The most recent generation of Jewish American authors—those following in the wake created by Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, and Cynthia Ozick—has distinguished its voice in various ways. Whether it be through a return to religious orthodoxy, a renewal of folkloric techniques, an awareness of post-Holocaust conundrums, a commitment (or reaction) to Zionist expression, or an engagement with multiculturalism and identity politics, these writers have created a body of writing that defiantly challenges Irving Howe’s ill-fated and oft-quoted prediction in 1977—two years after Daniel Walden founded *Studies in American Jewish Literature*—that Jewish American fiction had reached its high point and, given the twilight of the immigrant experience, was at an impasse (16). The robust narratives of Steve Stern, Allegra Goodman, Nathan Englander, and Dara Horn speak not only to the vitality of Jewish writing in the United States but to the state of American literature as a whole. Yet while many scholars have discussed the distinctive nature of contemporary Jewish American writing on a thematic level—for example, the awareness of religious custom, the Holocaust, Israel, postmodern culture—few have noted any distinctiveness of form. And while it would be erroneous to hold that this most recent generation has privileged a particular genre of writing, it would not be inaccurate to suggest that, with those who create fiction, the narrative cycle has been represented inordinately.
A cursory look at the output of Jewish American authors since the mid-1980s reveals a striking tendency toward the cycle form. This is especially the case with first works of fiction, where writers initially establish their voices and, in the process, build a literary beachhead. Now prominent authors such as Goodman, Michael Chabon, Thane Rosenbaum, Nathan Englander, and Melvin Jules Bukiet all relied on the genre when publishing their first or second books. And although in many cases these authors’ works have been marketed and reviewed as collections of stories, or in some cases novels, a closer reading of the texts would suggest that they actually function as short-story cycles, a vibrant yet relatively neglected hybrid genre that possesses characteristics of both the traditional story collection and the more conventional novel. It stands out from the former in that the various narratives composing the text are significantly linked in some way. Whereas the individual stories in most traditional collections are disparate and unique, the components that make up a story cycle maintain a consistency in terms of character, setting, chronology, imagery, and even theme. In this way, story cycles encourage a more novelistic reading, since the narratives more directly, or more naturally, flow one from the other or build upon one another. Yet they stand out from traditional novels in that the narrative unity among their various segments—the stories or “chapters”—is much weaker. In this way, a specific story within a cycle can easily stand on its own (such as in an anthology or a reader) outside of the collection, whereas a chapter of a novel could lose much of its meaning or impact when extricated from its context.

An equally notable phenomenon in recent Jewish American writing has been the arrival of Russian émigrés. Authors such as Gary Shteyngart, Anya Ulinich, Lara Vapnyar, Michael Idov, Olga Grushin, and Sana Krasikov have distinguished themselves through a series of well-received fiction and, as a result, are now read as a curious subset of contemporary Jewish American literature. Perhaps most significant, these authors have brought back to the fore many of the essential themes that first marked Jewish American writing: the in-between status of the immigrant, struggles between old world and new world mentality, guilt and shame generated by intergenerational conflicts, and ethno-religious marginalization. These are, interestingly enough, many of the characteristics that Irving Howe lamented as increasingly scarce in contemporary Jewish fiction. What is more, they largely define the works of two particular Jewish Russian émigrés, Ellen Litman and David Bezmozgis, writers who have used the short-story cycle form in their first works of fiction. Both *The Last Chicken in America: A Novel in Stories* (2007) and *Natasha and Other Stories* (2004) use tightly interlinked yet independent narratives not only to explore the growth of a particular character but to foreground that development within the larger context of the Russian immigrant community. The hybrid cycle genre allows each author to juxtapose both individual and group awareness—of Russianness,
Jewishness, and Americanness—where one is inextricably linked to the other. Or put another way, both the individual and the community become protagonists. In this manner, Litman and Bezmozgis not only write their ways into America as its latest group of immigrants but just as significant align themselves with the recent generation of Jewish American writers through working one of its most commonly employed genres. It is not important whether this generic alignment is intentional or inadvertent. What is noteworthy is the fact that these Russian-born authors reflect a growing trend in recent Jewish American fiction and by doing so participate as equals in defining the current generation.

Before looking closely at Litman’s and Bezmozgis’s fictions, it may first be useful to map out the critical contours of the cycle narrative, since the genre is so revealing when illustrating the interrelationship between the subject and his or her community. There have been a number of insightful studies devoted to the short-story cycle, also called the composite novel, or even the short-story sequence. Generally, it is defined as a text of short fictions interconnected by common threads of character, setting, and/or theme, thereby providing a more holistic reading than could be had by focusing on any one of its individual components. In the first sustained investigation into the short-story cycle, Forrest L. Ingram defined the genre as “a set of stories so linked to one another that the reader’s experience of each one is modified by his experience of the others” (19), while at the same time one that “maintain[s] a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit” (15). Furthermore, the cycle is given a textual unity through “dynamic patterns of recurrence and development” (20). Ingram’s emphasis on authorial intention in the creation of a cycle is echoed by Robert M. Luscher, who maintains that “the hand of the serious writer shapes the finished sequence according to his own aesthetic intentions” (159). Such an emphasis privileges what Ingram calls “composed cycles” or “completed cycles” (the first being a form conceived by the author from the very beginning and the latter being the conscious fulfillment of an originally unintended narrative act) over “arranged cycles,” or those in which individual stories are brought together, after their completion, so as to highlight their associative qualities (17–18).

