



A Reader's Guide

PENELOPE FITZGERALD

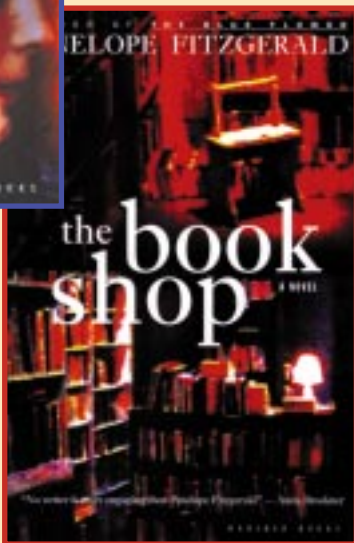


"No writer is more engaging than Penelope Fitzgerald."
—Anita Brookner,
The Spectator

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240pp. • 5 1/2 x 8 1/4

"She is, almost sentence by sentence. . . the finest British writer alive." —Richard Eder,
Los Angeles Times

"Fitzgerald writes with a mysterious clarity nobody else approaches. . ." —A. S. Byatt



ISBN 0-395-86946-3 • \$10.00
128pp. • 5 1/2 x 8 1/4

THE BLUE FLOWER

"A masterpiece. How does she do it?"—A. S. Byatt

Friedrich Leopold, Baron von Hardenberg (1772–1801), was born in Oberwiederstadt, Germany, studied law, philosophy, and history, worked as a government auditor at Weissenfels, and — under the pseudonym Novalis—became known as the “prophet of Romanticism.” Best known for his *Sacred Songs* (1799) and *Hymns to the Night* (1800), Novalis left unfinished two prose narratives, the more important of which, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, centers on a mystical young poet in search of a mysterious blue flower.

Penelope Fitzgerald has taken the facts of Novalis’s short life and fashioned a remarkable, poetic novel of irrational love, passionate thought, and the transfiguration of the commonplace. *The Blue Flower*, chosen nineteen times in England as the 1995 “Book of the Year,” also presents an uncannily convincing view of landscape and life in late-eighteenth-century Saxony — its small towns, universities, estates, and people, from humble to noble.

In her inimitably magical way, Fitzgerald reconstructs Fritz von Hardenberg’s formative years, from his childhood in a large family through the death in 1797 of his beloved Sophie von Kühn, as well as the society that he sought to transform and transcend. It is Fritz’s inexplicable, impetuous love for the plain, twelve-year-old Sophie, however, that is both focus and fulcrum for this “quite astonishing. . . masterpiece.” (*New York Times Book Review*)

THE BOOKSHOP

"A beautiful book, a perfect little gem."—BBC “Kaleidoscope”

Penelope Fitzgerald’s second novel, her first to be short-listed for England’s prestigious Booker Prize, is set in the small East Anglian town of Hardborough in 1959. In this “island between sea and river,” Florence Green — a middle-aged widow with “a kind heart” — decides to open a bookshop in a long-unused, five-hundred-year-old property, the Old House.

Florence does not anticipate the ruthless opposition of Violet Gamart, who dreams of her own Hardborough Centre for Music and the Arts in the Old House and will not countenance any contenders for cultural first lady. As the battle heats up, Florence must contend not only with Violet Gamart and her cohorts, but with a poltergeist and forces of nature as well. Florence’s own allies are few and oddly matched: the eleven-year-old Christine Gipping; Mr. Raven, the wise marshman; and the reclusive local squire, Mr. Brundish.

Fitzgerald casts a cool, sympathetic eye on this small-town battleground, on its often comically animated residents, and on one courageous woman’s quest for principled self-fulfillment. *The Bookshop* is, in every way, “a marvelously piercing fiction.” (*Times Literary Supplement*)



Penelope Fitzgerald published her first novel, *The Golden Child*, in 1977, when she was sixty years old, and since then she has published eight additional novels to increasing praise and prizes. Three of those—*The Bookshop* (1978), *The Beginning of Spring* (1988), and *The Gate of Angels* (1990)—were short-listed for the Booker Prize. She was awarded the Booker Prize for *Offshore* (1979). She has also written three biographies. Fitzgerald is now regarded as “one of the finest and most entertaining novelists writing in England today.” (*The Observer*)

Prior to her career as a novelist, Fitzgerald led a varied professional life. In addition to raising three children, she worked as a journalist, in the Ministry of Food, at the BBC, and as a teacher. These experiences, as well as her travels, provided a wonderfully rich harvest of settings and characters from which she later crafted her remarkable fictions.

