privileged experiences.

Tori says

Struck by a severe attack of the cutes, an over-worked bag of metaphors, and flimsy characterization. The dialogue is unnatural and in most cases unfitting for the characters (Dee and Dum's conversations in particular strike me as unreal for high schoolers). Most of these things are stylistic and, while annoying to read, can be groomed out with some forethought and good editing. The book, as has been acknowledged by other people, could easily be a hundred pages shorter than it is.

Blue I found sympathetic as a teenager who related more easily with books and films than actual people. It's natural, and forgiveable, for a girl as sheltered as she to fall under the spell of the Bluebloods, the beautiful people you find at any high school. Eventually she learns that they are not worth knowing--a fact of growing up and graduating from teenagerhood.

So if the Bluebloods are fascinating only due to their looks (which exert a gravitational pull on the eyes of everyone else, thereby inflating their fascination even for people like Blue who, as her dad might say, should know better), what about Hannah? The entire novel is predicated on the premise that Hannah is worth writing/talking/freakishly obsessing over. The Bluebloods do it. Blue does it. Her dad does it, if Blue's suppositions about Gareth and Hannah's ongoing affair are correct. But what blows the whole novel for me is not the excessive hyperbole and verbal diarrhea, but Hannah. She's not worth it. I can't buy into the obsession because Pessl can't make her worth the interest.

We're supposed to find her incredibly fascinating because Blue *tells* us she is fascinating, insists ad nauseum that Hannah is a Movie Star, a walking Tragic Past slash Freaking Rubiks Cube (see Redundant and Overused Gimmicks of Modern Literature, Pessl 2006). Yet there's nothing about Hannah herself that lives up to the hype. Agreed, she's a bit strange, melodramatic, and probably depressed. She's gorgeous in a classic, 1940s femme fatale kind of way, and she likes to samba with her wineglass in the living room. She dies in a freakish way (suicide or murder, pick your brand of mustard). But what about her warrants the Bluebloods' adoration? Or Blue's intense fascination? If Blue is so perceptive, why can't she see that this

woman is nothing more than a veiled plot device (woman murdered in woods = oooh, a whodunit)?

What we mostly get of Hannah is description, for Pessl is unable to make Hannah interesting through Hannah herself. She very rarely speaks in conversation, and when she does, it's hardly enlightening. Very early in the novel--I think it's the second time Blue meets her--Blue describes Hannah as this glowing personality whose words you just had to pay attention to, the assumption being that even if they are not particularly weighty, profound, or radiating wisdom like a nuclear reactor (ha! see, it's catching), that they are at least clever or novel enough to be worth hearing. But Hannah's side of the ensuing conversation is nothing more than the standard chit-chat Hi-how-are-yous When-did-you-moves How-do-you-like-Stocktons that any neighborly grandmother could come up with. Hannah is nothing more than a mannequin that Pessl dresses up like the mysterious leading lady, but ultimately she's vapor. Synopsis: this novel is mostly fluff. At times amusing fluff, but pretty gratuitous.

Maxwell says

I tried with this book. I gave it 150 pages, and at this moment in time I just can't get into it. The constant literary allusions and pop culture references, mixed with the didactic and wordy writing style kept pushing me out of the story. I'd skim whole paragraphs just to find the important, plot-moving parts of the sentences. I held out hope for this one because I chose it for book club (sorry, friends!) and it's been on my shelf for 2+ years, so I felt like I had to conquer it. But it's only day 3 of 2017, and I don't want to start off my year forcing myself to read a book I'm not enjoying—even if that means quitting on the first book of the year. Now I'm on to better reads!

