

Sunday Book Review

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Core Curriculum

Review by [LIESL SCHILLINGER](#)
Published: August 13, 2006

Whoever coined the phrase “everybody loves a winner” probably wasn’t one. When the news came out that a distractingly pretty actress, playwright and [Barnard College](#) graduate named Marisha Pessl, only 27, had sold her first book (which she also illustrated) — a “Nabokovian” thriller about an intellectual widower and his precocious daughter — for a substantial sum, the pick-a-little, talk-a-little publishing blog brigade went into conniptions. “She’s the latest in a long, long line to suffer from ‘Hot Young Author Chick’ Syndrome,” one blogger grumbled; another wrote in a headline, “It’s Not About Marisha Pessl’s Looks and Money — Is It?” and asked if the book would have been snapped up so quickly if Pessl hadn’t had such a “drool-worthy author photo.” But don’t hate her because she’s beautiful: her talent and originality would draw wolf whistles if she were an 86-year-old hunchbacked troll. And in Pessl’s case, Nabokovian doesn’t need scare quotes. Her exhilarating synthesis of the classic and the modern, frivolity and fate — “Pnin” meets “The O.C.” — is a poetic act of will. Never mind jealous detractors: virtuosity is its own reward. And this skylarking book will leave readers salivating for more.

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Like Alan Bennett’s delectable and brilliant play “The History Boys,” now on Broadway, “Special Topics in

Calamity Physics” tells the story of a wise newcomer who joins a circle of students who orbit a charismatic teacher with a tragic secret. The newcomer, a motherless waif named Blue van Meer, spent most of her life driving between college towns with her genius poli-sci professor father, Gareth. To kill time on their drives, they discuss radical class warfare, riff on Homer and Steinbeck, recite movie dialogue and poems by Blake, Neruda and

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Shout

SPECIAL TOPICS IN CALAMITY PHYSICS

By Marisha Pessl.

Illustrated. 514 pp. Viking. \$25.95.

Readers' Opinions

[Forum: Book News and Reviews](#)

“Paper Moon,” delighting in each other’s shrewd and charming company as they dupe the yokels. But the action of this tale takes place once the car wheels come to rest, in Stockton, N.C., home of the St. Gallway School, where the Tudor facades of the buildings resemble august dead presidents, “gray-topped, heavy brow, wooden teeth, mulish bearing,” and where Blue succumbs to the gravitational pull of the teacher who holds St. Gallway’s “Bluebloods” in thrall.

That teacher, Hannah Schneider, has the magnetism of Miss Jean Brodie and the film-noir mystique of Lauren Bacall. When Blue meets her, in a “Hitchcock cameo,” by the frozen-food section at a grocery store, she falls under her spell. “She had an elegant sort of romantic, bone-sculpted face, one that took well to both shadows and light,” Blue recalls. “Most extraordinary though was the air of a Chateau Marmont bungalow about her, a sense of RKO, which I’d never before witnessed in person.” Hannah teaches a course on cinema in a room lined with posters of

screen kisses from “Casablanca,” “Breakfast at Tiffany’s,” “From Here to Eternity,” and other four-star oldies, but she conducts her most serious myth-making at boozy dinner parties she throws at her house for students she’s handpicked.

There’s Tade, a rich, latchkey hussy who cruises decaying middle-aged men for kicks.

[Shakespeare](#), and read Hollywood biographies — from a tell-all by Louis B. Mayer’s maid to blow-by-blows on Howard Hughes and Cary Grant. Gareth is fond of making oracular statements, which his daughter laps up as if they were Churchill’s: “Everyone is responsible for the page-turning tempo of his or her Life Story,” he tells her. And, he cautions, “never try to change the narrative structure of someone else’s story.” Tightly swaddled in her daughter-dad duad, Blue does not know that her story is someone else’s. Only gradually does she learn that the frantic tempo of her life has been conducted by forces she does not suspect.

