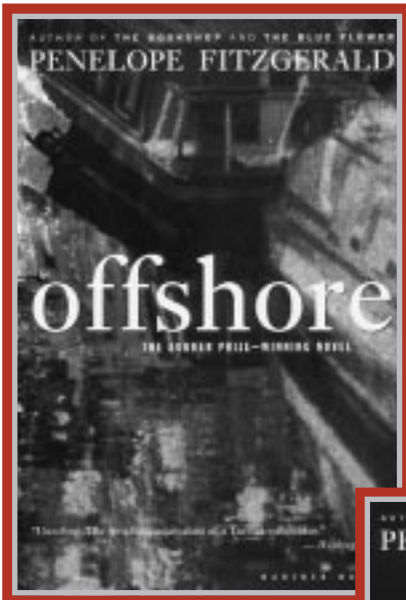




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# A Reader's Guide

## PENELOPE FITZGERALD



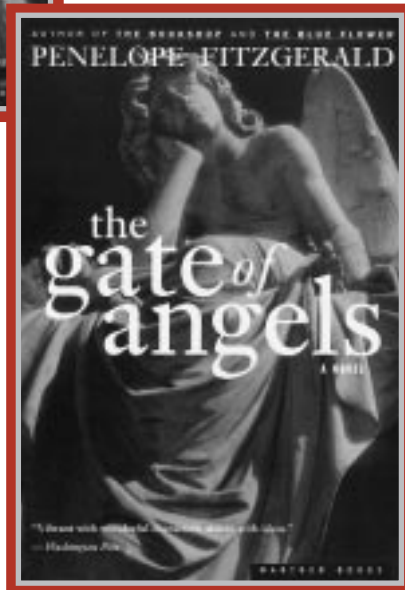
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*"[Fitzgerald] relishes absurdities . . . is full of sharp observations and inventions, and is very funny."*

— Anthony Thwaite,  
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*"[Fitzgerald's] dry, shrewd, sympathetic, and sharply economical books are almost disreputably enjoyable . . . You can breathe the air and taste the water."*

— Michael Hofmann, *New York Times Book Review*



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## OFFSHORE

BOOKER PRIZE WINNER

*"A marvellous achievement: supple, humane, ripe, generous and graceful."*  
— Bernard Levin, *Sunday Times*

*Offshore* is set in the 1960s among the houseboats that rise and fall with the tide of the Thames on London's Battersea Reach. Living between land and water, the boat owners, whose craft range from a shipshape converted minesweeper to a leaky barge, feel that they belong to neither. Richard Barnes is an ex-naval reservist whose allegiance to order and efficiency make him the group's unofficial leader. Nenna James, who is drawn to Richard, still loves her estranged husband, Edward, and tries to manage her two spunky daughters. And Maurice, a male prostitute, is a sympathetic friend to all.

Penelope Fitzgerald guides her charming cast of eccentrics through a series of mishaps and muddles. Along the way, we are treated to Fitzgerald's trademark wit, deft characterization, and vivid scene setting. *Offshore* is "dazzling . . . the novelistic equivalent of a Turner watercolor" (*Washington Post*).

## THE GATE OF ANGELS

BOOKER PRIZE FINALIST

*"Delights, amuses, disturbs and provokes reflection, in equal measure."*  
— Allan Massie, *Scotsman*

Cambridge University in 1912 is on the threshold of world-changing discoveries in physics. Young, rational Fred Fairly, a country clergyman's only son, is a junior fellow at the university's smallest college, St. Angelicus, closed to women for 500 years. Fred's experiences — with family, colleagues, and the mysterious, beautiful Daisy Saunders, who literally crashes into his life — bring him into a wider world and to some drastic modifications of his diehard beliefs and ambitions.

In this luminous, dexterous novel, Fitzgerald applies her incomparable talent to building a story from apparently irreconcilable strands, from the metaphysical to the religious, with ample mystery, romance, and history thrown in. Atoms and ghosts, angels and villains, certainty and chance, love and jealousy, reason and imagination, all figure prominently in Fitzgerald's world. And a collision between any two of them can change the course of a life, or of life itself. *The Gate of Angels* "contains more wit, intelligence and feeling than many novels three times its length" (Michael Ratcliffe).

## FOR DISCUSSION

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We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and, for every reader, provide a deeper understanding of *Offshore* and *The Gate of Angels*.

