



The History of Love

Nicole Krauss

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Fourteen-year-old Alma Singer is trying to find a cure for her mother's loneliness. Believing she might discover it in an old book her mother is lovingly translating, she sets out in search of its author. Across New York an old man called 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...

The History of Love Details

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From Reader Review The History of Love for online ebook

Katie says

Leo is the obvious charmer of this novel, an elderly man who escapes the Nazis as a boy and eventually follows the love of his life to America where he discovers she has married someone else. Leo holds the torch for Alma throughout his long life. He has also written a novel, *The History of Love*, the manuscript of which he entrusted to a friend and believes forever lost. His novel is the holy spirit of this novel. Every character is profoundly affected by it. Leo didn't quite charm me as much as Krauss wanted. I found some of the humour too slapstick. It was Alma who won me over.

Alma is the second narrator. She is named after the heroine of Leo's book which her father loved. Except the book isn't credited as being authored by Leo and it was published in Chile in Spanish. The first mystery in a succession surrounding this book. Her father is dead when the narrative begins. Alma is a brilliant humorous portrait of an adolescent girl who has lost her father and is dealing with a grief-stricken mother and a traumatised younger brother. Her mother is a translator and is excited when she is commissioned to translate *The History of Love* into English.

All the characters live obsessively in the past. It's a novel about lost edens, about coming to terms with the present when the past is more inspiring, more magical. But because of its humour and vitality Krauss does a fabulous job of making the present a constant cause for celebration.

It's one of those novels that, despite its fabulous labyrinthine structure and fresh lively prose, relies very heavily on its charm. It's up there with *A Gentleman in Moscow* as the most charming novel I've ever read. Krauss probably overeggs the mystery within a mystery (or book within a book) motif, especially towards the end when she drafts in Alma's brother to contribute some barmy detective work. But ultimately a lovely heartwarming novel written with fizzing joie de vivre about the joys, sorrows and compensations of love.

Brina says

One of the last books I read in 2017 was Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One Own*. In this series of essays, Woolf maintains that if a woman has a room of her own in which to write, then she is more than capable of producing the same if not greater works than men. While pondering my 2018 classics bingo and what book to use as a free square, my thoughts turned to Nicole Krauss. I finally discovered Krauss last year, having read both *Great House* and *Forest Dark*. The prose in both novels was superb, leading literary critics to dub Krauss as one of the greatest Jewish writers since Kafka. Krauss has a desk of her own in which to write, discussing it at length in *Great House*. I decided it would be appropriate to use my bingo free square for her *History of Love*, another of her novels that weaves together multiple plot lines in Kafka like fashion.

Leopold Gursky is approaching the age of his death. As he nears his final hour, he can not help but reminisce about his childhood home in Slonim near Minsk and his boyhood friends Bruno Schulz- real life author of *Streets of Crocodiles*- and Zvi Litvinoff. All three men decided upon careers in writing in their youth before the Nazis invaded Poland and shattered their dreams. Before Jewish life in Slonim ended, young Leopold Gursky fell in love with Alma Mereminski. With a name meaning soul and a body strikingly beautiful, Gursky decided at age ten that Mereminski would be the one true love of his life, even carving their initials into a special tree. The young lovebirds knew that their love was something special; however, the Nazis

posed an even greater threat, and the Mereminski family fled to New York in 1941, not before Alma became pregnant with Leo's child; something neither was aware of.

Hiding in the forest for the duration of the war, Leo reached New York years later and learned about his son's existence. Named Isaac after a great Jewish Russian writer, the boy would go on to become a prolific writer in his own right yet pain Leo for the rest of his life. Prior to going into hiding, Leo had written a manuscript that was close to his heart entitled *The History of Love*. He entrusted Zvi Litvinoff with this book for safekeeping, knowing that Litvinoff was fortunate enough to be leaving for the safety of Chile. Little did Gursky know that years later Litvinoff would change the language from Yiddish to Spanish and pass off this eloquent book as his own.

Years later, fourteen year old Alma Singer, named for the protagonist in *History of Love*, stumbles across a letter from one Jacob Marcus who is asking Alma's mother Charlotte to translate the book from Spanish to English. The Singer family has been grieving over the death of their husband/father Daniel for the last seven years, and Alma believes that translating this book would make her mother happy again. As she discovers discarded translations in the trash, Alma undergoes a personal quest to discover who her namesake was and why this protagonist named Alma profoundly moved her father to gift his copy of *The History of Love* to her mother. In this process of self discovery, Alma unearths many answers as well as questions about both her father, her namesake, and their past.

In true Krauss fashion, she weaves together these three plot lines without either protagonist knowing of each other's existence. Gursky lives inside his memories hoping for one chance meeting with his son, who has no idea who his real father is. Alma is also searching for Alma Mereminski or someone who can provide clues as to who she was. Encouraged by her uncle to stop constantly grieving for her father, she is urged to step outside of her comfort zone of writing and books. As she matures, Alma learns clues about the *History of Love*, her father, and herself. Meanwhile, Krauss intersperses the sections about Gursky and Singer with the story of Litvinoff's life in Chile and how *History of Love* came to be. All three stories are moving and eventually come to a nexus toward the novel's denouement.

