Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story* (Granta, 2010)

After the much-praised *Absurdistan*, Gary Shteyngart’s third novel brings high expectations in its wake. It is the story of Lenny Abramov, a 39 year-old Russian-American, and his romance with Eunice Park, a Korean-American who he meets in Rome, but a Rome of the future. Here, Lenny is selling an immortality drug for his company Post-Human Services; his opening statement to the reader is that he is never going to die. In this typically not brave new world, books are seen as suspect, outdated and even smelly; today’s world of mobile phones, facebook and twitter has progressed to one where privacy is a thing of the past. Everyone carries a device called an äppät which allows them to have access to intimate details about their peers or new acquaintances.

In this world, in which traditional notions of the human are disappearing, Lenny writes an old-fashioned diary, which comprises half the narrative of the book. The other half, by contrast, consists of the electronic communications from Eunice to her friends and family. The story seems to be set 10 or 20 years in the future, in a time when a neo-con America has collapsed economically and China is the world’s superpower. America is at war with Venezuela; when Lenny and Eunice arrive there, the country descends rapidly into civil war. This plot summary (saving, of course, the neatly surprising end) makes it clear that *Super Sad True Love Story* is that very fashionable thing, a dystopia. Shteyngart’s novel has been linked to the work of David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Lethem, Tom Wolfe and Philip Roth; other useful contemporary parallels are Margaret Atwood and Maggie Gee. It is science fiction, but also a romance; it is a satire of modern America, and an effectively comic one. Thus the novel is an ambitious compendium of genres, with more narrative drive and sheer *joie de vivre* than many contemporary dystopias. It wears its politics lightly, and encourages us to care about its protagonists, something that many more self-consciously worthy novels fail to do.

One of the novel’s strengths is the quality of the writing. Lenny’s diary is elegant, illustrated when he reflects on Rome: ‘The city of Rome appeared around us, casually splendid, eternally assured of itself, happy to take our money and pose for a picture, but in the end needing nothing and no one’ (21). This is original and convincing. Similarly, Lenny memorably describes himself as ‘a man who lived in death’s anteroom and could barely stand the light and heat of his brief sojourn on earth’ (23). The contrast between this voice and that of Eunice is effective, and the style appropriate to each character: a typical phrase from the latter is ‘Sup, my little Busy Bee-iotch? I’m baaaaaaack.’ (110). The novel shows that the epistolary mode can be usefully morphed to depict the contemporary world in its representation of comically contrasting methods of communication. It is also a memorable evocation of the city, and of how outsiders in it come together: Lenny and Eunice are both effectively migrants, coming to a (future) America from the outside. Immigration as a theme makes the novel topical; it also means that America is seen not merely in the future, but also through an outsider’s eyes, giving a doubly distancing effect. The distance helps the satire.

As is so frequently the case, I found that the book did not quite live up to the glowing reviews. One of the reasons for this is that, although Eunice’s communications are sometimes amusing, the style (deliberately) jars, and the joke becomes repetitive. The contrast between Lenny’s eloquence and her abruptness loses its effectiveness. In addition, the success of the humour depends on the individual taste of the reader. The novel won the...
Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse prize for comic fiction, a prize that goes to a novel that has captured the comic spirit of the author: clearly, Shteyngart has achieved something which many, but not everyone (this reviewer included) will enjoy.

_Super Sad True Love Story_ is not a perfect book; it is so fashionable and contemporary in its content and politics that it is likely to date quickly. On the other hand it is noteworthy for its combination of genres, its energy, and the manner in which it makes us realise that its world is one that is all too possible.

Nick Turner