

# **The History of Love**

**by Nicole Krauss**

## About the Book

Fourteen-year-old Alma Singer is trying to find a cure for her mother's loneliness. Believing that she might discover it in an old book her mother is lovingly translating, she sets out in search of its author. Across New York and old man named Leo Gursky is trying to survive a little bit longer. He spends his days dreaming of the lost love who, sixty years ago in Poland, inspired him to write a book. And although he doesn't know it yet, that book also survived: crossing oceans and generations, and changing lives. . . .

## Praise for the Book

"Vertiginously exciting . . . vibrantly imagined. . . . [Krauss is] a prodigious talent."  
— **Janet Maslin, *New York Times***

"At least as heartbreaking as it is hilarious."  
— **Ron Charles, *Washington Post***

"Brilliant. An achievement of extraordinary depth and beauty."  
— **Dan Cryer, *Newsday***

"The novel's achievement is precisely, and not negligibly, this: to have made a new fiction — alternately delightful and hilarious and deeply affecting."  
— ***LA Weekly***

"Moving and virtuosic."  
— ***San Francisco Chronicle***

"Luminous prose. . . . Krauss is a masterful storyteller . . . a writer of astonishing breadth."  
— ***Cleveland Plain Dealer***

"Ingenious."  
— ***Entertainment Weekly***

*Courtesy of W. W. Norton*

## About the Author

### Nicole Krauss

Updated: 11/15/2005

**Personal Information:** Female; married Jonathan Safran Foer (novelist).

**Education:** Graduate of Stanford University, Oxford University, and Courtauld Institute.

**Addresses:** Agent: c/o Author Mail, Random House, 299 Park Ave., New York, NY 10171-0002.

**Career:** Poet and writer.

### WRITINGS

- *Man Walks into a Room*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 2002.
- *The History of Love*, W. W. Norton (New York, NY), 2005.

Contributor of poetry and reviews to literary journals and other periodicals, including *Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Doubletake*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, and *Partisan Review*.

### Sidelights

Nicole Krauss was an accomplished poet before she wrote her first novel, and in an online interview on Random House's *Bold Type* she said, "For a long time I only wanted to write poetry. But it's hard—a hard life, I mean. There's that thing Auden said, about how a poet only believes himself to be a poet at the moment when he is making his last revision to a new poem. 'The moment before, he was still only a potential poet: the moment after he is a man who has ceased to write poetry, perhaps forever.' With a novel it's somehow easier: the duration of the writing is so much longer, and the unhappiness of the in-between less frequent."

Krauss got the idea for her debut novel, *Man Walks into a Room*, from a news story she read about a man who left his office one day and was found several states away with no memory of who he was. The man had a brain tumor, and when it was removed, his memory returned. In Krauss's story, the man, Samson Greene, is a thirty-six-year-old professor of English at Columbia University. He is married to Anna, and has a dog named Frank. When Samson is discovered wandering around the Las Vegas desert, he doesn't even remember his own name. Anna brings him back to New York, and the benign tumor is removed, but in Samson's case, along with the tumor, he is relieved of all memory except for the first twelve years of his life. He can remember his mother and growing up in California, but twenty-four years are gone.

The lonely Samson, now unable to relate to his wife, friends, and colleagues, willingly takes part in an experiment that requires that he return to Nevada. The memories of another person, an elderly, eccentric man named Donald, are grafted into Samson's mind. But Donald's new memories of nuclear testing are disturbing. Samson also becomes driven to find the burial place

of his mother, which he now cannot remember, and he liberates his senile Uncle Max from a nursing home to help him.

