



# The Free World

*David Bezmozgis*

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A *New York Times* Notable Book for 2011

A *Globe and Mail* Best Books of the Year 2011 Title

Summer, 1978. Brezhnev sits like a stone in the Kremlin, Israel and Egypt are inching towards peace, and in the bustling, polyglot streets of Rome, strange new creatures have appeared: Soviet Jews who have escaped to freedom through a crack in the Iron Curtain. Among the thousands who have landed in Italy to secure visas for new lives in the West are the members of the Krasnansky family — three generations of Russian Jews.

There is Samuil, an old Communist and Red Army veteran, who reluctantly leaves the country to which he has dedicated himself body and soul; Karl, his elder son, a man eager to embrace the opportunities emigration affords; Alec, his younger son, a carefree playboy for whom life has always been a game; and Polina, Alec's new wife, who has risked the most by breaking with her old family to join this new one. Together, they will spend six months in Rome — their way station and purgatory. They will immerse themselves in the carnival of emigration, in an Italy rife with love affairs and ruthless hustles, with dislocation and nostalgia, with the promise and peril of a new life. Through the unforgettable Krasnansky family, David Bezmozgis has created an intimate portrait of a tumultuous era.

Written in precise, musical prose, *The Free World* is a stunning debut novel, a heartfelt multigenerational saga of great historical scope and even greater human depth. Enlarging on the themes of aspiration and exile that infused his critically acclaimed first collection, *Natasha and Other Stories*, *The Free World* establishes Bezmozgis as one of our most mature and accomplished storytellers.

## The Free World Details

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## From Reader Review The Free World for online ebook

### Chrissie says

NO SPOILERS!

How many people do you know are real heroes? I bet not that many. So why do I want a book to have at least one or two characters that I admire? Well, the book gets kind of depressing otherwise. Why bother reading, all I have to do is turn on the television or look out my window to see the ordinary.

In the beginning I was very much enjoying the humor, then I got tired of and annoyed at the characters. I didn't learn really any history from this book either. I did learn one thing, how life of many struggling emigrés in the 70s, fleeing the East to freedom in the West presented itself. I found it a depressing picture, although I do believe it to be accurate. I was struggling to keep reading when things kept going down and down and down. Then at the end I realized these characters did very special things. They were not as creepy as I had thought them to be. And I thought, maybe this is really how people are. Often the kindness one human being shows another isn't blatant, the kindness is to be found in little things that are not broadcasted out loud. I actually found I liked the book. On the other hand I was struggling through the majority of it. How do I give stars to such a book? This book proves that one should not give up on a book too soon. Sticking with a book can be rewarding. I will give this book two stars. Quite simply, the book as a whole was OK. I am restrictive with my stars. They express my emotions. As you see, this book has worthy elements, but still I only give two stars because "this book was OK" expresses how I feel toward it.

The situation of such émigrés is worth delving into. Read this (found 80 %) through the novel:

*He tried to envision different scenarios and how he might best behave in each. But no matter how hard he tried to focus, his thoughts became diffuse and drifted apart. It was impossible to plan without a clear objective, and he didn't have one. He didn't know what outcome he wanted.*

These émigrés were without money, without a home, many separated from their friends and family, lost both emotionally and physically. I felt this paragraph really summed up the problem in just a few words. Many had no direction. And what was the freedom they were looking for? To discuss this would be to give a spoiler.

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Having now read 50%, I find I am having some trouble with the book. There are flashbacks to the 1940s and Latvia. I like learning history, but sometimes I feel totally lost. Political events are not clearly explained. I do not recognize the names of many political figures. They are thrown out at me and then dropped. The same happens with other family acquaintances. Maybe the problem is more my inability to accept not understanding every line. I do understand where the book is going. Maybe that should be enough?

Alec's behavior can get a bit annoying. The humor is still present, but not as strong.

This is a quick update. I am certainly not so frustrated to motivate my dishing the book.

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Now I have read 19%. I still enjoy this tremendously. Do you like this kind of humor?

