

Keith Gessen, born Konstantin Alexandrovich Gessen, immigrated to the United States from the Moscow, Soviet Union, with his parents and older sister, Masha, in 1981 at the age of 6. As Gessen notes, “My parents took me out of the Soviet Union—it was as my grandmother kept telling us, ‘a terrible country,’ violent, tragic, poor, and prone to outbursts of anti-Semitism—and they did it because there was an opportunity: Congress, under pressure from American Jewish groups, had passed legislation that tied U.S.-Soviet trade to Jewish emigration. . Gessen continues. We moved to Boston. Probably no other decision had a greater effect on my life¹.

My parents were attached to Russian culture by a thousand ineradicable ties, Gessen says. Before they emigrated, his father mailed their Russian library to the U.S. in a series of many small ten pound packages. In Boston, the family’s Russian books occupied the shelves on the first and second floors of their home. Their English language books were housed in the basement. Furthermore, Gessen’s parents socialized almost exclusively with other Russian emigrates in the Boston area. On the other hand, I assimilated whole heartedly, Keith tells us². At six you can still remember the language, but you won’t have an accent. If you are a few years older, you probably won’t ever lose your accent. I know other people who came over at about 6, and only speak Russian to their parents and never go back to Russia. On the other hand, I started going back while I was in college and have been writing and thinking about Russia ever since.

An interest in words, language, culture and literature was part of the Gessen family environment. His father, is a computer programmer. Keith’s mother (deceased) was a literary

¹ Gessen, K., *Why I taught My Son to Speak Russian*, The New Yorker, June 16, 2008.

² Keith Gessen on Soviet Publishing and His Roundabout Path to Writing Fiction: (Podcast) But *That’s Another Story*, April 29, 2019.

critic; her mother, Ruzya Solodovnik, (marginally, Baba Seva in *A Terrible Country*) was a Soviet government censor of dispatches filed by foreign reporters such as Harrison Salisbury. His paternal grandmother, Ester Goldberg Gessen, was a translator for a foreign literary magazine. Keith's sister, Masha Kessen is the author of *Ester and Ruzya: How My Grandmothers Survived Hitler's War and Stalin's Peace* (2004). A non-fiction account based on interviews with the grandmothers when Masha returned to Moscow in 1991. (A fascinating read.) Continuing a family tradition, Gessen was the translator for Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices From Chernobyl*. Also, he has translated a children's book and a book of poems

Education and early literary experiences

Keith graduated from Harvard in 1998 with a BA in history and literature. He completed the course work for his MFA in creative writing from Syracuse University in 2004. He wrote the first two sections of his first novel, *All the Sad Young Literary Men* (2008) while at Syracuse, then he moved to New York planning to quickly finish the novel. "But then we started *n + 1*, a literary magazine which basically took over my life. So it took me another three years to write the last third of the book."³ *All the Sad Young Literary Men* is loosely based on Gessen's experience as part of a group of anxious young writers. Gessen continues as co-editor of *n + 1*. He is also an assistant professor of Journalism at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. In 2008 he was named a "5 under 35" honoree by the National Book Foundation.

n+1 is a literary magazine that publishes social criticism, political commentary, essays, art poetry, book reviews and short fiction. This project was started in 2004 by Keith Gessen, Benjamin Kunkel and 5 other young and aspiring authors. The magazine is described by Gessen as 'like the Partisan Review, except not dead.' *n+1* has received mixed reviews depending on whose ox is being gored. "Detractors decry the editors' youth and perceived elitism; one called it "a crock of shit." Others have appreciated the boldness of the project

³ Gessen interview in the podcast, *That's Another Story*

itself, The New York Times Magazine literary critic A.O. Scott (September 2005 issue) wrote that n+1 was trying “to organize a generational struggle against laziness and cynicism, to raise again the banners of creative enthusiasm and intellectual engagement.” In a review of Gessen’s novel, *All the Sad Young Literary Men*, Joyce Carol Oates referenced the author’s founding of “the spirited intellectual literary journal n+1.” Sixteen years after its’ founding, n+1 publishes three 200 page editions a year and a series of small books.⁴

During his early years in New York, starting at age 22, Keith was trying to understand contemporary authors. Growing up he was more comfortable with the Russian literature his family of bibliophiles treasured, Tolstoy, Dostoyovsky, etc. In the podcast *But That’s Another Story*, (4/29/19) Keith notes, I started reading stuff that my friends had started talking about in my senior year in college. . . DeLillo. Pynchon. *Infinite Jest* had just come out. “It felt to me like not only was it contemporary literature that I enjoyed—I love White Noise. I loved it for the jest. It felt like something I could do.” From these authors and a copy of Saul Bellow’s *Humboldt’s Gift*, Gessen concluded that it was okay to use your own life experiences as a subject for fiction. Or as he says in a 2018 interview in The New Yorker, “I love nonfiction and I really love oral history. I like fiction that is made up, but I really love fiction that is thinly veiled autobiography. Each form has its truth and falsity. . . in pacing, its tolerance for coincidence, and even its tone. Continuing the discussion, Gessen says the his ultimate model while writing the *My Terrible Country* was Tolstoy’s “The Cossacks,” but the books he most enjoyed reading were memoirs of people’s sojourns in a foreign place for a certain period of time. When questioned about how much of *My Terrible Country* is based on his year-long stay with his grandmother in 2008, he says that in essence, Baba Seva is loosely based on his grandmother, but the other characters were made up. “My experiences in Russia were not as interesting as Andrei’s.”⁵

⁴ Wikipedia, n+1

⁵ David Wallace, *Keith Gessen on Family History and a Changing Russia*: , April 9, 2018.

Keith Gessen is married to the podcast writer, Emily Gould. They have 2 sons and live in Brooklyn. He has written some charming accounts, published in the New Yorker, based on disciplining a 3 year-old, and why he taught his son to speak Russian.. Gessen has been published in The New Yorker, The London Review of Books, The Atlantic, and the New York Review of Books, and the New York Times.