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Dimness at Noon

By Alan Charles Kors

[Blue Angel](#), by Francine Prose, New York: Harper Collins, 314 pages, \$25

From an evolutionary and ethological perspective, universities serve the purposes of assortative mating almost ideally. Individuals with mutually desirable traits find each other easily. From that simple fact arises a great deal of what happens outside (and, indeed, inside) the classroom. There are more pheromones in the academic air than in most singles bars. A campus is crawling with people in their prime. If that were not enough, universities add to this hormonal cauldron the heady aphrodisiacs of frequent intellectual and physical self-confidence. The corporate world has no idea what it is missing.

Cultural feminists loathe biological models as much as any scriptural fundamentalist, but they are much given to one particular image from natural history: predator and prey. Frat parties are a spider's web into which innocent victims wander by chance. Professors, in cunning, calculating rut, lay in wait for unwary, dewy creatures who yield to their guise.

Literature has, to say the least, taken note of these phenomena. Courtship, seduction, and mating, in complex culture, are infinitely nuanced. They will not be defined or controlled by codes of conduct that try to do more than outlaw coercion and violence.

Nonetheless, our campuses, avatars in this of broader cultural and political trends, are in the midst of an effort to regulate the sexual behavior of free, autonomous, and capable adults, with a special regard for the beneficiary of what political correctness defines as an "imbalance of power," the male professor. As anyone worldly would have predicted, they have failed miserably when it comes to the truly predatory, truly clever, or truly self-confident male: the academic equivalents of the Kennedys and Clintons continue to charm the pants off even the feminists and to live their lives with relative impunity. It is, on the whole, the awkward bumbling, the hapless Packwoods, who are destined for ruin (many of them, of course, as self-indulgent and boorish as the professor in David Mamet's brilliant *Oleanna* [1992], a play so much more complex than most critics of political correctness ever understood).

In between, there are the more common consequences of the new sexual inquisition and reign of Big Sister: a male professoriate increasingly afraid to close a door during office hours or to have a cup of coffee with a female student; benighted traditionalists whose ordinary language and honest opinions in class get them into hot (or boiling) water; and, the real stuff of tragicomedy, the ordinary souls who somehow stumble their way imperceptibly into sexual—and thus, in these times, institutional and personal—disaster.

Francine Prose's well-received and popular *Blue Angel* is ostensibly a novel about such an ordinary soul. It seeks to be a satire of the politically correct university. Its title refers both to the celebrated Heinrich Mann novel and the yet more celebrated 1930 film made of it (with Marlene Dietrich as the unforgettably seductive Lola Lola). Therefore, we know from the outset that *Blue Angel* also is about a temptress who leads a smug professor of little self-awareness into personal disgrace, humiliation, and ruin. Seemingly sensitive to the depredations of the Orwellian world of Women's Centers and intrusive, careerist power, Prose's novel even aspires to being a *Darkness at Noon* for our times.

It is none of those things, alas, and never rises above caricature, moral and narrative confusion, and a disheartening inability to get the mood

and feel of our campuses right. It is simply an effort to cash in on the culture's fascination with and revulsion toward political correctness run amuck.

Its protagonist, Ted Swenson, teaches creative writing at Euston College in Vermont. He has been faithful to his wife, Sherrie, who works in Student Health, but in middle age, Swenson is suddenly tempted by more. He has a sad daughter whom he has alienated, for reasons good and bad, and who attends another university. He has a multiply pierced, bizarrely dressed, depressive, dishonest Goth girl in his class, Angela Argo, who becomes his obsession and his Lola. She wishes him ill and she uses him for her own ends. She seduces him by sexualized attention and by the sharp eroticism of the prose she gives him to correct, then denounces him, having taped his admission of their encounter. To drink the poison to the last drop, he puts himself through the demeaning ordeal of a campus judicial "hearing," and he loses his family and his job.

Not a single one of the main characters in this novel is credible. To touch us at all or to reveal anything of significance about maleness, sexuality, and current academic absurdities, Swenson would need to descend into this nightmare by stages that arise from the ordinary in life. He delights in his wife's sexuality, has a developed sense of the absurd, and understands the new sexual climate. His sudden and out-of-character fixation on Angela does not even stem from sexual boredom or daydreaming curiosity. Instead, he has an inexplicable attraction to the most obviously unstable and dangerous student in his class. He knows that she has submitted erotic poetry in a course taught by his closest female friend on the faculty, and he checks the work out of the library, which, mysteriously, has shelved it. He knows that she has worked for a telephone sex line, and, to put it simply, that she is deeply disturbed.