*-Do you speak English? the woman asked.*

*-A little, Alec said.*

*-And your wife?*

*-No.*

*-Well, perhaps we can be of help. The woman beamed, handing Alec a pamphlet. I am with an organization offering services. Free English classes and assistance with immigration processing, for example.-What is your organization?*

*-We are with the Baptist Church.*

*-What is she saying? Polina asked.*

*-Jesus Christ wants to solve all our problems.*

*-That's a relief. (19%)*

This kind of humor may not appeal to everybody, but me, I am laughing. Alec is a "mart alec". Perfect name!

\*\*\*\*\*

I have not read much, only 10%! Sorry, there are no page notations in this Amazon ebook. What I immediately like is that each individual is characterized by showing you how they behave, what they laugh at, how they respond to each other. The reader is not told, but shown so they can judge the personalities of the main characters.

The book is about a family of eight. They are Latvian Jews escaping from behind the Iron Curtain to freedom. Or so they hope. What will they pay for this freedom? How will each one react? It is the 1970s, I think.... The family consists of a mother and father (Emma and Samuil) and their two sons (the older is Karl and the younger is Alec). Both are married. Karl to Rosa and Alex to Polina. Karl and Rosa have two sons - Yury and Zhenya. they are seven and five respectively. All I know is that they have arrived from Vienna and are now outside Rome in housing for such emigrés.

What draws me immediately are the lines that depict the different characters. Try this:

*Alec stood beside his brother and directed his flashlight at the wall immediately above Karl's left shoulder. The wall, a grimy off-white, diffused just enough light to illuminate the side of Karl's face. Karl's expression suggested that he was not at all seduced by the anarchic, carnival atmosphere in the hotel. His mind operated on another plane. Alec would see a circus and want to join; Karl, meanwhile, would estimate the cost of feeding the elephants and conjecture that the acrobats suffered from venereal disease. (10% of the novel)*

The housing provided is dirty, cramped and there is really no food. There are power cuts. They have just arrived so let's give them a chance to sort things out. For some it is a carnival atmosphere! For others it is just dirty and horrible. And the kids are racing around having fun.

Here follows a quip from Samuil when he is traveling on a **very hot** bus:

*Samuil and Emma settled for a pair of seats near the back. Once they were on the road it became evident that the bus lacked proper ventilation. For relief Samuil slid his window open but encountered resistance from the woman behind him.*

*-I have a young child, sir, do you want her to catch pneumonia?*

*-We're elderly people, you'd prefer we suffocate?*

*-Citizens, let's be civilized, another voice chimed in.*

*-We could exchange seats, Emma suggested.*

*-And wake my child? the woman said.*

*-If your screeching hasn't woken her, moving won't either, Samuil said. (8% of the novel)*

Samuil is use to his own chauffeur. He is use to being the family head, the one to dictate every move of the family. You learn about Samuil; you learn about Emma when you read these lines. And I felt the heat and discomfort in the bus. I laughed at the lines: Samuil "encountered reisitance from the woman behind him". I like the whole dialogue.

The reader has already met Alec too. The first thing he does in the train station while his brother is busy unloading /loading baggage is to eye some young girls and imagine himself talking with them. The reader has his number immediately.

So far, this is fun.

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## **LindaJ^ says**

The book starts as the Krasnansky family leaves Vienna for Rome. It is 1978 and they are among the Soviet Jews given permission to leave the Soviet Union. Their journey started in Riga (when Latvia was part of the Soviet Union). They are being aided by a Jewish organization that is assisting the Jews allowed to leave with getting permission to resettle in such countries as Israel, Australia, Canada, and the United States. The top news story concerns the Egyptian - Israeli peace treaty.

The patriarch is Samuil, married to Emma. Samuil is a Communist who fought in the Red Army and received many medals. Emma is Samuil's wife. Karl is Samuil's oldest son and the instigator of the decision to leave the Soviet Union. He is married to Rosa and has two young sons. Alec is Samuil's younger son. He is married to Polina. The family decides to emigrate to Canada, but Samuil fails the physical so the family is stuck in Rome while Samuil appeals his denial of entry to Canada. Josef Roidman is also trying to emigrate but he lost a leg while fighting with the Red Army and has yet to be approved to resettle. Lyova emigrated from the Soviet Union to Israel but has become disillusioned and is seeking to emigrate to the United States.

