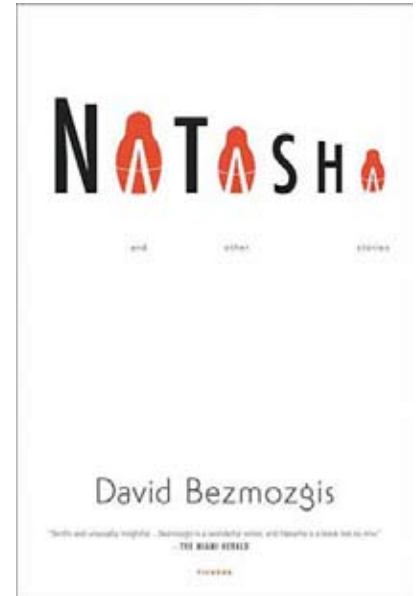




Reading Group Gold

Natasha and Other Stories

by David Bezmozgis



ISBN: 978-0-312-42393-3 | 2005

About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Natasha and Other Stories* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this novel. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Natasha and Other Stories*.

About the Book

- Winner, Best First Book, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, the Caribbean and Canada
- One of the 25 Best Books of the Year, *Los Angeles Times*
- Winner, Reform Judaism Prize for Jewish Fiction
- Finalist, *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, the Art Seidenbaum Award
- Shortlist, *Guardian* First Book Award
- Shortlist, Governor-General's Award

Natasha, the acclaimed story collection by David Bezmozgis, is a poignant and quietly affecting account of the Berman family, Russian-Jewish immigrants in search of a better life in Canada. These seven coming-of-age stories, narrated with unsparing humor and precocious intelligence by the Berman's young son Mark, tell of the struggles and hard-won lessons of life as an outsider seeking to fit in. From the loss of childhood innocence in the first tale "Tapka" to the religious wisdom learned at a Jewish retirement home in the closing story "Minyan," *Natasha* demonstrates why, as T. Coraghessan Boyle writes, this New York Times notable book is "a first collection that reads like the work of a past master."

"An authority one usually finds only in more seasoned writers."—Meghan O'Rourke, *The New York Times Book Review*

"An effervescent debut...A familiar tale of dislocation and assimilation with enough humor, honesty, and courage to make it new again...If the last page of 'Tapka' doesn't stop your heart, maybe it was never really beating."—*O magazine*



Reading Group Gold

“Deft...humane but unblinkingly unsentimental...Bezmozgis’s...fine stories...are thick with memorable characters.”—John Biguenet, *Chicago Tribune*

“Dazzling, hilarious, and hugely compassionate narratives [written with] freshness and precision...Readers will find themselves laughing out loud, then gasping as Bezmozgis brings these fictions to the searing, startling, and perfectly pitched conclusions that remind us that, as Babel said, ‘no iron can stab the heart so powerfully as a period put in exactly the right place.’”—Francine Prose, *People*

“Passionately full of life...Often ebullient and warmly comic...[Bezmozgis has] considerable talents.”
—James Wood, *London Review of Books*

About the Author

David Bezmozgis was born in Riga, Latvia, in 1973. In 1980 he immigrated with his parents to Toronto, where he lives today. This is his first book.

Discussion Questions

1. In “Tapka” what does the dog symbolize to Rita? To Mark’s mother? What is the significance of the dog to Mark, initially as a young boy and then as a mature narrator? On page 9, Mark observes, “we had intuited an elemental truth: love needs no leash.” Do you agree? How does his observation relate to the events in “Tapka”? Does the story end happily or tragically? Explain.
2. Despite being set in Canada, do you think the struggles faced by the Bermans in “Roman Berman, Massage Therapist” might apply to other immigrants elsewhere in the world, particularly America? Explain. Why is Doctor Kornblum interested in the Bermans? When the family leaves the Kornblums, Mark wonders, “As we walked back to the Pontiac it was unclear whether nothing or everything had changed” (p 36). Do you think anything changed? Explain.
3. In what ways is “The Second Strongest Man” a continuation of the themes introduced in “Roman Berman, Massage Therapist”? Does the second story resolve some of the questions posed in the earlier story? Explain. Why is Roman’s confession to Gregory on page 60, stating that he often thinks of returning to Russia, a significant moment in the story? By the end, how do you think Mark views his father’s situation versus that of Gregory?
4. How is the story “An Animal To The Memory” about both the rejection and acceptance of one’s cultural identity? What conflicting messages does Mark receive about his heritage? On page 69, Mark’s mother says that he is not leaving Hebrew school until he learns what it is to be a Jew. Does Gurvich finally teach Mark what it means to be a Jew? How?
5. In the title story, how does Bezmozgis gradually reveal that Natasha is not like other girls that Mark has met? How do Mark, Natasha and Zina each view sex differently? On page 94, do you think that Mark and



Reading Group Gold

Natasha's discussion about sexuality objectification reveals anything about men's and women's attitude toward sex in general? Why? On page 104, Natasha accuses Mark of being like his uncle, of wanting people to make his decisions for him. Do you agree? Explain. By the story's end, what has Natasha taught Mark about himself?

6. In "Choynski," how do the events leading to the deaths of Mark's grandmother and Charley Davis mirror each other? How does the story's narrative structure contribute to this mirroring effect? What do Joe Choynski and the theme of fighting symbolize in the story as a whole? Why do you think it's so important that Mark return his grandmother's false teeth to her? What does the story seem to be saying about the importance of the things that people leave behind after they die?

7. In "Minyan," why does Bezmozgis never define the exact nature of Itzik and Herschel's relationship? Do you think that defining it would change the story's meaning? Explain. According to Zalman, what will happen to Herschel? Do you think that "Minyan" is a fitting end to *Natasha*? Why?

8. Do you think that reading *Natasha*'s stories together, in the order they are arranged, offers a different experience than if you were to read the stories independently in a magazine? Why? In what ways is *Natasha* more like a novel than other story collections you may have read?

9. Do you think that being Jewish or a Russian immigrant alters how you read the stories in *Natasha*? In what ways do the stories transcend the specificity of their characters' experience and become universal? Which stories and characters in *Natasha* did you most relate to? Explain.