Others, however, have tended to privilege a more reader-response approach to recognizing the “larger picture” or the patterns of the various parts. For them, it is the reader who discovers the stories’ connections. While Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris concur with Ingram by defining the cycle (or the “composite novel,” their preferred term) as a series of “shorter texts that—though individually complete and autonomous—are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one of more organized principles” (2), they nonetheless argue that the identification of its individual parts should be “self-contained [and] experienced independently by a reader” (11). Similarly, J. Gerald Kennedy mistrusts Ingram’s
assumption of an author’s intent, since it precludes any fortuitously perceived narrative structure and because, in the words of Kennedy, “textual unity, like beauty, lies mainly in the eye of the beholding reader” (ix). Yet regardless of whether the connectedness of the individual stories is dictated by the author or by the reader, the distinguishing feature of the cycle narrative is its hybridity, its equal kinship to both the novel and a “mere collection” of stories. As Susan Garland Mann states, “There is only one essential characteristic of the short story cycle: the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated” (15). Simply put, the whole of a short-story cycle is larger than the sum of its parts.

Such an accommodating structure allows for a more communal approach to the narrative, and it is here where one can see the short-story cycle as a form well suited for American ethnic writing and the kinds of tensions it generates, the kind of dynamics that we will see at work in both Litman and Bezmozgis. If, as Ingram suggests, the cycle narrative is given form primarily through authorial invention, then we can read the text as an attempt to write (and understand) one’s self into the context of one’s cultural (Jewish or Russian or American) background. And if, as suggested by Dunn and Morris, cohesion among the stories is placed at the feet of the reader, then we can see how the genre functions as an exercise in community building, where the audience is invited to create meaning.

Referring to the genre’s distinguishing features—the self-sufficiency of the individual stories as well as their structured importance—James Nagel argues that “the cycle lends itself to diegetical discontinuities, to the resolutions of a series of conflicts, to the exploration of a variety of characters, to the use of a family or even a community as protagonist, to the exploration of the mores of a region or religion or ethnic group, each story revealing another aspect of the local culture” (15). What is more, the short-story cycle can draw attention to the problematic logic of ethnic representation, wherein unique literary subjects are seen, however unintentionally, as representative or typical figures within that ethnic community. As Noelle Brada-Williams points out, the heteroglossic nature of the form serves as a check against any tendency toward ethnically sanitized or stereotype-affirming representations. The genre can, in her words, “work towards solving the problem of representing an entire community within the necessarily limited confines of a single work by balancing a variety of representations rather than offering the single representation provided by the novel or the individual short story” (452–53). This tension between the individual and the ethnic community—or what Werner Sollors calls relations of consent (i.e., defining the self through individual choice) and those of descent (that is, acting according to familial and communal expectations)—goes to the very design of the short-story cycle, since it underscores the ongoing and interlinked negotiations between self and community.
When applied to the context of contemporary Jewish American fiction, the short-story cycle as a form is particularly revealing: it provides a means through which authors can narrate subjectivity, and do so through an episodic and fragmented, yet highly interconnected, structure. Such a narrative strategy highlights the multifaceted nature of Jewish Americaness and the diverse influences—for example, religious directives, literary inheritance, media influences, cultural legacy, and the demands of the marketplace—under which present-day identity is forged. Put another way, the hybrid nature of the short-story cycle allows Jewish American writers the flexibility to represent their subject from multiple angles within the same text, much the way cubist paintings subvert uniformity of visual perspective, thereby freeing the writers from the restrictions of certain cultural, religious, or literary frameworks that might otherwise limit their narratives. These story cycles may emphasize idiosyncratic negotiations within the individual self, within the family, or within the localized Jewish community, but all of them are concerned with the ways in which history, tradition, and culture inform identity.

Such concerns infuse the texts of both Bezmozgis and Litman. The individual narratives in *Natasha and Other Stories*, in fact, revolve around a young immigrant and his growth out of the shadows of his parents’ Russian past, into the broader North American culture (in this case, Toronto), and then eventually closer to an understanding of his Jewish (and Russian) heritage. As in the early nineteenth-century immigrant narratives of Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, and Ludwig Lewisohn, Bezmozgis’s story collection exposes the tensions that his protagonist and first-person narrator, Mark Berman, experience in negotiating between the world of his parents and the lure of New World assimilation. Indeed, the individual stories of *Natasha* are arranged in such a way that they not only suggest a bildungsroman but, perhaps more significantly, reveal the dynamics involved in ethnic identification.

