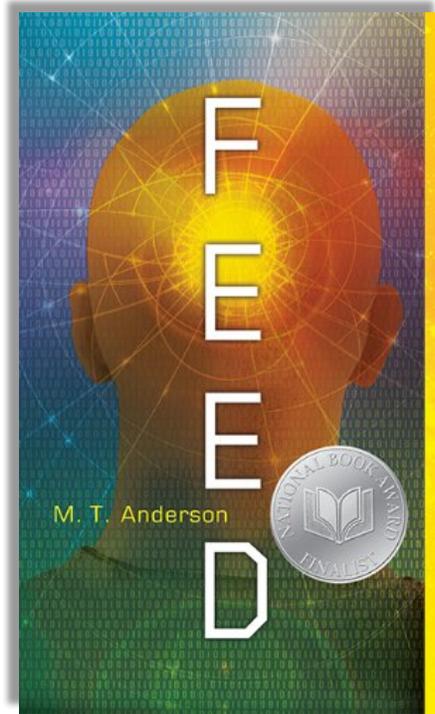


8: Runaway consumerism



Here is Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry in “A Capitalist Critique of Consumerism,” which appeared online in *The Week* on April 5, 2016: “Frank Trentmann’s new book on consumerism, *The Empire of Things*, begins with an eye-opening fact: ‘A typical German owns 10,000 objects.’ Let that sink in. Ten thousand! The second and third sentences are hardly less forgiving. ‘In Los Angeles, a middle-class garage no longer houses a car but several hundred boxes of stuff. The United Kingdom in 2013 was home to six billion items of clothing, roughly 100 per adult; a quarter of these never leave the wardrobe.’ Though consumerism is often seen as a liberal bogeyman, even supporters of free enterprise—of whom I am one—need to admit we have a problem.”

Gobry goes on to assert that “the alternative to ‘consumerism’ is, literally, the Soviet Union” with consumer choice limited to a single brand in any product line. This is nonsense. The issue isn’t the abundance of choice in our society: it’s materialism enabled by prosperity and boosted by advertising and overextended credit. There may be no practical remedy. It’s important to recognize that whatever solution might come along will have to build on the real-world conditions in which we live. The solution is certainly not ethical

consumerism, which merely substitutes some goods for others (which, indeed, are often imported). As Ian Thompson points out in reviewing *Empire of Things* in *The Guardian* (February 9, 2016), “citizen-consumers in the west have the luxury of ethical consumption, while others do not.” And, clearly, a Communist revolution is not the answer, either. That ship has sailed.

During the past decade two prominent authors have explored runaway consumerism in very different ways: the Russian-American prodigy Gary Shteyngart in *Super Sad True Love Story* and M. T. Anderson in his award-winning young adult novel, *Feed*. The Australian author Max Barry has also written a dystopian novel that hinges on runaway consumerism: *Jennifer Government* (2003). Many other writers have included the theme in their own work, from Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* to Kurt Vonnegut in *Player Piano* to William F. Nolan and George Clayton Johnson in *Logan’s Run*, all of which are featured elsewhere in this book.

Gary Shteyngart

Imagine the USA 10 or 15 years down the road, as Gary Shteyngart does in *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010). The dollar is pegged to the yuan, and a tyrannical right-wing government is in power. The country is bogged down in a losing war in Venezuela, and China threatens to invade. Soldiers fill the streets. A Bipartisan Party holds power in Washington, DC. The divide between High Net Worth Individuals and Low is a chasm that cannot be spanned. Everyone carries an “äppärät”—an always-online device that broadcasts its carrier’s Male or Female Hotness as well as health and nutritional benchmarks. The äppärät also provides access to intimate correspondence. Not only are there no secrets from the government. There are no secrets among the people, either. Even your credit rating hovers brightly in the air above your head when you pass a Credit Pole on the street. And, as Chris Cox notes in his review in *The Guardian* (February 26, 2011), “Everyone works in media or credit. People don’t really like talking much any more; they prefer streaming information about each other on their ‘äppäräti’ (alarming smart phones). And they certainly don’t like reading books—apart from anything else, they smell bad.”

This is the USA Gary Shteyngart creates to showcase the truly sad love story of Lenny Abramov (Russian-American, age 39, depressive reader of books) and Eunice Park (Korean-American, age 24, anorexic, self-obsessed, and a shopaholic like all her friends). The tale of their troubled relationship plays out

against the backdrop of a city (New York) and a country in the throes of total collapse. It's not a pretty picture—but it's extremely funny.