As with Nicole Krauss' two other novels that I have read, in *History of Love* I experienced mature literary fiction which had a profound impact on me. I think I was moved the most by this novel because I have a daughter named Alma and I was touched by the protagonist Alma's capacity to love amidst her grieving. This added personal twist seems to be a page out of Krauss' mature style of writing that I have come to love and look forward to. She has certainly done well given a room of her own in which to write, and has become a leading contemporary literary fiction author. Having caught up with her novels, I happily anticipate the day she publishes her next novel, whenever that may be.

5 stars

Emily May says

I tend to be an emotional reader and my ratings reflect that. I finish books filled with excitement or sadness or intense dislike and write equally passionate reviews/rants, often including snazzy gifs to make my point. This is why some classics get 1 star and J.K. Rowling gets 5 stars and even *Twilight* gets 2 stars - I feel it's almost impossible to objectively judge quality of writing and literary value, so I usually rate based on the emotional effect the book had on me. That being said, I occasionally think there are some books that are just built on a clever concept and become better the more you sit and think about what you've just read.

In my opinion, *The History of Love* is one of those books.

For one thing, this novel is something of a work of art. The graphic design - even of the dedications page - feels important to the novel without seeming overly gimmicky. I've actually always loved the concept of a book within a book: when a book, which forms part of the plot, also ties in with the physical book in your hands (or ebook, perhaps).

In this case, the story features a book entitled - you guessed it - *The History of Love*, which carries an obituary at the end identical to the one at the end of this book. The real message behind the story is that by writing about things and stories, people who are dead and experiences that are long past are given the opportunity to live on through words. The fictional *The History of Love* in the story stays alive across time and continents because people read it and keep the memories alive. The implication with the ending of this book is that Krauss is doing the same and encouraging readers to keep Leo and his story alive.

Another thing I love is having very different stories that run parallel to one another and intersect in ways you wouldn't imagine. I like the exploration of how small, subtle things can shape people's lives and how one unsuccessful author can have such a huge effect on the life of someone they never met. I guess in some ways it did make me feel quite emotional, but it took some thinking about first.

I found Leo Gursky to be exactly the kind of character who evokes sympathy from me, but especially within this kind of context. We are introduced to him as an aging and extremely lonely man who is preoccupied with his own mortality and impending death. Once upon a time, Leo lived in Poland, fell in love with a woman called Alma, and wrote her a book he called *The History of Love* (which he believes was lost in a flood). But with fascism on the rise in Germany, however, Alma's father sends her to the United States where she builds a new life that Leo isn't a part of.

When Leo finally makes it to the USA, he has no place in Alma's life and must forge a new lonely existence in a strange country. Meanwhile, another story is taking place somewhere completely different. A teenage girl called Alma was named after the character in *The History of Love* - her parents' favourite book that was, in fact, published - and she is currently trying to deal with the death of her father. In yet another parallel story, Zvi Litvinoff is the man who stole and published Leo's manuscript and now feels a terrible guilt for doing so. All these lives move alongside one another, rarely actually touching, but making waves for the others all the same.

For me, the real message here is about the power of words and stories. How they can shape lives and have long-term effects that most of us don't recognise as they're affecting us. It's about the power that lies in being able to tell your story and having it be heard. **It took me a while to compile my thoughts, but I highly recommend this book for those looking for a thought-provoking little read.**

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Cecily says

“He was a great writer. He fell in love. It was his life.”

The Simplest Questions Are the Hardest to Answer

1. What is love?
2. Who am I?
3. Is there a word for everything?
4. What sort of book is this?
5. What is a palaeontologist?

5. What is a Palaeontologist?

“If he took a complete, illustrated guide to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, shred it into a hundred pieces, cast them into the wind from the museum’s steps, let a few weeks pass, went back and scoured Fifth Avenue and Central Park for as many surviving scraps as he could find, then tried to reconstruct the history of painting, including schools, styles, genres, and names of painters from his scraps, that would be like being a palaeontologist.”

This beautiful book is a similar cornucopia of fragments. The narratives have different textures, colours, size, shape, weight, mood, and style. They connect in often unexpected ways: pieces may split, run parallel, then diverge, or be reunited. **And yet.** The result is wondrous, strange, and deceptively simple.

4. What Sort of Book is This?

“A kind of half-light in which the reader can project his or her own imagination.”

It is ostensibly about love, but is at least as much about surviving loss and postponing death. It’s also about identity. **And yet.** The book itself has no single identity: love stories, investigative journal, self-help book, memoir, philosophical musings, historical fiction, bildungsroman, quest, survival manual, teenage diary, spiritual metaphor...

