



Gary Shteyngart
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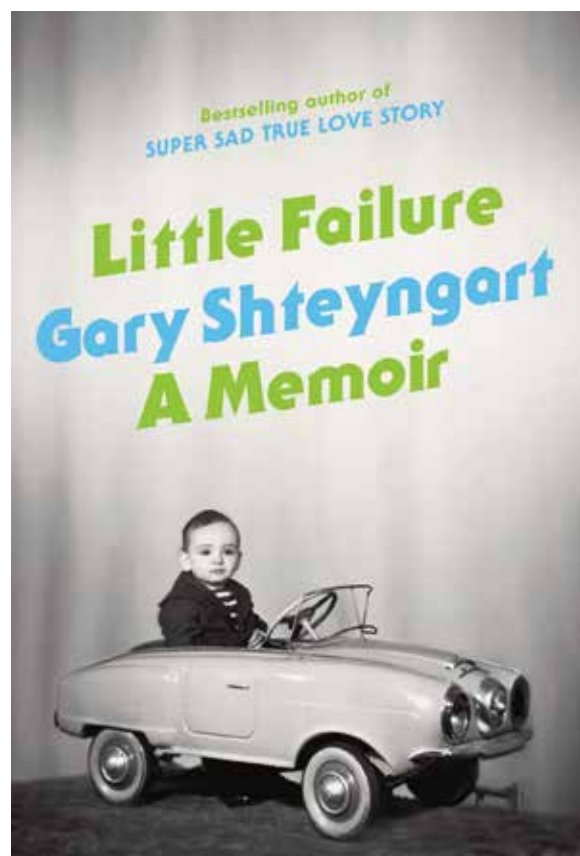
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LENINGRAD, QUEENS, COLUMBIA

GARY SHTEYNGART'S *LITTLE FAILURE*

Gary Shteyngart, the award-winning author of three critically acclaimed novels—*The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, *Absurdistan*, and *Super Sad True Love Story*—recently published a memoir, *Little Failure*. Titled after a nickname given to the author by his mother, the book takes us on a simultaneously heart-wrenching and hilarious journey through Shteyngart's childhood and young adulthood. Born in Soviet Leningrad, where he spent seven years as a sickly, asthmatic child fiercely devoted to Lenin and his *rodina* (motherland), he immigrated with his parents to New York as a Jewish refugee in 1979. The family settled in Kew Gardens, Queens, where he discovered the evils of the Soviet Union and the glory of Ronald Reagan. Shteyngart's parents, raised as secular Jews, enthusiastically embraced the Jewish faith upon immigrating and sent him to a local Hebrew School, where his peers tormented him for his Soviet heritage, strange clothing (often fur), and the tendency to mutter in Russian under his breath. He made it through the experience, earning at least minimal respect from his classmates by writing satirical tales and reading them aloud in school. When he enrolled in Stuyvesant High School—his first day there was one of the first times he'd set foot in Manhattan—he soon realized the folly of his Republican values. He later went to Oberlin College, majored in political science to please his parents, and started writing *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*. He finished the book nearly ten years later in New York, while working as a writer of brochures for the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA). It was published in 2002, when he was thirty years old.

I met Shteyngart, a member of the Harriman Institute faculty teaching in the M.F.A. writing program at Columbia's School of the Arts, on February 11, 2014, at the Columbia Journalism café, just a month after publication of *Little Failure*, and three months after the birth of his son, Johnny. Tired from flying around the world—it was Day 49 of his 158-day book tour—he feverishly unwrapped a cough drop. “This is my best friend, this Halls mentholiptus eucalyptus something or other,” he said, popping it into his mouth, “Mmmm . . . ahhhh . . . ahhhh . . . bring it on!”



Little Failure: A Memoir

Gary Shteyngart

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Gary Shteyngart talking with Harriman director Timothy Frye (right) in Frye's office before the author's reading and discussion at the Harriman Institute (photo by David Dini, Columbia University Photography)

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: You mentioned on NPR's "Fresh Air" that your goal for this memoir was to create an "almost historical record of this bizarre generation" that left the Soviet Union for the United States. Can you elaborate?