Emily says

I was about one-quarter of the way through this book when I had a strange revelation. It was, basically, kind of formulaic. And yet, the formula was rare and unpredictable. See, several years ago, I read Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, a dark book about a group of preciously sophisticated, murderous wacked-out Classics majors at a small liberal arts college. I was captivated. Six months ago I read Daniel Handler (aka Lemony Snicket's) *The Basic Eight*, about a group of precociously sophisticated, murderous high school students at a San Francisco high school. I was, again, captivated. And then I read *Special Topics In Calamity Physics*, about a preciously sophisticated group of prep school kids that get involved in...is it a murder? A suicide? And I thought, is this some sort of new trend in fiction? The secret, murderous high school club? If it is the new trend, I understand why, I suppose. High School can murder anyone's soul, and it's tightly knit cliques that tend to do the most murdering. (I know the *Secret History* took place at a college, but it was about Classics majors, and they are just plain weird.)

As a literature junkie, I also think I understand why these characters are always precociously smart—because former English majors and literature geeks dream them up, and it's such fun to dream up a character that lets you quote Joyce and Shakespeare nonstop.

So, maybe I couldn't help but take this book with a grain of salt, and maybe the main character seemed just a bit too grown up for her years. But here's the thing— I couldn't stop reading the book. Like, I was obsessively carrying it around, and during the climactic sequence, I just sat there on the bus and didn't even notice I was late to work. So it's got formulaic elements, but the solution to the mystery bears no resemblance to either Daniel Handler or Donna Tartt. And so heroine Blue seems a bit too wise for her years...so does Harry Potter, after all. I'd pick this one up if you like intrigue and don't mind a bit of academia along the way. (Yes,

there are references to Joyce and Shakespeare along the way).

Jason Pettus says

(Full review can be found at the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com:]).

Okay, I'll admit it -- that whenever I hear of another young, good-looking first-time author in New York getting an obscenely high advance on their first book and suddenly becoming The Talk Of The Town, I automatically become suspicious, as sure a response from me as Pavlov's dogs salivating at the sound of their little bell. And that's because I've been around various people in the New York literary industry now long enough to know, that many of the decisions in that industry are made with the same immature dysfunction of a high-school Homecoming dance; that those who are chosen to become the next "Belle of the Ball" have been chosen perhaps because they're physically attractive, or popular, or are having sex with the captain of the football team, or have personality types that are easy to sell to others, or any of another thousand reasons besides that they simply deserve it.

And indeed, as I started making my way this week through Marisha Pessl's *Special Topics in Calamity Physics*, the latest book from the literary world to be guilty of all the things mentioned above, the news didn't seem good; that for its first couple of hundred pages, the entire thing comes off as a grandly pretentious excuse for MFA holders to justify the years of their lives and tens of thousands of dollars they wasted to get that degree in the first place. The story of gifted child and snotty high-school senior Blue van Meer, the novel at first seems like it'll be going down the same well-worn path made most famous by the 1989 movie *Heathers* -- wherein a group of precocious teenagers who worship the pop culture of their grandparents' generation stand around not acting like teenagers at all, spouting world-weary attitudes that most high-schoolers have difficulty even understanding, much less affecting. And it doesn't help, of course, that Pessl's writing style simply screams "please love me for all the big words I know, and I hope my cutesy intellectual diversions keep your mind off the fact that the plot isn't actually very good" (see *Your Superfluous Postmodern Footnotes Make Me Want to Stab You in the Head: Why No One in their Twenties Should Ever Be Allowed to Read David Foster Wallace*, J. Pettus, 7th ed.).

But then...but then. But then I started getting further along into the book, started getting used to the odd halting style of Pessl's writing. And I started realizing that there were other intriguing things going on in the story as well, multiple layers that Pessl was laying down in such a subtle way to not even be noticeable at first -- for example, like the infinitely complex relationship Blue has with her intolerably snotty professor father Gareth, of the hermetically tight situation they have formed because of Blue's mother being dead and the two of them living in a different city every year. Or of the way Blue finally and slowly starts acting like an actual teen as the book progresses; the way she lashes out emotionally in awkward situations, her tendency to take the things said to her much too literally, even as she believes herself to be too smart and much too educated to succumb to such immaturity.

What quickly starts...