It is like Newton’s Third Law interpreted as poetic allegory. Every force is counterbalanced by an equal and opposite force: writing and reading, truth and lies, taking and giving, youth and age, future and past, hope and despair, hiding and being seen, and ultimately, life and death.

3. Is There a Word for Everything?

“When will you learn that there isn’t a word for everything?” a reader says to a writer. Long ago, “sometimes people felt things and, because there was no word for them, they went unmentioned.” Trying to describe the emotion of being moved “must have been like trying to catch something invisible”. Years later, the writer calls a book “Words for Everything”.

Many characters read, and all the main characters write, whether for publication or not, one “because an undescribed world was too lonely”. **And yet.** The bigger issue is the things that cannot be said, are not said, or are lost in transit or translation (whether by accident or design). Silence. Gaps. Absence. Loss.

“So many words get lost. They leave the mouth and lose their courage, wandering aimlessly until they are swept into the gutter like dead leaves.”

There are three main narrators, but secondary sources (paratexts?), often with unknown or misattributed authorship, are key to the plot: letters, photos, obituaries, drawings, and books that may be “not unlike the

truth". Things are further muddled by mentions of real-life people (JL Borges, for instance), people who are real in Krauss' book and are central to works of fiction within it, and a couple of characters who may not be real, even in that fictional realm. Where is truth?

2. Who Am I?

I thought I knew who I was. I don't need to investigate or assert the truth of my identity in any legalistic sense, but like Alma S, I'm named after someone. Unlike her, I chose to claim my name for myself, rather than learn more about the one whose name I bear.

And yet. Of all the labels I can ascribe myself, many are in relation to others: mother, daughter, wife, friend, even English, British, European. I am not myself alone - even when it might feel like it. I can claim membership of numerous collective identities. Even as a reader, I am connected to other readers, as well as authors and their creations.

Silence. Gaps. Absence. Loss

"I lost the sound of laughter. I lost a pair of shoes... I lost the only woman I wanted to love. I lost years. I lost books. I lost the house where I was born. And I lost Isaac. So who is to say that somewhere along the way... I didn't also lose my mind?"

The characters on these pages have variously lost lovers, a parent, a child, their homeland, their health, their mission, and acknowledgement of their authorship, and some are concerned with extinctions at a species-wide level. **And yet.** Like Tennyson's Ulysses, they continue "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield".

Survival may happen by accident, but it usually continues by will. While some focus on practical skills, most concentrate on ways to enhance and prolong life, and thus delay death - whether their own or someone else's.

And yet. Krauss offers no easy answers, or even any definite ones. Just as there are many permutations to define who we are, so there are many, sometimes contradictory, ways to endure loss:

Notice and be noticed - or hide to survive?

Keep things the same - or change everything?

Acknowledge and remember - or forget in order to live?

Tell people you love them - or ask them to "Love me less"?

Look forward - or look back?

Develop rituals and superstitions - or apply cold logic?

"Sacrifice the world" to "to hold on to a certain feeling"

Fill the gaps with facts or fiction - or...

Learn to appreciate the beauty found in absence: the silence between notes of music, the pauses of punctuation:

"Where he saw a page of words, his friend saw the field of hesitations, black holes, and possibilities between the words. Where his friend saw dappled light, the felicity of flight, the sadness of gravity, he saw the solid form of the common sparrow."

Image of leaf/bird by Ukrainian architect Oleg Shuplyak.

This isn't a trite message about seeing the silver lining, but about finding a different way to see, to experience, to live, while acknowledging and appreciating who or what is missing.

"He learned to live with the truth. Not to accept it, but to live with it."

1. What is Love?

I am fortunate that the tragedies in my life have been minor compared with those experienced by the characters here. The cultural context and the smattering of Yiddish words are largely unfamiliar to me, too. **And yet.** Krauss spoke to me from these pages: to me, of me, and of others.

"I tried to make sense of things. It could be my epitaph."

Sometimes, even if I've really enjoyed a book, I find myself thinking **"And yet."**

Not with this. Not even a little bit.

I guess that means it's perfect - even if I can't adequately explain why, nor answer this final question.

I am a reader. Krauss is a writer. I am in awe.