The story is told through the eyes of Samuil, Alec, and Polina. It is a story of how they pass the time in Rome and also about events of the past. The reader learns about Samuil's brother and cousin, Polina's first husband and sister, and how Alec and Polina met and why they married.

The tale is well told. We characters are nicely developed through the daily activities and remembrances. The characters fell like real people who make good and bad decisions. I did not always like them but they are recognizable.

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## **Karo says**

Seven years ago, I bought a plane ticket to somewhere new, packed 20 kilos of clothes and a laptop, and left the country. Just like that, I became an immigrant, met another one, and now our children are first-generation Brits (even though none of their multiple passports are British ones just yet). What makes for a good story to tell your grandchildren was really just a mix of boredom with the motherland and ample opportunities for EU citizens to live, work and produce offspring wherever they like. We take the children to see their grandparents several times a year, and the two-hour direct flight home must seem like a joke to most

Americans, who would probably not even make it halfway through their state in that time.

In *The Free World*, David Bezmozgis' novel of Soviet emigrants stuck in transit in the late 1970s, emigration is a whole different kettle of fish. For the Krasnansky family and the thousand more Soviet Jews, it means leaving your family behind forever, not knowing where you're going to end up or which of your possessions to hang on to. After the strains of the journey out of the Soviet Union, their sponsor in the US lets them down, and they are stranded in Rome, at the mercy of the American and Canadian embassies and Jewish aid organisations. While brothers Alec and Karl, the middle-aged driving forces behind their family's journey, make the best of their enforced stay in Italy, finding work and making friends, their parents and wives seem less adaptable. Soon, the novel's plot takes on several more layers, in which the reader pieces together the stories of Alec's quiet wife Polina and his father Samuil. His past paints a bleak picture of Jewish life in the 20th century. After witnessing his father's assassination in rural Ukraine, Samuil flees to Latvia with his mother and brother. There, the two boys quickly turn to Communism, which eventually helps them survive when other family members are killed. Samuil stays a Communist and struggles with his sons' decision to leave the Soviet Union with the help of Zionist organisations. Bezmozgis' writing depicts the horrors of the repeated pogroms that frame Samuil's life in very short, matter-of-fact descriptions. It is left to the reader to visualise the realities of Jewish life in the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the author supplies a counterbalance in several minor characters who paint an equally depressing picture of Zionism and Israel. Without having to delve into politics, the reader realises that as with most things in life, there are two sides to every story, and lots and lots of shades of grey. While the novel could serve as a starting point for lengthy discussions about Zionism and Jewish history, it doesn't have to. For the purpose of the story, it provides just enough information.

*The Free World* is Bezmozgis' first novel, and even without knowing that the author's own life is mirrored in the storyline, it feels like a story that carries a lot of history and personal importance. It doesn't aspire to become one of the big European family sagas and deliberately spans a short amount of time, with the underlying histories slowly coming together chapter by chapter. The ending seems hurried and strangely open, but then again that's just what the Krasnansky's Italian intermezzo is.

I don't think people were meant to live like this, Polina said.

Like what? Alec asked [...]

To form attachments only to have them broken.

For me, the transition from one life to another has been neat, and in almost all respects I've managed to gain rather than lose. It's sobering to be reminded that I've been one of the lucky ones.

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## janet says

There are some really great moments in this book, some of them laugh out loud funny or incredibly quirky, and I really like that it doesn't simply anything, but it just didn't hold together as a cohesive text for me. Part of my lack of enthusiasm for it might have been due to the fact that I had just read arguably Dickens' and Hemingway's best books. Having said that, I would read his next book to see where he goes from here as an artist.

Samuel's story was very engaging and the fact that he adhered to communism as a philosophy and was critical of Israel's policies is both realistic and not what one expects from a story about Latvian Jewish emigres based on the dominant discourse of the cold war. If the story had just been told through his eyes, it would have not been what the author intended, but would have held together. The incidental and undeveloped characters are much more colorful and likable than the couple that he has tell the rest of the story. Alec is completely banal and Polina could be interesting, but I just don't see that her actions are consistent with how her personality is portrayed. It seems like she is being described as Alec understands her and he isn't really capable of understanding her.

