

## BOOKS &amp; THE ARTS

## Was It Sexy, or Just Soviet?

*The Post-Communist Expat Safari Novel Has Its Day*

ELIOT BORENSTEIN

Given the number of prematurely world-weary young men and women who followed the lure of easy money, cheap alcohol and even cheaper sex to the geopolitical discount bins of the former Soviet Union and Eastern bloc, it only stands to reason that this particular "lost generation" has begun to memorialize itself on and off the best-seller lists. The past two years have seen a veritable boom in fictional accounts of the experience of North American expatriates in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Russia and Ukraine. The authors are all varying shades of young; at 30, if the Russian-born Gary Shteyngart had never left home, he would only recently have been excluded from the Young Communist League's generous definition of "youth." With the exception of Jonathan Franzen, all of these authors have turned their experiences into fodder for unabashedly autobiographical first novels (all subtitled "A Novel," presumably to set the reader straight). Yet their tone is doubly elegiac, a look back at lost youth in lost lands. A decade after the USSR's surprisingly peaceful demise, six men look back on their emergence into adulthood in a world that briefly promised to be their perfect playground.

It's hard to say what is more surprising about this crop of post-Communist safari novels: that there are so many of them (six!) or so few (only six?). To the extent that the average expat could be said to have had a clearly defined goal, if a young North American man in the former Warsaw Pact countries was not trying to make a killing as a cross between a missionary and a venture capitalist (a hybrid that was unimaginable before the 1990s), he was secretly hoping to turn these bleak industrial landscapes into literary gold mines. Purely as a matter of statistics, one could expect at least this many novels to emerge from the expat experience, like the proverbial infinite number of monkeys eventually typing their way toward Shakespearean sonnets.

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But there was no reason to expect that so many of them would be so good.

A cursory look at the names of these authors immediately leads to a nagging question: Where are the women? Why is it that the expat experience ends up represented as so fundamentally masculine? North American women did travel to Eastern Europe in the 1990s, working roughly the same jobs as the men. And such women figure prominently in the two novels most directly preoccupied with expat life (*Prague* and *The Winter Zoo*), and in *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*. Yet the expat voice comes across best in a feckless, frat-boy baritone (for an "authentic" example from the time, see *the eXile*, an anthology from the Russian expat newspaper of the same name). If the tale of young American men wandering throughout Old Europe is familiar and predictable, a heroine's story is certainly no harder to imagine. But where are the accounts of naïve young women seduced by the suave, if oily, charms of Eastern European sophisticates? They can be found, but only in novels written by men.

There is a certain logic to this: Ultimately, the post-Communist expat's story is a fundamentally male narrative of conquest, submission and coming of age. The expat experience was a perfect juncture between self-congratulatory Western machismo and the cultural anxieties of the cold war's losers and victims. One of the commonplaces of the post-Soviet media, for example, is that Russia (always represented as female) has fallen prey to Western despoilers, who ravage the country's national resources, corrupt the morals of innocent youth and turn its women into a valuable commodity for export. It is remarkable how much the heroes of these North American novels resemble their de-

## IN THIS ESSAY

**THE CORRECTIONS.**

By Jonathan Franzen.  
Farrar, Straus & Giroux.  
566 pp. Paper \$15.

**EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED: A Novel.**

By Jonathan Safran Foer.  
Houghton Mifflin.  
276 pp. \$24.

**LEAVING KATYA: A Novel.**

By Paul Greenberg.  
Putnam.  
247 pp. \$24.95.

**PRAGUE: A Novel.**

By Arthur Phillips.  
Random House.  
367 pp. \$24.95.

**THE RUSSIAN DEBUTANTE'S HANDBOOK: A Novel.**

By Gary Shteyngart.  
Riverhead.  
452 pp. \$24.95.

**THE WINTER ZOO: A Novel.**

By John Beckman.  
Henry Holt.  
348 pp. \$25.

fiction in the imaginings of the post-Communist “natives” themselves. Though they may not be as nakedly cynical as the Western villains of post-Soviet potboilers, these young men are indulging in the very activities that define their caricatured counterparts: drinking, pillaging and whoring.

