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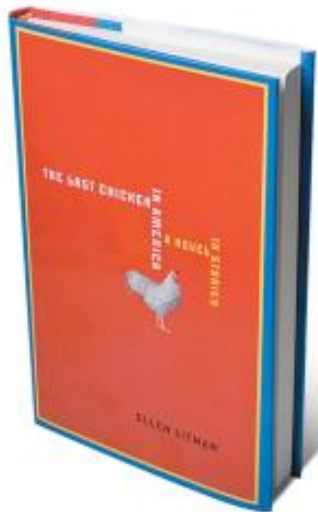
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Critics' Pick

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- Time Out New York / Issue 623 : September 6, 2007 - September 12, 2007
- Reviews
- The Last Chicken in America
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By Ellen Litman. Norton, \$23.95.



The Jewish immigrants in Ellen Litman's excellent debut, *The Last Chicken in America*, didn't flee pogroms but rather the dreariness of life in communist and postcommunist Russia. The question that hovers throughout these short stories is whether their existence in America—Pittsburgh, specifically—is any better.

The characters who populate these interconnected stories study computer programming and find jobs at banks. But new houses are no insulation from loneliness or despair. Masha, a character at the center of a number of these narratives, comes back to Pittsburgh from Boston, where she is a grad student at Harvard, and says of her parents' house: "They'd been renovating it slowly. Last time it was the master bedroom: new hardwood floors, wallpaper with big glowing flowers. They wanted me to like it, but it just made me depressed." Generational culture clash isn't especially new in the U.S., nor is it unique to immigrant families, but Litman does an admirable job of showing how the freedom to shape one's own destiny—a freedom that these characters enjoyed only to a much lesser extent in Russia—can be as isolating as it is empowering.

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Whisper to a friend:
"Let's meet at the Oyster Bar."










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- Litman is quietly insightful and extremely fair to each of her characters, who range from lonely senior citizens to stifled office workers and old-world parents mystified by their kids' quintessentially American aspirations. That fairness, combined with the author's lack of sentimentality, make *The Last Chicken* feel remarkably mature. This smart, well-

crafted book both documents a historical phenomenon—the recent experiences of a subset of immigrants—but also gets at something larger than America itself: universal questions about the choices we make and the stubborn elusiveness of happiness.

— *Adelle Waldman*

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