The collection begins with “Tapka,” the story of Mark as a first grader learning to take care of his neighbors’ Lhasa Apso. At the beginning of the narrative, Bezmozgis establishes the distance between Mark (and his family) and the Russian immigrant community. Except for their dog-loving neighbors, who are also from the land of the czars, “there were no other Russians in the building [where he lives]. For this privilege, my parents paid twenty extra dollars a month in rent” (3). This remoteness is exacerbated by Mark’s Jewish heritage, as he learns all too well in school. In class with the children of other Eastern European immigrants, he finds that when his teacher asks about everyone’s nationality, and then calls on his classmate, Dima, “Dima says ‘Jewish.’ ‘What a shame,’ says the teacher, ‘so young and already a Jew’” (4). His family’s Russian Jewishness, especially given the cause célèbre of refuseniks in the late-1970s, becomes an important signifier in the following story, “Roman Berman, Massage Therapist.”
As his father is trying to establish his business, Mark notes that “as Russian Jews, recent immigrants, and political refugees, we were still a cause. We had good PR. We could trade on our history” (21). And because they are Russian Jews, they are invited to the home of Dr. Harvey Kornblum, a prominent physician in Toronto who makes it a point to help the disadvantaged newcomers. In order to thank their hosts, Mark’s mother makes a fresh apple cake, and this cake is linked not only to the Berman’s Jewish Russian past but also to the changes in their observance under the Soviets, and thus their brand of Jewishness:

Before Stalin, my great-grandmother lit the candles and made an apple cake every Friday night. In my grandfather’s recollections of prewar Jewish Latvia, the candles and apple cakes feature prominently. When my mother was a girl, Stalin was already in charge, and although there was still apple cake, there were no more candles. By the time I was born, there were neither candles nor apple cake, though in my mother’s mind, apple cake still meant Jewish. (30)

After dinner, and after a promise from Dr. Kornblum that he will refer patients to Mark’s father, Mrs. Kornblum returns the cake to his mother, stating that they try to stay kosher at home. Both grateful for the referrals and angered by the Kornblums’ refusal of their gift—and, by association, their family’s specific Jewish Russian history—the Bermans leave their hosts unsure where they figure in their new world. Walking back to their car, Mark contemplates, “Somewhere between Kornblum’s and the Pontiac was our fate. It floated above us like an ether, ambiguous and perceptible” (36). His and his family’s alienation is trifold: they are immigrants in a new land, they are Jews among other Russians, and they are “Russian Jews” in the eyes of the Western Jewish community.

Mark’s ties to his Russian past become more tenuous in the next story in the collection, “The Second Strongest Man.” In it, the Russian weightlifter Sergei Federenko, a champion lifter discovered by Mark’s father back in the Soviet Union, visits Toronto for an international tournament. Throughout the story Mark recalls his idolization of Sergei as a young weight lifter back in Russia, but now, years later, his onetime hero is being nudged out, as if put out to pasture, by a young and upcoming contender and his trainer. Because he was a former trainer in the Soviet Union, Roman Berman is asked to judge the weightlifting competition, and during the event is confronted by a KGB agent who serves as a constant reminder of why he moved his family to Canada. “Don’t ever forget,” Roman tells his young son, “This is why we left. So you never have to know people like him” (52). The waning of Sergei’s influence (as a lifter and as an idol) and the dark reminders of the family’s Soviet past combine in such a way that Russia no longer becomes the defining marker it had once been to his family.
As a result, Russian national identity loses almost all of its resonance in Natasha after “The Second Strongest Man.” The story ends, appropriately, with the ill-defined figure of the KGB agent, whose jaw is badly inflamed due to some dental work he had received while in Toronto. As he watches his father accompany a drunk—and notably ineffectual and tamed—Sergei to a dark sedan after their last evening together, Mark notices that “the light from the car’s interior was sufficient to illuminate [the agent’s] swollen face” (64). It is almost as if the prominence of Russianness is being whisked out of the text, just as Sergei is being taken away by the disfigured KGB agent. What is more, the physical condition of the KGB agent functions as a visual cue, bridging the previous story, and the Roman’s efforts as a physical therapist, and the next narrative, which highlights the physical atrocities against Jews. In other words, Bezmozgis uses the imagery to interweave his stories into more of a cohesive whole.

As the importance of Russianness wanes in Mark's life after “The Second Strongest Man,” the opposite occurs with the ethnic side of his identity. Starting with “An Animal to the Memory,” Jewishness takes on more meaning in Mark’s life. The events in this portion of the novel center around Mark’s time in Hebrew school, an educational imposition placed on him by his mother. “As far as she was concerned,” the narrator reveals, “I wasn’t leaving Hebrew school until I learned what it was to be a Jew” (69). The story begins, significantly enough, with references to Mark’s fights in school, many of them the result of his being seen as a Russian outsider. Whereas in the previous story the protagonist had admired the strength of the weight lifter, here he is presented as “the toughest kid in Hebrew school” (71). His most vivid memory of this period concerns Holocaust Remembrance Day, an annual event where students are confronted with images and stories from the Shoah.