Indeed, sex and drunken debauchery are these characters’ primary means of getting to know their surroundings (Milan Kundera clearly has a lot to answer for). Note the randomness that motivates the protagonists of nearly all of these novels:

With the exception of the hero of *Leaving Katya*, none of these men have any particular reason to choose the country they visit. These are not stories about immersing oneself in a beloved

foreign culture; such supporting characters can be found in *The Winter Zoo* and *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook*, and they are female. Instead, the heroes are like typical college students on study-abroad programs, roaming thousands of miles on a journey of self-discovery. Travel may broaden the mind, but it narrows the vision, facilitating an obsessive, adolescent-narrative navel-gazing.

For the men, much of their knowledge of the host country is carnal. Franzen’s *The Corrections*, in which Chip Lambert’s time in Lithuania is a brief stopover as he claws his way out of a checkered, foundering career, is both the most casual and the most sophisticated when it comes to sex tourism. Twice a week he goes to an expensive club for a massage, sauna and sex with women who “led daytime lives that revolved around child care, or parent care, or the university’s International Journalism program, or the making of art in political hues that nobody would buy.” Franzen’s description of post-Communist Lithuanian life is so casually reductive that it makes its point without even a whiff of moralizing: “All in all, he found Vilnius a lovely world of braised beef and cabbage and potato pancakes, of beer and vodka and tobacco, of comradeship, subversive enterprise, and pussy.” This brief exploration of expat sexual encounters is, like the entire Lithuanian episode, deployed as part of the novel’s vast arsenal of evidence of the more insidious effects of globalization, which itself often resembles the tangled love-hate relationships in the novel’s central dysfunctional family more than any kind of international capitalist conspiracy. His breezy sendup of the expat experience, complete with an Internet scam to defraud Western investors interested in

a privatized Lithuanian democratic party and gravel futures, is only enhanced by the fact that Chip has come to Lithuania to escape from his life as a perennial American loser. Sex with the natives is simply a standard perk that comes with the job.

The most egregious example of the treatment of the host country as sex object is Greenberg’s *Leaving Katya*. Daniel, the novel’s protagonist, only truly becomes an expatriate when running back to the Motherland to escape his shrewish Russian wife in New York. The novel begins with a wonderful passage about the “parallel uni-

*Sex and drunken debauchery are the characters’ primary means of knowing their surroundings—Kundera has a lot to answer for.*

verse” of Katya’s industrial-strength underwear, which makes him pose the question that he will spend the rest of the novel trying to answer: “Was this sexy, or just Soviet?” Unfortunately, their encounter becomes so burdened with heavy-handed symbolism that no hydraulic undergarment could possibly support it. Daniel mounts Katya underneath a poster showing a tanker that “passed backward and forward across the Finnish Gulf between Helsinki and Leningrad.” In case the reader misses the point, Daniel is struck by a “nonsense thought—that I was now as far inside the Soviet Union as I had ever been.”

Daniel ends up bringing Katya to New York and marrying her, much to the horror of his family, who had never thought his “Russia phase” would go so far (couldn’t he have just brought home one of those stacking dolls and a furry hat?). From this point on, Daniel is preoccupied with solving two riddles, one involving Katya (what is she really thinking?) and the other revolving around himself (is Katya right in saying that he has a “weak character?”). Some of the most insightful passages in this novel, whose autobiographical roots are laid bare on the book’s promotional website, come from the mouths of the Russian characters, most notably the proverbial older, wiser woman Daniel meets in Novosibirsk (who deflates the myth of Katya by saying “she’s a little Communist bitch”) and Katya herself, who finally explains some of her motivations in the book’s closing pages. Ultimately, the novel’s success or failure is a function of the distance between author and character: Is Daniel’s cluelessness the clever device of a now-wiser author, or is it a set of sincere observations to be taken at face value?

Such confusion between author and hero is openly courted by Jonathan Safran Foer in *Everything Is Illuminated*, which features the Ukrainian travels of a young American named Jonathan Safran Foer. Simply giving the character the same name as his author dispenses with the usual ventriloquism of first novels, in favor of post-modern coyness. But Foer the character does not create the same kind of vortex of solipsism as Greenberg’s fictional stand-in, perhaps because “Foer” is a marginal presence in comparison with the novel’s star: the young Ukrainian amateur translator and tour guide, Alexander Perchov.