The *Bold Type* interviewer noted the “acute detail” in those parts of the story that deal with Samson’s amnesia, neurological science, and the nuclear testing of the 1950s, and asked Krauss about her research in writing the novel. Krauss noted that her father is a surgeon who was able to put her in touch with a pathologist and a neurologist who provided answers to her questions. She also corresponded with former soldiers who were stationed at Desert Rock during the nuclear testing, who were able to provide her with details. Krauss also said she read the writings of Oliver Sacks. “I was interested in the idea — one that seems to be at the heart of much of his work — of the adaptability of the brain, of its need, above all, ‘to construct a coherent self and world,’ whatever disorders befall it. I think we all see the world so radically differently from each other, that we construct ways of being and modes of perception that allow us to survive given our particular brain. The knowledge that this is our own construction — and therefore singular to us — is part of what makes us feel so alone.” Krauss concluded the interview by saying that *Man Walks into a Room* is “about a man who becomes disengaged, and who — after a lot of loneliness and pain — relearns the difficult beauty of engagement. If I could reduce what matters to me most right now to a single word, it would be simply that: engagement.”

A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor wrote that Krauss “tells her strange story — a knotty combination of psychological novel and cautionary science-fiction tale — with considerable finesse, crafting graceful compound-complex sentences charged with understated emotion.” The reviewer called the characters Donald and Uncle Max “memorable.”

“Krauss has written a wonderful debut,” said *Library Journal*’s Judith Kicinski, “full of shimmering sentences and real emotion.” A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer felt that an outline of the story “suggests a somber tale full of dark symbolism, but in fact it is surprisingly lighthearted, sharply observant, and often touching.”

## **FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

### **PERIODICALS**

- *Kirkus Reviews*, March 15, 2002, review of *Man Walks into a Room*, p. 360.
- *Library Journal*, May 1, 2002, Judith Kicinski, review of *Man Walks into a Room*, p. 134.
- *Publishers Weekly*, February 18, 2002, review of *Man Walks into a Room*, p. 69.

### **ONLINE**

- *Bold Type*, <http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/> (May, 2002), interview.

**Source:** *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit: Gale, 2005.

**Source Database:** Literature Resource Center

## Author Interview

**Q: Was there a particular author you read growing up who inspired you to want to become a writer?**

**Nicole Krauss:** I was always reading something or other as a child, even at the dinner table. But I don't think there was a particular author or book that set me on the path to writing; it was more like the slow and steady sum total of everything I read. When you're young, especially if you live out in the country, as I basically did, books offer a form of travel; a breadth of experience that far exceeds what is otherwise available to you. People often describe reading as a means of escape. But for me it was the opposite. What's the opposite of escape? A means of arriving, let's say, at all that I was so eager to see and know.

Mostly I read whatever was around the house, and then when I discovered the local library I started ransacking the shelves. I read a biography of Henry Miller when I was eleven or twelve, before I'd read any of his books. At one stage my mother started reading *A Tale of Two Cities* aloud to my brother and me in nightly installments, but that only lasted a few days so we never got very far. The one recommendation I remember her making — it was when I was twelve — was *Portnoy's Complaint*. I read it and loved it, although I did wonder whether, when she gave it to me, she had remembered the scene with the Italian whore.

**Q: What books are you reading at the moment?**

**NK:** I've just finished *Housekeeping*, by Marilynne Robinson, which was so pained and beautiful. And now I've started Mr. *Sammler's Planet*. I've been thinking a lot about Bellow since his death. There's this line that keeps coming back to me from *The Dean's December*. It's the part where Dean Corde imagines a dog's howl to be a protest against the narrowness of its understanding, a kind of plea: "For God's sake, open the universe a little more!" It must be one of the most powerful sentences ever written in a novel.

**Q: Which literary character would you most like to meet?**

**NK:** I don't think I've ever longed to meet a character beyond the way I've met him or her already in a book. In a way, it's possible to come to know people in a much quicker, more intense, and meaningful way on the page than you usually get to do in life. Real life has a kind of awkwardness that great books don't — to describe awkwardness in a book often, actually, affects in the reader a kind of comfort, like watching a storm from inside a warm house. My actual exchanges with people, beyond those I'm very close to, tend to always be a little less than I'd hoped they'd be. For example, today an Orthodox Jewish family stopped me in the park to ask me what kind of dog I had. We talked for a bit, they admired my dog, George, and the whole exchange was warm and lovely. And then, as they turned to go, bestowing one last compliment on George, I said, I guess to sweeten the deal, "Good Shabbas." And then I realized it was only Wednesday.

