

rescuing the true Niagara from the memory hole.

The Native Americans who once lived in the region avoided the falls, with its rattlesnakes and dangerous river rapids. When Europeans arrived in the 17th century, they immediately set to dispossessing the local tribes. The patron saint of Niagara Falls, a city on the New York side of the river, was a 19th-century landowner named Peter Porter lauded for his purported proto-environmental views, but Strand discovers that he was more interested in war profiteering and land grabs than in philanthropy. She moves on to the history of the tacky museums, with their Egyptian mummies and two-legged dogs, and the falls' use as a backdrop to acts of daredevilry. No diversion or digression is too small. While she sketches each tale with humor, the kaleidoscopic narrative at times resembles one of the tawdry casinos around the falls that she deplores—lots of bright lights, jingling and jangling, but ultimately a place to satisfy a compulsion.

Yet it is hard to begrudge Strand her indulgences. Her prose is cheeky and sharp. In two sentences, she limns the early life of Frederick Law Olmsted: "He went to sea and almost died of scurvy. He bought a farm and won a prize for pears." Olmsted, the architect of New York's Central Park, pushed in the 1870s to make Niagara a place of wooded paths for all classes of society to enjoy—though Strand faults him for being patriarchal and elitist. With good reason, she is much harder on Robert Moses, another New York master planner, who, nearly a century later, ruthlessly paved the way (literally—the Robert Moses Parkway divides the Niagara River from nearby communities) for a power authority that spawned toxic waste-dumping industries.

The book's most compelling chapter examines Niagara Falls as a symbol for sex. Strand mixes the history of the honeymoon capital—a tradition hastily evolved through heavy marketing—with ruminations on Marilyn Monroe (the falls, like Marilyn, have "been girdled and boosted into the shape the audience wants"). And she weaves in scenes from an in-town convention of the Red Hat Society, a club for women over 50 that revolves largely around merchandising and the

slogan "Red Hatters Matter." The parallels are incisive, even sadly profound.

Strand has produced a multilayered book that occasionally sparkles and shimmers. But after a point, keeping up with her tireless reportage becomes exhausting. *Inventing Niagara* may best be appreciated in dribbles, like Niagara Falls during the off-season.

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## In the Genes

Reviewed by Bonnie J. Rough

IN 2004, JOURNALIST MASHA Gessen learned through genetic tests that she was predisposed to develop breast cancer, which had killed her mother in middle age. Faced with choosing whether or not to take preemptive measures, including surgical removal of her still-healthy breasts and ovaries, she embarked on a research bender. The result was a series of personal essays for *Slate*—which eventually became the frame for *Blood Matters*, an intelligent and imaginatively researched tour of modern genetics.

Today, relatively simple tests can reveal patients' predispositions toward hundreds of diseases—and even diagnose disorders in human embryos before implantation during fertility treatments. With each year the list of detectable genetic diseases grows, as does the number of books about this suddenly common medical experience and its attendant dilemmas. (In last year's *Embryo Culture*, for example, Beth Kohl tackled the ethical quandaries of creating "designer" babies through reproductive technology.)

Characterized by Gessen's publisher as a "field guide," *Blood Matters* is more properly described as a collection of dispatches from the field. Her approach seems to draw from her days as a war reporter: She traverses unfamiliar, often risky terrain in search of interesting stories, visiting with scientists, doctors, genetic counselors, religious thinkers, and a host of individuals and families

### BLOOD MATTERS:

From Inherited Illness to Designer Babies, How the World and I Found Ourselves in the Future of the Gene.

By Masha Gessen.  
Harcourt. 321 pp. \$25

stricken by genetic disease. Jewish communities receive special attention, both because of Gessen's own Jewish background and because these semi-closed groups have been well studied by geneticists. A 2005 study, for example, hypothesized that the same genetic mutations that predispose many Jews to diseases such as Tay-Sachs and Gaucher also give them higher IQs.

Gessen jumbles the research related to her own genetic mutation—hearings with genetic counselors, doctors, other cancer “previvors,” even an economist who helped her calculate her personal risks—with a series of junkets into the world of genetics. She explores Nazi eugenics, Huntington's disease, the new use of science in matchmaking among Jewish families to prevent marriages between genetically “incompatible” individuals, various illnesses prevalent among closed communities such as Old Order Mennonites, and the genetic components of behavior studied in a Russian facility that breeds foxes, minks, and rats of various temperaments.

But it is Gessen's writing about her own mutation and deftly chosen family anecdotes that possess much of *Blood Matters*' narrative power. As she grapples with the decision of whether to keep her breasts, her ovaries, both, or

neither (she reveals her choice midway through the book), she continues to nurse her young daughter and to live with the fear that descended when her mother died. “I would think about this in the sleepless early mornings, when my daughter pressed her hot heels into the small of my back, and I knew I was the only thing that protected her from the cold wind of fear and freedom that came into the room through the open balcony door. Then she would tap me on the shoulder and ask me to turn around so she could hold my breasts.”

A book about a medical arena of whip-quick advancement is necessarily of the moment. The numerous up-to-the-minute scientific breakthroughs mentioned in the text indicate that *Blood Matters* may not have a long shelf life, but Gessen is to be commended for creating a valuable snapshot of a domain that gains a greater hold on our lives by the year. “If there is one thing behavioral geneticists can agree on,” she writes, “it is that all of their findings are nothing but a reason to do further studies.” Perhaps *Blood Matters* may be taken in the same spirit: as a foundational early comer to the literary canon of a burgeoning field.

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