Mark stands by a portrait of Mordecai Anielewicz, the leader of the Warsaw resistance, as the school’s director, Rabbi Gurvich, recites the El Maleh Rachamim. Although he is moved by what he hears—“I felt his voice reach into me, down into that place where my mother said I was supposed to have the thing called my ‘Jewish soul’” (74)—he nonetheless ends up desecrating the event by getting into another fight, again as a result of his outsider status. After the remembrance Rabbi Gurvich takes Mark back down into the basement, where the Holocaust memorial was set up, and accuses him of actions befitting a Nazi. Muttering softly and then repeating the expression until it becomes a shout, Mark utters the words, “I’m a Jew,” in defiance of Gurvich’s accusations. With tears streaming down his face, and shaking as he stands alone amid the paraphernalia of Holocaust Remembrance Day, Mark hears the rabbi remark, “Now, Berman . . . now maybe you understand what it is to be a Jew” (77).

The placement of this story is no accident. It comes in the middle of the collection, and in this way can be read as a pivotal moment in Mark’s development.
It is followed by the book’s title story, an encounter with another young émigré and the protagonist’s seemingly aimless teenage days in his parents’ basement. This is the closest that Mark comes to being unmoored, consumed into the larger Western culture beyond the reach of his family. These are days filled with meaningless sex with Natasha, his newfound and troubled Russian companion, and marijuana highs. Only after Natasha leaves him for his drug-dealing friend does he realize how meaningless his young life has become. Standing outside in his backyard, looking through a window into the basement where he had spent a good part of his teenage days masturbating and getting high, “I saw what Natasha must have seen every time she came to the house. In the full light of summer, I looked into darkness.” Feeling that he had already “crafted a new identity,” he becomes aware of “the end of my subterranean life” (110). This moment, coupled with the previous understanding on Holocaust Day of what it meant to be a Jew, signals a turn in Mark’s life and sets a tone that will define the last two narratives in the collection.

Both “Choynski” and “Minyan” are stories in which Mark’s ethnic heritage comes to the fore. Whereas in the earlier narratives of the cycle his identity was defined against the backdrop of his Russianness—where his Jewishness is a liability, and, more times than not, the context was one of distance, difference, and alienation—in the final parts of the collection Mark enmeshes himself more in his Jewish legacy, both cultural and religious. In the penultimate story, the narrator searches for information surrounding Joe Choynski, “the greatest heavyweight never to win a title” and “America’s first great fighting Jew” (114). The references to boxing link directly, or cycle back, to the previous stories in the collection that foreground fighting and corporality, namely, “Roman Berman, Massage Therapist,” “The Second Strongest Man,” and “An Animal to the Memory.” What is more, Bezmozgis juxtaposes Mark’s investigations into Choynski with vignettes of his grandmother’s failing health. The back-and-forth quality of the narrative draws direct parallels between the famous Jewish boxer and Mark’s own familial past, and in doing so underscores the tenacity of his Jewish heritage which corresponds to the fighter imagery that occurs elsewhere in the text.

The same can be said of the final story, “Minyan,” where Mark recalls the frustrating attempts to find ten men in the synagogue located in his grandfather’s B’nai Brith retirement home. The Orthodox seem perpetually stuck with only eight regular male attendees, and only the presence of Mark and his grandfather (who has just recently been accepted into the home) complete the minyan. Mark’s presence at the services seems unusual at first, but as he reveals to the reader, “Most of the old Jews came because they were drawn by the nostalgia for ancient cadences. I came because I was drawn by the nostalgia for old Jews” (134). Whereas the building’s regular attendees are connected to the more religious or traditional aspects of Judaism, the narrator is motivated by cultural,
and largely humanistic, links to his past. On the one hand, this attitude recalls the emphasis on inherited cultural (as opposed to observant) Jewishness found earlier in the story cycle—the significance of the apple cake in “Roman Berman, Massage Therapist” (30)—yet at the same time it stands in stark contrast to the kind of ethnic ambivalence demonstrated by Mark’s family while growing up. Much as is in the previous story, Mark is drawn to the various and diverse signifiers that defined his Jewish past, for example, the old men, the boxers, the community of Jews. This inclusive message is driven home in the last pages of the text, where the synagogue’s gabbai refuses to turn away one of the home’s residents just because others in the building believe him to be gay: “Homosexuals, murders, liars, and thieves—I take them all. Without them we would never have a minyan” (147). With these final words, Bezmozgis underscores Mark’s (ironic) assimilation into the Jewish community and its ever-increasing significance throughout the text.