Patrick says

Reviews of “Special Topics in Calamity Physics” and the Bottle of Açaí Juice I Bought for Lunch

Cleverly Masked as SAT Test Questions

Choices:

- (a) Special Topics in Calamity Physics
- (b) The bottle of açai juice I bought for lunch
- (c) Both a and b
- (d) Neither a nor b

Questions

- (1) I had heard good things about it
- (2) I bought it on a whim
- (3) If feeling extremely charitable, I might call it “frothy”
- (4) It seemed sort of good in the beginning, but by the end I was like, “Blaahahhgajh. End, end, end.”
- (5) Contains metaphors that go down like a junebug having lion sex in a bourbon mood
- (6) Blue things totally dissed
- (7) Nabokov rolling in his grave
- (8) Authoritative blurb raises questions about agenda of bluber
- (9) Handy pronunciation key for difficult-to-pronounce words like “açaf” or “pessl”
- (10) “I’m confused about what editors, like, do?”
- (11) “Maybe I don’t need this many antioxidants and/or self-indulgence.”
- (12) “Post-BBC Office is anyone allowed to be named Gareth? Really? Really?”

[Pencils down.]

Answers:

- (1) c
- (2) c
- (3) c
- (4) c
- (5) c (“A Cadillac-sized smile drove away with his face as if I’d just agreed to pay him ‘in cayash,’ as Dad would say, for a Sedona Beige Metallic Pontiac Grand Prix, fully loaded, two grand over sticker price, driving it off the lot right then and there.”; “Stop the radicals! Join the antioxidant revolution!”)
- (6) c (~bloods plotline disappear halfway through; ~berries have 61 fewer ORAC units than açai)
- (7) d (This is against policy at Cimitière de Clarens.)
- (8) c (Jonathan Franzen: “A masterpiece of sorts.”; Brunswick Laboratories, MA: ORAC Unit analysis, presented as bar chart)
- (9) b (“say ‘ah-sci-ee’”)
- (10) a
- (11) c
- (12) a (No, unless a boy is born that can swim faster than a shark.)

Oriana says

Let me start by saying that I *did* like this book. I did. Ms. Pessl is probably too smart for her own good, but that's never stopped me before.

That said, as with most over-intellectualized writings, I had trouble getting close to her, to her work. There's such a lot of time spent obfuscating, demonstrating how clever she is, developing stacked metaphors and allusions, that the story is difficult to get lost in. You are constantly reminded that *you are reading a novel by a very smart young lady*. And while some of the characters are extensively developed (Hannah, Jade, Blue's father), most of the others, including our "heroine," Blue, remain very flat. She, most of all, has so little emotion that it's difficult to believe her on the few occasions when she freaks out; when she cries or yells, you wonder, "Where did *that* come from?"

Also, some of my friends have complained (rightly) that the last fifty-ish pages seem to belong to a completely different book, that everything changes drastically right at the end, without ample warning. Which: true, true. Although I guess that didn't bother me so much, because of course once it switches you can go, "Oh so *that's* why that happened, and that, and that." But still I guess it was a little hard to swallow.

In any case, the book is definitely compelling, interesting, imaginative, original, etc., etc., etc. And really, it's only her first book, so she's got lots of time to improve. I'll read her next one, for sure.

Nick Black says

FINAL EXAM -- You might first review my ongoing commentary as I digested this oleose turd.

Special Topics in Calamity Physics is

- (a) a bullshit patty between two slices of lies
- (b) a ghastly spasm of false erudition and pretension to knowledge
- (c) nothing to do with physics whatsoever, and indeed infuriating in its suggestion that someone who hasn't even taken calculus is "writing essays on String Theory" (capitalization *not*, I assure you, mine), and indeed that AP Physics in either its Classical Dynamics or Electromagnetics formats has anything to do with the oft-referenced Special Theory of Relativity (also, the line "like studying quarks and quantum mechanics at the same time" -- nicely alliterative, but HOW THE FUCK WOULD YOU STUDY QUARKS WITHOUT QUANTUM MECHANICS)
- (d) Christ, a waste of my time (see Visual Aid 1.0 ("Results", *Electron Band Structure in Germanium, My Ass*, Lucas Kovar, 2001, *Annals of Improbable Research*))
- (e) all of the above

oh yeah, and gareth killed hannah. i'm going to go drink the bathroom cleaner until i hurl chunks of my spleen. fuck you, marisha pessl.