Quotes

- "Once upon a time, there was a boy who loved a girl, and her **laughter** was a question he wanted to spend his whole life answering."
- "The boy became a man who became invisible. In this way he escaped death."
- "At times I believed that the last page of my book and the last page of my life were one and the same."
- "The truth is a thing I invented so I could live."
- "All I want is not to die on a day when I went unseen."
- "The words of our childhood [Yiddish]... became strangers to us... Life demanded a new language."
- "The traffic lights bled into the puddles."
- "Life is a beauty... and a **joy** forever." Later, "Life is beautiful... and a **joke** forever."
- "In the most important moment of his life he had chosen the wrong sentence."
- "What is not known about Zvi Litvitoff is endless... These things were lost to oblivion like so much about so many who are born and die without anyone ever taking the time to write it all down."
- "Holding hands... is a way to remember how it feels to say nothing together."
- "Some were bought and read, many were bought and not read, some were given as gifts, some sat fading in bookstore windows serving as landing docks for flies, some were marked up with pencil, and a good many were sent to the paper compactor, where they were shredded to a pulp along with other unread or unwanted book, their sentences parsed and minced in the machine's spinning blades."
- A writer imagines books "As a flock of... homing pigeons that could flap their wings and return to him to report on how many tears shed, how many laughs, how many passages read aloud, how many cruel closings of the cover after barely reading a page, how many never opened at all."
- "Only now my son was gone did I realise how much I'd been living for him."
- "I've always arrived too late for my life."
- "I thought it would be strange to live in the world without her in it. **And yet.** I'd gotten used to living with her memory a long time ago."
- "The door between the lives we could have led and the lives we had led had shut."
- "The grammar of my life:... wherever there appears a plural, correct for the singular."
- Not everyone stays in love:
JM married young "before we knew enough about disappointment, and once we did we found we reminded each other of it."
Another says, "It's hard to imagine any kind of anything - happiness or otherwise - without her. I've lived with Frances so long."

- “She seemed to pull light and gravity to the place where she stood.”
- “Perhaps this is what it means to be a father - to teach your child to live without you. If so, no one was a greater father than I.”
- “At the end, all that’s left of you are your possessions... Perhaps that’s why I hoarded the world: with the hope that when I died, the sum total of my things would suggest a life larger than the one I lived.”
- “To paint a leaf, you have to sacrifice the whole landscape.”
- “After my Uncle Julian left, my mother became more withdrawn, or maybe a better word would be *obscure*, as in faint, unclear, distant.”
- “In another room, my mother slept curled next to the warmth of a pile of books.”
- “FOR MY GRANDPARENTS who taught me the opposite of disappearing and FOR JONATHAN, my life.”
- “Once upon a time, there was a boy who loved a girl, and her **kiss** was a question he wanted to spend his whole life answering.”

Further Notes

I have jotted down lists about the story, characters, and themes, showing the many and complex connections, [HERE](#), but it is not a review (this one is), and it's full of spoilers.

Reread

Read in January 2016 and again in July 2016. This review was updated slightly, and my further notes/appendix one significantly.

The reread was a bit like watching *The Sixth Sense* for the second or subsequent time: at least as good, but utterly different. The multi-threaded plot is so cleverly woven, and once you know the pattern, you spot all the little threads early on. In particular, on first reading, I didn't pay much attention to the irritating and self-important little brother, so his actual importance came as something of a shock. Knowing the outcome meant I was more interested in and sympathetic to him, and even more appreciative of the book as a whole.

Image sources

A heart, like the one used to represent Leo Gursky:

<https://openclipart.org/image/2400px...>

Leaf/bird:

<http://amazingdata.com/amazing-pictur...>

Sansanee says

Have you ever felt so moved that it's as if you're possessed? Reading *The History of Love* was like having my chest cracked open, the words flooding into me.

Some passages I loved:

The floorboards creaked under my weight. There were books everywhere. There were pens, and a blue glass vase, an ashtray from the Dolder Grand in Zurich, the rusted arrow of a weather vane, a little brass

hourglass, sand dollars on the windowsill, a pair of binoculars, an empty wine bottle that served as a candle holder, wax melted down the neck. I touched this thing and that. At the end, all that's left of you are your possessions. Perhaps that's why I've never been able to throw anything away. Perhaps that's why I hoarded the world: with the hope that when I died, the sum total of my things would suggest a life larger than the one I lived.

And this: *Every year, the memories I have of my father become more faint, unclear, and distant. Once they were vivid and true, then they became like photographs, and now they are more like photographs of photographs. But sometimes, at rare moments, a memory of him will return to me with such suddenness and clarity that all the feeling I've pushed down for years springs out like a jack-in-the-box....*

One more line, one that caused the words to swim on the page for me: "The truth is the thing I invented so I could live."

The novel unfolds through several character viewpoints, through different narrative forms - first person accounts, journal entries, excerpts from a novel within the novel itself called *The History of Love*, even poetry. There is a literary mystery, at the heart of which is a love story that inspires other love stories, so that the novel itself is a history of love.

Matthew says

Nicole Krauss is married to Jonathan Safran Foer. They both live in Park Slope, Brooklyn, and they both write clever, critically acclaimed novels featuring preciously innocent narrators, magical realism, and some safe postmodern "experiments" (blank pages, pictures, excessive repetition, etc.) that you'd notice just by flipping through. I loved Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, liked his *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* okay, and liked Krauss's *History of Love* a little less. I'm wondering now if my appreciation for *Everything is Illuminated* (and my waning appreciation for the other two books) is due to the fact that I read it first. I hope not.