Reviews of the novel were mixed. Ruth Franklin notes in *The New Republic* (September 1, 2010) that “Gary Shteyngart’s novel offers a vision of the worst-case scenario, a dystopian American culture sexed up, dumbed down, and digitized ad absurdum.” She adds, “*Super Sad True Love Story* is a satire that strikes painfully at many of our culture’s weakest spots, particularly its pornographic obsession with sex and its nonchalance about Internet privacy, or what remains of it . . . The novel of the future, like the love object who is here the center of obsession, will be a ‘sleek digital creature,’ buzzing with information and fun to play with but in the end perfunctory.”

On a more positive note, Terrence Rafferty describes *Super Sad True Love Story* in the online magazine *Slate* (August 2, 2010) as “a spectacularly clever near-future dystopian satire.” He adds, “Consumerism; youth-worship; subliteracy; and developed societies’ obsessions with money, class, health, and entertainment—the most prestigious occupations in this society are Media and Credit, followed at a discreet distance by Retail—are easy sport for a wit as gifted as Gary Shteyngart . . . But in *Super Sad True Love Story*, the jokes, offhanded as they seem, accumulate a certain weight—the volume and suffocating mass of an oppressive, inhospitable culture. Who wants to live—even for a normal, ‘human,’ span—inside a joke?” Chris Cox again: “It’s said that good satire should afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. On finishing *Super Sad True Love Story*, you feel both bruised and consoled at once.”

M. T. Anderson

Laura Miller refers to M. T. Anderson’s award-winning novel, *Feed* (2017) in her *New Yorker* article as a “merciless and very clever satire of late-capitalist complacency.”

“We went to the moon to have fun, but the moon turned out to completely suck.” This opening sentence sets the supercilious tone, signals the idiomatic language Anderson employs throughout, and introduces Titus, the teenage narrator. It’s a brilliant lead.

Feed tells the tale of Titus and his friends, six teenagers who hang out and party together. Like a majority of their fellow citizens—those who can afford the cost—they access all their news, advertising, education, games, “m-chat,” and money through implants in their brains—not just embedded chips but multipurpose devices that are fully integrated into their nervous systems. There is a world of constant distractions. Fashions may change by the hour. A powerful future version of Virtual Reality allows them to experience novelty and excitement at any time without special equipment—and without pausing for reflection. This is a world you and I would not want to live in, yet there’s much, much more to make life little worth living.

Corporations are the dominant force on the planet. Climate change, pollution, and overfishing have killed the oceans. Earth is dying. Past wars have left a blanket of radioactive dust all across the surface. Chemical pollution is causing lesions to appear on people’s skin. Human settlements on Earth exist underground under domes to shield people from the intolerable heat and unbreathable atmosphere. Massive numbers have migrated off-planet to Mars, the moons of Jupiter, and nearby star systems. This is truly a dystopian society.

The Feed of the title is the experience generated by the implants in people’s brains, a product of the Feed Tech Corporation. As Titus notes, “the braggest thing about the feed, the thing that made it really big, is that it knows everything you want and hope for, sometimes before you even know what those things are. . . [A]ll you have to do is want something and there’s a chance it will be yours.” Those wants and hopes are manifested through personalized sales pitches that constantly bombard the teenagers’ consciousness. If they have any purpose in life, it is to consume indiscriminately in a constant search for novelty and acceptance by their friends.

To compound the misery, one’s feed can be hacked by a shadowy entity called the Coalition of Pity. Titus and his friends fall victim to such an attack. While they resume their lives unchanged after brief hospitalization, Titus’ new girlfriend, Violet, learns that her life is in danger as a result. She is unable to recover completely.

The language has degraded to the colloquial dialect that is spoken by Titus and his friends, but it’s not limited to the young: their parents speak the same way. There is no public education. Now, children attend School™, the corporations’ for-profit answer to public schools, which clearly doesn’t teach much at all. Violet is exceptional because she can read and write, and her father speaks in

complete sentences that contain no slang. But Titus reports that “[e]veryone is supersmart now. You can look things up automatic, like science and history, like if you want to know which battles of the Civil War George Washington fought in and shit.” When Violet asks Titus whether he can read, he responds, “A little. I kind of protested it in School™. On the grounds that the silent ‘E’ is stupid.”