GT Bookstore, 2008-08-26, impulse acquisition

Erica says

What have I learned? I've learned that apparently it's possible for a large number of fawning reviewers to confuse "pretentious" with "intelligent". I very likely got what I deserved when I chose to ignore a clear warning, namely the so called "Glossary of Terms" inside the dustjacket which introduced our 16 year old heroine, Blue van Meer, as "a brainy, deadpan, preternaturally erudite girl who...has a head crammed full of literary, scientific, and philosophical knowledge." Admittedly, I was taken in by the somewhat amusing and engaging first page, but after that...imagine spending 500 pages with a sheltered, socially inept, overly verbose adolescent know-it-all. Yuck.

The kindest thing I can say about this book is that it's desperately trying to be a long-winded young adult version of *The Secret History* with a nasty case of Purple Prose:

"But at last, at the very end of the twisting gravel road was the house, an awkward, wooden-faced coy mistress clinging to half a hill with bulky additions stuck to her sides like giant faux pas."

But wait, there's more:

"There was no sound in the claustrophobic hallway except Zach's breathing which heaved like the interior of a conch shell. I could feel his eyes dripping down me, coursing through the folds of Jefferson's crispy black dress that resembled an upside-down shitake mushroom if you squinted at it. The silvery-black fabric felt flimsy, as if it could stiffly peel away like tinfoil around cold fried chicken."

'nuff said.

Summer says

Donna Tartt wrote a splendid book called *The Secret History* which both celebrated and skewered hyper-intellectualism as well as explored the process of interacting with a text and the pleasures of narrative devices. This book follows roughly the same storyline (and, incidentally, the storyline of Daniel Handler's *The Basic Eight*, down to the "study questions" at the end), except there's absolutely no reason for the precious chapter titles and the annotated references - they have no bearing on the story itself and the general effect is talking with someone who's read a lot of books and hasn't understood a damn one of them.

The irritating dialogue is more reminiscent of chick lit than of anything spoken in real life or in the realm of drama, and the narrator is utterly divorced from the grand intellectual she is supposed to be (again: see *The Secret History* for an excellent depiction of young scholars). No one has any sort of believable emotional reaction to anything, because no one has any discernable personality traits. Charles, Camilla, and Frances wander over from Tartt's novel to halfheartedly play roles as Charles, Leulah (really!) and Nigel, and then get bored and leave after the story inexplicably becomes a murder mystery. The only possible killer is so obviously telegraphed from early on that all of Blue's supermarket-paperback-mystery "sleuthing" is enragingly tiresome. Also, there's some sort of limp romantic subplot that I guess we're supposed to care about.

So where *The Secret History* is a brilliant story of the delights and dangers of text and narrative and a wrenching depiction of a classical sort of madness, *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* is the same book shat out and frosted with irritatingly perky metaphors and the worst dialogue I've seen outside of a Harlequin pulper. If you want to read this book and aren't a fan of Donna Tartt, just read *The Basic Eight*, which is shorter and more entertaining.

Doug Bradshaw says

I've read other reviews and I believe the negative reviews have been written by people who didn't take time to really read the book and follow it all the way through. It would be easy to do. It's not a book you can speed read. (See *Ulysses* by James Joyce) Sometimes I'll tear through a good book in a couple of days. But there is so much in this book that you have to take your time to really comprehend it and get the good stuff out of it. Marisha's writing technique is totally unique with her hundreds of references to great works of fiction, movie stars, reference books, and other explanations of behavior. I laughed and enjoyed perhaps 60 percent of these and whipped through some of them, not quite following but knowing they'd be worth studying if I were retired and had more time.