Among her abiding themes are the courage and determination of innocence in the face of sometimes monstrous adversity, the rewards of courageous eccentricity or creative effort, survival in terms of one’s own sense of self, and the sometimes tiny sources of both grand achievement and terrible loss.

In addition to having perfected a style graced by wit, keen perception, and mastery of language, Fitzgerald has written a series of “dry, shrewd, sympathetic, and sharply economical books [that] are almost disreputably enjoyable.” (*New York Times Book Review*)

We hope the following questions, together with “Fitzgerald on Fitzgerald,” will stimulate a deeper understanding of *The Blue Flower* and *The Bookshop*.

THE BLUE FLOWER

1. The blue flower—*die blaue Blume*—has long been a symbol of Romantic yearning. What is the meaning, in the novel and in Fritz’s life, of the blue flower, and of *The Blue Flower*, Fritz’s unfinished writing? How do Karoline, Erasmus, Sophie, and the Mandelsloh react to the opening chapter of Fritz’s *Blue Flower*?
2. How closely does Fitzgerald follow the facts of Friedrich von Hardenberg’s (Fritz’s) life? Why does she focus on the years *prior* to his becoming Novalis, the poet and man of letters? How does she present him as a genius in the making? Is her portrait credible?
3. How can we explain Fritz’s sudden, irrational love for the plain, twelve-year-old Sophie von Kühn? What about the girl attracts him so powerfully? Is Sophie a repository of Fritz’s Romantic ideals and aspirations? Does he project upon her his own thoughts, beliefs, and feelings? What is the significance of his insistence on Sophie’s resemblance to “Raphael’s self-portrait at the age of twenty-five”?
4. Fritz approaches mining as “not a science, but an art.” What does he mean? Are there conflicts that arise from Fritz’s chosen vocation as a poet and his work in the Directorate of Salt Mines?
5. In the first chapter, Fitzgerald writes that “Impatience, translated into spiritual energy, raced through all the young Hardenbergs.” How are impatience and spiritual energy revealed throughout the novel, in relation to individual characters and to their times? With what consequences?
6. The philosopher Fichte proclaims: “We create the world not out of our imagination, but out of our sense of duty. We need the world so that we may have the greatest possible number of opportunities to do our duty.” How important to Fitzgerald’s characters is the concept of duty? Which characters most embody a sense of duty?
7. In his report to the Freiherr on Fritz’s behavior at the school at Neudietendorf, the Prediger “explained that Fritz perpetually asked questions, but was unwilling to receive answers.” Is this characterization true of Fritz throughout the novel? If so, with what consequences for himself and others?

8. The artist that Fritz asks to paint Sophie's portrait says, "In every created thing. . . there is an attempt to communicate. There is a question being asked. . . I could not hear her question and so I could not paint." Why can Fritz hear Sophie's question, but the painter can't? How does this relate to Fritz's *Blue Flower*?
9. In the Weissenfels churchyard, Fritz comments to himself, "The universe, after all, is within us. The way leads inwards, always inwards." What does Fritz mean? Is this idea evident in other characters' thoughts or actions?
10. For all his strengths and accomplishments, Fritz exhibits specific weaknesses, failures of feeling and understanding, and instances of ignorance. How are these revealed, especially in his relationships with the women in his life: his mother, Sidonie, Karoline Just, Sophie, and the Mandelsloh? Are they as evident in his relationships with men?
11. What does Fritz mean when he insists that "women are children of nature" and "nature, in a sense, is their art" and that "We [men] are morally better than [women] are, but they can reach perfection, we can't"? How does Fitzgerald represent the juxtaposition of, on the one hand, women, Nature, and perfection and, on the other, men, morality, and the practical world?
12. Of Fritz's circle of friends in Jena, Fitzgerald writes: "They were all intelligent, all revolutionaries, but since each of them had a different plan, none of it would come to anything." How does this judgment place the Jena circle within the wider milieu of late-eighteenth-century Germany and Europe? What are the most important features of that milieu, that *Zeitgeist*? Do the "uncertainty and expectancy" that "moved among the guests" at Fritz and Sophie's engagement party constitute an accurate description of a society on the verge of revolutionary change?
13. On Fritz's first visit to the home of Kreisamtmann Coelestin Just, he experiences a "transfiguration." What other transfigurations does he experience and what is their nature? What is the relationship between these moments of transfiguration and everyday life?
14. Fitzgerald tells Novalis's story in fifty-five brief chapters, which have been likened both to movements in a sonata and to a series of pictures. Which analogy seems more fitting—a musical pattern of movement and countermovement or a gallery of portraits and landscapes?
15. As Sophie approaches death at Grüningen, Fritz pleads with the Mandelsloh to answer his question "Should I stay here?" The Mandelsloh responds, "If you stayed here, you would not be

