



Blue Angel

By Francine Prose
ISBN: 9780060882037

National Book Award Finalist **An Introduction**

Meet Ted Swenson (the narrator calls him only Swenson), a middle-aged, less than prolific novelist cum creative writing teacher on staff at Euston, a mediocre private college nestled deep in the "moose-ridden" wilderness of rural Vermont. There, he has carved out a semi-satisfying life with his wife Sherrie, the campus nurse with whom he fell in love years earlier in a New York City emergency room. Their marriage is a happy one. The sight of Sherrie in her blue jeans, black t-shirt, and lab coat still awakens Swenson's desire, and together they enjoy the simple pleasures of domesticity: comfortable sex, Sherrie's lovingly prepared dinners, fine wine and the view of her vegetable garden from the kitchen window. Upon closer observation, Ted and Sherrie's familial tranquility is precarious. Ruby, their melancholy daughter, fled to a state school after a fall-out with her father over a teenage romance with a campus bad-boy. The specter of a failed writing career torments Swenson, as do his under-read, culturally stagnate students. Add to the mix a volatile politically correct campus climate -- what was once provocative intellectual and emotional inquiry is now sexual harassment to litigious students and parents. Indeed, life is closing in on Swenson, and his resentment is palpable. Into this

pressure-cooker walks Angela Argo, a "skinny, pale redhead with neon-orange and lime-green streaks in her hair and a delicate, sharp-featured face pierced in a half-dozen places." When she enters -- or, rather, storms -- into Swenson's life of repressed longings, all hell breaks loose. And who better to skewer the resulting circus and its performers than Francine Prose? While *Blue Angel* is an irreverent, smart, and deliciously funny satire of political correctness and the ivory tower, it is also searing and uncompromising in its exploration of Swenson's spiral into a mid-life crisis. Francine Prose detonates some well-rooted cultural beliefs surrounding both of these topics. For instance, Angela, a barely legal student, literally preys upon the unsuspecting Swenson. Readers may squirm uncomfortably while contemplating the notion that the sexy middle-aged male teacher is the victim, and the female student the aggressor. Flawed as Swenson may be, he's a complex character, and he makes us think. We cringe at each wrong turn he makes, as he fumbles around wounding those who love him. Yet, we empathize with Ted Swenson. He's so . . . human. And that seems to be the point. Human behavior is not black and white, and cannot be stifled by the tenets of puritanical political correctness. Moral people sometimes do immoral things, and they learn important lessons from their foibles. Life is complicated, unpredictable, and often uncomfortable. There's just no controlling it. One can only hold on to a sense of humor and, hopefully, emerge relatively unscathed and, perhaps, enriched.

Discussion Questions

1. ". . . the writer need not paint a picture of an ideal world, but only describe the actual world, without sermons, without judgement" (pg. 3). How does this quote from the first chapter resonate throughout the novel? Do you think it reflects what Francine Prose is aiming to accomplish in *Blue Angel*? Is she successful? Why or why not?
2. Angela's favorite novel is *Jane Eyre*, which is about a governess who falls in love with the scarred, angry father of her charge. One of Swenson's favorite novels is *The Red and Black*, which is about a young man who also happens to be social climber. How is this ironic?
3. Much is made of the fact that Angela is a compulsive liar. That said, what do we really know about Angela? Working backwards from the end of the novel, reconstruct her history. Who is her father? Was she molested?
4. "What if someone rose to say what so many of them are thinking, that there's something erotic about the act of teaching, all that information streaming back and forth like some . . . bodily fluid" (pg. 22). Discuss this quote from Chapter 2. Is it true?
5. One theme central to the novel is that of truth, which is crystallized during the dinner party given by Dean Francis Bentham. Swenson witnesses Magda commit what he calls professional suicide by elaborating on an attempt to teach her students a Philip Larkin poem in which the word "fuck" is used. Was Swenson projecting his own fear of the truth, or did you get the sense that Magda was walking a fine line? In a situation such as that, is there such a thing as too much truth?
6. How would you characterize Swenson's relationships with the women in *Blue Angel*: Sherrie, Magda, Ruby and Angela. Is there something that he wants from them that they can't give him? If so, what is it and does it affect Swenson's final fall from grace?
7. How do you feel about Swenson? Did you empathize with him? Were you angry with him? Regardless of Angela's predatory nature, did you hold him more responsible for the eventual outcome of the situation than she? Why or why not?
8. Discuss the current climate of political correctness. What are pros and cons of political correctness? Is too much political correctness better than no political correctness?

About the Author: Francine Prose is the author of ten highly acclaimed works of fiction, including *Bigfoot Dreams*, *Household Saints*, *Hunters and Gatherers*, *Primitive People*, and *Guided Tours of Hell*. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *GQ*, and *The Paris Review*; she is a contributing editor at *Harper's*, and she writes regularly on art for the *Wall Street Journal*. The recipient of numerous grants and awards, including a Guggenheim and a Fulbright, Francine Prose is a Director's Fellow at the Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. She has taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the Sewanee Writers' Conference, and Johns Hopkins University. She lives in New York City.