Failure is an option: Immigration, memory, and the Russian Jewish experience with Gary Shteyngart

Gary Shteyngart

Monday, May 7, 2018 - 7:00pm
Kane Hall 120

A decade and a half ago, with the publication of his 2002 novel *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook*, the writer Gary Shteyngart launched a new wave of literary production by Jewish writers who immigrated to North America from the Soviet Union at a young age, and who took up the pen in English, their adopted tongue. By now, works by award-winning and bestselling writers Anya Ulinich, David Bezmozgis, Boris Fishman, Lara Vapnyar, Irina Reyn, Nadia Kalman, Sana Krasikov, and others easily fill an impressive—and growing—bookshelf. Coinciding with the flourishing of English-language literature by authors of diverse national, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Junot Díaz, and Chang-rae Lee, this cohort of writers placed the experience of Russian Jewish immigrants on the map of contemporary American fiction.

Shteyngart followed his debut with two more satirical novels. *Absurdistan* (2006) was a whimsical yet darkly comic take on both Vladimir Putin's oligarchy and George W. Bush's America. *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) presented a dystopian vision of America's decline that was filled with prophesies on issues ranging from surveillance technology to economic disparity that have gradually—and stunningly—been coming true in the years since. Vastly different in their breadth and set in a range of real and imagined locations the world over, Shteyngart's first three novels explored different versions of a series of nebbishes who, in parodic ways, resembled the author himself.

With the publication of his memoir *Little Failure* in 2014, Shteyngart appears to have closed a chapter of his career that built rich fictional worlds on his satirized autobiography. *Little Failure*—a humorous, touching, and deeply honest exploration of his family's and his own history delved deeply into the 20th Century experience of Jews in the Soviet Union and during immigration that sat at the core of Shteyngart's earlier fiction. In his anticipated new novel, *Lake Success*, to be published in autumn of 2018, Shteyngart is poised to pivot in a new direction and to train his perceptive gaze on unfolding American realities. Set during a time that Shteyngart's narrator defines as “the first summer of Trump,” the novel launches its American Jewish protagonist—a hedge fund broker of dubious accomplishments and a failed father and husband—on a life-changing trip across the United States aboard a Greyhound bus. Semi-cognizant of other literary protagonists who had previously undertaken similar journeys of self-discovery and failed, and not entirely unaware that such pursuits of
lost time tend to yield disappointing results, Shteyngart's new hero offers profound observations of a native country he hadn't known before, its fabric of fragile human relationships rapidly and starkly fraying all around him.

The 2018 Stroum Lectures with Gary Shteyngart will offer an opportunity to look back on the first fifteen years of the writer's career and to look ahead to his future literary pursuits. In a series of conversations with Sasha Senderovich, Assistant Professor of Russian and Jewish Studies at UW, and readings, Gary Shteyngart will explore the questions of the role of humor and comedy in today's world, immigration and the Jewish experience, prescient issues in Russian-American political and cultural relations, and the satirist's role in authoritarian societies.

This event is free and open to the public, but RSVP is required. Please register for the May 7 lecture on its event page. Second lecture on May 9.

Event Type: 
Lectures

Related Fields:
Jewish Studies  Russian