



SPECIAL TOPICS IN
CALAMITY PHYSICS
By Marisha Pessl
(Viking, \$25.95,
528 pages)

"It's sort of a bookish coming-of-age mystery," I explained to the nurse at the county clinic when she asked what I was reading. "All the chapters are titled after great works of literature."

"Sounds a little cutesy," Nurse Gunn remarked, adjusting the speculum

slightly. "I mean, everybody's writing coming-of-age stories these days, aren't they? My goodness."

Well, everyone's a critic, not least the young leading lady of *Special Topics in Calamity Physics*, the incredibly self-possessed Blue van Meer (picture Christina Ricci circa 2000). All ironic asides and self-deprecating wit, Blue never questions the unconventional nomadic lifestyle she shares with her overbearing charismatic, hyper-erudite dad until, during her senior year in high school, they finally settle down in Stockton, North Carolina.

Blue's tiny social life blooms as the film studies teacher at her new school shoehorns her into social gatherings with the Bluebloods, an impossibly glamorous and highly feared clique. Subsequently, her regular teen activities (makeovers, crushes, risky behavior, clawing her way to valedictorian) become secondary to a terrible, transforming event, a murder "unreal and monstrous, something no textbook or encyclopedia could prepare you for," which leads her to investigate everything she took for granted about her own history.

Blue's narration is peppered with literary and cinematic references, obscure quotations, and detailed endnotes. Many of these are real — Blue has a particular fondness for Marlon Brando and Shakespeare — and many are completely invented but plausible enough. (I'd be delighted to read, for example, *Almanac of American Strange Habits, Tics, and Behaviors* [1994 ed.], if it existed.) Take out the self-referential knowingness, and you've got a — yes, Nurse Gunn — slightly cutesy but wonderfully precocious coming-of-ager about a girl whose illusions about grown-ups being able to protect her, or even themselves, are destroyed.

It's probably apropos to mention the buzz around this debut novel. The author, who's also an actress, dancer, and playwright, is such a dishy, multi-talented piece of business, it's no wonder the majority of her press consists of gossip speculation on whether she's the next Zadie Smith or Donna Tartt. (She's frequently compared to Dave Eggers, too, but nobody seemed too concerned about *his* author photo.)

Regardless of hype, *Special Topics*, is ultimately appealing on its own merits. Brilliant 16-year-olds will adore it and wish they could attend St. Galway, Blue's private school where even the dumb kids talk like 25-year-old New York hipsters. Mystery fans will enjoy Pessl's up-to-the-minute twist on the genre. And those actual New York literary hipsters? They'll all wish they'd written it themselves.

— Donna Blumenfeld

For an interview with the "dishy, multi-talented piece of business" Marisha Pessl, visit venuszine.com.



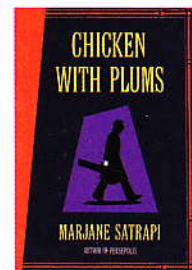
A FICTIONAL HISTORY OF THE
UNITED STATES
(WITH HUGE CHUNKS MISSING)
Edited by T Cooper and Adam
Mansbach
(Akashic Books, \$15.95, 207 pages)

Remember that *a-ha!* moment in school when you realized that history isn't as tidy and boring as the textbooks would have you believe? *A Fictional History of the United States* lets you experience that moment all over again, with a distinct, varied collection of work by 17 authors — such as Neal Pollack, Sarah Schulman, and Kate Bornstein — who present "fictional histories" in forms ranging from political cartoons to absurdist fiction to interview.

Organized in rough chronology, the book opens with Paul La Farge's "The Discovery of America" and closes with Daniel Alarcon's "The Anodyne Dreams of Various Imbeciles," a story set in 2007 in which an unnamed President is shot (at his ranch, no less — sound like anyone we know?) in the first sentence. The broad timeline makes for a wide spectrum of topics to be explored. "April 9, 1924" by Amy Bloom is a standout tale of a Jewish Russian immigrant finding her footing as a seamstress in 1920s America, while in "West," Benjamin Weissman includes a fascinating passage of one pioneer preparing the body of a slaughtered fellow traveler, aptly named Gore, for a cannibalistic dinner, only to have the man reappear later that evening, after passing through the bowels of his homicidal companions.

Rarely does a collection showcase such disparate work, but here the improvisational cacophony successfully unlocks history from the flat, linear narrative form it has traditionally been reduced to on paper, making for a read that more closely reflects the chaos of life, both past and present.

— Kate Rockwood



CHICKEN WITH PLUMS
By Marjane Satrapi
(Pantheon, \$16.95, 96 pages)

Unable to find the exact replacement of his beloved broken instrument, tar player Nasser Ali Khan simply climbs into bed one day, resolving to abstain from all life's pleasures. Marjane Satrapi's third U.S.-published graphic novel, based on the final days of her great uncle's life in Iran during 1958, is segmented into each of the passing days Nasser remains bedridden, inching closer and closer to death. Throughout the brief interim, friends and relatives visit to cajole him out of his malaise, then eventually to say their goodbyes. Their bedside discourses with Nasser release a plethora of memories and visions that gradually unveil the intricacy of his decision.

Although *Chicken With Plums*, published in France three years earlier, is not erected on the monumental scale of Satrapi's *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2*, it finds the artist on moodier, more ruminative territory. The familiar echoes of her previous works — layered vignettes from past and future, conversational exchanges with ancestral spirits and holy deities, disclosures through oral history — are all resplendently present. But this time, so too is a fluid, pervasive sense of melancholy and contemplation that, despite the mischievous twitches of humor and jumpy frame-to-frame action entailed in the graphic novel form, Satrapi successfully captures with fuller panels, solitary close ups, and an introspective stream-of-consciousness pacing.

For a story about the stunted capacity for enjoyment, Satrapi liberally partakes in the pleasure as storyteller through her funny, poignant drawings on every page. In spite of the sober subject matter, the end effect is just as delicious as the depiction of Nasser's favorite dish, chicken with plums, which appears to him (and to the reader) in a vision that's grandiose, wistfully allegorical, and barely within reach. — Ling Ma