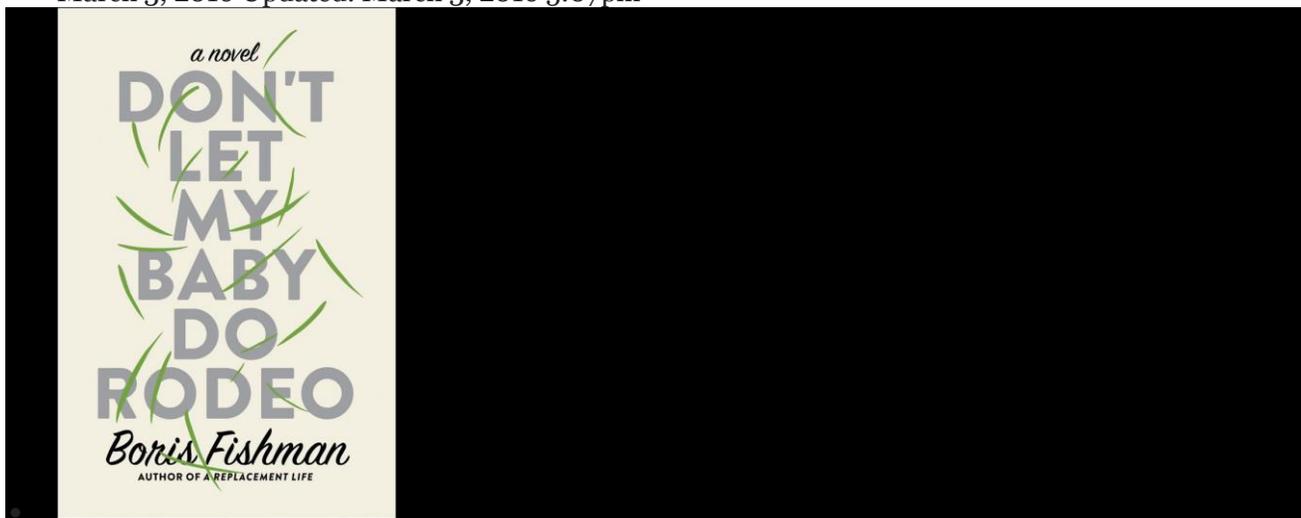


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‘Don’t Let My Baby Do Rodeo,’ by Boris Fishman

By Steven G. Kellman

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Barbed wire, interstate highways and shopping malls doomed the Western frontier, but the myth of the American West lived on in Eastern Europe long after the surrender of Geronimo in 1886. Far from Hollywood, or even Monument Valley, red Westerns — a.k.a. borscht Westerns — were produced in Slavic languages, and Karl May, the prolific author of German novels set in the 19th century American West, continues to have a wide following where no buffalo roam, in the states of the former Soviet bloc.

In his first, widely acclaimed novel, “A Replacement Life,” Boris Fishman, who left his native Belarus at age 9, looked eastward, for an intricate fiction about an American author who gets into trouble with German authorities for forging Holocaust reparation claims. With “Don’t Let My Baby Do Rodeo,” he now looks westward, with a novel that concludes with a road trip to Montana.

Alex and Maya Rubin, immigrants from Minsk and Kiev, respectively, have settled into suburban life in northern New Jersey, he in his father's import business and she as a mammographer at a hospital. Unable to conceive, they adopt a baby boy. Opting for a closed arrangement, with no direct contact between them and the birth parents, they are startled when teenagers Laurel and Tim appear on their doorstep and hand them an infant. Laurel's enigmatic parting words provide the novel with its title: "Don't let my baby do rodeo." Everyone — even Alex's intrusive parents, who balk at the fact that the new blond-haired Rubin, given the name Max, does not look Jewish — comes to accept and love him.

However, by the time he is 8, Max, who has never been informed about his origins, is exhibiting behavior that disturbs his adoptive parents — sleeping on the ground, eating grass, running away to sit in a river. Therapy sessions with a nutty psychologist and a daffy faith healer accomplish nothing. Though she herself is the wildest creature in the Rubin household, Maya fears some kind of genetic atavism, that her son's biological father, a rodeo cowboy, was reasserting himself in the boy's uncouth actions.

Neither Maya nor Alex has ever been west of New Jersey, but, convinced that Laurel and Tim can solve the mystery of Max, Maya persuades Alex to seek out the younger couple's last known address. Maya, Alex and Max embark on a fateful journey to Montana: "It was a reckless trip — three voyagers into the gloom, on the doorstep of winter."

The plot is kicked into motion by the competing claims of nature and nurture. Is young Max a facsimile of the middle-class immigrant Jews who raise him, or is he irrevocably branded by the rodeo cowboy, destined to become the Aryan barbarian that Alex's assertive father, Eugene, is sure he was?

"Biologically, he is and always will be the child of those people," insists Eugene. "He came to us with programming; you can spend your whole lives changing the code, and still you are going to rewrite only fragments."

Though Fishman provides convincing details about the nerve-racking ordeal of applying to adopt a child, Max is ultimately incidental to the novel's main concern, Maya. From the opening pages

in which, panicked over Max's failure to return from school one afternoon, she rushes off on a bus to try to track him down in the farthest reaches of New Jersey, she is the principal focus. And she exemplifies the truth pronounced by a handsome stranger she later meets on the road: "A woman lives a life of contradictions wrapped inside paradoxes inside a big candy wrapper."

A dramatic flashback portrays Maya as a headstrong exchange student who is amused and wooed by her boyfriend's virginal best friend, Alex. Faced with the dire prospect of having to return to Ukraine when her visa expires, she accepts the marriage proposal that Alex impulsively offers.

"Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo" is the story of a restless wife who seeks truths about her son and herself amid the "flat, featureless, and demonic" landscape stretching beyond South Dakota. As passionate and mystified by the vast expanses as she is about Max, Maya notes that "it was not unlike adoptive mothering, the American West."

Fishman's respect for the absurdity of his preposterous tale usually, but not always, redeems some of his more extravagant touches. And a gaudy supporting cast — a bus driver who plays impresario to his passengers, a henpecked park ranger who takes his shotgun to a rattlesnake, a reclusive one-eyed popular novelist — leavens what might otherwise be a somber story of marital discord. Fishman sometimes tends to belabor unnecessary explication. But his second novel is a fresh, unpredictable departure from his first. Max may or may not do rodeo, but from now on expect Boris Fishman to do anything.

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Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo

By Boris Fishman

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