Basically, this is a coming of age story. The main character, Blue, has been raised by an intellectual professor who is always on the move dragging her around the country to different jobs with different universities. Her mother died when she was very young, so her only deep relationship is with her father. And it is a very touching and loving relationship. She becomes his "Mini Me" in many ways. They land for her senior year in a very high end private school and as she is maturing and pulled into a group of "cool" kids by a very interesting and eccentric female teacher, her life starts to change as she tries to become a "cool" teenager, to date and party, to become more than a smart but nerdy professor's perfect little daughter.

As all of this happens, she starts to realize that her father has a few flaws, has been having flings with women and treating them poorly, that he has lied about some of his meetings with other professors and that there may be some kind of secret second life going on.

There is murder, disappearances, first sexual experiences, shyness, embarrassing moments of being young and tongue-tied in front of a class, but more than anything, there is the touching love of a young girl for her father, and then how she deals with some unexpected, heart wrenching blows to her life.

Throughout the book, there were dozens and dozens of laugh out loud moments excellent insights into relationships and the little things that make us tick. And even though much of the book was somewhat tongue in cheek, the main themes came through to me loud and clear and when I finally finished up after re-reading the introduction (a must unless you have a photographic memory) I put the book down, sad that I was finished and hoping that there will be some kind of follow up.

Fabian says

If the whimsy of "Bonjour Tristesse" met & mated with all that malignant magic from "The Secret History" this would be their child. This Gen-Nexter novel holds the pulse of the zeitgeist under its overachieving, overintelligent finger and lets it be known: this is the novel for our generation, for the eager me!me!&onlyme!s. The heroine is such a brat, the reader oftens remembers past characters like these: uberegotist humanoids--selfish to the extreme, & SMILES--here is their side of the story (indeed, I know of one or two overachieving, overintelligent high schoolers which still instantly make me cringe). That the young characters loathe and are still wholly attracted to the poor, poor teacher--that the ending is as bleak and miserable as an empty box...this is the new B. E. Ellis for sure. (A better one, actually, since this is, in effect, TODAY.)

An instant modern classic!

Edward Lorn says

Let's get my one and only complaint about the book out of the way.

Special Topics in Calamity Physics is hard to get into. I started it numerous times it, but it kept losing my attention. Then my good friend Thomas Stromquist mentioned it was on his TBR, so we gave it the old buddy-read try and I finally got past the first 50 pages. It wasn't until Blue met Hannah that the story grabbed me. That is not to say that the opening pages are unneeded. The exact opposite is true. Everything here comes together to create a tremendous literary achievement. But it's a bit like Peter Straub's *Ghost Story* in that it takes a while to get going. Once it did grab me, I never wanted to put it down.

Unfortunately, my experience with this wonderful book will forever be marred by a dark time in American history, when a court jester took over the Kingdom, when hate and anger won out over logic and progress, when a quarter of America chose the rewind button over the pause button. Would Clinton have moved us forward? Probably not. She was as much of a part of the oligarchy and white America as Trump, but she certainly wouldn't have sent us back to the age of Jim Crow by promoting the gloating, gleeful hatred we're seeing now.

In a way, I feel like Blue felt toward the end of this book; abandoned and forgotten. To witness the results of Election Day 2016 and see that 42.4% of American citizens decided to stay home and allow a sexist, racist, xenophobic, sexual predator to win the office of Commander and Chief of the one of the greatest superpowers on Earth is surreal. We're the laughing stock of the free world and for good reason. For fuck's sake, only 58.6% of Americans could even be bothered to vote.

So, I suppose, *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* was an apt novel to read during this unruly time in American politics. The topic of uncertainty plays as big of a part in the novel as it now does in America's future. Both see the ruin of intelligent people. Both deal with habitual liars and human beings being terrible to one another.

Yeah, man, I couldn't have read a better (worse?) book around this time of year.

Will you like *Special Topics in Calamity Physics*? I'm gonna say, probably not. If you didn't like Pessl's sophomore effort *Night Film*, you'll likely not like this one. Even though the two books couldn't be more different in tone, they both take a considerable amount of effort to understand and propose more questions than Pessl gives outright answers to. I, however, loved both books. I especially dig that Pessl doesn't hold the reader's hand. I like having to figure things out on my own. As long as there's enough information for me to puzzle piece everything together, I'm happy, and that's exactly what this book offers.