Gary Shteyngart: There really was a kind of iron curtain that doesn't exist anymore. Current immigrants from the middle class have access to the same crap we have—the iPhones, the iPads, the same kind of clothes. We had no inkling of what to expect. What we had was an ABBA cover band record—one of those *plastinkas* [records] that look like they're made out of some kind of rubber—and the song "Money, Money, Money." Nowadays people come, many of them know English, many of them are wealthier, they have a lot of access to the idea of the West, and not to mention the actual goods, the actual records, but we didn't. And that kind of immigration is very rare. Even back then. Certainly if you were middle class in India you still had an idea of what Western goods looked like. So, there will never be anything like that again.

Udensiva-Brenner: Until people start emigrating from North Korea.

Shteyngart: Exactly, that may be the last one left. It would be interesting to see. Even immigrating from North to South Korea—and there've been a lot of studies on the people that escaped—the adjustment period is very difficult. Both in the way the South Koreans perceive them [North Koreans], and their inability to function in a hugely technological society.

Udensiva-Brenner: What kinds of things were you surprised to find in the U.S.?

Shteyngart: The new Pan Am Terminal. It was so different from the crappy Leningrad airport, Pulkovo—this tiny, cramped space.

All of a sudden you land and there's a flying saucer waiting for you. And the cars; the Chevrolet Corvette . . . it looked like an airplane missing its wings! Cereal—in the book I talk about cereal quite a bit—the fact that it comes in this little container. Amazing!

Udensiva-Brenner: Did you have any idea that these things existed? Did your parents prepare you for it?

Shteyngart: They didn't know. Who knew? Nobody had any idea.

Udensiva-Brenner: As a kid you admired Lenin. Then, once you immigrated, your parents told you you'd been duped about Lenin and the greatness of the Soviet Union. How did you feel?

Shteyngart: Great betrayal. But, you know, you start looking for other stuff to fill the void. Soviet immigrants, whether they are young or old, are brought up with this idea of power being very important, and when we moved to America we became entranced with Republican politics, for example, or conservative politics in Israel, like Likud. There was always this very great respect for what's considered strength. I remember as a child my parents would make fun of Jimmy Carter because he was perceived as a weak leader. When I came to America, I was also, like all of the people around me, quite in love with Reagan.

Udensiva-Brenner: You've said you wrote this memoir partly in order to get a better understanding of your parents. What did you discover?

Shteyngart: Well, I had the overall feeling of reconciliation with the past. Growing up—it was tough. I didn't know why they behaved the way they did. I didn't understand where their insults came from, the general feeling of depression and anxiety. In returning to Russia you sort of see the root of those emotions—it's a

depressing and anxious country. Just walking down the street you see people look angry for no good reason, or vacant, or upset in a way that few people in America would look unless they just found out they have cancer. It's a very difficult existence. America is a much softer country than Russia, but my parents remained tough people. That's why they had so much difficulty in my becoming a writer. My mother was so adamant that I become something else, a lawyer . . . And that's where the term "little failure" was coined.

Udensiva-Brenner: When you were five, your grandmother encouraged you to write. She paid you with a slice of cheese for every page you produced and you ended up with a 100-page novel called *Lenin and His Magical Goose*. How much did that experience contribute to your becoming a writer?

Shteyngart: The most important thing was reading. The fact that I was reading *Nils and the Magical Geese* [*The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* by Selma Lagerlöf] at the time, that was probably even more important. I loved the way the language worked and I wanted to do the same thing. That's how it starts; you want to imitate. But the fact that I was being rewarded and that somebody loved me for doing this was very important. I think that's why so many writers do this—you want to be validated.

Udensiva-Brenner: And writing helped you validate yourself in Hebrew school.

Shteyngart: It really helped. It moved me away from this complete Russianness and hatred to this kind of, you know, this crazy writing guy. I mean they were Jews after all, so humor and storytelling mattered. That was good.

Udensiva-Brenner: You first entertained your classmates with a science fiction novel called *The Challenge* [sic] based largely on your Republican politics. Did they catch on to the Republican connotations?

Shteyngart: You know it's interesting; those kids were mostly from Democratic families. Did they catch on? I don't remember. I know as we got older and toward high school that I would constantly get into these arguments with . . . there were a lot of cool girls who were Democrats. It seemed like fun, almost.