Whereas the protagonist of Natasha and Other Stories evolves into a creature of shared culture, in Litman’s The Last Chicken in America, community rests front and center, and from the very beginning the book’s structure suggests an interwoven relationship between the individual and the Russian émigré community that surrounds her, albeit one that is not always wanted or always constructive. The twelve individual stories that compose the text are arranged in an alternating manner, where, for the most part, every other narrative focuses on Masha, the book’s protagonist by default, and each of the remaining six concern the lives of other Jewish Russian émigrés who live in Pittsburgh’s Squirrel Hill neighborhood.8 Not only are all of the stories interlinked through narrative juxtaposition, but they are given a more novelistic cohesion through repetition of allusion. Characters and places that appear in one story, either Masha’s or one of the others, are referenced again in one or more of the narratives that follow. Sometimes a figure briefly mentioned in one story functions as a protagonist in another. In this way, Litman creates what she (or her publisher) calls in the book’s subtitle “A Novel in Stories,” giving the text a broader and more unified quality than even Bezmozgis’s.9 More significantly, by interlinking her twelve stories in this manner—in other words, by creating a cycle narrative—Litman is able not only to relate a classical immigrant bildungsroman (where an individual arrives in America, negotiates the tensions between the Old World and the New, and grows through processes of assimilation and self-assertion) but to emphasize this narrative within a larger communal context. By doing so, the author reveals the heteroglossic and multifaceted interconnectivity underlying the American ethnic experience, or the American experience as a whole, which is analogous to the short-story cycle the reader engages.

Taken entirely on their own, the six stories that make up Masha’s narrative, while not as revealing as those of Bezmozgis, are nonetheless components
of an immigrant bildungsroman where we see a young individual and his or her family struggle, develop, and accomplish over time. In the first story, “The Last Chicken in America,” Masha is a high school student who, along with her parents, has just recently arrived in Pittsburgh, having emigrated from Moscow. By the last installment of the book, both appropriately and ironically entitled “Home,” she has moved away to Boston, attends Harvard as a graduate student in Slavic languages and literature, and, at least on the surface, has escaped the stifling insularity she so closely associates with the Squirrel Hill émigré community. While the other four Masha stories provide glimpses of the protagonist at various times over the intervening years—in “Charity” she is a quasi-nanny for an upper-middle-class Jewish family; in “Russian Club” she becomes a member of her high school’s Russian club with its visiting professor from her homeland; in “Peculiarities of the National Driving” she learns how to drive, having to navigate the roads while at the same time negotiating their family’s economic concerns; and in “Among the Lilacs and the Girls,” now a student at the University of Pittsburgh, she and her father contend with her mother’s debilitating depression—it is the two framing stories that give the collection much of its cohesion. Inextricably linked in a variety of ways, they function as an essential framing device guiding the course of the text. Both stories introduce (or reintroduce) many of the characters who populate the various stories, both provide the themes that largely define the collection, and both establish the ambiguous tone surrounding the contemporary immigrant experience in America.

One of the ways that Litman interconnects “The Last Chicken in America” and “Home” is by setting them within a similar milieu. Both take place with essentially the same Squirrel Hill émigré characters that define Masha’s early life in America. Both of the Donetsk twins, flighty figures for whom Masha has little patience, play prominent roles in the two stories, as does Lariska, Masha’s closest female friend. Furthermore, Lariska’s relationship with Zhenechka effectively frames the text. In the first story, Lariska fantasizes about marrying him—“She is in love with an ‘old-timer,’ a mysterious distant cousin, Zhenechka” (14)—and the final story revolves around their impending marriage. Indeed, the topic of romantic relationships largely defines each story. Whereas “Home” is about the marriage of Lariska and Zhenechka, the title story concerns Masha’s problematic relationship with Alick, another Russian émigré but one with more of the American experience under his belt. Both stories also directly establish the difficult place of Masha in relation to her community. In the first story, Masha admits to the reader, “I hate being in the middle” (17), and in the final narrative she broods over her situation vis-à-vis America. Not feeling entirely comfortable being back in Squirrel Hill, among all of her old Russian friends and neighbors, she nonetheless is uncertain about her inherited home: “I watched CNN, I ate out, I read
American books. I’d quit my job and gone back to school, which was something most Americans admired. But I lacked their boldness and fluency, their flippant resistance to gloom. My father said I’d never be quite like them” (229).

More importantly, both the first and last stories establish a theme that largely guides the narrative: the benefits and (especially) the costs of immigration. The title of the first, “The Last Chicken in America,” is itself a reference to the New World as a land of abundance. A significant portion of the action in this story takes place in the Giant Eagle supermarket—indeed, this is where Masha meets Alick in the opening paragraphs—and Masha’s mother, while unable to shake off her Russian sense of scarcity and caution, spends much of her time among the plenitude. As Masha relates:

We stand shivering in the meat and frozen-food section.
“Are you done yet?” says my father.
My mother idles, turns over the packages of frozen chicken, picks up one, then another, then both.
“Slow down, Lina. It’s not the last chicken in America.”
“I know what I’m doing,” says my mother. “Today it’s ninety-nine cents a pound, tomorrow it will be twice as much.”
“We’ve been here for an hour, Lina. Enough already.”
“You two can wait for me outside,” says my mother. “I’ll manage without your help.”
“Bitch,” he says, and storms out of the store. (29)

While on the one hand the supermarket, an icon of American consumer culture, provides comfort and a sense of security, at the same time it causes conflict and ruptures established family norms.