I feel the need to clarify something though. There is a difference between an author giving zero answers and readers being able to have more than one right answer. Dig it: The bible can be read by a hundred people and each person will have a different experience because that book is full of allegory and metaphor. There is no one right answer. This is why so many people believe it to be the work of a higher power, because they cannot grasp the concept that a human being can create something so intricate and multifaceted. But authors like Pessl show us that it is possible for a human being to master the artform that is allegory. Luckily for readers everywhere, Pessl's novels are far more lucid and cogent than any book of the bible. They are far

more realistic as well.

I am in awe, yet again, at how many story threads and intricate details Marisha Pessl is able to juggle while keeping her narrative engaging. The openness of the mystery was a breath of fresh air when compared to the heavy-handed, spoon-fed denouements I've grown accustomed to receiving in modern thrillers. This isn't James Patterson or Dan Brown. This is a smart, well-written mystery while loads of heart.

Speaking of heart, I want to get even more personal with this review. There's a scene in this book where Blue is betrayed by someone she's just been intimate with. This scene hit me hard because much the same thing happened to me in high school. I was a football player and relatively popular for being a fat kid. I still got picked on quite a bit, but a lot of people liked me because I carried around a gives-no-fucks attitude. I learned at a really early age not to give a flying fuck what other people thought about me. What everyone else thinks about me is none of my business. Well, this confidence attracted a girl by the name of Jill. Jill was a smaller girl, on the thin side, not really someone I thought would ever be interested in me, because everyone else thought she was super hot. And, I'll be damned, Jill and I ended up hooking up. We fucked quite a bit over the course of four days. I thought I was in love, and she kept coming back for more, so I must've been doing something right. That is until someone found out about us and she denied everything. Denied even knowing me. Even when people came forward and said they'd seen us together, she called them a liar. I never once bragged about those four days we screwed around together, but she outright refused to even admit she'd so much as hung out with me. I didn't care if anyone knew about us fucking, but it hurt that she would pretend like I meant nothing to her because she was scared people would think less of her for so much as knowing me. Hell, maybe I never did mean anything to her. I'll never know.

Anyway, yeah, that scene tore my heart out and crushed it under a boot heel. That shit hurt, yo.

In summation: Sorry that this is less of a review and more of a diatribe, but my reviews have always been personal things. Also, my reviews will always be for *me* first. I like being able to look back on my reviews and see what I was like or what the state of the world was like while I was reading. I fucking hate that this election was a blight on an otherwise fantastic book and that, from here on out, any time I see *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* sitting on my bookshelf, I will see the gloating face of America's broken education system and tl;dr crowd.

Final Judgment: A brilliantly and beautifully constructed and impeccably delivered novel by one of my newest favorite authors.

Andrew Smith says

I only got about 20% of the way through this one. But do keep in mind that it's a big book: over 500 pages or 21 hours of listening. I don't like giving up on books and I'd really enjoyed her 2014 novel *Night Film* so I did try to stay with it. The problem is that though there's a relatively enticing story here the telling is just so protracted, so tiresome that I lost the will.

It kicks off by introducing 24-year-old Blue van Meer who'd lost her mother early (car accident) and is now touring America with her father, moving from one academic outpost to the next. At the point I gave up, Blue had already flagged another death and had introduced us to the fated lady. The story was working its way – very slowly – to the point of her demise.

I think it's the style as much as the pontification that got to me. It really is like listening to the ramblings of a twenty-something: chuntering on, using lots of words - far too many for the point being made. The whole thing just blathering away without making any significant progress.

Some reviewers have compared this book to The Secret History. I can see the similarities, but Donna Tartt's book, although flawed, did grab me more and made me stay with it. This is a book that readers will either love or hate, I feel. I think I've nailed my colours to the mast on that one.