Here there are three narrators: Leo Gursky, a Holocaust survivor and sometimes writer, living alone in New York, waiting to die; 14-year-old Alma Singer, a precocious girl who has to deal not only with her father's death but with her mother's subsequent depression as well; and a third person omniscient narrator who relates the story of a little-known book called (wait for it) *The History of Love*. It goes without saying that these characters are connected in ways they don't understand (hint: by the mysterious book) and that somehow this connection, once made, will help everyone involved. That's all fine.

Things, however, don't come together as well as they should at the end, despite some beautiful writing, and the book that lies at the core of this story, the book that has lived on for generations, changing lives along the way, is really just an annoyingly simple allegory about the genesis of "love" and other "feelings". Krauss has obvious talent, but it isn't enough to corral this messy pastiche of a novel.

"I try to make a point of being seen. Sometimes when I'm out, I'll buy a juice even though I'm not thirsty. If a store is crowded I'll even go so far as dropping my change all over the floor, the nickels and dimes skidding in every direction."

Eve says

"If you don't know what it feels like to have someone you love put a hand below your bottom rib for the first time, what chance is there for love?"

What a reading experience! I went into this book knowing absolutely nothing about its premise. All I knew was that it is highly regarded by many of my Goodreads friends. What you should know is that right after I finished reading it, I spent the rest of the day rereading and underlining passages and clues I might have overlooked. Did you find yourself doing the same thing after watching *The Sixth Sense* for the first time? Don't lie!

This book is a compelling, heartwarming study of loneliness, loss and adolescence. At least ten to fifteen characters are inadvertently drawn together by a book published soon after World War II called *The History of Love*. The mystery behind its author and publication, and the different lives it touches up to present day unfold in a series of personal journal entries. Central to the novel are a group of teenagers who each survive and/or escape the Nazi occupation of Poland only to find the overwhelming loneliness and grief that awaits them when they attempt to "start over."

I guess it depends on what you're going through at the moment, but this book just made my heart hurt so much. Not enough to cry, but enough to remind me that I am human, and that we all have personal circumstances that we're struggling to overcome. Sometimes one good day in a gloomy month is so precious that we dread the setting of the sun. The more I think about it, the more questions I have. Love is such a complex thing, whether it's fulfilled, reciprocated, or never comes to fruition...it can be the thing that pushes us forward and makes us get out of bed every morning. That is pretty powerful, and Krauss did a magnificent job of relaying that message.

Jon says

How about the history of me bawling my face off.

Elyse says

FANTASTIC.....

A FAVORITE.....

I'll read it again!!!!!!

I LOVE THIS BOOK!!!!!!!!!

Candi says

"All I want is not to die on a day when I went unseen."

Leopold Gursky, Holocaust survivor, is a lonely old man who dreams of his long-lost love Alma Mereminski and survives each day with the desire to just be noticed by someone. He has one single soul he can call a friend in this world, Bruno, his "old faithful". Alma Singer is a fourteen year old girl who lost her father and whose heart aches for the mother that can barely get out of bed and make it to the next day - *"My mother is lonely even when we're around her"*. Alma and her brother, Bird, have each other, but Alma needs her mother to be happy and live in this world once again, not simply by getting by with just her memories. Then comes the day when Alma's mother is asked to translate a book called "The History of Love" – the very same book that Alma's father gave to her mother all those years ago and the one that provided the inspiration behind Alma's own name. Alma begins a quest to find a partner for her mother and becomes involved in researching the background of this book. We also meet Zvi Litvinoff, a Polish refugee living in South America. Litvinoff, too, suffers from his own private sorrow and grief, but is the fortunate recipient of loyalty and love from a woman named Rosa. Litvinoff has achieved some fame in his life with the publication of his book, "The History of Love". There it is again, that book... "The History of Love."

I thought this book was brilliantly written. There is a puzzle to solve here and we are only given snippets of the answers a little at a time. I must say that you have to be ready to devote your full attention to this book – so choose a time when you can do just that! I am very glad I read this after the holiday season; otherwise I admit that I may have gotten lost through the intricate weaving of the threads of this story. However, if you can devote your time and truly focus, the payoff is well worth it!

Krauss's novel exudes such a feeling of loneliness and loss. My heart ached for Leo Gursky and young Alma Singer. There are moments of humor, however, when Leo exerts such efforts to get himself noticed. One scene had me laughing to myself and I won't soon get that one out of my head! Of course, love is a central theme in this book - love for a soul-mate, love for a mother, love for a son, love for a father, and love for the friend that helps you get through each day. The writing is exquisite and often quite lyrical. After reading this, it struck me that one cannot simply survive on memories alone, no matter how precious those memories may be. Trying to sustain oneself with the past keeps us from really living in the present. I will not soon forget **The History of Love**.

"Crossing the street, I was hit head-on by a brutal loneliness. I felt dark and hollow. Abandoned, unnoticed, forgotten, I stood on the sidewalk, a nothing, a gatherer of dust. People hurried past me. And everyone who walked by was happier than I. I felt the old envy. I would have given anything to be one of them."