### OFFSHORE

1. What might be the significance of the title *Offshore*, other than its obvious reference to living on houseboats? In what ways may Nenna, Richard, Maurice, and Willis all be characterized as being “offshore”? In contrast, how is life “onshore” portrayed?
2. We learn that “Nenna’s attitude to truth was flexible and more like Willis’s than Richard’s.” What are Nenna’s, Willis’s, Richard’s, and Maurice’s attitudes toward the “truth”? Do their attitudes toward the truth change?
3. There are repeated references to the ebb and flood of the river’s tide. What are some examples of how these fluctuating currents mirror the story’s events and the characters’ lives?
4. What prevents Nenna from reuniting with Edward? In what ways might both Nenna and Edward be responsible for their living apart?
5. Fitzgerald writes that “the barge-dwellers . . . would have liked to be more respectable than they were . . . But a certain failure, distressing to themselves, to be like other people caused them to sink back . . . into the mud moorings of the great tideway.” How do Nenna, Maurice, Willis, and even Richard embody that “certain failure,” and what prevents them from rectifying their situations?
6. In what ways do the names and conditions of the boats — *Lord Jim*, *Grace*, *Dreadnought*, *Maurice*, and the others — reflect the owners’ personalities and lives?
7. Maurice says to Nenna, “There isn’t one kind of happiness, there’s all kinds. Decision is torment for anyone with imagination.” What deters the characters from making decisions and experiencing happiness? Why might making a decision be “torment for anyone with imagination”?
8. What ironies emerge in the novel’s final scenes?

### THE GATE OF ANGELS

1. Fitzgerald has said that she originally wanted to call this novel *Mistakes Made by Scientists*. In what ways would that title be appropriate? In what ways is *The Gate of Angels* appropriate?

2. The story opens with a powerful storm that turns people, trees, and even cows topsy-turvy. In what ways does this kind of random disorder, in which people and things go “quite contrary to all their experience,” recur throughout the book?
3. What are some of the differences between Fred’s life in Cambridge and Daisy’s life in south London? What are the opportunities open to men and women in Edwardian England? To what extent does social class shape these opportunities?
4. Fitzgerald has said that the period of her novel, “when the whole controversy about mind and body was really at its height,” is of “very great interest” to her as a novelist and a Christian. What does Fitzgerald make of the conflict between religion and science and that between faith and reason? In what ways might this conflict be different today?
5. Fred and Daisy’s collision with the farmer’s wagon and the resulting new arrangement have parallels with the collisions of atomic particles. What other parallels exist between the new physics and the characters’ lives?
6. We learn that Fred “felt that luck and chance should have no place in science” or, it is implied, in life. What events and observations lead Fred to change his mind?
7. After James Elder’s departure from Blackfriars, the newspaper headline is “Mystery of ‘Ministering Angel,’” clearly a reference to Daisy. In what ways does the title “Ministering Angel” fit Daisy? What other allusions to angels appear in the novel?
8. In his address to his students, Fred insists that “there is no difference whatever between scientific thought and ordinary thought . . . all thinking is done in precisely the same way . . . don’t, as scientists, believe you are anything extraordinary. Don’t allow yourself for a moment to feel anything like contempt for those whose minds work differently from your own. Their minds in fact don’t work differently from your own . . . The important thing is that a new idea should develop out of what is already there so that it soon becomes an old acquaintance.” In what ways does this statement sum up the novel?
9. How is it appropriate that Daisy Saunders is the first woman ever to enter St. Angelicus? How can we explain the southwest gate’s being left open — for only the third time in five centuries — on this particular evening? What is the significance of the novel’s ending with a chance act of mercy and charity that violates tradition and leads to a romantic reunion of Daisy and Fred?



Penelope Fitzgerald published her first novel, *The Golden Child* (1977), when she was sixty years old and has published eight others in the twenty years since then. Always a favorite of critics in England and the United States, she remained little known to a general American audience until Mariner Books published her most recent novel, *The Blue Flower*, as a paperback original in 1997. A finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the only paperback among eleven books named an Editors' Choice by the *New York Times Book Review*, *The Blue Flower* was hailed by the *New York Times* as "a quite astonishing book, a masterpiece." This acclaimed novelist is no longer the best kept secret in American publishing.

Fitzgerald's second novel, *The Bookshop*, has also made its first American appearance in a new Mariner edition and was cited by the *Boston Globe* as "a brilliant little book . . . it is perfect." Celebrated for her wit, keen perception, and economy of language, Fitzgerald "is, almost sentence for sentence, . . . the finest British writer alive" (Richard Eder, *Los Angeles Times*). Few writers offer such an extensive range of characters and settings with such compelling detail and insight. Whether re-creating eighteenth-century Germany, Edwardian England, pre-Revolutionary Russia, or Italy in the 1950s, Fitzgerald leavens her novels with humor, charm, ambiguity, and perfect pitch. She brings every character and epoch to vivid life. As Anita Brookner has said, "No writer is more engaging than Penelope Fitzgerald."

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