Dan Schwent says

This one is going back on the pile. I made it over 100 pages this time. That's something, right?

My problems with this book are the glacial pace and overwritten sentences. It's like an even more wordy Donna Tartt book. I don't need literary references cited in every paragraph and overblown dialogue and flowery language for the sake of flowery language don't impress me at this stage in the game. The pretentious, pompous tone of the book is also a turn-off. Picking up the book to read it began feeling like a chore before I finally threw in the towel.

I'm a man with a finite lifespan and thus a finite amount of books I'll be able to read before I reach the clearing at the end of the path. I think I'll go read something more engaging.

Casey says

This first bit is my initial reaction to the book. I'm keeping it up because I still think it's valid. However, see below for my post-reading thoughts.

Oh, how I hate this book. The parenthetical statements are making me homicidal. The dad is a jackass of unparalleled proportion, and I have yet to see Hannah do ANYTHING that warrants Blue's fascination. Sure, she picks up strange men in diners, but really, who hasn't? The writing is way too fond of its own wit, and I'm sick of all the figurative language. It's crammed in like a hermit crab in a too-small shell (that simile is my own (and purposefully poor), but not unlike the fifty million that litter every page of the book).

Now, it does have one thing going for it: plot. If someone were to tell me what the book is about without my having to read it, I'd be thrilled. Because I certainly do want to know what happens, but damn, it's a slog.

After finishing:

As you can tell from the above, I initially hated this book. I was eagerly awaiting the end so I could grant it ZERO stars. And I stand by my claims. Call me old-fashioned, but I think a sentence should have no more than one simile or metaphor. And I think that figurative language should be spread out a bit, because it gets to a point that it's annoying and distracting. Now, I acknowledge that this overcrowding might have been on purpose--the story is told in a teenager's voice--but it *was* annoying and distracting. The same thing goes with the over-abundance of citations (although near the end of the book, there's a confrontation in the dad's office, and the citation bit gets pretty funny). And I know the dad is supposed to come off as an ass, but it made me impatient. Finally, the teen dialog was dismally inauthentic. Dee and Dum especially rang false.

So I still have some reservations about the book (as my boyfriend will tell you, it's a bit banged-up because I threw it a few times).

So how did it go from zero stars to four? Well, it all happened around page 311. That's when the language loosened up a little, and Pessl let what she really had going for her--the plot--take over. At this point, the story takes a dramatic turn, and it almost seems to become a different book. It made a quick transformation from AWFULLY LAME to a pretty cool action/mystery piece. I will say that I felt like this was an abrupt change that though (again) may have been on purpose, was a little awkward. But damn, who cares? From that point on, I couldn't put the book down, I kept turning back to clues in earlier pages, I accidentally let my 7th period silent reading go on ten minutes too long. Just like Blue realized she'd been duped, I saw that what I thought was a completely shitty book was, in actuality, quite fantastic.

I have some problems with the last chapter--it was a little self-indulgent, I thought--but it's a small complaint.

I hope that people who are hating this give it a chance.

Well played, Marisha Pessl, well played. You got me.

Raeleen Lemay says

Yesterday it took me 5 hours to crawl through 18 pages, so I think it's safe to say I'm not really into this. I adored Night Film, so I thought I should give this a try, but it's not really my thing. Oh well!

James says

I really wanted to like this book.

But it's a train wreck. The literary carnage is so grotesque and horrifying, you can't help but look, read. (And I promise you, just take my word for it, that metaphor is better than most that Pessl uses in this debut novel of hers.)

Despite what Bayard says, it's amazing what happens when you stop talking about a text and actually interact with it. I'll tell you what happens: disappointment. Utter, utter disappointment.

For all intents and purposes, the book doesn't even start until the second half when a certain major character is found dead by the narrator/protagonist. As readers, we learn about the death with the first line of Chapter #1: "Before I tell you about Hannah Schneider's death, I'll tell you about my mother's." So essentially, the first half of the book amounts to literary blue balls in which Pessl torments us with bad writing and we writhe in agony praying for release.