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

Original Comments (Pre-Review):

I would like to review this novel more formally in the near future, but to do so I'll have to flick through it and refresh my memory.

My reaction at the time was that it was one of the best novels I had ever read.

Nicole Krauss understands people and love and feelings and she writes about them in a word perfect way.

As a reader, I am prepared to go wherever she wants to take me. I will trust her judgement.

I have recently watched a few of her videos and interviews on Youtube and she's also someone who I enjoy listening to when she speaks about her craft and her choice of subject matter.

This probably sounds very gushy and naive, but I promise to write something more considered.

Review (September 26, 2011):

Warning about Spoilers

I have tried to minimise and identify plot spoilers.

However, this is an emotional response to the novel, and might reveal significance that you might want to enjoy by way of your own detection.

I hope that my review doesn't spoil anything for you, or if it does, that you quickly forget it.

Lives Lived and Measured by the Deli Counter

Nicole Krauss' "The History of Love" is one of my favourite novels of all time.

I read it once pre-Good Reads, and have just re-read it, so that I could review it. And I will read it again. Often.

That doesn't count the numerous times I have fingered through the book seeking out passages and expressions and meanings and significances that stimulated or appealed to me.

It's an exquisitely crafted tale of love, loss, longing, hope, defiance, resilience and, it has to be said, delusion.

I love its Jewish wisdom and concern with the family, I love its Yiddish rhythms and expressions and humour and playfulness, I love the window it offers into the millennia of Jewish culture and enrichment of the world.

When I open the pages of this book, I feel like I am walking into the best delicatessen or pastry shop in the world.

Everything is there on display, everything is on offer (we can eat in or take away!).

It's all been made with consummate skill and affection, it's designed to satiate our appetite, to enrich our lives.

I look at it all, knowing it will feed us, it will sustain us, it will revive our energy.

It's food for thought, it's food for life.

I'm sure it will help us live our own lives and tell our own tales, it will equip each of us to tell our own History of Love.

I am wearing my Second Avenue Deli t-shirt as I think and type this.

Legend

“The History of Love” is written from four different perspectives, each of which is represented by a different symbol at the beginning of the chapter:

Leo Gursky = a heart

Alma Singer = a compass

Omniscient Narrator = an open book

Bird (Alma’s brother) = an ark

Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time, there was a Polish boy named Leo Gursky who loved a girl across the field named Alma Mereminski.

“Her laughter was a question he wanted to spend his whole life answering”.

He asked her to marry him when they were both still only ten.

“He promised her he would never love another girl as long as he lived.

“What if I die? She asked. Even then, he said.”

He carved “A+L” in the bark of a tree and had someone take a photo of the two of them in front of that tree.

He writes three books for her, all in their native Yiddish, the last being “The History of Love”.

Book 1: this one was about Slonim (Alma says, *“she liked it better when I made things up”*)

Book 2: he made up everything for this one (Alma says, *“maybe I shouldn’t make up everything, because that made it hard to believe anything”*)

Book 3: “The History of Love” (Leo says, *“I didn’t write about real things and I didn’t write about imaginary things. I wrote about the only things I knew.”*)

In July, 1941, that boy, who was now a man of 21, avoided murder by the German Einsatzgruppen, because he was lying on his back in the woods thinking about the girl.

“You could say it was his love for her that saved his life.”

Alma’s father had already saved her by sending her to America.

Unbeknown to either of them, Alma was pregnant with their son, Isaac, when she left.

Oblivious to the birth of his son, Leo lives in hiding surrounded by Nazi atrocities.

Letters back and forth fail to reach their destination.

He even writes his own obituary, when he is in the depths of illness and despair.

By the time Leo finally escapes to New York himself, five years later, he has become an invisible man in the face of death.

He traces Alma, only to learn that she has had their child and that, believing he was dead, she has married another man.

He is ecstatic that “our sum had come to equal a child” (“A+L=I”).

He asks her once to “come with me”, she can’t and he does the hardest thing he’s ever done in his life: he picked up his hat and walked away.

He has little involvement with Alma or Isaac after that, except as an occasional remote observer.

And yet.

He continues to love Alma, though he now has another quest: to determine whether Isaac, who becomes a famous writer in his own right, ever knew about his father and that he wrote “The History of Love”.

Once Upon Another Timeline

Once upon another time (it is the year 2000 when Leo is 80 and believes he is approaching death), a precocious 15 year old girl goes by the name Alma Singer.

Her mother, Charlotte, a literary translator who specialises in Spanish literature, named her after every girl in a book Alma’s father David gave her mother called “The History of Love”.

It is written in Spanish, and the “author” is Zvi Litvinoff, a friend of Leo’s who, after Leo left Poland, escaped to Chile, carrying with him the original Yiddish manuscript of “The History of Love” for safekeeping.

Alma’s father died when she was seven.

Like Leo, Charlotte has continued to love him (“*my mother never fell out of love with my father*”) and has never felt the need or desire to love another man.