Though *Everything Is Illuminated* features another narrative line (a fictional account of Foer’s ancestors), it is Alex who steals the show. In the best traditions of Gogol and

Zoshchenko, Foer has created a narrator whose command of the language is idiosyncratic at best: Largely self-taught, Alex writes as if he has made a thorough study of Roget’s Thesaurus and resolved to treat all the secondary definitions as primary. The novel’s much-quoted beginning makes this strategy abundantly clear: “My legal name is Alexander Perchov. But all my many friends dub me Alex, because that is a more flaccid-to-utter version of my legal name. Mother dubs me Alexi-stop-spleening me!, because I am always spleening her. . . . it is because I am always elsewhere with friends, and disseminating so much currency, and performing so many things that can spleen a mother.” Foer has been praised for his ingenious wordplay, but even a few paragraphs of this “funny foreigner” routine can grow tiresome, recalling not so much Gogol or Sholom Aleichem as Balki from the 1980s sitcom *Perfect Strangers*.

It would be too easy to take Foer to task for the fact that no one would write like this, that Alex’s grammar is too perfect for someone so prone to malapropisms, that his mistakes have nothing in common with Slavic syntax or that Ukrainians and Russians would find the phrase “seeing-eye bitch” funny for roughly the same reasons we do. The bigger problem is that Foer, in a novel whose plot is rooted in the Holocaust, is giving us natives who are so cute and quaint that they would make good plastic prizes for an *Everything Is Illuminated* Happy Meal tie-in. These caveats aside, Foer does use Alex’s and his eternally grumpy grandfather’s perspectives to deflate the image of the American visitor, referred to early on as “a very spoiled Jew.” Strictly speaking, *Everything Is Illuminated* is a sort of farce on the expat novel, since

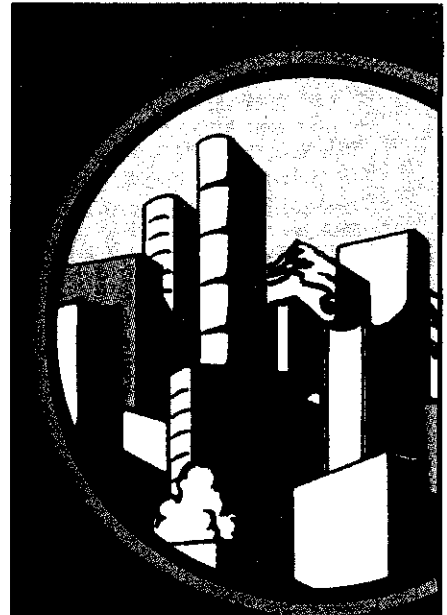
Foer makes but a relatively brief visit to Ukraine before returning to New York. The novel pokes fun instead at a different kind of post-Communist safari: the inevitably doomed search for one's roots in a now-vanished Old Country. Foer the character is obliged to create a family saga for himself that his ancestral home staunchly refuses to provide. And he also inadvertently makes some surprising discoveries about his own family's connection to his Ukrainian hosts. But ultimately, *Everything Is Illuminated* perpetuates an old expatriate pattern: Ukraine serves as the backdrop for an American's journey of self-discovery.

In *The Winter Zoo*, John Beckman overcomes this cliché of American self-absorption and self-discovery precisely by reveling in it: No one could be more unwilling to take responsibility for his own actions than Gurney, the novel's main character. Or at least not at the sacrifice of charm and appeal. Leave it to others to avoid such minor features of adulthood as jobs and career: Gurney is running away from nothing less than fatherhood. Given that the novel begins with his abandonment of a newborn daughter in Iowa to pursue an incestuous attraction to his cousin Jane in Krakow, *The Winter Zoo* seems to be challenging the reader to like Gurney. Yet like him we do, and it is a testament to Beckman's talent. Gurney's attractiveness would be impossible to maintain if he were the narrator, or if the point of view remained claustrophobically centered on him. Instead, we see Gurney more as the object of other characters' desire—not just his cousin's but also the native Poles'. With his cornfed bulk, winning smile and air of naïveté, Gurney is Iowa incarnate, and also a Nabokov fantasy twisted through the looking glass: a six-foot, twentysomething Lolita who fascinates the local, underage Humberts. Beckman's reversal of the classic seduction plot reaches its peak at the end of the novel, when, during an international orgy facilitated by large amounts of ill-gotten cash and even larger doses of Ecstasy, Gurney has a homosexual encounter with a teen-age Krakovian. To paraphrase Greenberg, this was probably as far inside America as the Pole would ever get.