Udensiva-Brenner: A defining moment for you in school was when you wrote the *Gnorah*—your own, humorous version of the Torah. Can you tell me a little bit about how it felt to finally be at the center of attention?

Shteyngart: Well, the way writing works is that you're at the center for a few weeks, a few months, and then it really moves on to the latest Cyndi Lauper album, or something. It was a good intro-

duction to the fact that writing can have an impact, but a limited impact. And then the world sort of clicks back into place, the class system, and people being who they're supposed to be.

Udensiva-Brenner: Did you feel that way after your first book, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, was published?

Shteyngart: I was shocked that it has had the shelf life that it has. That, you know, people would actually show up to my readings. And that it was translated into many languages. I was living in Rome after it came out, so I would tour to different countries. I remember reading in Prague—that's where *Russian Deb* was based—and thinking, it can't be! I was walking through the streets and there was a writers' festival, and my name was on the list with, you know, Nadine Gordimer and all these other people, and I was thirty years old, maybe thirty-one, and I was just shocked that that could happen.

Udensiva-Brenner: Your parents read *Russian Deb*, which contained many autobiographical details, and said: "Wow, we had no idea you had such an unhappy childhood." How did they feel about the memoir?

Shteyngart: I sent them a copy, but they haven't said anything yet. When there's a Russian translation we'll talk about it.

Udensiva-Brenner: Do they get upset when you write about this sort of stuff?

Shteyngart: I don't think they understand it. My father in particular. To him, being Jewish is the highest value. He doesn't understand how Hebrew school could have been traumatic for me. These are my people. "Don't write like a self-hating Jew"—that will always be my father's mantra.

Udensiva-Brenner: Why did you decide to omit from the memoir pretty much everything after your first book deal?

Shteyngart: The memoir thrives on conflict—any story you write thrives on conflict—and after the publication of my first book the conflict began to end. Not completely, but not in a way that I think would make for terribly interesting work.

Udensiva-Brenner: You've been going to psychoanalysis four times a week for almost twelve years . . .

Shteyngart: It's almost over. The memoir was a kind of good accounting of my life until now; the child is a good indication that I can progress, and you know, move on in the world. Things are pretty stable. Now it's a long process of disengagement called "termination."

Udensiva-Brenner: How has psychoanalysis affected your writing?

Shteyngart: Almost everything I wrote in the memoir was said in analysis, sort of publishing things into the air—it was a nice test run.

Udensiva-Brenner: How many drafts of it did you go through before you submitted it to your editor?

Shteyngart: Just one.

Udensiva-Brenner: Did you have to revise much after that?

Shteyngart: No! And my editor is a tough cookie. With *Super Sad* we went through God knows how many drafts and the whole thing was completely reworked and restructured. So many sci-fi elements and other things were cut, but here he did work, but it wasn't a lot at all. I mean, with a novel like *Super Sad*, there are so many plot elements. Here I know the plot; it's my life.

Udensiva-Brenner: Have you ever fought with an editor?

Shteyngart: It's never been an issue, I have to say. It's strange, but my editor at Random House is terrific—he teaches at Columbia too. Sometimes there are space constraints in a magazine article and things have to be cut. That's sad, but you know, what are you gonna do? You can say, "I think I prefer this section to that if you're gonna cut it," but overall it's been great. I've never fought.

When I was just starting out, there was a piece commissioned about the invasion of Iraq in 2003. And it wasn't just me who was commissioned, it was a bunch of us, and I'm not gonna name the newspaper—let's just say that it was a very well-known one. And, from what I was told, they cancelled the whole thing. All of us. We had all written for them. And what I was told was that they did it because it would be a disaster for their relations with the Bush White House. But that was the only time that anything I'd ever written had been cancelled like that. Those were scary times.

Udensiva-Brenner: Is it true that you never get writer's block?

Shteyngart: Yeah.

Udensiva-Brenner: So you just sit down and get right into it?

Shteyngart: No, I do a lot of research. This book required a lot of research talking to my parents, obviously, my friend Jonathan, friends from high school and college, looking through all the letters that I'd sent to JZ, my college girlfriend, and she had thankfully kept a lot of them . . . I was so stoned at Oberlin it was hard to remember anything.

