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## Book Review: 'Little Failure' by Gary Shteyngart

An almost too dexterous comic memoir of family love and disappointment.

By Edward Kosner

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Can a writer be too good for his own good—too dexterous, too ingratiating? It's an odd question but one inescapably raised by Gary Shteyngart, the author of "Super Sad True Love Story" (2010) and two other novels, with its ironic, winning virtuoso riffs and ultimately endearing conclusion, puts his skill on full display, for better or worse.

### LITTLE FAILURE

By Gary Shteyngart

Random House, 349 pages, \$27



GARY SHTEYNGART

"Little Failure" is a family hard-love story. The Shteyngarts were among the Russian Jews traded to the U.S. for grain in 1979 by the masters of the faltering Soviet Union: father, a mechanical engineer; mother, a pianist and music teacher; and asthmatic 7-year-old Igor, their hypersensitive only child. His father calls the ever-congested child Soplyak—Snotty. His mother calls him Failurchka—Little Failure. They love him desperately, although father smacks him around and mother gives him the silent treatment when he misbehaves.

Disoriented but intrepid, they wind up in outer-borough New York. The boy is daunted by this Technicolor new world. "How will I ever measure up to the elite, smiling giants strolling this land . . .," he writes, "who live like lords in their little castles on forty-by-one-hundred foot lots in Kew Gardens, Queens? How will I ever learn to speak English the way they do, in a way so informal and direct, but with the words circling the air like homing pigeons?"

But learn he does, first at the Solomon Schechter Hebrew academy, where he brags to his standoffish classmates on the school bus, "Ober zer! Look at eet! Eet izt mai hots!"

Young Igor, now Gary, inches his way up the pecking order by penning a sci-fi novel imperfectly titled "The Challenge" that a kindly teacher has him read to the class each day. He also produces a parody of the Torah and Russified pop hits—Madonna's "Like a Virgin" turned into "Like a Sturgeon."

At the ferociously competitive Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, Mr. Shteyngart quickly discovers that he's no longer the smartest person he's ever met. Teamed up with a fellow immigrant, a Vietnamese girl, in a biology lab, he watches helplessly as she dissects her frog and labels each part in English and Latin. "Aren't you going to do anything?" she asks. "Are you, like, retarded?"

Although the Shteyngarts were ransomed from the Soviets by President Jimmy Carter, once in America they became devoted Reaganites. Young Shteyngart shows solidarity by subscribing to William F. Buckley's National Review and volunteering for George H.W. Bush's 1988 presidential campaign. He recalls attending the election-night victory party at the Marriott Marquis hotel, where he encounters two blond Young Republicans.

"Hey," one of the lovelies says.

Me, debonair, unconcerned: "Hey."

"So, I'll have a rum and coke, just a splash of ice and a lime."

He has been mistaken for a waiter.

He dreams, meanwhile, of using Stuyvesant as a springboard to the top of the Ivy League—until he gets his report card:

I am crying even before I see the four digits.

82.33.

Essentially, a B.

Harvard, Yale, Princeton?

Lehigh, Lafayette, maybe Bucknell.

What does it mean for an immigrant child of the top rank to go to Bucknell University?

It means that I have failed my parents. I have failed myself. I have failed my future. We may as well have never come here.

He ends up at artsy Oberlin College in Ohio, where he majors in a 3-foot blue bong and finds first love. (As it happens, my average at the equally competitive Bronx High School of Science in the '50s was 82.414. I know how he felt.)

Gary's tropism toward humiliation eases as he grows into himself as a writer, first with the encouragement of an enthusiastic college instructor and later on his own in a tiny, roach-ridden apartment on the Lower East Side. The antic tone of the memoir modulates. His intense Oberlin love affair comes to an end when the girl decides to go home to North Carolina while he pursues his destiny to New York. She is followed by a WASPy princess he shares with a hipster poet-woodworker. This affair ends, too, and Gary's beloved winds up in prison after she brains yet another beau with a claw hammer.

Indeed, the post-adolescent Mr. Shteyngart's most important relationship turns out to be with "John," an older onetime television writer who rather inexplicably becomes his mentor, writing coach, bankroller and surrogate father. John takes his protégé to dinner at La Côte Basque, reads and rereads his fledgling novel, writes him long pep letters, and stars him in a documentary film but refuses to come over to stomp a giant water bug terrorizing Mr. Shteyngart in his slum flat. Finally, even John loses patience with the author.

Just in time, Mr. Shteyngart is admitted to two prestigious writing programs and a book editor appears with an offer to publish his first novel, now titled "The Russian Debutante's Handbook." He is launched.

The true romance in "Little Failure" is with his mother and father. The three form a neurotic triangle in which the wheezing son plays peacemaker between parents constantly threatening to get the dread *razvod*—divorce. After they settle him in his Oberlin dorm, Mr. Shteyngart expects the newly empty-nesters to break up. Instead, "on the way back home, my parents 'make up,'" he writes. "In fact, once I depart the family scene the entire trajectory of their marriage changes. They will know as much love and happiness together as people of their geography are allowed. . . . Will they be lonely without Little Igor? I certainly hope so. The other alternative: They were always better off without me. I was never a part of the family romance. I was only an impediment to it."

Schlepping this and so much other emotional baggage for so long, Mr. Shteyngart embarks on heavy-duty, four-sessions-a-week psychoanalysis. It lasts for 12 years and seems to have worked. The joker's voice vanishes as he writes respectfully, almost reverently about the process. "It saves my life," he writes. "What more can I add to that?" He marries, although we learn far less about this love than about her predecessors.

The final act of the drama takes place back in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg again, where in 2011 Mr. Shteyngart brings his mother and father on a sentimental journey to their lost world. The parents have thrived in America. His father wound up working on Reagan's Star Wars antimissile program. His mother has moved up to a quasi-executive role at the nonprofit where she works. They have bought a bigger home in a better neighborhood. Initially horrified by their depiction in his novel, they are now rightly proud of his achievement.

They revisit the rundown scenes of their Soviet life, stopping outside the Mariinskaya Municipal Hospital. There Semyon Shteyngart blandly informs his son, "I spent time here. In the *nervnoye otdeleniye*." Gary is stupefied—"My father was a 23-year-old mental patient?"—but he recovers, and the perestroika leading to emotional glasnost with his parents picks up momentum. The book ends at the Great Choral Synagogue of St. Petersburg with Mr. Shteyngart and his father reciting the Kaddish—the Hebrew mourner's prayer—for Semyon's father, Isaac, killed by the Germans in the siege of Leningrad.

Mr. Shteyngart is an enormously entertaining writer. But the incessant cascade of cleverness molting into pathos can produce not only heartbreak but heartburn. At one point, Mr. Shteyngart takes an acting class with Louise Lasser, the comic actress and onetime wife of Woody Allen. "You know what your problem is, Gary?" she tells him. "You're fake and manipulative!"

Mr. Shteyngart is no fake. But he can be manipulative. And decades after he regaled the Solomon Schechter School with his writing, he's still entertaining the class. Failurchka? Hardly.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of a memoir, "It's News to Me," about his career as editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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