When Charlotte disposes of some of his possessions, Alma rescues an old sweater and decides to wear it for the rest of her life.

She manages to wear it for 42 days straight.

Alma is on her own quest: to know her own father better, to help her younger brother Bird to know him too, to find a lover for her mother and to learn more about her namesake in “The History of Love”.

In the midst of this assortment of delicacies, Charlotte receives a letter asking her to translate “The History of Love” from Spanish to English.

Family Plot

I have included the above plot details, despite my normal reluctance to summarise plots in reviews.

Please don’t construe any of the details as spoilers. Most of them are revealed in the first forty pages, only not necessarily in that order.

And I have left out a lot of the back story, so that I could set up this context, that family is fundamental to the plot, to “The History of Love”, not to mention history itself.

The Paleontological Detective

Every crime needs its own detective and every detective needs their own methodology, even a child detective.

Nicole Krauss twice mentions the task of paleontologists.

“Bird asked what a paleontologist was and Mom said that if he took a complete, illustrated guide to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, shred it into a hundred pieces, cast them into the wind from the museum’s steps, let a few weeks pass, went back and scoured Fifth Avenue and Central Park for as many surviving scraps as he could find, then tried to reconstruct the history of painting, including schools, styles, genres, and names of painters from his scraps, that would be like a paleontologist.”

“The only difference is that paleontologists study fossils in order to figure out the origin and evolution of life.”

“Every fourteen-year-old should know something about where she comes from, my mother said. It wouldn’t do to go around without the faintest clue of how it all began.”

Here, the historical quest, the puzzle depends on your perspective.

And there are two, the young and the old, the present and the past joining together to construct the future.

For Alma, the young, the puzzle is what happened before “The History of Love” found its way into her family?

For Leo, the old, it is what happened after he wrote “The History of Love”?

Both have to sit down, sometimes patiently, sometimes impatiently, and work their own methodical way towards a solution of their own puzzle.

In a way, their problem is the same: the problem of family.

Leo loses a (prospective) wife and a son, Charlotte loses a husband, Alma loses a father.

They have all lost the story of their family, of their love.

Here, the novel is symbolic of the fate of the Jewish Family in the face of the Holocaust and the Jewish Diaspora.

The Jewish Family has been dispersed all over the world, family members have been separated, the spine of their love and connections and cultures and books and stories has been severed.

Their book has been shred into a hundred pieces and cast into the wind.

Somebody has to scour the world, to find the surviving “scraps”, piece it all together again and reconstruct their history and their culture.

And it will take a paleontologist. Or two.

You Can Only Lose What You Once Had

Leo once had Alma. He had a lover whom he loved and who loved him.

He lost her, but he kept his love alive, just as he hoped that the object of his love was still alive (she actually lived until 1995).

The novel is almost mythical or mythological in the way it tells this tale.

Charlotte tells young Alma: “*The first woman may have been Eve, but the first girl will always be Alma.*”

So Leo and Alma are almost posited against Adam and Eve as the first boy and girl, the first to have mortal parents, the first children who ever fell in love with each other, the first to create a new family.

Without the object of his love, he wrote about it.

He kept his love alive, his love kept him alive.

As he wrote in his own obituary, “*He was a great writer. He fell in love. It was his life.*”

And yet. His life stalled when he lost the object of his love.

He ceased to live for any purpose other than the preservation of his love.

His love became a fabrication that substituted for and subsumed his life.

He appears to be in two minds about this:

On the one hand, what more to life is there but love?

"I thought we were fighting for something more than her love, he said....What is more than her love? I asked."

On the other hand, he recognised that he needed his invention in order to survive, that reality would have killed him.

"What do I want to tell you? The truth? What is the truth? That I mistook your mother for my life? No. Isaac, I said. The truth is the thing I invented so I could live."

And again, his confrontation of the truth:

"The truth is that she told me that she couldn't love me. When she said goodbye, she was saying goodbye forever. And yet. I made myself forget. I don't know why. I keep asking myself. But I did."

And:

"And now at the end of my life, I can barely tell the difference between what is real and what I believe."

Perhaps, the truth is whatever works for you.

“My Friend Bruno”

Leo constantly refers to his friend Bruno.

I have only one head, but I am in two minds as to whether he is real or make believe.

He might be a self-generated survival tool.

He is modelled on Bruno Schulz, the Polish author of "The Street of Crocodiles", which is referred to a number of times in the novel.

He died in 1942, and Leo even mentions that he died in 1941 in the novel.

He attempts suicide in the novel, unsuccessfully, so there might be a sense in which he is a darker twin of Leo, who nevertheless manages to prolong his life (in the same way Zvi Litvinoff manages to prolong his life by confiscating and caring for Leo's obituary when he seemed like he was about to die).

His role diminishes as Leo embraces reality over the course of the novel.

“And Yet”

And yet. *“And yet.”*

These two words are so important to the novel.

