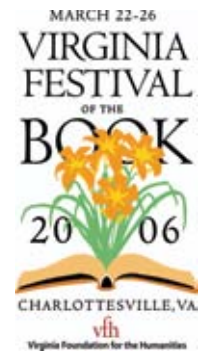


Natasha and Other Stories by David Bezmozgis recommended by Erika Meitner

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the "VABooks!" column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Erika Meitner—author of the poetry collection *Inventory at the All-Night Drugstore* and Morgenstern Fellow in Jewish Studies at the University of Virginia—recommends *Natasha and Other Stories* by David Bezmozgis. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



Last month I turned 30, and though I pleaded with people not to bring gifts to my birthday party, once all my guests left my apartment I found myself sifting through a substantial pile of small gift bags: bottles of wine, scented body scrub, faux Jackie-O sunglasses, and a book—*Natasha and Other Stories*, by David Bezmozgis.

This last gift was a bit unusual. I'm a poet and a graduate student in Jewish Studies, and, as a rule, my friends don't buy me books simply because I own so many, and it's impossible to tell what I already own or what I might like. The Bezmozgis book was from a couple I knew (grad students in Psychology and History) who had been raving about it, which is also rare in our world, as so few people I know actually have time to read for pleasure during the semester. Usually I'm deeply ensconced in 400-page volumes with names like *Critical Theology*, or *Post-Modern Man*; I assume everyone else is as well, but apparently my friends have time to read.

When I went to bed that night, curiosity got the best of me; I cracked open *Natasha*, and ended up devouring the first story, "Tapka." Narrated by Mark Berman, a six year-old Russian Jew who has just immigrated from Riga to Toronto, this story is about the disaster that ensues when he and his seven year-old cousin Jana are asked to walk their Russian neighbors' Lhasa-apso (the Tapka of the title) during their lunch breaks from school. Other background threads that are also crucial to the story in-

clude the Berman family's struggle to learn English, and the slow, strange acculturation process that inevitably occurs with any immigration.

What I found most compelling about Bezmozgis's writing immediately was his voice. Many writers (especially in their first books) suffer from something I've dubbed "overwrought syndrome." When Jonathan Safran Foer, for example, writes in the voice of an Ukranian translator in *Everything is Illuminated*, it's hilarious, but I can feel the sheer effort behind the construction of each of Alex's sentences; by the end of the chapter, I'm exhausted. Bezmozgis has a much lighter touch with his narration and his dialogue—almost like a Russian Jewish Canadian version of Junot Diaz (the Dominican-American author of *Drown*).

The book is a group of interconnected stories that follow Mark through a series of weird, but totally plausible interactions and situations, as he becomes an adult. In one of my favorites, "Roman Berman, Massage Therapist," Mark's parents (Roman and Bella) try to figure out how to get clients for Roman's newly opened massage business so he can stop working at a chocolate bar factory. This eventually leads to a fraught dinner with a rich Canadian Jewish family who pride themselves on pitying Russian Jewish immigrants. The deftness and subtlety with which Bezmozgis handles class issues, Jewish issues, immigrant issues, and power dynamics within one short story is impressive. While darkly comic, this

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story, like the other stories in the book, has an emotional gravitas to it that comes out in the smallest detail—an apple cake.

In the world of Jewish fiction, critics always seem to be on the lookout for someone to tout as a new Philip Roth. While I personally think this perpetual hunt-for-the-new-Roth is a little misguided, it points to the fact that people appreciate authors

who have a certain level of insight, writing skill, humor, Jewish content, and emotional honesty (even when it's potentially ugly or unpalatable) in their work. North America has a long literary history of great Jewish immigrant fiction—Henry Roth, Anzia Yezierska, Abraham Cahan—and now we can add David Bezmozgis to the list.