Gurney's aimless life in Krakow, a city about which he knows nothing, with a language he never attempts to master, provides a complex view of the ethics of any sort of expatriate involvement in the labyrinth of post-Communist Poland. The fact that he spends most of the novel lusting after his cousin is a tidy symbol of life in the expat bubble, which is nothing if not incestuous.

Throughout the novel, Gurney is implicitly contrasted with Dick Chestnutt, an expat of twenty years' standing, who has attained a kind of rootedness in this rootless community while always remaining an outcast. When he was younger, his antics were charming, but as he got older, his combination of public protest and literal exhibitionism, and his predatory relations with the young girls he tutored in English and on the guitar, lost much of their appeal. Chestnutt is the lecherous grandpa to his fellow expats, expressing wisdom that is dead-on despite his unsavory character. ("Boredom spreads in direct proportion to the influx of young Americans.") Gurney only skims the surface of Polish life (even Auschwitz leaves him unmoved), while Chestnutt gets dangerously involved. Ultimately, Gurney leaves Krakow and survives; Chestnutt is buried there.

Beckman gives Gurney the perfect job for an American who has decided to try his luck in colder climes: working the roulette table at the local casino. The casino exemplifies the new economy at its most problematic: It is a joint venture funded by less-than-scrupulous Western capitalists and by Zbigniew Zamoyski, a former Communist who forever complains about the harmful influence of Western culture on Poland (not so incidentally, he is also the ex-lover of Gurney's cousin, the estranged husband of their landlady and the murderer of Dick Chestnutt). The novel's plot recapitulates Poland's troubled attitude toward money and profit: Gurney's friend Jackie wins a small fortune at his roulette table, an event that eventually pushes Gurney to leave the country for fear of reprisals from the casino's managers. The expat often comes to Eastern Europe for easy money, yet this particular windfall becomes a very large pile of bad pennies: No one seems to want it, and it is almost impossible to give it away. Jackie gives most of it to Gurney, Gurney sends the rest back to the mother of his infant daughter, and she sends most of it back to Krakow, unaware that Gurney is long gone. The money ends up in the hands of the teenage Wanda, Zamoyski's daughter, who once had a crush on Gurney, but even she is reluctant to spend it: "It had a wonderful effect when she simply ignored it; it gave her the ferocious calm of a soldier. But it scared her to death when she remembered it was there." In defiance of the laws of the reintroduced market, this is money that constantly changes hands without ever really circulating: Everyone who gets it only takes what can be justified as necessary or charitable (money for student loans, for instance, or a wild Christmas



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**T**he *Winter Zoo* does an admirable job of bringing together the aimlessness of the American characters with the jaded perspective of their Polish hosts, while continually calling into question the ethics of their interactions, both personal and economic. But the fullest exploration of the expat dilemma in all its messiness is in Arthur Phillips's *Prague*.

Through the choice of his title alone, Phillips announces to his readers that he is one step ahead of the game: *Prague* is a novel set in Budapest, and the plot never strays across Czech borders. The main character, John Price, is nagged by the sense that he has chosen the wrong venue for his European wanderings, that Prague is where the action really is. One suspects that John would be equally restless if he ever actually reached this promised land, but that is precisely the point: The expat life is based on a sense of impermanence and interchangeability. And also on the inevitable leveling of difference brought on by terms such as "Central Europe": Prague and Budapest are virtually indistinguishable from the point of view of venture capitalists and college graduates looking to do the Grand Tour on the cheap. True, the countries have entirely unrelated languages and cultural traditions, but thanks to young Americans' notorious geographical ignorance, these are differences that make no difference. Beckman gives us Central Europe as postadolescent orgy, while Phillips turns it into a party game for overgrown American toddlers—a grab bag full of mysterious toys for would-be adventurers, while for would-be investors and "shock therapists" it is a piñata that will yield a cascade of treats once it is beaten hard enough.

Thus it should come as no surprise that Phillips starts his novel with a game called Sincerity, in which all the players take turns making apparently sincere statements, only one out of four of which is actually true. The object of the game is to deceive one's opponents while simultaneously unmasking their lies; the collateral damage is the wounded pride and hurt feelings of one's fellow players (John says about his estranged brother Scott, also a participant: "Scott is our parents' favorite"). Sincerity is the central issue in Phillips's presentation of the inevitable culture clash between Young America and Old Europe. With the exception of Emily, a Nebraskan who, like Beckman's Gurney, fits the tiresome stereotype of the Midwestern yokel, all the Americans (and one Canadian) who form this particu-

lar circle approach the world around them through the near-impervious shield of irony so characteristic of a certain strand of recent American pop culture (*Seinfeld* as opposed to *Touched by an Angel*). They come from a world in which nothing crucial is ever at stake, and now find themselves in a city where the burdens of history are felt on every street corner.