When authors try to represent the inner thinking of their characters, I usually favor 1st person narratives, and the reason is well demonstrated in this book. Though each character that tells his or her story is meant to be original, they didn't really have distinctive voices, which ironically causes the transitions between sections to be more jarring. What I mean is that if we enter into the voice of Samuel. for example, and then go to Alec with his own voice, I can accept this shift. On the other hand, if it is all the same voice and such a big switch is made between stories, I find it really jarring. Underlying this is the fact that he really was telling at least 3 different stories in one novel that didn't really adhere.

One thing he did get right is the lack of a sense of place and time for these people in limbo. Interestingly, this is sometimes how I feel moving from country to country every few years. It isn't all bad -there is a certain amount of freedom and excitement in this situation, especially if you have chosen it. This is a definite subtext of this work, which is praiseworthy.

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### **Alla says**

Endearing at times because this is the same way all Russian immigrants came before the early 90s including my family. It gets three stars for the little bit of nostalgic/childhood memory that it brings back and because it's such an easy read. As far as immigrant experience accounts go, this is one of the weaker ones and feels a little bit superficial. It gives off the impression of being an unfinished work, like an outline to build on. There were a lot of times when he would describe an experience, and I know how it was because I lived through it, but for someone who hasn't, he fails to really convey the full depth of the experience.

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### **Mam says**

This is an interesting novel of emigration, specifically Soviet Jews, who are allowed to exit Russia during a thaw. The author writes well, especially when describing the world of immigrants in Italy. He shows their confusions and adjustments through one multigenerational family which lets the reader feel the experience more deeply.

I think what's most surprising is to move through the familiar setting of Rome from a different perspective. The traffic, the markets, the monuments: all feel different when a displaced emigrant moves through them. And move through is important because the emigrants are all waiting to move on to a country that will accept them as permanent residents.

Bezmozgis shows well the limits and opportunities of the desired countries, with a lot of thought given to Israel.

One surprising note in the story was that the Vatican, and the election of Popes, are of great interest to the family. This is the second novel of loss and change I read recently, that draws on Vatican activity as consolation or interest. (The other, Please Look after Mom, is set in Korea). Maybe in both, there is a kind of magical thinking that still supports an idea of a powerful Catholic Church. Maybe it's more, "When in Rome.."

The novel ends as the family begins its next stage of emigration.

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### **Stephanie \*Very Stable Genius\* says**

I'm not putting any stars up on this book; I don't think it's fair since I could not go on with it. I listened to most of the audio book before I lost the will to live. I decided to give up with 3 hours left because life is short and there are so many good books out there.....but I tried, I really did.

I was so bored with this. It's about some people, not sure who was who, emigrating from the Soviet Union to the U.S. and Canada via Rome. It was so mundane.

It went something like this.....

Boris: Paulina, did you find an apartment?

Paulina: No

Boris: Why not?

Paulina: It was too hard. But I did go to the store and buy apples.

Boris: But you know I like pears better than apples.

Paulina: I know but pears are out of season.

Boris: Oh, why didn't you say that you stupid women.

I wanted to scream. I'm sure that there are people out there who just loved this book; you may be one of them.....sorry. I may be defective.

Life is too short to read boring books.

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## **Patrick McCoy says**

David Bezmozgis' latest novel *The Free World* is a finely crafted story about a Latvian family that is attempting to emigrate to a western country in 1978, but must first get accepted by a country while they wait in a kind of purgatory in Rome. The family is made up of the patriarch and matriarch and their two sons and their families. Both sons are married, but one has two children and the other is a newly wed. On the surface it doesn't seem as though much happens in the novel, but there are two big events that occur near the end of the book that suggest that life for all of them will never be the same nor what they thought it would be once they've reached the free world aka the west. It seems as though Bezmozgis has done his research due to the realistic details surrounding their departure from the Soviet Union and their wait in Rome. He casually makes references to events that were taking place at that time. I was a fan of his first collection of short stories, *Natasha and Other Stories*, and here he has shown that he can take a story and can draw it out into a compelling novel. I also look forward to his future efforts as well.

