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GARY SHTEYNGART, AUTHOR

Author Gary Shteyngart transforms watches into characters in his latest novel, *Lake Success*.

WORDS CAIT BAZEMORE, CONTRIBUTOR

PHOTOS BRIGITTE LACOMBE

Gary Shteyngart is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the memoir *Little Failure* and the novels *Super Sad True Love Story*, *Absurdistan*, and *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*. His writing has also appeared in a plethora of publications, including *Travel + Leisure*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *The New Yorker*.

In his latest novel, *Lake Success*, Shteyngart introduces a new type of character in the form of six watches that accompany his protagonist, Barry, on an anything-but-typical cross-country road trip. Though Shteyngart didn't become a self-proclaimed watch geek until 2016, watches have held a special place in his heart since childhood. *Revolution* talked with Shteyngart to learn more about the role watches have played in his life and work.

I've read your article "Confessions of a Watch Geek" in *The New Yorker*, but for the readers of *Revolution*, can you retell your watch origin story?

It started in 2016. The election cycle was kicking off, and the more it was looking like there was going to be a scary outcome, the more I needed to take my mind off things. I've never had a hobby — never collected anything — so, I went to the Museum of Modern Art, looking for something [to start collecting]. I didn't know what it was going to be — maybe post-modern teakettles — but I ran into a Junghans Max Bill watch.

Now, at this point, I didn't even know what a mechanical watch was. I assumed, like most people tend to, that everything was quartz — I actually

didn't even know what quartz was! But I looked at the watch and thought, wow, this has a really great Bauhaus-influenced design. I did think it was a bit pricey — almost \$1,000 seemed like a lot for a watch — but I bought it. Once it stopped running, I thought it was broken. So, I called Junghans, and they patiently explained what an automatic watch was.

I noticed as I was wearing it, the watch calmed me down — the smooth ticking, the way the second hand went around the dial. But I also started reading [about watches] online, and it took my mind off things. And as the country and the world started hurtling into a frightening direction, I could fill my head with facts and figures and reference numbers.

How did you decide on your next watch purchase?

Junghans led to NOMOS Glashütte, which is a brand I've really fallen in love with. Not just because they're really great watches but because of their whole philosophy. They're very personable. As I was writing the piece for *The New Yorker*, that took me to Glashütte in Germany to visit NOMOS and then A. Lange & Söhne. I also went to NOMOS's design workshop in Berlin. And it was really heaven seeing how the watches are put together. It was more fun than I'd had in a while.

What watches are in your collection?

After NOMOS, I expanded into a couple other kinds of watches. I bought several Rolex pieces that I

love. For me, vintage Rolexes are some of the most interesting watches around. I have a GMT 1675 with a gilt dial that belonged to one of President Nixon's NASA advisors. It's been fun to imagine what that watch has been through.

I just got an Omega Seamaster Chronograph that I love to death. I have a little Patek Philippe Calatrava that I love from the mid-century. It has a great movement. The Lange Saxonia Thin feels good on my wrist. My wrists are fairly small, so I tend to gravitate toward thinner, smaller watches. I've only been collecting for a couple years. I'm still a newbie, but I feel like I've learned quite a lot.

Author Gary Shteyngart.



There's one watch I read about in a previous interview that you didn't mention — a Casio from your childhood — could you tell me more about that watch?

Yeah! I forgot about that! So, the Casio was the initial watch I owned. I immigrated to the United States when I was seven, and the first watch I ever had was a Casio musical alarm watch. It played the songs of the world — a Japanese song, an Italian song, a Russian song. I didn't speak any English, and all the kids hated me because being from the Soviet Union wasn't very cool [in 1979], so the watch was kind of like a friend of mine in a way. I hung out with it all the time, and I would listen to the songs, especially the Russian song. And the watch kind of did for me what watches do now — it calmed me down, made me feel more at ease. But one day, a bully took it away. And my grandmother was this fierce Russian woman, and she came to the school and demanded he give it back. There's a lot of funny, bittersweet memories of that watch.

