

# A Replacement Life

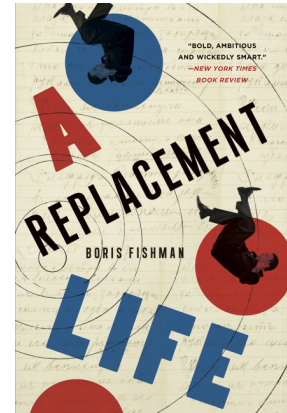
Harper Perennial

By Boris Fishman

ISBN: 9780062287885

## Introduction

In this highly acclaimed literary debut, a failed journalist is asked to do the unthinkable: forge Holocaust-restitution claims for older Russian Jews in Brooklyn, New York.



Yevgeny Gelman, grandfather of Slava Gelman, "didn't suffer in the exact way" he needs to have suffered to qualify for the restitution the German government has been paying out to Holocaust survivors. But suffer he has—as a Jew in the war, as a second-class citizen in the USSR, as an immigrant to America. So? Isn't his grandson a "writer"?

High-minded Slava wants to put this immigrant scraping behind him. Only the American Dream is not panning out for him—Century, the legendary magazine where he works as a researcher, wants nothing greater from him. Slava wants to be a correct, blameless American, but he wants to be a lionized writer even more.

Slava's turn as the Forger of South Brooklyn teaches him that not every fact is the truth, and not every lie a falsehood. It takes more than law abiding to become an American; it takes the same self-reinvention in which his people excel. Intoxicated and unmoored by his inventions, Slava risks exposure. Cornered, he commits an irrevocable act that finally grants him a sense of home in America, but not before collecting a price from his family.

*A Replacement Life* is a dark, moving, and beautifully written novel about family, honor, and justice.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Much like the author, Slava Gelman has to figure out how to write stories that will seem credible, in his case to the officials who assess restitution claims. How does he meet the challenge? What does he determine helps make a story believable? Which of the three "false narratives" included in the book was most engaging, and why?

2. Did you sympathize with Slava's desire to escape South Brooklyn? Does it seem like a vibrant community? Is it a good example of what refugees from a less fortunate place can become in America? Or is the community missing something that Slava considers vital to good citizenship in his adopted country?

3. *A Replacement Life* has both melancholy and tragic elements. For instance, Slava feels great regret over having abandoned his grandmother, and he and his family pay dearly for his and Grandfather's scheme. But *A Replacement Life* contains much humor as well. What examples of comedy can you recall? How well do they co-exist with the more somber notes of the book? Why do you think Fishman wrote a book that works in these various tones? How does the novel fit in the tradition of Jewish humor?
4. What lessons do you think Slava has taken away at novel's end? How do you think he will live his life now? What do you think he will do professionally, and what do you think he has understood about what's important in a life partner?
5. Why do you think the middle generation—that is, Slava's parents—plays such a relatively minor role in the book? Why does Fishman place such emphasis on the relationship of the grandchildren and grandparents?
6. Which of Slava's love interests was more sympathetic or compelling, and why? How do Slava's perceptions of Vera and Arianna shift over the course of the novel? What does Slava learn from these women? With whom do you think he would be happier?
7. Grandfather defends his scheme to Slava by saying: "Maybe I didn't suffer in the exact way I need to have suffered" [Grandfather] flicked a finger at the envelope" but they made sure to kill all the people who did. We had our whole world taken out from under us. No more dances, no holidays, no meals with your mother at the stove . . . Do you know what we came back to after the war? Tomatoes the size of your head. They'd fertilized them with human ash. You follow?" To what extent do you empathize with Grandfather's logic? Do you think he and his confederates in South Brooklyn are criminals? Do you think there's any justification for what they are doing?
8. In what way does the novel affirm the American Dream, that is, the idea that great rewards—material comfort, professional advancement, a sense of belonging—await those immigrants to America who work hard? In what ways does the novel challenge that notion?
9. In what ways is Slava an appealing character? In what ways is he frustrating, small-minded, or disappointing? Did you root for him? What is Slava trying to figure out for himself in the course of the novel?
10. Who was your favorite character, and why?
11. Compare Grandfather and Israel. In what ways are the two men alike, and in what ways dissimilar? Whom did you like more, and why?
12. Apart from the general fact that many first novels draw on autobiographical elements, Fishman's specific background—he immigrated from the former Soviet Union at only a slightly older age than Slava, and spent his first years in America in roughly the same area as Slava—

---

makes a strong case that some of the material in *A Replacement Life* comes from real life. However, just as many details—the narrator's crime, for one—seem invented. In what ways did your awareness of the author's personal history inform or inhibit your appreciation of the novel? Do you think that history makes the writing of such a novel easier or more difficult?

13. In the novel-long tug-of-war between Slava and Grandfather, whom did you root for, and why? Do you think Slava learns anything from Grandfather by the end of *A Replacement Life*? Does Grandfather learn anything from Slava? How has their relationship changed in the course of the novel?

14. "You must know these things," Slava thinks as he imagines his descendants at Grandmother's grave at novel's end, "for you will replace me as I am replacing them." What is the title of the novel referring to? How many types of "life replacement" can you count in the novel?

15. What makes someone American, or Russian? If one continues to live in the country one was born, the answer is easy, but for those who had to give up one homeland for another, what determines where on the spectrum one falls? Where on the spectrum does Slava begin the novel, and where does he end it? In what ways does he realize he was wrong about what it means to "be Russian" and what it means to "be American"? Is it possible for an immigrant to be fully one or the other?

16. "It's family, Slavik," Grandfather says in persuading Slava to agree to forge the older man's claim. "I would give my right arm for you if that's what it took. That's family." What does *A Replacement Life* say about our obligations to family? Would you ever commit a crime for a loved one?

17. How much distance does *A Replacement Life* find between what's lawful and moral? What is an individual's obligation in circumstances where he or she finds the law unjust?

18. How do Slava's aspirations for himself—professionally, romantically, creatively—differ from what he comes to discover would make him happiest?

19. What does *A Replacement Life* say about the traditional aspirations of Jewish parents for their children? Could the Gelmans have avoided their heartache if Slava's parents and grandparents had found a way to support his dreams of becoming a writer? Could that have been achieved if Slava had elected a different course?

20. What meaning does the Gelmans' former homeland—the Soviet Union when they left, now Belarus—have for them? How do you explain their simultaneous disdain of the place they left behind—certainly of the way it treated its Jews—and their clinging to its ways of life, culturally and emotionally?