Books

Review: *Our Country Friends*

By Gary Shteyngart (Random House).

By
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|
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Gary Shteyngart (Brigitte Lacombe)

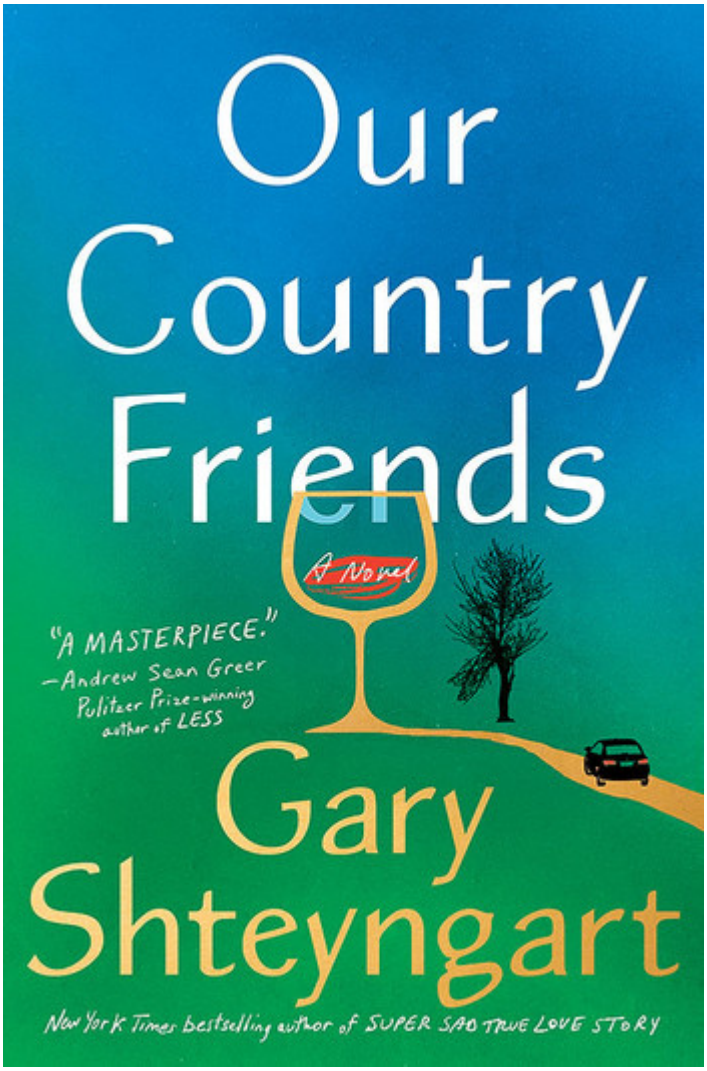
Did we really need this — Gary Shteyngart’s take on how the virus broke the world? We’re still emerging from the pandemic nightmare. Is a jab of the celebrated satirist’s high-dose pen really what the doctor ordered?

Turns out, it is. The gently named *Our Country Friends*, a super sad funny new novel set in an epically unfunny time, is not just wisecracking but wise, and as tender as it

is trenchant.

Shteyngart, who teaches in Columbia's graduate writing program, brings us back to March 2020, when a pod is forming at a Hudson Valley bungalow colony owned by the Russian-born, Queens-raised novelist Alexander (Sasha) Senderovsky. Sasha; his wife Masha, a psychiatrist; and Nat, their precocious, anxious, K-pop-fixated daughter, are joined by an odd lot: Vinod and Karen, Sasha's old chums, who bring their own immigrant journeys and traumas; Ed Kim, the glammy scion of a successful Korean family; Dee, Sasha's provocative former writing student; and the exploding supernova in their quirky constellation, a movie star we know only as the Actor. They come for the weekend. They stay for the summer.

The novel is set in the pandemic's early months, when we all sheltered in place and peered out at a world gone toxic. The characters may be at safe remove from the cities — "moated … into their biosphere" — but they are also "watching a double disaster through glasses pressed to binoculars pressed in turn to a telescope." It all intrudes: the ventilator shortages and curbside morgues, the brutal murder of George Floyd, the paroxysms of protest, the dizziness of life untethered, the dead trees portending climate change.



Random House

If that all sounds kind of grim, not to worry: there are delights in store. When we first meet Senderovsky, he is stocking up at local shops, overspending on sausages and whiskey. Shteyngart is just as punctilious: he's packed our pandemic picnic basket with surprises (Nat singing K-pop to the neighbor's sheep, a hypnotizing dating app, a groundhog named Steve), and his sharp prose and social observations are nothing short of delectable.

The pandemic has been kind to puzzle fiends, and the solvers among us may spend some happy hours decoding allusions to authors from Homer to Nabokov. Most obvious is Chekhov, with the novel's division into four acts, the insertion of a dramatis personae up top, and nods throughout to *Uncle Vanya*. Former Russian majors will catch winking references to classics, whether *Anna Karenina* ("The House on the Hill was in a tizzy") or *Lolita* (Vinod tells Sasha: "I broke your liquor, you broke my life").

Still, every unhappy era is unhappy in its own way. Even apart from the pandemic, ours is a doozy — from the here unnamed forty-fifth president to climate change to the vaporousness of online life, where the self merges with the selfie and social media can make or break you overnight. Shteyngart also takes on the complex, sometimes brutal dynamics of immigrant families in America, as when Sasha reflects in a particularly acrid passage on the role he has unwittingly played:

You came, they laughed at your accent on an urban playground, and then you were given your degrees and guided into battle. By which point, you were just a scab sent in to reinforce the established order … All of us have come to feast on this land of bondage. And all of us are useful and expendable in turn.

Along with such hot-button topics, Shteyngart also reminds us that even when the world is a preoccupying mess, our personal crises remain paramount. In the end it is the fates of the characters, their longing for family and connection, their betrayals and loyalties that stay with us. That and the sparkle of the storytelling.

As Shteyngart writes in his memoir *Little Failure*, he learned as a child that "the world is harsh and inconsiderate, and you can rely only on your family." Reading *Our Country Friends*, you'll decide for yourself how true that is. But in any case, join Sasha and company upstate. They, and the master who conjured them, are great company as we ride out the storm.

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