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BOOKS OF THE TIMES

### Name Dropper's Boarding School Intrigue

 By JANET MASLIN  
 Published: July 31, 2006

Marisha Pessl's "Special Topics in Calamity Physics" is the most flashily erudite first novel since Jonathan Safran Foer's "Everything Is Illuminated." With its pirouettes and cartwheels, its tireless annotations and digressions, it has a similar whiz-kid eagerness to wow the reader.



Deborah Lopez

Marisha Pessl.

#### SPECIAL TOPICS IN CALAMITY PHYSICS

By Marisha Pessl

 Illustrated. 514 pages. Viking.  
 \$25.95.

In Ms. Pessl's case that means sustaining the mock-academic brio of her title throughout a long, serpentine, seemingly lightweight schoolgirl story. It also means that the narrative, described as "Core Curriculum," is sectioned into chapters named for works by writers familiar from the classroom.

A fledgling author who invokes [Shakespeare](#), Flaubert and [Allen Ginsberg](#) for a tale of boarding-school intrigue had better live up to her grandiose aspirations. Otherwise she risks sounding pitifully overeager to impress. Mr. Foer wound up far exceeding the expectations he created, but Ms. Pessl starts out on thinner ice. Whether she is reinventing, satirizing or dissecting the conventions of prep lit, she has confined herself to a small canvas and a wearily familiar world. Or so it seems.

This novel's blatant gimmickry also promises trouble: Ms. Pessl endlessly recycles the idea of citing literary attributions or historical antecedents for every thought. Like this: "I decided to take control of the situation (see 'Emma,' Austen, 1816)." Or: "I knew I'd probably flee without warning, like Hannibal's elephants during the Battle of Zama in 202 B.C."

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Sometimes the references are real, but more often they are bogus: “She was now disturbingly peaceful (see ‘Lake Lucerne,’ *A QUESTION OF SWITZERLAND*, Porter, 2000, p. 159).” Most of the fakery is witty, but occasionally (“[Margaret Thatcher](#): The Woman, the Myth”) it falls flat.

See how  
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Ms. Pessl shoehorns so many of these asides into “Special Topics in Calamity Physics” that her narrative unfolds in a state of perpetual interruption. At first this takes some getting used to. And it thwarts, resists, rather than invites, close attention. A 500-page headache is as possible as a bracing joyride.

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The extremely good news: “Special Topics in Calamity Physics” soon jettisons its booster rockets and begins to soar. All Ms. Pessl must do is dispel the suspicion that she is dawdling and indicate that serious ingenuity is at play. At that point the teenage insights of the book’s narrator, Blue van Meer, become only part of a more complex construction, and it becomes evident that Ms. Pessl has hidden a secret history beneath her novel’s surface.

ADVERTI

This book’s gradual upward trajectory leads it toward mounting suspense, a hall-of-mirrors finale and a coda that is supremely inspired. In the guise of asking questions, Ms. Pessl resoundingly answers a big one: yes, she knew precisely what she was doing all along.

Blue’s life revolves around her beloved Dad, a lady-killing academic with a resemblance to [George Clooney](#), a delivery like [Jack Nicholson](#)’s and a nonstop penchant for wisecracks that his daughter adores. Anyone else would soon want to throttle Dad, but the book presents him, perhaps coyly, as a Renaissance Man and parental ideal.

INSIDE

Dad, who lectures on topics like “Modes of Oration and the Brawn of Language,” has a teaching career that leads father and daughter to St. Gallway, a North Carolina boarding school founded by an industrialist, Horatio Mills Gallway, “not in the name of altruistic principles like civic duty or the persistence of scholarship, but for a megalomaniacal desire to see *SAINT* in front of his surname.”

Dad, a k a Gareth van Meer, is a big fish in a small pond. And that pond is stocked with vibrant versions of standard characters, from the louche clique that adopts Blue (including a ringleader, Jade, “blessed with the enviable properties of a mink coat — graceful, unreasonable and impractical no matter what she was draped over, whether it be couches or people”) to the film teacher, Hannah Schneider, who Auntie Mames the students into a fascination with her outsized, mysterious glamour. (Ms. Pessl likes to use nouns as verbs, in a book that van Goghs the reader with dazzling, wildly dynamic imagery flung

everywhere.)

The story holds many mysteries. The most conspicuous one: How did Hannah wind up hanging from an electrical cord during a hike through Great Smoky Mountains National Park? Her death is mentioned in an introductory chapter. Then Ms. Pessl goes back and iceberg-tips a version of how Hannah fit into the social and intellectual paroxysms of life at St. Gallway.

These descriptions are accompanied by a smattering of illustrations identified as "Visual Aid 2.1" and "Visual Aid 2.2" and so on. They have been executed by the author in either a genuinely or an artificially naïve adolescent drawing style; the book is too tricky to make a clear distinction. In any case everyone supposedly drawn by Blue has the same prettily regular features and almond-shaped eyes.

Everything about "Special Topics in Calamity Physics" is comparably coy, convoluted, brightly self-conscious and (to use a word blessedly remote from Blue's jubilant vocabulary) postmodern. Even the physics equation on the book's back cover has outsized verve. And what begins as a dubious proposition, in a world wholly without need for additions to its Prep School Confidential bibliography, becomes a whirling, glittering, multifaceted marvel, delivered in an irrepressibly smart and flamboyant new voice. No reference points need be invoked. It speaks for itself.

The book's triumphant coda is a final exam rehashing questions raised by the narrative. True or false: "Blue van Meer has read too many books." True or false: "Reading an obscene number of reference books is greatly advantageous to one's mental health."

Here's one not from Ms. Pessl. Q: Is "Special Topics in Calamity Physics" required reading for devotees of inventive new fiction? A: Yes.

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