You could compare this road-tripping duo to Humbert Humbert and his Lo — leaving out the sexual component (no, this book is not one of those plucky, degraded memoirs so dear to popular tastes) — but their truer fictional ancestors are Moses Pray and his (probable) daughter, Addie Loggins, chugging across the heartland in

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Leulah, “pearlskinned” and ethereal, with long brown hair braided like a Victorian bell pull; Milton, “sturdy and grim,” tattooed and reeking of cigarettes, with a curdled, puffy “Orson Wellian” look; scrawny Nigel, who favors “thin, tonguelike neckties;” and Charles, a blond heartthrob with “duvet eyes, shadowy eyelids, a smile like a hammock and a silvered, sleepy countenance.” When Blue spots Charles and Hannah in a clinch on the quad, she mistakes them for “one of those tan, hair-tossing ‘Blue Lagoon’ couples (one per every high school) who threatened to destroy the bedrock of the chaste educational community simply by the muggy way they looked at each other in the halls.” And of course, there’s Blue herself, the perennial outsider: “I have blue eyes, freckles and stand approximately 5-foot-3 in socks,” she writes modestly. (Presumably, like Lolita, she’s the same height “in one sock.”) But Hannah turns her Vaseline-blurred close-up lens on Blue, making her one of the beautiful people. Should this nubile bunch accompany their teacher on an overnight camping trip into the woods? Ever seen a horror flick?

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Liesl Schillinger, a New York-based arts writer, is a regular contributor to the Book Review.

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About the only person in Stockton who is not smitten with Hannah is Gareth van Meer, who churlishly dismisses her as "commonplace." His contempt perplexes Blue. Typically, like Moses in "Paper Moon," her father has gamely taken aboard the Trixie Delights who cross his path. "Dad picked up women the way certain wool pants can't help but pick up lint," she explains. She has coined a nickname for the women — "June Bugs" — to indicate their pestiness, harmlessness and short life span, but she pities them for their bruised hearts and rejected gifts. "How many hours had Natalie Simms slaved constructing the birdhouse out of popsicle sticks?" she wonders. Blue's decision that her father is wrong about Hannah is her first act of rebellion. "I simply felt somewhere, at some time, she'd been the toast of something. And a confident, even aggressive look in her eyes, made me certain she was planning a comeback."

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Forum: Book News and Reviews

But, as the reader knows from the first page of Pessl's novel, a comeback is impossible. Hannah is dead, strangled by an electrical cord, her tongue "the cheery pink of a kitchen sponge." Blue's book is an attempt to untangle the mystery of her demise, from the safe remove of Harvard Yard, where she spades through her memories of Stockton. Whether Hannah died at her own hand or had help is unclear, and only Blue possesses the information that can answer the question not of whodunit (if there is a who) but why? As in "The Big Sleep," the intrigue does not depend

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on any one murderer to work its convoluted magic (Raymond Chandler himself was unsure who offed one of his story's victims). Gareth, uncharacteristically, has no wisdom to share. Like Bogey, who told Bacall in the film version, "Angel, I'm going to leave you in a tough spot," he lets her stare down the villains on her own.

The joys of this shrewdly playful narrative lie not only in the high-low darts and dives of Pessl's tricky plotting, but in her prose, which floats and runs as if by instinct, unpremeditated and unerring. A forgettable man is casually summarized as "an extra packet of salt one misses at the bottom of a bag of fast food"; teachers at Blue's school have "the kind faces of mice"; lonely days "shuffled by like bland schoolgirls"; and a boy's voice is "stiff as new shoes." From time to time, arresting aperçus interrupt the flight, a reminder that even a glittering creature knows about the dark. "When it comes to certain human miseries, the only eyewitnesses should be the pavement and maybe the trees," Gareth tells the young Blue. A decade later, when she is forced to confront one of these miseries — a woman her father has spurned — she thinks, "there were few things in the world more horrific than the adult weep." Soon before Hannah's mysterious demise, she tells Blue, "Life hinges on a couple of seconds you never see coming." That bleak truth is something that Blue, whose butterfly-catching mother died in a freak accident when she was 5, has known since she still had her baby teeth. "It really wasn't so much the tragic event itself, but others having knowledge of it that prevented recovery," she reflects.

Heeding Gareth van Meer's dictum that the most page-turning read known to man is the collegiate curriculum, with its "celestial, sweet set of instructions, culminating in the scary wonder of the Final Exam," Pessl structures Blue's mystery like a kind of Great Books class, each chapter figuratively linked by its title to a well-known work of literature, from "Othello" (the story of how Blue's father seduced her mother) to "The Woman in White" (the first meeting with Hannah), to "Deliverance" (the fateful camping trip). A professor is all-powerful, Gareth liked to tell his daughter, he puts "a veritable frame around life," and "organizes the unorganizable. Nimble partitions it into modern and postmodern, renaissance, baroque, primitivism, imperialism and so on. Splice that up with Research Papers, Vacation, Midterms. All that order — simply divine." Blue's syllabus also includes a murder or two. Her book's last pages are a final exam. You will be relieved to learn it is mostly multiple choice, and there is no time limit.

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