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Super Sad True Love Story: A Novel



Synopsis

A NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK • SELECTED ONE OF 10 BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY MICHIKO KAKUTANI, THE NEW YORK TIMES • NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY The Washington Post • The Boston Globe • San Francisco Chronicle • The Seattle Times • O: The Oprah Magazine • Maureen Corrigan, NPR • Salon • Slate • Minneapolis Star Tribune • St. Louis Post-Dispatch • The Kansas City Star • Charlotte Observer • The Globe and Mail • Vancouver Sun • Montreal Gazette • Kirkus Reviews

In the near future, America is crushed by a financial crisis and our patient Chinese creditors may just be ready to foreclose on the whole mess. Then Lenny Abramov, son of an Russian immigrant janitor and ardent fan of •printed, bound media artifacts• (aka books), meets Eunice Park, an impossibly cute Korean American woman with a major in Images and a minor in Assertiveness. Could falling in love redeem a planet falling apart?

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Almost unclassifiable, "Super Sad True Love Story" is an unorthodox tale that defied every expectation I had going into it. So I may not know how to describe the novel concisely to convey its successes, but I can say that I'm in love with this "Love Story." In a beguiling mix of humor, pathos, and intrigue--Gary Shteyngart has written a topical, disturbing, and believably prescient satire of the near future. Taking cues from his previous works "Absurdistan" and "The Russian Debutante's Handbook," protagonist Lenny Abramov is of Russian descent. From a Jewish immigrant family settled in New York, Lenny has achieved some success selling immortality to the upper echelon of

the income bracket. In a technological world, success is not only measured--it is broadcast. Receivers transmit instant credit ratings, personal communication devices evaluate attractiveness quotients, and books have become a digitized (not to be read, but to be scanned for information). It is, to be sure, a world of instant gratification where to be without media is to be devoid of life itself. When sad sack Lenny meets the beautiful, yet immeasurably damaged, Eunice Park--he falls instantly in love. Reluctantly, Eunice does begin to date Lenny. Despite their incalculable differences, the two form a relationship as much about necessity and usefulness as it is about genuine emotion. Oblivious to the political climate, where New York is systematically being co-opted into a police state, the two form an almost perfect co-dependent bond. But as the world around them starts to splinter, so too must Lenny and Eunice come to terms with whether or not their relationship can survive. Picking up "Super Sad True Love Story," I wasn't sure what I was getting into. What I did NOT expect, however, was a novel filled with Orwellian nightmares brought so vividly to life. As many times as I chuckled at Shteyngart's vision of this dystopian future, I was also disturbed by how much our society actually seems to be moving that way. It is a stunning accomplishment as a whole. As a satire, it works. As light sci-fi, it works. As a relationship drama, it works. One of my favorite books of the year, easily, "Super Sad True Love Story" is a mesmerizing tale. Important and entertaining, I was "Super Sad" to finish this story.

I suppose the mixed reader reviews are unsurprising. And if they are nevertheless disheartening, I think this novel, ahead of any written by an American in a generation or more, will find greater and greater admiration the longer it endures--and it will endure. A Modest Proposal was not well-received in London, after all, and the perfect pitch with which Shteyngart captures this cultural moment is no likelier to warm the hearts of those living it. What is surprising, however, and more difficult to rationalize is the tediousness of most of the criticisms in these pages. To answer a few: 1. "It's boring." Tough. This is a purely stylistic judgment. I can't argue with it, but I do take issue with the equation of "I was bored" with "this is a bad book nobody should read." "Boring" is only aesthetically relevant when it is intelligently justified, which, sadly, it hasn't been here. 2. "There's sex in it." First of all, so? It may be churlish, but my instinctive assumption is that the folks complaining of graphic sex as "juvenile" and "there to shock" have not read a lot of contemporary literary fiction. The sex is far more graphic in, and sexuality is much more the subject of, to name a few, John Updike, Philip Roth, Jonathan Franzen, Don DeLillo, Tom Wolfe, Martin Amis, Saul Bellow, Jose Saramago, Norman Mailer, Milan Kundera, Mario Vargas Llosa, and John Coetzee. Sex permeates, and as both itself and metaphor is essential to, several of the best novels of the twentieth century (see, e.g.,

The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Ulysses, Blindness, Lolita, Brave New World). Now, perhaps all of these novelists and all of their novels are juvenile and vulgar, but don't toss them into the fire without Tristram Shandy, Gargantua and Pantagruel, In Search of Lost Time, etc., and indeed without Shakespeare and Solomon. Writers write about sex. Secondly, yes, the sex is invariably desperate or gratuitous. This may or may not be the way we have sex now (it is certainly one of the ways in which we have sex now-and almost as certainly always has been-and just as certainly is not the only way), but it is the way sex is shown to us by, at least, television, film, the internet and particularly pornography. If you find it grim, even soulless, good. This appears to be what Shteyngart is worried about, and whether or not one agrees with either the assessment or the worry, he makes his point very well. But that aside, "there's sex in it" is a hollow criticism. One might as well say "there's walking in it" or "I hate the gratuitous eating."³ "He just extends current trends." Indeed. This is satire, not science fiction. Do not confuse the book's near-future setting with futurism-Shteyngart's imagination is working on how we live now, extrapolated more than exaggerated, not the creation of an original, plausible future. Swift, Twain, Wodehouse, et al, were all satirizing their own times, and this is, ultimately, all satire can do, even in science fiction. Douglas Adams may be at the End of the Universe, but you're kidding yourself if you don't think The Sirius Cybernetics Corporation is the modern tech company, the Cricketters are xenophobes from time immemorial, the Vogons are modern bureaucracy, the Golgafrinchans are all of us, etc. If humor is being had at the expense of a time and place that is definitively not one's own, it isn't satire but ridicule.⁴ "It's liberal." Yeah, it is. Shteyngart's a liberal. It could be a weakness were it myopic or actually bigoted. It's neither. The liberalism that underpins the book spares neither liberals (of whom Lenny is one) nor liberal conventions, but if the criticism is that it is not conservative, and does not take a conservative view nor come to conservative conclusions, that's certainly true. Although I don't believe it is primarily a political novel, it is a political novel. Political novels inevitably take sides. The question, though, is not about his politics or the reader's. As with any novel, the question can be aesthetic (is it: funny? entertaining? moving? illuminating? bottom line, is it GOOD? because good should always be good enough). The question can be literary (what does it do as a novel? how does it do it?). The question can be ideological, of course, and Super Sad certainly cuts close to forcing ideological judgments, although not ones that have much to do with Democrats and Republicans. My opinion is that the most important question, the determinative question, is the moral one. This is, and not very far below the surface, a deeply moral book. It is at least in part a deeply moral book ABOUT morality, and so it seems fairest, if one wants to hold it accountable for being something more than merely good (which is itself an astonishing thing to ask of a whole novel), to