Nonetheless, he creates points of contact between her life and that of his wife, and he treats her differently, in class, from all of his other students. One day, he picks her up in his own car at the girls' dorm, drives her to Burlington, passes a zealous campus feminist who sees them together, and then returns to her room (where he is partially seduced). Leaving the building, he is observed by a student in his class. Further, he has no self-insight whatsoever and no understanding of his family. He shouldn't be fired for sexual misconduct; he should be shot for stupidity.

Blue Angel's campus feminists are supposed to arouse horror in us, if

for nothing else than their inability to understand the nuances of life. They are given no emotions, however, nor convictions, nor personalities. It is Prose who misses the nuances. Angela, the grim Goth, is too insecure to be a true Lola, haunted by her campus isolation, her unpopularity, and her family's disapproval. Her motivations are far-fetched and, in the end, detached from any substantial life, even a sociopathic one. The careerist dean, who thinks that militant feminists can be charmed by dinner parties with retrograde male professors, belongs to the 1950s, not the 1990s, and he could not have navigated political correctness with the behaviors Prose gives to him. The meeting of the faculty that hears and accepts the new sexual policy at Euston College bears no resemblance whatsoever to any such actual meeting, and offers not one voice representative of the current mixture of feminist sanctimony, careerist cynicism, and professorial cowardice.

What drives academic repression, category mistakes, and overreach into private life are quite vivid and passionate claims, the abdication of critical intellect in the face of those passions, an ideology that assigns true and false consciousness to the most unlikely recipients, and the loss of moral outrage on behalf of privacy and liberty. That sad combination has created absurd campuses, of supremely bad faith, that must be experienced to be believed. Literature should permit one to experience it; *Blue Angel* does not.

The one credible character in the novel, Swenson's wife Sherrie, seems well drawn by the gift of authorial inattention. She is there simply as a stable foil to the unfolding chaos, and Prose does not worry much about her persona. This gives her the best lines of the book and an ineffable if accidental goodness and clarity, from which nothing whatsoever follows. Swenson, his sins about to be exposed, asks her, "Do you promise not to hate me no matter what?" She replies: "Have you been sleeping with a student?" On the night before Swenson's hearing, Sherrie, who has left him, calls to say: "This is not a real conversation. This is to wish you good luck." It is Swenson, however, not Sherrie, with whom we are expected to empathize.

The one credible scene in the novel, and it is a very good one, is Swenson's hearing before a faculty panel. Implausibly, the panel is composed of the few faculty whose relationship to Swenson is both complex and known to us, but, here, Prose gets the details right: the sham collegiality; the improvised, bizarre procedures; the excruciating isolation and humiliation of the defendant; the lack of due process; the elements of show trial. The very precision and pain of the hearing, however, and her knowledge throughout that she will make it the climax

of her novel, tempt Prose into unbearable pretensions.

It is bad enough that the narrative voice constantly reminds us that it knows the differences between the film (and novel) *The Blue Angel* and the occasional appropriation of those motifs in its own work—a confession that does not mitigate the fact that Prose wishes to use the theme of Lola for dramatic purpose without having actually to engage it. Beyond bearing, however, is Prose's elevation of the ludicrous Swenson to the martyred status of Rubashov, the old Bolshevik now caught up in Stalin's purges, in *Darkness at Noon*. Every time that Rubashov thinks of his own victims—those sacrificed to the Stalinist logic of ends and means—his decaying tooth shoots sharp pain down his nerve. Like Rubashov, Swenson is betrayed, in revenge for his own betrayals, by his tooth, which, in Swenson's case, aches throughout the novel and breaks when he is about to sleep with Angela, ending their affair before any consummation.

The comparison is ludicrous. Rubashov is a man who killed and betrayed to erect the inhuman political logic that will destroy him in its turn, and who discovers, in his toothache, an existential guilt inseparable from his denial of the personal, the empathetic, and the apolitical. Swenson is a self-indulgent, soulless shlemiel who should have seen a dentist, but who wanted sex with an undergraduate Cruella DeVil. It is Disney doing the academic gulag.

There are, indeed, lives withered and ruined by sexual and political correctness on our campuses, for whom mouthing the Clintonian line, "It's just about sex," would only double their already dire punishments. There are sexual Stalinists who act with impunity, and who, unlike Rubashov, run no risk of the political logic devouring its own. Missing the comedy, Prose also misses the tragedy. You will know nothing of either from this opportunistic and shallow novel.

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