Super Sad True Love Story: A Novel

Jeffrey Barlow
Pacific University

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Gary Shteyngart’s Super Sad True Love Story: A Novel

Posted on November 6, 2010 by Admin

Review by Jeffrey Barlow

I have lately reviewed a series of apocalyptic works for Interface, ranging from zombie takeovers (Myra Grant’s Feed [1]) to the decline of the American brain (Nicholas Carr’s The Shallows [2]). I now find myself reporting on a related work, insofar as the impact of the Internet goes, Gary Shteyngart’s Super Sad True Love Story: A Novel

Shteyngart has splendid credentials of the high-literature-set-in-New York sort. He emigrated to the U.S. from Russia in 1979 at the age of seven. His earlier books have won numerous awards and he clearly is a rising literary figure [3]. This book received excellent reviews and I am painfully aware that I am very much an outlier in that regard.

Grant’s, Carr’s, and now Shteyngart’s works have little in common save the manner in which they deal explicitly with the impact of digital communications. In each of them, digital media have reduced communication to a mindless, if not soulless, process. Writing is reduced (or to be fair to Carr, threatens to be reduced) to simplistic texting. Here is a representative text sent to Eunice, the female participant in the supersadtruelovestory, from her sister:

“ I feel like I don’t know what I’m doing half the time anyways, but I’m so glad that we can confide in each other, because the world sometimes feels so, like, I can’t even describe it. It’s like I’m floating around and the moment anyone gets near me or I get near anyone there’s just this STATIC. Sometimes people verbal me and I just look at their mouth and it’s like WHAT? What are you saying to me? How am I supposed to even verbal back and does it even matter what comes out?”[4]

The recipient, Eunice, a Korean-American twenty-something, is if anything even less literate than her sister. When Lenny Abramov, the protagonist, reads aloud to Eunice as part of his campaign
to educate her, we get this scene:

“Are you following all this?” I said. “Maybe we should stop.” “I’m listening,” she half-whispered. “But are you understanding?” I said. “I’ve never really learned how to read texts,” she said. “Just to scan them for info.” [5]

The only fully literate and reflective major character is Lenny, the son of Jewish immigrants who left a collapsing post-Russian state to migrate to New York. Lenny owns a “Wall of Books,” his most precious possession. Others are deeply suspicious of books, which in the popular view, smell very badly and are at best archaically useless.

Though educated and reflective, Lenny is painfully and obliviously unaware. Virtually everyone in the work, including his supposed friends, victimizes or makes fun of him, including the light of his life, Eunice. In this, Lenny, like many other characters is fundamentally a walking ethnic stereotype, in this case the hapless Jewish male, the schlemiel.

However, Eunice and her coevals, as well as Lenny, might be forgiven for remaining unaware, because they live in a United States on the very verge of collapse. It has sold its economy to Sweden and to China, among others, and is fighting a losing war in Venezuela. The national government, the ARA—American Recovery Administration—has responded by fastening an ever more repressive society on its citizenry.

Here is the author’s take on one such ARA moment:

“An unstable, barely governable country presenting grave risk to the international system of corporate governance and exchange mechanisms” is what Central Banker Li called us when his ass had landed safely in Beijing. We had been humiliated in front of the world. The Fourth of July fireworks were canceled. The parade to crown the “American Spender” winner put on hold because a section of Broadway near City Hall had buckled in the heat. The remaining streets were empty, the citizenry prudently staying home, the F running at one train per hour (not that different from its normal schedule, I must say). The only changes noticeable are the new ARA signs drooping off some of the Credit Poles featuring a tiger pawing at a miniature globe and the words “America is back! Grrrr ... Don’t write us of [sic]. Ain’t No Stoppin’ Us Now! Together We’ll Surprise the World!” [6]

The repression extends to total control over communications. Each citizen carries an “äppärät”—a sort of next generation smartphone—with which to communicate, regardless of whether one wishes to do so or not. The apparat reveals to all other nearby similar machines (and to the Credit Poles mentioned above, which are ubiquitous readers which constantly flash the carrier’s information to everyone around) their credit standing, their mood, even their sexual attractiveness based on an average of responses from other apparat users. Highly abbreviated texting on the apparat has become the substitute of choice for “verbaling,” human speech.
There are a number of sub-plots that careen through the book, but basically do little more than fill out the society in which the love story occurs. These are interesting and evocative of other writers’ takes on dystopian futures. The apparat and the security state which employs it are reminiscent of Orwell’s 1984, of course; the attitude toward books as well as other plot elements remind the reader of Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451. There are many other such tropes.