We can see this clearly as we follow the trajectory of Masha’s family over the course of the book, especially in the plight of her mother. There are several hints throughout the Masha stories that something is not right with Lina—for example, in the first story she cries right in the middle of the street (17), and in “Peculiarities of the National Driving” Lina “can’t drive because of her migraines and overall nervousness” (129)—but her condition is made explicit in “Among the Lilacs and the Girls.” In it Masha and her father, Tolik, grapple with the depression that seems to be consuming the mother, along with the number of times her condition ends up with hospitalization. They cannot account for this change in Lina—her borscht, once a staple of their former lives, now has “no taste” (167)—although Tolik reminisces that things had been better back in Moscow, where his wife was a much revered teacher, quite the contrast to her current workaday existence in Pittsburgh. This condition seems to abate by the end of the book, in “Home,” where Lina appears to be once again the
supermarket-loving mother we found at the beginning of the collection—when Masha returns for a visit, Lina insists on taking her shopping—still another example of the ways in which Litman interlinks, or cycles back to, previous elements within her text. Yet whether in reference to the argument in the Giant Eagle supermarket or to the more serious depression that debilitates her, the notion that we carry away from *The Last Chicken in America* is that something has broken Lina.

Indeed, this sense of brokenness permeates the entire collection, and it is yet another way in which Litman has tightly woven her twelve individual stories so as to create a larger, more unified narrative canvas. Again, it is the title story that first establishes this major theme, as Masha speculates on the female competitiveness in her English language class: “This is what’s wrong with immigration. Those who could be your friends at home here become cautious competitors. Parents envy their children. Sisters become dangerous—all that private information they can unleash at a strategically chosen moment. It’s about surviving. Immigration distorts people. We walk around distorted” (19). In “What Do You Dream of, Cruiser *Aurora*?,” the second story in the collection and one that presents the lives of other Squirrel Hill émigrés, Liberman, a recent transplant from Leningrad, hangs above his bed “a broken barometer, its needle now always stuck on *storm*” (38). In “Charity,” Masha works for an upwardly mobile Jewish middle-class family—in some ways, reminiscent of the Potemkins in Philip Roth’s “Goodbye, Columbus”—whose wife, Pam, cannot admit the brokenness of her marriage. At one point, Masha feels the emptiness and futility of the family’s life. After a school pageant as she, Pam, and Pam’s children wait for the absent father (one, we later learn, who is late either because of all-consuming work or because of a mistress), Masha notices the young boy spinning aimlessly in place: “No one paid attention to him. His eyes were closed. It was the loneliest thing you’d see, this blind endless twirling, over and over” (69).

In one of the other stories surrounding the Squirrel Hill community, “In the Man-Free Zone,” Natasha speculates on how she used to be a devoted mother and wife when she first arrived in Pittsburgh but over the years has divorced and become a lukewarm caregiver (79). She also tells her friend, Dinka (who is also the daughter of Liberman from “What Do You Dream of, Cruiser *Aurora*?”), that the men in their lives are “dispirited. Damaged by the immigration” (82). Similarly, in “About Kamyshinskii,” yet another story involving various Russian émigrés, Olya, who is battling cancer, comments to her husband on the broken relationships of their friends: “What is America doing to us, Seryozha?,” to which he replies, “It’s not America. It’s them [the Russian men]. America just gave them space” (213). One of those ruptured marriages involves the Kogans, a couple whom Tolik, ironically enough, envies for their closeness. In “Among the Lilacs and the Girls,” which precedes “About Kamyshinskii,”
Tolik thinks to himself as he watches Kostya and Marina Kogan arm in arm, “Why can’t we be normal like this?” (164). For Masha, her family, and the rest of the Russian community of Squirrel Hill, America may have its promises, but its bounty often comes with a cost.

In this way, The Last Chicken in America emanates a more cautionary tone than Bezmozgis’s Natasha, recalling several other early twentieth-century Jewish American immigrant narratives in which assimilation had its drawbacks. One is reminded of the uncertainty and regret underlying Ludwig Lewisohn’s The Island Within (1928) or the somber closing words of Abraham Cahan’s The Rise of David Levinsky (1917): “My past and my present do not comport well” (530). And yet, while Litman’s immigrant cycle does underscore the brokenness and distortions brought about through immigration, there is nonetheless a sense that life in the “Old World” was not much better. In several of the stories Masha or one of the other Squirrel Hill residents alludes to the hardships in Russia, especially for Jews. In “Charity,” Masha responds to Pam’s comments about what it means to be a Jew, “I wanted to tell them I knew what it meant. It meant classmates calling you names. It meant a line in your passport, schools that would never accept you, jobs you couldn’t have. It meant leaflets and threats and a general on TV promising pogroms in May. It meant immigration” (68).