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## **Beverly says**

I so wanted to like this book, but I had to give up on it due to boredom. I had the same problem with Bezmozgis' previous book, a series of linked stories. There is a dryness to this author's writing that is astounding. What could be more fascinating than immigrant stories? Instead Bezmozgis presents a dry, sordid world of discomfort - probably true as far as it goes- but it doesn't go far enough. At least in the part I read.

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### **Jayne Charles says**

The summary on the back cover led to me to suppose this was a lighter read than it was. Intelligent and insightful, I found it quite a harrowing read, delving into the past lives of its characters, Soviet refugees looking to start a new life in the West. As the story begins they have arrived in Rome, that city intended as a brief stopover as they make their way to America. However events get in the way of their plans and they find themselves stuck in Italy for the foreseeable. As they find homes and work in Rome, the novel examines their lives in Latvia before and during Communism.

I wished I could remember more of my A-level history, as I sometimes struggled to comprehend the different political forces at work in 20th Century Latvia. Add Zionism to the mix and you have a complex weaving of ideologies; it is perhaps not surprising that members of the same family found themselves at times on opposing sides of the struggle.

Always beautifully written and rich in detail, this is a book to take your time over and provides much food for thought.

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### **Jennifer says**

Absolutely one of the best books I've read in a long time, with all the right ingredients: a story about a time and a place and a people I knew nothing about (Jewish Russian emigrants waiting in Rome in 1978 for a country to accept them); a lack of romanticism or sentimentality; and writing that never hit a wrong note. Pepper that with a feckless hero and the author's wry sense of humor, and you've got a great read.

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### **Trish says**

An intimate portrait of transition, of relationships breaking and strengthening, of family reaching to protect and love. Bezmozgis is an extremely talented writer and this book was an absolute pleasure to read.

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### **David says**

I ended up really getting into this one. I don't think it was the subject matter particularly as much as it was the humanness of the characters that Bezmozgis manages to capture and convey. The prose is thick and full of digression, but it moves forward really well despite that. It just is the sort of writing that feels really good to read and plugs you right into the fallible but human parts of the characters.

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### **Jill says**

Sometimes freedom is another word for nothing left to lose but often, it's the act of rediscovering what it means to truly be free. The Krasnanskys – a family of Latvian Jews– have chosen to give up a complex and familiar past to strike out for an uncertain future and, like other Soviet immigrants, must spend months in

Rome waiting to secure their visas. At the book's opening, they are in limbo: abandoned by their sponsor, waiting to break free from bureaucratic red tape so they can continue their journey to the United States or Canada.

Tethered by their past, the uncertainty of their future, and their complicated bonds to each other, they are anything but free. Samuil, the patriarch, is a doctrinaire Communist, a Red Army decorated war hero, who witnessed the murder of his father by the White Army and who cares little where his family winds up. He and his wife Emma are there with two sons: Karl, a born capitalist and pragmatist who in many ways repudiates his father's philosophies and Alec, the somewhat clueless and womanizing younger brother who travels with his new wife, Polina, who left her first husband and her beloved sister for him.

This could be played for madcap comedy and it could be played for dry dissertation, but Mr. Bezmozgis finds a middle ground. Little by little, the back story of each of these characters is revealed: Samuil's initiation and disenchantment with the Red Guards (He muses, "The race was never lost or won. All that happened was that, in the interim, men died. The trick was to die at the right moment, consoled by the perception of victory.") Polina's former marriage and the own compromises she had to make, in breaking with her own family to join this new one, and so on.

There are beautifully-rendered scenes, such as when Alec assumes his caseworker is making a play for him and leading him to her apartment; instead, she is taking him to the briefing department of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). Mr. Bezmozgis takes great care to avoid the clichés of the immigrant experience; the characters he creates are mostly self-interested, not all that admirable, and – for that matter – not particularly interested in joining fellow Jews in Israel. Alec says, "Getting killed or maimed in Lebanon, or Egypt, or wherever the bullets were flying, seemed to defeat the whole point of leaving the Soviet Union." The immigrant stereotypes are similarly given short shrift. Upon attending a community center production of "Fiddler on the Roof", Samuil groans, "Somewhere in America, Sholem Aleichem was spinning in his grave."

