

# THE AUDIENCE RESPONDS

## Bringing the Page to Life

By Nanci Tangeman

I was 374 pages into *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* when I came across a mystery, a literary enigma so baffling, so important, that I had to set the book down and pour myself a glass of cabernet to contemplate it. Half a bottle later, I still hadn't figured it out. What was the mystery?

How do you pronounce "Okh!" ?

(You know, "Okh!" as in this passage from Gary Shteyngart's novel where the Groundhog meets his true love Lena for the first time: "So Groundhog is leaving House of Girl, but then he hearing beautiful sound from room of love. 'Okh! Okh! Okh!' It is like wonderful Slavic angel. 'Okh! Okh! Okh!'" )

Luckily that very same night, the John Adams Institute welcomed Shteyngart to the Singelkerk. And to my delight, the author himself was able to answer my question as he read about the lovers' encounter ("Okh! Okh! Okh!"). After the lecture, when I snuggled up with my own copy of the "Handbook," I could still hear Shteyngart's Russian okh-okh-okh-ing in my head. (I could also hear it at breakfast the next morning; on the tram; in Albert Heijn ... )

That night in March, Shteyngart was doing what John Adams lecturers do best — bringing the printed page to life. (In the case of Lena and the Groundhog, they were brought to a particularly raucous life!)

The lecturers do it over and over again. And it's not just with fiction.

Economist Paul Krugman and Robert Kagan did it with U.S. military



Gary Shteyngart reading in Amsterdam, 26 March 2003

and economic policy, respectively, at a time when the world was watching America's next move even more than usual. Historians Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt did it with *The Holocaust*, exactly 58 years after the liberation of Auschwitz.

And, in April, Fay Weldon did it with her life story when she discussed her autobiography *Auto Da Fay*. Not even Shteyngart's fantastic romp through New York and fictional Prava could top Weldon's real-life adventures. Her stories of earthquakes in New Zealand, misplaced husbands and 85-year-old grandmothers breaking into houses held the sell-out crowd's attention. She said it herself that night: "The truth is more unbelievable than fiction."

I don't make it to every single lecture, but I wish I could. I wish I could because after every lecture I take a little something home. Like a better understanding of a differing viewpoint (Robert Kagan). Or a tidbit of inside information (Fay Weldon wore a million pound sterling necklace to the same Bulgari party where her book, *The Bulgari Connection*, was being handed out as a party favor!). Or, thanks to Gary Shteyngart, a new expression to add to my vocabulary (Okh!).

Now, I just need to find the appropriate occasion to use it!

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