**Q: The voice of Leo Gursky, the old man who is at the centre of *The History of Love*, is brilliantly conceived. How difficult was it to find his voice?**

**NK:** It was easy in that I just wasn't looking for it, or him. One day I had his voice in my head, and I started writing, and it turned out to be the beginning of the novel. Honestly, he feels like me. It was never a stretch to write in his voice; I never sat around scratching my head, wondering what he'd think or how he'd say something.

I'm a shy person and, to begin with, I don't like the idea of writing a character that looks suspiciously like me. I would feel trapped by the narrowness of veracity, by having to conform to a certain version of reality. What I'm interested in is the sheer joy and freedom of making something new. Of imagining and inventing, while also expressing myself in the strongest way I can. Maybe it's similar to the difference between figurative and abstract painting. In Leo's voice I could write about certain feelings in a way that was both more abstract and more powerful than I could in my own life.

**Q: What books did you read while you were writing *The History of Love*? Some writers don't like to read fiction while they are in the midst of writing a novel, do you find it helps your writing or is it distracting?**

**NK:** Neither, really. I'm always reading something. It took me two years to write *The History of Love*, and I can't imagine what it would have been like if I didn't, or couldn't, read during that time. My brain would have revolted. Either that or it would have gotten dull. But the specific books I read didn't have much to do directly with my writing.

**Q: The structure of the novel is complex. Did you have to plan the novel out quite carefully before you started writing and was it difficult to keep all the elements of the plot in your head as you wrote each part?**

**NK:** When I started, I'd decided to write a book with no plot. Devising plots didn't seem like my strength, which didn't bother me too much, since the books I love generally don't depend on them. For a long time all I had was Leo's voice. Then Alma's. I had these little bits of *The History of Love* which I didn't know yet were going to become a book within a book — they were just vignettes. I had no idea how all of these elements could possibly fit together. But I also had a sense that they belonged together. It was a struggle to figure out how to connect them to form a constellation. I was always on the edge of failure. I worked myself into so many corners, and dug myself so many holes, and had to try to find intricate, intelligent ways out of them. It was kind of like a game of Twister: how do I get my toe on the red circle all the way over there?

As far as keeping it all in my head, somehow I did. There are lots of things I'm not good at, but I happen to have a very good sense of direction. I'm always the one who reads the maps on trips. If you dropped me in a foreign city and let me walk around, the first thing that would happen is that a bird's eye view of the city, with all the streets, would form in my mind. I think maybe that spatial sense, the habit of drawing mental maps, is my way of holding lots of things in my head. The plot was just a way of giving everything I was thinking about a place: a street, an alley, a square, a boulevard, a bridge.

*Courtesy of Penguin Books UK*

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## The Author on Her Work

I started to write *The History of Love* in the spring of 2002, just after my first novel was published. It was a strange time: wonderful, but also melancholy. Something about the feeling of writing seemed to change for me once the book was published. I felt, a bit, as if I'd lost something hard to put my finger on, something personal and natural that I'd loved about writing. I was working on a new book, but my heart wasn't quite in it. So one day I decided to throw away the hundred or so pages I had. I wanted to give up my old ideas about writing — or at least about trying to write well — and just write something for myself. To no end. A nothing.

Soon after that, Leo's voice appeared on the page. It was so familiar to me: at once the easiest thing I'd ever written, and also the most alive. Sometimes I even confused his voice with my own, or was unable to tell us apart; strange to say, considering he's an eighty-year-old man from Poland. But with the arrival of Leo's voice, I found a way to write about things that were personal without being autobiographical. To me that's an important distinction. If I were to write an autobiographical sentence about this moment, I might say: I'm writing in the study on the top floor of my house, one knee up, with my sister's sweatshirt on. But if I were to write something personal, I'd describe something of my inner life — something I can't do with ease in a reader's guide essay, without the armor of fiction — with the hope that it might be familiar to someone else. If it's personal to me, maybe it will feel personal to someone who reads my books. I wanted to write a book that people would take personally.