This ambiguous attitude toward life in America is given an added twist in the story “Russian Club.” Here, Masha meets Victor Harlamo, a visiting professor of philology from Moscow State University and a scholar totally immersed in the silver age of Russian poetry. He calls the United States a “soulless society” (105) and claims that national poetry cannot exist outside of Russia: “For a true Russian person, immigration is death. A Russian poet can’t survive in immigration” (106). Yet, while Victor criticizes America as a detriment to the soul, he ironically romanticizes the problematic and self-destructive nature of Russian society. As he tells Masha, he longs for “Russian brokenness,” a state of being he does not find in America: “We’re sensitive, foolish, illogical. We live in a state of turmoil, on the brink of being destroyed, steps away from the next drunken bout” (95). And indeed, there is an illogicalness in Victor’s thinking when placed within the context of Litman’s text. What he describes as “broken” is similar to what Masha and the other émigrés of Squirrel Hill have called “damaged” or “distorted.” So which is it? Does brokenness and distortion reside in the homeland, or is it solely the result of immigration? Litman never entirely answers that question, but her problematizing of the issue creates an effective tension that carries the narrative.

We see this again in the final story in the collection, when Masha returns home to attend the wedding of Lariska. Throughout “Home,” Masha’s father continuously questions her choice to leave Pittsburgh and attend Harvard,
accusing her of being ashamed of her own Russian community and of only being able to “embrace” them through the safe distance of her Slavic language studies. For her, leaving home was a way of escaping stasis and sterility:

Squirrel Hill never really changed. New signboards here and there. A couple of new Russian stores. Young people got married, old people got hearing aids. Every once in a while, someone’s teenager would do something extravagant, like get busted for drugs, or join the Peace Corps. Otherwise, it all remained the same: my mother’s eggplant recipe, house renovations, New Year’s parties. The safest career in Squirrel Hill was still in computer programming. The only way to change was to escape. (222–23)

Yet, while appearing to critique the limitations of the Squirrel Hill immigrant experience, Litman nonetheless holds out for a more generous reading. During Lariska’s wedding, as she looks around at the commotion of reception, she notices that her family and former classmates have indeed changed. In the final paragraphs of the book Masha notes the many figures who populated her adolescence—and as one might expect in a short-story cycle, these are many of the characters who make up the book’s twelve stories—including Lariska and her philandering husband, Zhenechka, and thinks to herself, “Maybe not everything was a mistake. Maybe we had learned something, and next time we’d do a little better, if only we give it a chance. Lariska and Zhenechka were dancing. . . . Mismatched like the rest of us. More beautiful than anything. And I had no words to describe them” (234). These closing thoughts reveal the ambiguity underlying Litman’s text, one that holds out for promise in America—as we find at the end of both “The Last Chicken in America” and “Home,” still another way these framing stories are connected—while at the same time demonstrating many of the resulting distortions and damages (many of which are illustrated in the inner ten narratives). In this way, Litman uses her story cycle to provide a true heteroglossic take on the contemporary immigrant experience.

Both Ellen Litman and David Bezmozgis in their first works of fiction use the short-story cycle form to reveal the dynamics underlying the Jewish Russian immigrant subject. Each presenting the larger narrative in a slightly different manner—Bezmozgis’s emphasis is more on the Jewish individual coming into his own, while Litman privileges the turmoil surrounding the expatriated Russian community—but both accomplish this through a hybrid genre that balances both singularity and the collective. The multifaceted and unified nature of both Natasha and Other Stories and The Last Chicken in America provide a broader communal perspective than one might find in a traditional novel, where the emphasis usually rests on one or two individuals, or in a simple collection of disparate stories. While the many figures in these two books may
live very different lives or define themselves in widely divergent ways, they all nonetheless share a rough inheritance, both national as well as ethnic. Each of the stories in these texts could stand on its own, but when brought within the context of each collection’s whole they reveal a larger portrait, one that in many ways is analogous to the relatively recent Russian Jewish immigrant experience in America. It is not just a singular experience but one that is shared out of necessity. When reading these two cycle narratives, the medium indeed becomes the message.

NOTES


3. As notable as this phenomenon may be, I do not want to suggest that the story-cycle form in Jewish writing is unique to recent works. Far from it. The genre was employed by earlier generations of Jewish American authors, as we see in Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives* (1909); Anzia Yezierska’s *Hungry Hearts* (1920); Leo Rosten’s *The Education of H*y*m*a*n K*a*p*l*a*n* (1937); Bernard Malamud’s *Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition* (1969); Cynthia Ozick’s *Levitations: Five Fictions* (1982) and *The Puttermesser Papers* (1997); E. L. Doctorow’s *Lives of the Poets: Six Stories and a Novella* (1984); and Stanley Elkin’s *Van Gogh’s Room at Arles* (1993). However, when compared to these earlier instances, the frequency and near predominance of the genre in contemporary writing is quite striking.
4. See Sanford Pinsker and Andrew Furman. Pinsker has cited recent Russian writing—stating, “The Russian (Jews) Are Coming!”—as one of the distinguishing manifestations of twenty-first-century Jewish American literature, and Furman has called this phenomenon the “Russification” of Jewish American fiction.