judge it on moral terms. What one asks is not "is this because of corporations?" or "is American BAD?" or "are Americans progressively illiterate, selfish, vain and cruel?" but "if this is our way of living, or some part of our way of living, notwithstanding how or why it came to be, what does it mean? what does the novel say about it?" One needn't be liberal or conservative to find something morally troubling about Shteyngart's world, which may be why even its least forgiving critics here are much harsher to the characters than is the text itself.⁵ "There are ethnic stereotypes!" Are there? Race and culture, and depictions of race and culture, are complex. On the other hand, some of what Shteyngart witnessed in his own neighborhood and his wife's roughly corresponds to what COULD, if misappropriated and misapplied, be called ethnic stereotypes of Russian Jewish and Korean immigrant communities in the New York metro. Must he dispense with anything he witnessed that has entered the national consciousness as "Jewish" or "Korean"? I don't think so. In fact, I think there's a very dangerous assumption in much of the criticism. A "stereotype" in literature is a caricature, a grotesque, often bent toward ridicule or confirmation of an audience's prejudices. It goes without saying that I find both complex, but whatever Eunice and Lenny may be they're not caricatures, nor is their experience claimed at any juncture to represent an Ethnic Experience or a Religious Experience. It's merely their own, particular and peculiar. What it is not, and this is where the dangerous assumption is made, is a conventional, long-settled, white Protestant experience. Many of the posters who say they are seeking "real" characters rather than stereotypes seem instead to be seeking "conventional, long-settled, white Protestant" characters, for only those characters will not fall victim to the "exotica," the cultural foreignness, that they've confused with stereotype. To be clear, that doesn't mean they object to "Jewish" characters or "Korean" characters, only that "Jewish" and "Korean" characters cannot be "real" unless they behave precisely as the dominant culture would have them behave. Their own cultures must be treated as irrelevances.⁶ "The writing is annoying!" It can be, but I don't think it could have told this story any other way. It certainly could not have captured what passes for communication at the moment. Lenny's prose, much closer to the author's, is often excellent if one requires evidence of ordinary facility, but Eunice Park is virtuosic. Shteyngart manages to capture the lingua franca with both outrageous parody and abundant sympathy. This is rare, and ultimately, for all the grating, a treat to read.⁷ "It's not a love story!" It bloody well is. Mismatch is encoded in the genome of the love story. There are a handful of great love stories in all of literature in which it's not switched on, but it mostly is because, to quote another novelist of miserable people making miserable matches in miserable times, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." It may not be the best, the most touching, and it is not (nor intended to be) the best, hottest engine in the novel,

but the love story of Lenny and Eunice is authentic, moving and, when situated in the wider narrative, desperately, desperately sad. At any rate, I don't think the title refers to poor Lenny and Eunice, bringing us to 8. "It has nothing good to say about America!" To the contrary. The novel aches with despair precisely because its author seems to love the country and its people so very much. I urge anyone who takes that view to carefully reread the last four pages. 9. "It's not uplifting!" or "It's too uplifting!" If nothing else, one must have sympathy for the poor novelist, already hard set to the grind of sentences and paragraphs, when the same book is called dreadful by some because it's sentimental and pulls its punches, others because it's terribly bleak and empty and one happy critic because it's not nihilistic. I think the problem is exacerbated here by the fixation on the word "satire." Super Sad is satirical, is "satire," but that's not all it is and far from all it aspires (mostly successfully) to be. I find it very funny, but it certainly isn't slapstick, meant to be a happy-go-lucky tale of an America down on its luck yet still plucky and full o' good folk. At the same time, it isn't a laundry list of the ills of Modern Civilization, nor a broad, surly attack on the United States and all it ever has been or ever will be. It chooses its punchlines carefully, has few true targets and even in them sees weakness rather than evil (one poster asks where the Tea Party is shot through almost every page), and is, most of all and most wisely, almost entirely devoid of rancor. Super Sad is, as all great novels, many things (satire, romance, pyrotechnics display, character study, tale of the city), but above all it is a tragedy. The comparison to Twain is inapt. If one has to be made, it should be to Fitzgerald. Oh, and 10. "None of the characters are likable!" This isn't the purpose of fiction. Grow up. And regardless, expand your sympathies. Lenny is a coward, Eunice is a child, both, and all their cohorts, are little in a world the big and the little have together made a moral hash. They aren't heroic because few people are, they reflect the chaos, callousness and vanity of their time because most people do, and they change without necessarily becoming better because perfectly upward trajectories belong to kitsch.

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