Do you have a grail watch?

I'm actually pretty happy with what I have. There are watches like the Patek Philippe 3940 Perpetual Calendar that are super beautiful but a bit pricey for me — and taking care of a perpetual calendar can be kind of a pain. There are watches that I really love like the mid-century, two-tone Patek 570, but those are in the half a million-dollar range, so that's not gonna happen.

Grand Seiko is something that really interests me. The Spring Drive is a fascinating technology, but they just don't quite fit to my wrist the way I'd like them to. If there were a smaller Snowflake that would be excellent — a 39mm Snowflake would be incredible.

There's also one weird watch I've been looking for. My vintage watch dealer has also been looking for it. It's a Rolex Air King — I love the old Air Kings 5500s — I think they're just incredible. And this one was issued by a Louisiana oil services company

called Circle Bar Drilling. They issued these Rolex Air Kings that had the logo of the company on the dial, which is this very cool-looking oil derrick. I wrote a book about oil politics called *Absurdistan*, so I have a connection to it. I've been just dying to find one, but looking into it, I've only come across three examples ever mentioned and one of them was stolen, so it's a bit of a tough find.

What watch are you wearing right now?

I'm wearing an Omega Seamaster from the '50s, a chronograph. It's 60 years old — who knows what it's seen. It's probably seen someone's entire life, and that's interesting to me.

I also read you tan your own leather watch bands at your upstate home; what inspired you to do that?

Well, when you're a novelist, you can only work for a few hours a day because you can only do your job well for a finite amount of time each day. So, there's a lot of free time to pick up hobbies. I spend about half the year in the country because I find writing comes a lot easier when I'm upstate, away from the city. But the boredom is compounded in a way. So, one day, I was looking at my NOMOS Glashütte Minimatik, which I have in the champagne dial. And one thing that didn't completely work for me was the strap, which was very light tan. So, I thought, I'm just going to put it near the pool so it'll reflect the sunlight, and then I'll tenderize it in the morning by putting it out on the porch. I thought the result was great — it had this sort of worn-in look. So, after that, I started experimenting with more straps. This is what happens when you have too much time on your hands!

What intrigues you about the world of watches, and what role do they play in *Lake Success*?

One of the things I noticed early on was that a lot of the watch nerds I was meeting were people that didn't totally know how to connect with others. And

The cover of *Lake Success*.

the watches were a language they used. It was a way to be social, to sit down and talk about reference numbers. It seemed like a way for people who were fundamentally shy to open up to one another.

And the character, Barry Cohen, in *Lake Success*, he works on Wall Street, but he's very scared of communication. Watches are a way for him to find connection to the world. He can't connect to his son, who's autistic. He can't connect to his wife, who's brilliant and beautiful. He's just not meant for that kind of connection. And watches are the one thing he has in his life that he can fully immerse himself in. He displaces a lot of affection and connection he should be having with human beings onto his watches.

How did you choose the watches for your protagonist Barry?

Barry's a hedge fund manager with a failing hedge fund. He's being investigated by the SEC. So, he gets on a Greyhound bus and travels across the country with nothing but these six watches. To research the book, I spent years hanging out with hedge fund managers. And one of them said to me, a hedge fund is a story — a story of how we're going to make money together. What's more important than anything is the ability to tell investors a story that makes you sound smart or different from other hedge fund managers. So, Barry has really internalized that idea. For example, he has an Omega Railmaster that was issued by the Pakistani air force, and that watch lets him break into a story. That's what he looks for in a watch — a backstory.

Do you think watches will continue to show up in your writing?

Lake Success has so much watch-talk in it. I don't think I need to write about watches anymore, in fiction anyway. I'm always down for writing in other media. I've never been to Baselworld — one day I'd love to go check that out. But in terms of fiction, I don't know, maybe a decade from now watches will creep back in. ☺