wanted as a nurse. . . You would be wanted as a liar." What are the full implications of her statement, and why does Fritz decide to leave?

16. Near the end of the novel, Fritz writes in his journal: "As things are, we are the enemies of the world, and foreigners to this earth. Our grasp of it is a process of estrangement." What does Fritz suggest here and how do these sentiments relate to his own life?
17. Fitzgerald writes that Fritz had learned, as a child at Neudietendorf, "Chance is one of the manifestations of God's will." How does chance play a significant role in the novel? Is it a manifestation of God's will?
18. After reading the opening chapter of *The Blue Flower* to Sophie and the Mandelsloh, Fritz comments, "If a story begins with finding, it must end with searching." Who is searching, and for what, throughout the novel?

THE BOOKSHOP

1. What forces and motivations lead Florence Green to establish her bookshop in such an unpromising location as Hardborough? What forces and motivations are ranged against her? Could she have anticipated, effectively battled, and overcome those forces?
2. The image of the heron and the eel on the novel's first page reappears later in the novel. How does this image relate to Fitzgerald's statement about Florence Green: "She blinded herself, in short, by pretending for a while that human beings are not divided into exterminators and exterminatees, with the former, at any given moment, predominating"? Are other images related to the theme of "exterminators and exterminatees"?
3. Referring to Violet Gamart, Mr. Brundish distinguishes between force and power. Is the implication that force cannot dislodge Florence, but power can? What constitutes Violet Gamart's power and what forces does she bring to bear on Florence? In what ways does Florence try to resist Mrs. Gamart's power?
4. Why do Mr. Raven and Mr. Brundish admire and support Florence, however ineffectually? What is the significance of these two remaining representatives of the old ways being unable to protect Florence and themselves against the machinations of the new society?
5. Does Christine Gipping embody the values, attitudes, and expectations of Hardborough's society? Is it merely that, "Like all the Hardborough children, she had learned to endure"? What

are the defining features and consequences of her relationship with Florence?

6. Of Milo North, Fitzgerald writes: “Gentleness is not kindness. His fluid personality tested and stole into the weak places of others until it found it could settle down to its own advantage.” What weak places in Florence and others does Milo find to exploit, and what advantage does he gain? How may we explain Florence’s misjudgment of Milo?
7. Florence is repeatedly described as “kind” and “courageous.” Is kindness her greatest asset or liability? In what ways does her kindheartedness complement or undermine her courage?
8. Is Vladimir Nabokov’s once controversial *Lolita* important in this novel beyond its role as a plot element? How does Florence go about deciding whether to stock the book? What does her approach reveal concerning her strengths and weaknesses, as a lover of books and as a businesswoman?
9. Does the final image of Florence on the train to London, “with her head bowed in shame,” ring true? Does she feel shame for herself, for Hardborough, or both?

FITZGERALD ON FITZGERALD

On brevity:

“I do leave a lot out and trust the reader really to be able to understand it. [My books are] about twice the length. . . when they’re first finished, but I cut all of it out. It’s just an insult to [readers] to explain everything.”

On choosing a subject:

“You’ve decided you’re interested in a subject or a period and then you go and read about it. . . And then you look at pictures about it and listen to the right music and. . . it begins to reconstitute itself.”

On her books as tragic comedies:

“[My books] are too sad really to be comedies, but not important enough to be tragedies. And I’ve got. . . a great feeling for people who are defeated by life. . . They’re very decent sorts, usually, but it’s really all rather too much for all of them.”

On children:

“Introducing children into a novel is helpful because they introduce a different scale of moral judgment. It’s probably one that they’ve learned from adults, but adults themselves don’t stick to it.”

“*Writers & Company*” — Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Radio

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