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Shteyngart Aims at Collapsing U.S., Not Russia

By Joy Neumeyer

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Gary Shteyngart skewered Russian emigres in his previous books “The Russian Debutante’s Handbook” and “Absurdistan.” **Joy Neumeyer**

Author Gary Shteyngart, who was in Moscow promoting his new book “A Super Sad True Love Story,” is no stranger to mocking Russia’s foibles. The son of Soviet Jews who moved to the United States with his parents at age 7, Shteyngart has skewered Russian emigres in “The Russian Debutante’s Handbook” and “Absurdistan.”

In his current book, however, he turns his satirical sights to his adopted homeland. In Shteyngart’s dystopian America, the Chinese yuan pegs the U.S. dollar, the unitary Bipartisan Party has replaced political factions, and everyone communicates through digital devices that broadcast their credit score and sexual ranking the moment they enter a room. In other words, an America that could be not too far away — perhaps, as Shteyngart puts it, “next Tuesday.”

While the United States has become the primary focus of his anxieties, Shteyngart grounds the book in familiar character types. Within this world of frantic self-exposure arises a love story between Lenny, a 38-year-old son of Soviet Jewish immigrants, and Eunice, a much-younger daughter of a South Korean family. Lenny, an "immigrant from the pre-digital generation," finds in Eunice an outlet for his fear of mortality; Eunice, despite all her techno-savvy, shares his hunger for non-digital connection.

The other love story in the novel is between Lenny and his adopted city, New York. Lenny's mixed feelings mirror Shteyngart's own experiences as a cultural transplant. Shteyngart grew up reading

Chekhov in his grandmother's apartment in Leningrad, where he gazed admiringly at the Lenin statue lording over Moscow Square. Once, his grandmother challenged 5-year-old Gary (then Igor) to write his own novel. Paid for in chunks of cheese, "Lenin and His Magical Goose" became his first book.

However, New York was far-removed from Lenin's familiar shadow. In the days of Reagan and the "evil empire," "it was terrible to be a kid in a shapka [fur hat] walking down the streets of Queens," he said. His parents mandated that only Russian be spoken at home, making his shift to English a "very gradual" process.

Despite his eventual acclimation to U.S. society, Shteyngart occasionally grows wistful about the childhood he missed. "I always wished I had an education in Russia," he said. "You know, in a Russian school. But my parents filled in nicely because they forced me to read in Russian." His next book will be a collection of essays that will include reflections on his childhood in Russia. According to him, at age 38, he has no time to waste. "What's the life expectancy for Russian men, 53? So I'd better write a memoir."

Shteyngart's parents forbade him to return to Russia in his youth, but he eventually made his way back in the mid-1990s. "Russia was at its lowest point, and I was at my lowest point," working miserably as a paralegal after college, he recalled. But "as traumatizing as it was, it felt right."

Ever since, Shteyngart has returned to Russia yearly to visit friends in St. Petersburg. His parents have no interest in accompanying him on his return visits. "'They always say, 'why don't you go to Spain or something like that?'"

While Shteyngart feels at home in the more "provincial" St. Petersburg, Moscow, which he considers "a big, Slavic New York," remains relatively unfamiliar. "I'm like 'Babe, Pig in the City' here," he said. He isn't particularly fond of some of the city's recent architectural creations, most notably the Moskva-City business complex. "It looks like a big development in Omaha or something."

But even Moscow holds the allure of unpredictability. "It's still exciting. … You never know what will happen," he said. He recounted a bomb scare that put an abrupt end to a reading he was scheduled to do on Wednesday at the Russian State University for the Humanities. Russian life provides ample grist for Shteyngart's satirical mill: After only two days, such experiences had already filled the pages of his notebook.

But in the novel he's currently promoting, his sights are squarely on the absurdities of another empire: the United States. "I figure that America's in such free fall, there's no need to write about the old collapse [of the Soviet Union]," he said. "I can take my pessimistic skills back to the U.S.A."

Shteyngart is skeptical that he has much of a Russian audience. He recalled a review he'd once received in a Russian publication that ended in the word "Ó·Ë‰ÌÓ" (offensive). He imagined that the headline for a review of "A Super Sad True Love Story" might read: "Balding traitor betrays motherland."

But, "this book they may like because it's about the collapse of the United States," he added.

"It kind of hurt to write about the demise of the Soviet Union, but this hurts even more," he said. "I own real estate in Manhattan."

In a question-and-answer session that followed a reading at the American Center last Wednesday, Shteyngart expanded on what he sees as the United States' cultural atrophy. In his view, electronic media have encouraged "the collapse of literary tradition," with only an empty "culture of endless self-expression" rising to take its place. "Everyone wants to write, but no one wants to read each other's books," he said.

However, Shteyngart's forecast for literary culture in the United States and the world at large isn't completely dire. "My great hope is that things are cyclical," with the current decline of books eventually giving way to a new generation of readers, he said. He's confident that his voice has a place in this process. Following the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, he said Americans have been more curious than ever before to explore a world "that exists beyond Alaska, beyond what Sarah Palin can see from her house."

Shteyngart is happy to bring his perspective as a cultural middleman to help Americans expand their horizons. After all, "who are you gonna trust to do that?" he asked. "A foreigner, or a nice, assimilated immigrant?"

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