Kirkus Reviews (September 1, 2002) praised *Feed*: “The crystalline realization of this wildly dystopic future carries in it obvious and enormous implications for today’s readers—satire at its finest.” By contrast, a young woman named Veda Kumarjiguda, apparently a member of the target audience for this novel, remarks online on *Figment* (August 17, 2010), that “I hated how most of the teens in *Feed* were portrayed as mindless drones. In reality, the Internet is populated by plenty of smart kids who are totally in control of ‘the Network,’ right? (Right?) I was angry enough that I wanted to write a blog post and yell, “LOOK I’M USING THE INTERNET FOR GOOD. I’M THINKING CRITICALLY!”

What we can learn from these novels

We haven’t always lived in a “consumer society.” Before the mid-19th Century, only the wealthiest nobles and merchants had the means to purchase goods far in excess of their needs. The Industrial Revolution began to change that by enabling the emergence of a middle class which managers and professionals could aspire to. In the following decades, rising productivity lowered prices, making an expanding array of goods accessible to the growing middle class.

By the 1920s, prosperity was the order of the day in the United States (though much less so in war-torn Europe). Consumerism was born, midwived by the explosive growth of advertising and public relations agencies. Consumer debt in the USA in 1950 was negligible. The amount owed on consumer goods by American households rose slowly through the 1950s, 60s, and into the mid-70s. The trend then accelerated, reaching a total of \$3.6 trillion in 2016. The Great Recession of 2007 through 2009 caused only a brief and shallow departure from the trend. “[T]he amount of debt grew from \$160 per person in 1952 to \$11,140 per person by the middle of 2016.”

Pity the poor American today who is without a smartphone, an automobile, and a flat screen television! In August 2016, Nielsen estimated that a total of 118.4

million American households included at least one television set, while the Census Bureau pegged the *total* number of US households at 116.9 million!

Meanwhile, consumerism has taken hold all across the planet, not just in North America, Europe, and Japan but in the world's emerging nations and among elites and a swelling middle class in the fast-growing cities of the Global South. Questions have been raised for decades about the "carrying capacity" of the Earth. It has become a cliché to note that for the world's seven billion people to achieve the average standard of living in the United States today would require the resources of four Earths.

It's not hard to see that continuing growth in the manufacturing and distribution of consumer goods around the world is not sustainable. We are fast draining the world's supply of drinkable water, arable land, trees, ocean fish, and other natural resources. And our push to ever-greater abundance is warming the planet to dangerous levels.

But will the society of the future resemble the scenarios illustrated by Shteyngart and Anderson? Unlikely. Both novels are satirical and thus exaggerated. But these stories were not made out of whole cloth.

Over the past century and a half, corporations have played an ever-larger role in American society. Their preeminent place in our lives today rests in part on Supreme Court decisions such as *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Rail Road* (1886), which conferred "personhood" on corporations, and *First National Bank v. Bellotti* (1978), which confirmed it; and in a succession of limited decisions culminating in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010) that gave corporations the power to contribute unlimited sums to the election campaigns of favored candidates for public office. The weakening of the labor movement beginning with the Taft-Hartley Act (1947) and increasingly favorable corporate tax policies may have been even more influential. Today, firms with fewer than 500 workers constitute 99.7 percent of the nearly six million firms that employ more than their owners. But the larger, corporate employers—the other 0.3 percent—account for *more than half* of the country's Gross Domestic Product.

It is widely accepted that the overextension of consumer credit as well as the profusion of sub-prime mortgages in the United States were among the primary causes of the Great Recession, which threatened to send the world economy into a tailspin. Reforms put in place in the years since 2009 have not even prevented the issuance of sub-prime mortgages. Nor have they discouraged the

continuing growth in consumer debt. Given the intention of the Trump Administration to gut the Dodd-Frank Act that was enacted to correct some of the excesses of the financial sector, there is no guarantee that the economy won't spiral downward once again in the near future. (I'll cover this question in far more detail in Chapter 10.)

In the final analysis, the runaway consumerism that lies at the heart of *Super Sad True Love Story* and *Feed* may be an exaggeration—but we would be foolish to ignore the essential truth the two novels reveal.

Note: attributions for the facts cited and quotations included here are to be found in endnotes in the published book.