A byproduct of British colonialism in the seventeenth-century was its institution of an
insidious, racist literary archetype—or, stock character—known as the “Stage Irishman.” This
recurring, two-dimensional cartoon attempted to personify an entire ethnicity with bigoted,
exaggerated, and misguided, cultural stereotypes in an effort to both entertain English audiences
and establish a bogus, hierarchal differentiation between themselves and the Irish, who were
already being promoted by the existing power structures as an inferior people (Duggan).
American entertainment hit upon something similar in the nineteenth century with a clichéd,
“blackface singer-dancer-comedian” type often referred to as the “Stage Negro” (Dorman 110).

In line with this pattern, late twentieth-century and turn-of-the-millennium era of
American literary and film narratives have revealed an emerging, new stereotype that could be
categorized as a “Stage Central (and) Eastern European.” The trend seems to have begun as early
as the Cold War and continues in prose by American travelers and expatriates who, since the
millennium, have begun to publish a growing body of work about their experiences in 1990s post-
Communist Europe. Stage post-Communist Europeans are being routinely portrayed by many
American writers as either buffoons, connivers, nationalists, crooks, or worse.

For instance, Paul Greenburg’s, Leaving Katya (2002), depicted the Russian Katya as an
obsessive cheater. Robert Eversz’s Gypsy Hearts (1997) painted its antagonist, the Czech
Monika, as a seductive, con-artist who swindled unsuspecting American men overseas. John
Beckman’s Winter Zoo (2002), produced the Polish Zbigniew, an embittered divorcé who
murdered an American expat. Better-known are Jonathan Franzen’s The Corrections (2001)
which told the story of Lithuanian Gitanas and his scheme to rip off American investors via the
internet from his home country, and Jonathan Safran Foer’s Everything is Illuminated (2002)
which presented a backward, Ukrainian co-protagonist named “Alex,” a vulgar representation of
a perverted and intolerant young post-Communist European who may well have served as the
basis for British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen’s hero of Borat: Cultural Learnings of America
for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan. Uninformed prejudice is one thing, but what
should readers make of post-Communist Europeans as represented by Americans who actually
live(d) there?

References


Duggan, George Chester. The Stage Irishman: A History of the Irish Play and Stage