It is a common formula to take the wit and wisdom of an adult and transplant it into an adolescent (from Catcher in the Rye to Juno). Pessl brings this trite technique to a new low. Unlike the social relevance and humor of Diablo Cody or the sparse, unfathomable brilliance of Salinger, Pessl just writes with broad strokes and clunky rhetorical devices. Her writing is hyperbolic and extreme. She seems to pride herself on

regurgitating endless references and allusions, but I would prefer that instead of describing someone as having “the air of a Chateau Marmont bungalow about her,” she just describe the damn person. Do some real work, Marisha.

And oh how Marisha Pessl loves similes and metaphors. She and Augusten Burroughs should get together and have some kind of simiphor-off. Sample Pessl snippet:

“Charles and his friends looked forward to the hours at her house much in the way New York City’s celery-thin heiresses and beetroot B-picture lotharios looked forward to noserubbing at the Stork Club certain sweaty Saturday nights in 1943 (see *Forget About El Morocco: The Xanadu of the New York Elite, the Stork Club, 1929-1965*, Riser, 1981).

I have two problems with this kind of writing.

- 1) I don't know the way New York City's celery-thin heiresses and beetroot B-picture lotharios looked forward to noserubbing at the Stork Club certain sweaty Saturday nights in 1943. So this metaphor is completely useless to me. Why can't Charles and his friends just look forward to the hours at her house?
- 2) The damn parenthetical references. They're throughout the entire book. It's probably supposed to help clear up my first problem with this passage, but it only serves to remove me from the story in two really stupid ways: 1) I stop reading and go look it up, or 2) Since I'm reading a book about a high school senior who can't possibly know all of the books and references in parentheses, I can only assume this is Marisha Pessl being an annoying smartass with this kind of crappy Authorial Intrusion.

(There's also "Visual Aids" throughout the book. Drawings by the author. Really annoying. Really stupid. Absolutely unnecessary.)

At one point there is a blubbery Mercedes. If anyone can send me a picture of a “blubbery” Mercedes, Authwhore will award you with a free book that is better than Special Topics in Calamity Physics.

At one point, people say their names “with paint-by-numbers politeness.” This is a problem because paint-by-numbers are not polite. They can be tacky, painstaking, time consuming, fun, childish, whimsical, or any number of other things, but I don’t think that there is anything polite about paint-by-numbers and certainly nothing polite about a writer using such poorly chosen imagery with reckless abandon and intending people read 514 pages of it.

At one point, “he either stared at the kid as if he were a Price is Right rerun, barely blinking, or replied in his molasses accent: ‘Nunna ya goddamn business.’” How do you stare at a Price is Right rerun? Well, Pessl knows that no one knows, so she tells us. You barely blink.

At one point, “Officer Donnie Lee happened to have saturated himself in Paul Revere-like cologne (it rode far ahead of him, alerting all of his impending arrival).” Which doesn’t even work! Paul Revere rode to warn people not of his own arrival but of the British’s. So I guess that’s why it’s Paul-Revere-like? But isn’t there a better image for something that travels ahead to warn of itself? A fog horn, perhaps? A screeching buzzer on a truck?

At one point, "Hannah was wearing a housedress the color of sandpaper..."

The color of sandpaper??? Pessl, how imprecise can you be!!! Is there a worse writer? What type? What grit? What brand? I've seen gray sandpaper, black sandpaper, brown sandpaper, rust sandpaper, beige sandpaper.....

At one point, the narrator/protagonist has a fight with her father and proceeds to throw books at him. I was really hoping to learn that Marisha Pessl had some true postmodern class and sense of humor by having her throw this book at him.

It didn't happen.

I threw my own copy instead.

For the record, Marisha Pessl is still hot.

Not Sophie Dahl hot. But still hot.

Elizabeth says

I could easily attend a semester-long seminar about this book. Holy "coming of age with murder, suicide, conspiracy theories, and turns you don't see coming because you aren't worthy to walk in the same light as Marisha Pessl" shit, this book was great. Better than *Night Film*. Bravo.