Where the book fails as an enjoyable reading experience for me is in the love story. Lenny is a schlemiel held together by reminiscences of happier—because more European and less American—times and people. Eunice soon became a boring caricature whose endless materialism is only rarely pierced by the beginnings of altruism or social consciousness, from which she quickly turns away. She is altogether a lapsarian heroine, selfish, weak, and treacherous; Madame Bovary, but far less interesting.

Her Korean family, like Lenny’s Jewish one, is a collective ethnic stereotype. His, warm and food-obsessed, hers headed by a dominating abusive Korean Confucian father and a weak mother who has failed to master even the rudiments of English [7]. Taken together they want me to tell the protagonist, “So get out more, meet some interesting people, New York must be full of them.”

The book works then, by weaving a not-very-interesting love story through a not-very-original setting. Its main appeal, it seems to me, is precisely what brought me to it: its many tropes of the evils of digital communications [8]. These are often the high points of the many quite favorable reviews the book has received [9].

Rob Harvilla’s review in The Village Voice (Surely the place Lenny would have preferred that his own book be favorably received!) wrote:

Gary Shteyngart’s Super Sad True Love Story tries to be many things—tragicomic 1984 update, poignant May-December romance per the title, heartfelt tribute to the nostalgic joys of plain ol’ books—and succeeds at most of them. But primarily, it’s the finest piece of anti-iPhone propaganda ever written, a cautionary tale full of distracted drones unwilling to tear themselves away from their little glowing screens long enough to make eye contact, let alone an actual lasting connection, with another human being. It’s super sad ’cause it’s true, but that also makes it hilarious.... Super Sad ain’t Tolstoy, but it argues for the analog pleasures of Tolstoy in an increasingly, detrimentally digital world, and that’ll do. Read it as an eBook, and you’re part of the problem.

Rob may be right, I could be part of the problem, reading this as I did on my Kindle. Fortunately, we learn at Shteyngart’s site that we can go to our ITunes store and download his free IPhone app which will give us (Free!):

“The official app for Gary Shteyngart, the bestselling author of novels including “Absurdistan,” “The Russian Debutante’s Handbook” and the new novel “Super Sad True Love
Story." Everything you want to know about Gary is now available for your iPhone or iTouch.

With this handy application, you’ll have instant access to:

- Breaking news
- Excerpts
- Bonus content
- Video clips
- Twitter and Facebook integration
- And more fan goodies!

The book is worth reading as a pastiche of dystopian clichés, and because it may indeed represent our possible future, which apparently will be alternately boring and terrifying.

However, the book, and its overwhelmingly favorable reception do tell us a great deal about the impact of electronic communications, including the Internet. There is a considerable market for point-with-alarm fiction at present, and the Internet is an easy target. This work suggests that many of us are afraid of the pace of change, and of the future. Why not blame it on the Internet?

Endnotes

[1] See Mira Grant’s Feed reviewed at: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/article.php?id=707


[3] From his website: Gary Shteyngart was born in Leningrad in 1972 and came to the United States seven years later. His debut novel, The Russian Debutante’s Handbook, won the Stephen Crane Award for First Fiction and the National Jewish Book Award for Fiction. His second novel, Absurdistan, was named one of the 10 Best Books of the Year by The New York Times Book Review, as well as a best book of the year by Time, The Washington Post Book World, the San Francisco Chronicle, the Chicago Tribune, and many other publications. He has been selected as one of Granta’s Best Young American Novelists. His work has appeared in The New Yorker, Esquire, GQ, and Travel + Leisure and his books have been translated into more than twenty languages. He lives in New York City. At: http://supersadtruelovestory.com/


[7] These Korean stereotypes are particularly unfair ones. Korean girls and women are nearly
 universally regarded as the most independent and confident females of East Asia, and it is almost inevitably the immigrant woman who masters English before the immigrant male.


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