

'Last Chicken' sees Squirrel Hill from new vantage point

BY ERIK ROSEN

For The Chronicle

Just take a walk through Squirrel Hill and its changing face is easy to see. Upscale clothing shops mingle with kosher delicatessens, coffee houses, pizza joints, a Middle Eastern rug place, a gay-friendly gift store, and at least half a dozen Asian restaurants.

It's no surprise, then, that first-time novelist Ellen Litman has chosen to set her novel in stories, "The Last Chicken in America," in such a fertile landscape.

Masha, the young narrator, is a recent transplant from Moscow, just out of high school and struggling in an ESL (English as a second language) class alongside "worn-out middle-aged engineers with bratty kids in

Allerdice High School and loud wives in the Advanced Beginner class next door."

Like many young immigrants, she's arrived with a suitcase full of expectations of a golden land of opportunity. What she finds are the narrow confines of the immigrant experience; a life constrained by language and cultural barriers where the community they've left behind is being reproduced in their new land as a coping mechanism.

Masha's relationship with her parents is as thorny as any teen's, but it is also complicated by her parents' poor English skills. "I hate being in the middle. I hate being with them at all times, everywhere they go — classes, welfare, dentist's office, supermarket," she complains. "I translate forms and letters; I interpret.

This is my job and I'm required to go along."

The 12 stories in "The Last Chicken in America" are chronologically woven together to present the immigrant experience from various characters' perspectives, but Masha remains at its heart. We share her bewilderment at romance as well as her first heartbreak, and the difficulty of being poor in a country where everything and anything is possible, but only if you can afford it. Masha's maturation is chronicled throughout the stories, tracing a believable arc from child to Russian literature student, dependent to independent young woman.

Many writers have explored the process of losing one's childhood dreams while gaining a richer understanding and appreciation for life's tragedies and triumphs. That Litman has set this universal story amidst

the unique challenges of an immigrant community in such an approachable way is quite impressive. In fact, this is an excellent debut novel. The writing is crisp and sparse, and the characters are rendered authentically; flawed and often unlikable, but always sympathetic.

Finally, it's great to read a novel that is set in our own back yard yet speaks so universally. We get a terrific variety of Pittsburgh and Squirrel Hill references, but they never seem contrived. In fact, Litman has given us the opportunity to see our community in a new way, through the eyes of those who are struggling to find their place. In this way, we may develop a deeper appreciation of this unique place we call home, as well as deepen our sympathy for those who still stand on the outside hoping we will welcome them in.

(Erik Rosen, a former Chronicle staff writer, can be reached at writer00@yahoo.com.)



Book Review

"The Last Chicken in America," by Ellen Litman, W. W. Norton & Company, 236 pages.