



From Russia, with love

Novelist Gary Shteyngart brings his antic style to a heartfelt memoir

LITTLE FAILURE, by Gary Shteyngart. Random House, 349 pp., \$27.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

A sense of the virtues of “Little Failure,” a memoir by novelist Gary Shteyngart, is offered by the captions beneath the endearing black-and-white snapshots that open each chapter. To wit:

Chapter 4, “Moscow Square”: “To become a cosmonaut, the author must first conquer his fear of heights on a ladder his father has built for that purpose. He must also stop wearing a sailor outfit and tights.”

Chapter 22, “The Benefactor”: “The author is tripping out of his mind on psychedelic mushrooms while being videotaped for a documentary called ‘Only Children’ by his new friend John.”

Shteyngart’s novels — “The Russian Debutante’s Handbook,” “Absurdistan” and “Super Sad True Love Story” — are postmodern satires with imaginative intensity verging on the vertiginous. They have made him a darling of critics and won readers with a taste for his flavor — smoked Chekhov on pumpernickel with a schmear of Philip Roth and David Foster Wallace. This memoir could expand his audience, grounding his methamphetamine style in real life and sincere emotion.

Born Igor Shteyngart in Leningrad in 1972, the author has vivid memories of his Soviet childhood, marked by verbal precocity, severe asthma, “pathological” reading, hunger and worry. His father’s



PHOTO BY BRIGITTE LACOMBE

Novelist and memoirist Gary Shteyngart was nicknamed Failuruchka as a kid.

early nickname for him was Sopylak — Snotty. Scenes from this period are interleaved with episodes from the present and from the family’s history, both laced with savage wit. His great-grandfather is “probably as rich as anyone on that side of my family has ever been, until nearly a hundred years later, in 2013, I lease myself a Volvo.” In the next sentence, however, fortune deserts this ancestor, murdered by a criminal band for his “Jewish money.”

Raised on the proud legacy of Lenin and the evil across the Atlantic, little Igor will get some big surprises in 1977. “Unbeknownst to me, the Soviet Union is falling apart.

The grain harvests have been terrible; there is hardly enough grain to feed the masses or keep them fully drunk. Meanwhile, in the United States a grassroots movement to free Soviet Jews from their polyester captivity has gained momentum.” Carter and Brezhnev work out a trade: grain for Jews. The Shteyngarts will be among those bartered.

After an interlude in Rome, the family lands in Queens, where Igor’s first name is changed to Gary and his nickname to Failuruchka. He embarks on an unhappy elementary education at a Hebrew parochial school where he resides just one rung up from the bottom of the pecking order.

His experiences to that point produce a 10-year-old Republican who throws himself into the writing of space fantasy novels and a satire of the Torah. “And G-d spoke: Don’t worry about ethics, this does not however mean you can like John Macaenroe. Do not pray to statues of Michael Jackson or Tom Selleck: I am your G-d. If you see a blind man do not cheat him: for example do not sell him cocaine when it is really angel dust.”

Over time, Shteyngart becomes an American. He eats McDonald’s, watches TV, loses his accent. At Stuyvesant High School, he begins to forge an identity based not on foreignness but on prodigiousness. No

one writes more, smokes more, drinks more, talks more, wants more wantonly. His parents begin to wring their hands over his prospects. Fortunately there’s a liberal arts academy in Ohio whose Lowest Average Accepted is 5 points below the author’s 88.69 — and that’s not its only selling point.

“Oberlin College was established in 1833 so that people who couldn’t otherwise find love, the emotional invalids and the Elephant Men of the world, could do so.” In college, Shteyngart gets a few real friends, some sympathetic teachers, a 3-foot-high, sky-blue bong, yet another nickname — Scary Gary — and the first real love of his life.

The story continues through Manhattan in the late ‘90s to the publication of Shteyngart’s first novel in 2002; the final chapter chronicles a poignant return to Russia with his parents as part of the research for “Little Failure.” Shteyngart himself sets the bar for its success: “On so many occasions in my novels I have approached a certain truth only to turn away from it, only to point my finger and laugh at it and then scurry back to safety. In this book, I promised myself I would not point the finger. My laughter would be intermittent. There would be no safety.”

Instead, there are feelings, complicated and sometimes difficult — anger, pride, shame, love.

“Little Failure” succeeds.

VIDEO
Watch the ‘Little Failure’ book trailer
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