The heart of the book is about family allegiance of disparate family members who seem, on the surface, to have little in common. "What does it matter to them where they were?" muses Samuil. "How were they different from the birds who landed in one place or another, unmoored by allegiances or souls." In this land of limbo, the only true connection is not to homeland – past or present – but to each other. At one point, Alec says, "The same borders you crossed to get here, you can cross in reverse. It needn't be hard. For all we know, it might even be easier in reverse." In reality, there is no moving back...only moving towards each other.

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## Sherri says

I am really not sure how to rate this book. I admit that I knew nothing about the Soviet Union allowing Jews to emigrate in the late 1970s. The story is about the time an extended Jewish family spends in Italy until they are approved to emigrate to Canada. The story is told from the viewpoints of three characters: Samuel, the father; Alec, the youngest son; and Polina, Alec's wife. The first half of the book is very slow. But it was necessary to build up the stories of the three primary characters - told from memories while in the Soviet Union and current times. Sadly, the only character I really liked was Polina and her story was a minor story.

Towards the end, I was ready to rate it with 4 stars. The story connected. I thought about the characters when not reading the book. But the story wrapped up too conveniently. The book ended too abruptly. That combined with the slow start makes it hard for me to recommend this book.

## **Natalie says**

Brilliant social novel, a pleasure to read.

Excellent development of the characters and their motivations.

Again I am liking a book about characters (some of them) that are not really admirable, or likable, but who deserve respect for their choices, their tenacity and strength nonetheless.

Bezmozgis elegant writing mixed with the darkest humor and poetic prose are unparalleled at this time...

The best editorial review was from Publishers Weekly:

"the book remains an assured, complex social novel whose relevance will be obvious to any reader genuinely curious about recent history, the limits of love, and the unexpected burdens that attend the arrival of freedom. (Apr.) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved."

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## **Felice says**

The Free World is the destination for the Krasnansky family from Riga, U.S.S.R. Not from Riga, Republic of Latvia as it is today, but from Riga 1978. Three generations of Russian Jews: Father, Mother, two sons, two daughters-in-law and two grandsons have gotten sponsorship from cousin Shura in Chicago and are just about to arrive in Italy when the novel begins. Once in Italy a serious hiccup in the endless paperwork and luggage juggling that the Krasnansky family has been enduring endangers the immigration. They are forced to regroup, rearrange their plans and hope for the best.

Author David Bezmozgis tells us about life in the old country and 99% of the journey to Italy in flashback. He fills us in on the characters' backstory piecemeal in between their experiences in the limbo life of waiting, waiting, waiting---sorry I was channeling Casablanca there for a second---to get an OK and move on to the new life. The characterizations are the great strength of The Free World and it's weakness. Not all of the Krasnanskys are fully fleshed out people but they all have believable stories and flaws. The characters that do come together: Father Samuil, Son Alec and his wife Polina are excellent creations. You route for them, you are irritated by them. The difficulty is that they do not come together as interestingly when interacting with one and other as they do when Bezmozgis writes about them as individuals.

There is the huddled masses yearning to be free angle in The Free World but this 1978 not 1878. The Krasnanskys are worldly. They aren't leaving behind poverty and ignorance for streets paved with gold nor do they seem to be searching for religious freedom. Bezmozgis brings an ironic but gentle humor to this contemporary immigration. Communism has been left behind but crazy is along for the ride. This may be the promise of a new life through eyes opened by television and the game show lure of a shiny new car but it is also with strong family feeling. They have committed to doing this together. That loyalty to one another, that bond of kinship is the theme that carries throughout the novel.

David Bezmozgis writes with an easy authority that amazed me. The Free World is filled with those kinds of

moments provide insight into human behavior through both sad honesty and giggles. I was engaged, involved and half way through the book before I had time to bemoan that it was going to end too soon.

