

Eight friends, six months in isolation, four romances ...
One Book Club Kit

Our Country Friends

"A MASTERPIECE."
—Andrew Sean Greer
Pulitzer Prize-winning
author of *LESS*



Gary Shteyngart

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did you come to *Our Country Friends*? What was your overall impression of the story, the writing, the style? If you have read Gary Shteyngart before, how does this novel compare to his others? How is it different?
2. The catalyst for the story is the pandemic. What was your experience when a huge swath of the nation went into lockdown? If you created a pod with neighbors and/or extended family or friends, were there any particularly charged dynamics at play?
3. The milieu of the novel is Chekhovian: a group of family and friends at a country estate. Which characters resonated most with you and why?
4. Next to the rusted antique bathroom mirror in The Writer's Cottage is a framed James Baldwin quote: "Love takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within." What does this quote mean to you, and how does it relate to *Our Country Friends*?
5. Couplings, hook-ups, crushes: *Our Country Friends* is full of desire. Were there any romances or lustful encounters that were unexpected? Was there a pair you wished had gotten together. If so, who and why?
6. The Actor falls hard for Dee after experiencing Karen's app Tröö Emotions. Do you believe in love at first sight? What have been your experiences with finding The One? When it comes to love, do you believe in soulmates or serendipity or something else entirely?
7. When Sasha first encounters the mysterious black pick-up truck, what did you think it was or what did it represent?
8. There are betrayals in this novel, but the biggest is between Sasha and Vinod involving the latter's manuscript. What does it say about their friendship that Vinod stayed after learning of Sasha's treacherous act? "They continued to assemble for dinner, [but] a new quiet reigned . . . mostly brooding silence as the bungalow residents absorbed what their host had done against their most kindly member."
9. Sasha muses: "There's a Russian term: krutista, meaning 'to spin around.' To spin around from one thing to another trying to make ends meet. That's the human condition for most of us." What do you think of this observation? Passion, regret, mortality. In this novel, which themes about the human condition moved you?
10. What did you think of the ending of *Our Country Friends*? If you could suggest an alternative ending, what would it be?

“Four months ago, under the cover of spring, he had welcomed five guests of exceptional quality to his colony. How did it get to this?”

THE HOSTS

SASHA

A published writer, “the landowner,” sometimes a fool. He rejected tenure to pursue TV work and “wished he could fall in love with someone as his wife evidently had done.”

MASHA

Sasha’s wife, a therapist, very cautious in these viral times.
“They force me to be someone I’m not. . . . They mistake my caring for authoritarianism and then I have no choice but to become Stalin in an apron.”

NATASHA

Their unfiltered child who notices everything, wise beyond her eight years.
“‘She’ and ‘her’ are my pronouns, though I reserve the right to change them later.”

THE GUESTS

KAREN CHO

Creator of the hugely popular dating app Tröö Emotions, which wreaks havoc. She wonders if Masha gave her the large family bungalow to highlight the fact she has no children. Motherhood, or a reasonable facsimile thereof, is not off the table.

VINOD MEHTA

An old friend and former adjunct professor. Like a character in a Chekhov play, taunted by desires but trapped in a life too small to accommodate the entirety of a human being.

ED KIM

A great cook and a gentleman with his eyes on a certain someone

DEE CAMERON

Sasha's former student, a writer with flirty, mischievous eyes, who declares:
"I don't fall in love, one way or another."

THE ACTOR

Handsome and he knows it. Neue Zürcher Zeitung called him the world's greatest thespian. He likes to ask uncomfortable questions and stir up trouble.
"Maybe I'm old-fashioned but I think people should have affairs."

THE GROUNDHOG

STEVE

Just Steve.

DRINK LIKE *OUR COUNTRY FRIENDS*

“Ed had promised himself he wouldn’t drink . . . But tumblers of Negronis kept finding their way into his hand and his tongue kept seeking out the cubed cool of the ice tinkling within.”



INGREDIENTS:

- 1 ¼ ounces gin
- 1 ¼ ounces Campari
- 1 ¼ ounces sweet vermouth
- Orange twist, for garnish

PREPARATION:

Stir all liquid ingredients with ice. Strain into chilled rocks glass filled with ice. Garnish with an orange twist.

Courtesy of NYT Cooking

SOMETHING TO NIBBLE ON....

GREEK MEZZE PLATTER

Yield: 8 servings

INGREDIENTS:

- Marinated Herbed Feta, recipe follows
- 6 roasted red peppers, store-bought
- 8–10 stuffed grape leaves, store-bought
- 1 cup hummus, store-bought
- 1 tbsp. pine nuts, toasted
- Good olive oil
- Toasted pita chips, for serving, recipe follows
- 4 sprigs of fresh thyme

Marinated Herbed Feta:

- 1 ½ tsp. dried thyme
- ½ tsp. dried fennel seeds
- ½ tsp. crushed red pepper flakes
- 1 ½ pounds Greek feta, drained and sliced ½-inch thick
- 3 sprigs fresh thyme
- ½ cup green olives with pits, such as Cerignola
- ½ cup good olive oil
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

Toasted Pita Chips:

- 4 loaves pita bread

DIRECTIONS:

1. Artfully arrange the marinated feta, red peppers, stuffed grape leaves, and a small bowl filled with the hummus on a platter. Sprinkle the pine nuts over the hummus and add a drizzle of olive oil. Place the pita chips on the platter and arrange the sprigs of thyme over the red peppers, for decoration.

Marinated Herbed Feta:

Yield: 8 servings

2. Combine the dried thyme, fennel seeds, and red pepper flakes in a small bowl. Lay the feta slices overlapping on a 9 × 9-inch square serving plate.
3. Sprinkle the feta with the entire herb mixture. Nestle the thyme sprigs and olives among the feta slices. Drizzle with the olive oil and sprinkle with ½ teaspoon salt and ¼ teaspoon black pepper. Cover the dish with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 4 hours. Serve at room temperature.

Toasted Pita Chips:

Yield: 32 chips

4. Preheat the oven to 350°F.
5. Slice the pita bread into 8 triangles and place them on a sheet pan. Place the sheet pan in the oven and toast the bread for 10 minutes.