So while the novel is filled with stories I heard growing up from my four grandparents, born in Hungary, Poland, Germany, and White Russia, and from my parents, one who grew up London and the other in Israel and New York, at the same time the novel is entirely imagined — and more than that, I wanted it to be a celebration of the imagination.

It's hard to say what the seeds were for the story in *The History of Love*, aside from certain experiences and feelings that took a novel to describe. Almost from the start, I knew that, along with Leo, I also wanted to have a young girl in the book. So Alma was born. And for almost a year I wrote both of their stories, without having any idea of their relationship to each other. I just knew that somehow they belonged in the same book. Needless to say, many pages were thrown away.

I know that early on I was moved by the idea of people who need to invent things in order to survive, either for their own sake or for the sake of protecting those they love. At some point in the book, Leo imagines telling his son: The truth is the thing I invented so I could live. Everyone in the book invents things they need to believe, or protects the inventions of those they love. And everyone in the book writes, which I suppose is no accident. For a long time — almost a year — I wrote my nothings, my pages to no end. And pretty soon it became clear to me how much I wanted them to be something, how much of a piece they felt, with Leo and Alma almost opposite sides of the same coin. I don't remember when, exactly, the form of the novel crystallized in my mind. I know I worried a lot, thinking I would never bring all of the strands of it together. Until I got there, I didn't know how the book would end. But somehow it did end, almost as accidentally as it began. And now, to my surprise, it's something.

*Courtesy of W. W. Norton*

## Discussion Questions

1. Leo Gursky and Alma Singer make an unlikely pair, but what they share in common ultimately brings them together. What are the similarities between these two characters?
2. Leo fears becoming invisible. How does fiction writing prove a balm for his anxiety?
3. Explore the theme of authenticity throughout the narrative. Who's real and who's a fraud?
4. Despite his preoccupation with his approaching death, Leo has a spirit that is indefatigably comic. Describe the interplay of tragedy and comedy in *The History of Love*.
5. What distinguishes parental love from romantic love in the novel?
6. Why is it so important to Alma that Bird act normal? How normal is Alma?
7. When Alma meets Leo, she calls him the "oldest man in the world." Does his voice sound so ancient?
8. Uncle Julian tells Alma, "Wittgenstein once wrote that when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it." How does this philosophical take on the artistic process relate to the impulse to write in *The History of Love*?
9. Many different narrators contribute to the story of *The History of Love*. What makes each of their voices unique? How does Krauss seam them together to make a coherent novel?
10. Survival requires different tactics in different environments. Aside from Alma's wilderness guidelines, what measures do the characters in the novel adopt to carry on?
11. Most all of the characters in the novel are writers — from Isaac Moritz to Bird Singer. Alma's mother is somewhat exceptional, as she works as a translator. Yet she is not the only character to transform others' words for her creative practice. What are the similarities and differences between an author and a translator?
12. What are the benefits of friendship in the novel? Why might Alma feel more comfortable remaining Misha's friend rather than becoming his girlfriend?
13. The fame and adulation Isaac Moritz earns for his novels represent the rewards many writers hope for, while Leo, an unwitting ghostwriter, remains unrecognized for his work. What role does validation play in the many acts of writing in *The History of Love*?

14. Leo decides to model nude for an art class in order to leave an imprint of his existence. He writes to preserve the memories of his love for Alma Mereminski. Yet drawings and novels are never faithful renditions of the truth. Do you recognize a process of erasure in the stories he tells us?
15. Why might Krauss have given her novel the title *The History of Love*, the same as that of the fictional book around which her narrative centers?

*Courtesy of W. W. Norton*