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### **Jo-anne says**

I thought this book had great promise but was disappointed with the ending...it needed another two chapters. Felt like a second book fell into the last chapter...and it didn't fit..or at least it wasn't a satisfactory " conclusion"

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### **Zingshowon says**

Takes me back to those school's advanced literature classes in my country, reading about the characters having every day conversation and topics from one apartment to another. Most of the time I was reading someone else's letter and figuring out where they are going to end up in the foreign countries. Unfortunately, I had skipped few pages to keep up with my mental mood. Overall it is well written and easy read. I picked up few Italian phrases, got to google something about KGB of the Soviet Union and Russian stereotypes.

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### **switterbug (Betsey) says**

The price of freedom comes at a great cost, as illustrated in this wry and acerbic novel of three generations of Soviet Jews who languish in limbo at a pension in Rome in 1978. They have come to this veritable weigh station with all their belongings, dreams and desires, to emigrate to freedom and assimilate in a new land. David Bezmozgis's debut novel reflects a rich repository of knowledge, as he is a Latvian Jew who emigrated to Canada in 1973. He understands the immigrant experience personally, and has used his history slyly and knowingly to create a fictional story that speaks volumes of truth.

The Krasnansky family consists of elderly patriarch Samuil, an ardent Jewish atheist and passionate Communist, his devoted wife, Emma, his two sons Alec and Karl, their respective wives, Rosa and Polina (the only non-Jewish family member), and Karl and Rosa's two children. They have come from Riga, Latvia, in the hope of emigrating to Chicago, but their hopes are dashed by relative (literally) circumstances. Now they are émigrés, waiting for visas to Canada, but the family can't readily agree on this bastion of democracy, a place described as similar in climate to their homeland. Additionally, Samuil's precarious health is slowing up the process of obtaining their papers.

Samuil mourns for his Red Guard years, and spends his days in Rome isolated emotionally from his family, writing his memoirs. He befriends a one-legged violinist and Ukrainian army veteran whose beliefs are in opposition to his, but is able to reach an understanding and even a poignant intimacy with Josef. He growls at his laconic sons--Alec's self-indulgent, roving eye, and Karl's swift and sordid mercenary involvement with the underworld of Rome.

Bezmozgis, an acclaimed "20 under 40" writer, blends dark humor with tenderness, and avoids the treacly sentiment often seen in novels of the Jewish immigrant experience. Although not as satirical as Gary Shtyngart, he does jostle, and sometimes stab at some golden calves. Alec, who was charming and

prevaricating enough to get a job with the HIAS, assists people in the briefing department with their "Persecution Stories." Like Dinaw Mengestu's protagonist in *How to Read the Air*, Alec helps émigrés embellish their tales of persecution so that they may be granted permanent asylum in the free world.

"Some people came prepared with a vast catalogue of grievances that they had been compiling their entire lives; other needed some interpretive assistance."

Later, during a screening of *Fiddler on the Roof*, Samuil seethes at the facile deceptions and sentimental exploits of the film, while Rosa and Emma, freshly persuaded with Jewish culture, watch in hypnotic reverence. Bezmozgis avoids the pitfalls of judgment while keenly portraying each character's private unmoored and chained melody.

The Rome depicted here is hot, crowded, impoverished, and filled with daily humiliations. The memories teeming inside each character vacillate from sensuous reveries to murderous misfortunes. As the clean, lyrical narrative moves along with an almost imperceptible grace, the reader eventually learns the back stories and circumstances of this family, the dirty little secrets and the irretrievable losses of the past that threaten to thwart the future.

Bezmozgis laces hope with a laser wit that illustrates the daily confrontations and mortifications that émigrés face as wanderers in a state of ambiguity and uncertainty. As one refugee has pointed out, a man who has lived in the Soviet Union and Israel,

"...I've been a citizen of two utopias. Now I have modest expectations. Basically, I want the country with the fewest parades."

The author has no illusions about Zionism, Israel, and the Middle East. Prepare to be mildly offended if you are a staunch supporter of any bully pulpits. Bezmozgis didn't write this book to be politically correct--or incorrect, either; he is too nuanced to be manipulative or polemical. He is generous, playful, arch, comic, biting, and acutely aware of the many facets of social, emotional, and physical purgatory. Accordingly, Bezmozgis begins and ends the book via subtly dramatic bookends that endow this soulfully messy book with an impeccably tidy metaphor for exile and assimilation.

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