5. Another recent Russian Jewish author, Lara Vapnyar, has also worked in the short-story form. In fact, two of her three books—There Are Jews in My House (2003) and Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love (2008)—are story collections. However, unlike those of Litman and Bezmozgis, the stories in Vapnyar’s texts lack any organizational cohesion and thus would not qualify as composing a short-story cycle. Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love comes closest to this generic form, in that each of the stories has something to do with food (and there is a “Roundup of Recipes” section at the end of the book that provides details on the various dishes described in the stories). However, this is a very loose form of thematic link, where none of the stories gain fuller meaning within the context of the others, and as such, we can best read Vapnyar’s book as a more traditional collection of disconnected stories.

6. Although most critics of this generic hybrid—for example, Forrest L. Ingram, Susan Garland Mann, and James Nagel—use “short-story cycle” as a descriptive tag, others prefer terms that foreground particular aspects of the fictional form. Both J. Gerald Kennedy and Robert M. Luscher favor “short story sequence,” in that it emphasizes the stories’ successional relationship over any narrative recurrence. On the other hand, Maggie Dunn and Anne Morris prefer the term “composite novel,” thereby stressing the form’s more novelistic characteristics (including cohesion of plot and development of character).

7. Nagel goes on to point out that the short-story cycle appears to have been the genre of choice for emerging ethnic American writers throughout the 1980s and 1990s (17). Works such as Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine (1984); Jamaica Kincaid’s Annie John (1985); Frank Chin’s The Chinaman Pacific & Frisco R.R. Co. (1988); Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club (1989); Julia Alvarez’s How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents (1991); Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street (1991); and Sherman Alexi’s The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1993) utilize the form in ways that foreground the multi-voicedness within particular ethnic communities. The same could be said of Jewish American writing during this same period, and even into the twenty-first century. In fact, and as I argue in this essay, one of the distinguishing characteristics of Jewish American texts over the past thirty years has been the widespread employment of the short-story cycle form.

8. The stories are not entirely arranged in this alternating manner. Although she is not the focus of all twelve stories, for all practical purposes Masha is the book’s protagonist, her story taking up more of the text than any other as well as serving as the book’s figural frame. And since, therefore, it would be appropriate and necessary to have her both open and close the collection, Litman needed to juxtapose two stories not centered around Masha.

9. The book’s subtitle, in fact, raises the question of genre. In the strictest sense, The Last Chicken in America is not really a novel. While all of the stories are interconnected in one way or another, there is not the unity or consistency that you would
find in the traditional novel, where there is a more tightly woven narrative. What is more, each of the stories in this collection could easily stand alone, such as in a reader or an anthology, much like those of Bezmozgis’s, and as such the book bears more of the stamp of a story cycle. Litman’s text has more in common with Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* or Jean Toomer’s *Cane* than it does *The Sun Also Rises* or *Tender Is the Night*. However, in the case of Litman’s work, perhaps Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris’s preferred term, “composite novel,” would be a more appropriate designation.

10. Given the fact that there are fewer stories surrounding Masha than there are in *Natasha* about Mark, this relative lack of comprehensiveness is understandable. The latter receives proportionately more narrative attention, and as a result the growth we see seems smoother, more complete than that of Masha’s. What is more, Masha’s story covers a significantly shorter temporal sweep than we find in *Natasha*. However, even in Bezmozgis’s text there are gaps that may bother the reader. For example, the social and psychological shifts between the stories “Natasha” and “Choynski” are larger and more ambiguous than those between the other tales, leaving one to wonder how certain changes in character or circumstances might be accounted for.

11. “Among the Lilacs and the Girls” is the only Masha story that is not presented in the first person. In fact, although Masha appears in the story in significant ways, the narrative more directly concerns her parents, Tolik and Lina, and the latter’s struggles with depression. As such, this story stands out as an anomaly within the six Masha narratives, although it functions as an alternative perspective to her life. This, in many ways, contributes to the multifaceted and heteroglossic nature of the text as a story cycle.

12. It is curious to note how Litman chooses to end her book with a marriage, a classic narrative trope. However, and as I argue below, the book’s ending is much more ambiguous than it is happy or affirming. After all, Lariska’s marriage to Zhenechka seems doomed from the beginning, in that she cannot seem to break him of his habits of promiscuity. As Lariska herself admits to Masha, “If it’s not good in the beginning, it will never get better” (27).

13. In stark contrast to Bezmozgis’s *Natasha*, most of the stories in *The Last Chicken in America* do not focus on Jewishness but instead tend to emphasize the Russian side of the immigrant experience. The two stories in which Masha’s ethnic background does become more of an issue are “Charity” and “Russian Class.”

WORKS CITED