Udensiva-Brenner: Do you face *any* challenges while you're writing?

Shteyngart: Well, time. I teach one semester at Columbia. Do a lot of travel writing, which I find helps. And I'm always giving lectures or whatever at other universities.

Udensiva-Brenner: What's your writing regimen?

Shteyngart: Four hours a day.

Udensiva-Brenner: Every day?

Shteyngart: No, I mean look, 150 days I'm running around like a crazy. You know, out of a four-year cycle publishing a book, one year is publicity and about a third of the year is either teaching or travel writing or touring or reading at other universities. So you get two-thirds of three years; so that's about two years of actual work for every four-year cycle. That's at about two pages a day, so let's say that the first draft is 400 pages; so about 200 days for the initial draft, and then however long it takes to do the editing.

Udensiva-Brenner: Do you go back and edit your daily two pages after you write them?

Shteyngart: Yes, I do. It's like, if you shoot a film, you go through this reel first, so you can go in to see what you're gonna shoot the next day. The dailies they're called. So something like that. You edit the two pages you wrote before, and then you write two new ones, and then the next day you edit them.

Udensiva-Brenner: Do you outline?

Shteyngart: It depends. With the memoir, obviously not; it was just linear, a straight shot. *Absurdistan* had a huge outline because I didn't know what was gonna happen. *Super Sad* I thought about it,

“With satire you hide so much behind humor and you can always get away from things if you don't feel comfortable. With a memoir . . . you can't hide from the truth. With a satire you lead with humor. Here, humor was just one of the things in my arsenal.”



Gary Shteyngart (left and right) and Timothy Frye (center) during the reading and discussion at the Harriman Institute (photos by David Dini, Columbia University Photography)

but then when the two parts sort of started speaking to one another it became much easier. I kind of let Lenny and Eunice run with it.

Udensiva-Brenner: How was the switch from fiction to memoir?

Shteyngart: Well, with satire you hide so much behind humor and you can always get away from things if you don't feel comfortable. With a memoir . . . I mean I hope the memoir is still funny . . . but a lot of it, you can't hide from the truth. With a satire you lead with humor. Here, humor was just one of the things in my arsenal.

Udensiva-Brenner: What's your favorite of the books you've written so far?

Shteyngart: I like them all for different reasons. The first one was the most tender to write, because I was so young. And I didn't know if it would get published or not, so I was writing for either anyone or no one, and it felt like this holy task. With the second book it became work, you know, deadlines. But I enjoyed writing *Absurdistan* because it was my most out and out satire. It was really more a work of journalism; so much of it, the parts in the Caucasus, was based on meeting crazy people.

Udensiva-Brenner: So you went to the Caucasus before you wrote it?

Shteyngart: I spent a summer there. The book was as grounded in reality as anything I'd ever written. People say, "Oh my God, it's like duck soup or something," but it wasn't; this is the sad reality on the ground. All of it is true. Hookers looking for "Galiburton" at the Hyatt in Baku, being threatened with a *kindjal* in Tbilisi,

some deputy of the Ministry of Privatization trying to get me to steal funds from some California charity, on and on.

And then *Super Sad* was fun to write because it was my first departure from the Russian-Jewish voice. Cause there was a Korean-American voice in there. That was so enjoyable; I would like to do something like that for the next one. Not necessarily Eunice's voice, but a woman's voice, and somebody who's not Russian, definitely.

Udensiva-Brenner: You've mentioned plans to write an international thriller . . .

Shteyngart: Yup.

Udensiva-Brenner: Will it be humorous?

Shteyngart: Everything will always have humor in it, but how much humor is the question. The humor is what makes the tragic parts stand out. They help each other. To write one without the other is beyond my imagination.

Udensiva-Brenner: Do you feel pressure when you start writing a new book to live up to your last one?

Shteyngart: Oh yeah, it never ends. There's a scene in the *Sopranos* where Paulie is not making enough money and he goes to Silvio and he says, "But Tony and I go way back." And Silvio says, "You're only as good as your last envelope." And that's what being in the creative arts is like: you're only as good as your last envelope. □