Yet even though nearly all the characters are at times seduced by the romanticism of European suffering and adventure, Prague resists the simple opposition between American cynicism and Eastern European earnestness. The plot revolves around an attempt by Charles Gabor, the Cleveland-born son of Hungarian émigrés seeking his fortune in Budapest despite his contempt for his parents' nostalgic patriotism, to invest in (and ultimately take over) the Horvath Kiado, one of the most venerable publishing houses in Hungary. After 1956 this press split in two, as the heir to the family business, Imre Horvath, set up a German branch to preserve Hungarian culture from Communist philistinism. John uses his society column at *Budapest Today*, the fictional expat newspaper, to build up a buzz about the press and facilitate the deal.

The takeover of the Horvath Kiado is Western investment at its most cynical, and yet Phillips manages to humanize all the participants so much that it never becomes a straightforward matter of a Western assault on the helpless East. Phillips grants Imre Horvath his share of moral authority for his role in the cultural opposition, but at the same time refuses to make him a disident hero.

In one of *Prague's* best passages, Phillips describes Horvath's three and a half years in a Hungarian work camp entirely in the negative: "He did not feel some secret part of himself made strong by his hardship. He did not discreetly receive from one prisoner and pass on to the next a tattered translation of the United States Constitution or Montesquieu's essays on the natural rights of man. He was not warmed by a great and unexpected love for his fellow prisoners." While Horvath's young subordinates fawn all over the great man, Charles Gabor is unimpressed: "Charles felt he had heard this story before, but with different characters. Somebody had saved somebody else from some horrible disaster, but at terrible personal sacrifice.... Was this a movie he'd seen? So familiar...." In a remarkable balancing act, Phillips manages to have it both ways: This particular Western investment, clinched while one of the players seems to be on his deathbed, could hardly be more

toxic, yet none of the participants is thoroughly reprehensible or impeccably clean.

**M**oral clarity is nowhere to be found in these novels; the expatriate experience simply will not provide it. So it makes perfect sense that at least one of the authors would eschew documentary realism in favor of broad humor and biting satire. In *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, Gary Shteyngart has taken the unassailable position of the humorist. Even as he exposes the absurdities of late capitalism in the United States and too-late capitalism in Eastern Europe, he can never be accused of taking himself too seriously. Shteyngart is not burdened with the challenge of getting the foreign backdrop exactly right, nor is he obliged to create fictional political crises in real European countries, as Franzen does in *The Corrections*. Instead, Shteyngart creates an entire fictional country, the Republic of Stolovaya (Russian for "cafeteria"), whose chic but dilapidated capital, Prava, suggests a neutral territory between Pravda and Prada. Implicitly, Shteyngart recognizes that the romantic haven of free-thinking and free love to which these young Americans flock ("It's the Paris of the 90s!") has always been a fantasy projection, less like *Mittleuropa* and more like Middle Earth.

*The Russian Debutante's Handbook* is a story of double expatriation. The hero, Vladimir Girshkin, is a "beta immigrant" from Leningrad, the uneasy product of a Soviet upbringing and a Midwestern liberal arts education. Unable to escape the perpetual taint of the schlemiel, Vladimir toils at a low-paying job in the Emma Lazarus Immigrant Absorption Society before a chain of improbable circumstances leads him to work for the Russian mafia in Prava. His otherwise useless education has given him invaluable anthropological insights into the habits of overprivileged American would-be literati, allowing him to come up with the perfect plan to exploit one of the few untapped markets in the city of Prava: the expats themselves. He creates *Cagliostro*, a cross between a literary magazine and a pyramid scheme, and one has the sense that the posers whom Vladimir fleeces in Prava could easily have been on loan from the casts of other expat novels. For all his anxieties about being a perpetual outsider, Vladimir (and Shteyngart) has a unique advantage: As a product of both the triumphalist West and the vanished East, when he looks at the visitors from the United States and the denizens of post-Communist Europe, he sees funny foreigners everywhere. ■