

Counterpoint: *Absurdistan*

A VILIFIED CHARACTER IN GARY SHTEYNGART'S NEW NOVEL TAKES A SWIPE AT HIS CREATOR—THE AUTHOR **BY JERRY SHTEYNFARB**

"THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT LOVE," the Russian-American writer Gary Shteyngart promises in his new novel, *Absurdistan* (Random House, \$25). A book about lies would be more like it.

On its face, this follow-up to Shteyngart's well-received *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* tells the tale of Misha Vainberg, a grossly overweight, overwealthy son of a Russian gangster who gets stranded in the land of Absurdistan. But the book is really just an excuse for Shteyngart to do his "oh, me so young and clever" routine and offer his useless socio-economic observations. Like, God help us, rap: "Heah come dat bitch/from round de way/box my putz/like Cassius Clay." Nice, huh? Too bad a little Googling exposes the real hardcore, old-school gems, like photos of the eager beaver mugging it up at the Stuyvesant High School Young Republicans clambake.

As for the writing, yes, Shteyngart can sometimes pen a neat sentence. *But what Russian can't?* We're born with this stuff. *Absurdistan's* most odious creation is a certain fellow novelist whom Shteyngart describes as "an upper-middle-class phony who came to the United States as a kid and is now playing the professional immigrant game." Shteyngart later accuses this colleague of impregnating his students at Hunter College, including the protagonist's girlfriend, Rouenna Sales.

Reader, I am him. And never have I been so publicly libeled. Those students were pregnant before I met them! An "upper-middle-class phony"? This coming from Shteyngart, a writer whose knowledge of the South Bronx (featured exhaustively in *Absurdistan*) is limited to once soaring over the 'hood on a JetBlue flight to Burlington, Vermont. As for the sultry Latina Rouenna Sales, believe me, I know Shteyngart's amorous habits well. Let's just say there's more kimchi on his plate than arroz con pollo.

Do what you have to, Mr. Shteyngart; build your modest throne on the corpses of your countrymen. But, as my lawyer will soon tell you, we live in a world where words have consequences. And if I can't earn your respect, I'll take your money. We're both Americans now, pal.