They express Leo's defiance, his determination not to accept the hand dealt to him, his determination to avoid and evade the evil and the crime and the misfortune around him.

It is his imagination, his ability to believe in something else that allows him to achieve this:

"I remember the time I first realised I could make myself see something that wasn't there...And then I turned the corner and saw it. A huge elephant, standing alone in the square. I knew I was imagining it. And yet. I wanted to believe...So I tried...And I found I could."

He has to imagine a better world than the one he has inherited or the one that his world has become.

It was his love that enabled him to stop thinking and worrying about death, to stop worrying about the inevitability of his fate.

To this extent, love is what keeps us alive, it is our heartbeat, it is the reason our heart beats (even if occasionally it causes our heart to skip a beat).

Love is the defiance of death.

It's not just something we do while waiting to die, it's something that keeps us alive.

It keeps individuals alive, it keeps families alive, it keeps cultures alive and it keeps communities alive.

Putting Your Legacy into Words

The great tragedy within Leo's life after Alma is that he believes his greatest creation, "The History of Love", has been lost.

In fact, it has been misappropriated, albeit without ill will.

Again, I don't mean this to be a spoiler. We, the readers, already know that it must exist in some form, if Alma's family can read it and Charlotte can be asked to translate it from Spanish to English.

Obviously, part of the resolution of the puzzle for Leo must be the recovery of his legacy.

It is one of the things that will bond him with the family he had (but wasn't really able to have).

The other thing we find out at the beginning of the novel is that Leo has had a heart attack that has killed one quarter of his heart.

This reinvigorates his fear of death and the concern that he might die an invisible man, survived only by "an apartment full of shit".

And yet, it also reinvigorates his creativity (which had stalled as well).

Within months, he starts to write again, 57 years after he had previously stopped (possibly when he had finished "The History of Love" and had become an invisible man during the War?).

What he writes ends up being 301 pages long, "it's not nothing".

It's his memoir, starting off "once upon a time", in the manner of a fable or a fairy tale, which he almost calls "Laughing and Crying and Writing and Waiting", but ends up naming "Words for Everything".

It's a polite, but defiant, retort to Alma's childhood challenge, "When will you learn that there isn't a word

for everything?"

Maybe there isn't a word for everything, but as "The History of Love" itself illustrates, in the hands of the right person, it is possible to say everything in words.

Leo sends the novel off to the address he finds for Isaac, in the hope that he will read it, only to read soon after that his only child has died.

(view spoiler)

Alma Singer

What more can I say about Alma?

She might not be blonde, she might not be beautiful, she might not be full-breasted (she's only 15), but she is an angel.

Whereas Leo is contemplative to the point of occasional melancholy, Alma is an inquisitive, optimistic, dynamic, witty breath of fresh air (perhaps, it's the way she flaps her wings?).

Her contributions to the story come in journal entries with numbered headings. (I like that!)

And yet, it has to be said that her detective skills alone are not sufficient to lead her to the denouement of this fable.

In the end, she realises that she has been searching for the wrong person.

She might be the pointer to the future, her symbol might be the compass, but she is unable to find true north alone.

If only because she wasn't present when a crucial phone call was made, the story needs her brother Bird to intervene, just like a "Lamed Vovnik" would do. (Note: look it up like I did!)

Her contribution ends up being a family affair.

Lucky for her.

Lucky Alma. Lucky Leo.

A+L

The last section of the book departs from the Legend at the beginning of this review.

Instead, it is headed with the inscription "A+L" that Leo carved into the tree in his childhood.

Each page is narrated alternately by Leo and Alma Singer.

(view spoiler)

At this most crucial time, you would think that there wasn't a word for everything, when in fact there was only one word that would suffice: "Alma".

More happens, but I'll deal with that under the SPOILER ALERT heading.

Suffice it to say that the novel affords Leo some last joy.

And who among us could deny that he earned that joy?

SPOILER ALERT

(view spoiler)

Dedication

This review is dedicated to the memory of Abe Lebewohl (the founder of the Second Avenue Deli in Manhattan) and to my daughter who turns 16 today and who lost her father in Manhattan and still hasn't found him again...And yet...he laughs and cries and writes and waits...

Jason says

I need to cut the crap with my preconceptions. Although I almost unfailingly launch into a new novel with great enthusiasm like a kid on Christmas morning, anxious to discover what hidden treasure awaits, for some reason I held out little hope for Mrs. Foer's book about a book about love. Maybe it's because books about books about love aren't usually my thing? Maybe it's because I read her husband's bestseller last year and was less than impressed? Maybe it's because I had heard somewhere that they wrote their books together (oh, how adorable!), bouncing ideas off one another and giving each other high fives, so naturally I assumed that if Mr. Foer's book was gimmicky (which it is), then *The History of Love* would surely be a major eye-roller as well, right?

Wrong.

Whatever the reason, I was clearly out of line, and for that I owe Nicole a huge apology. In this book she weaves three intersecting storylines all under a cloud of intriguing ambiguity, so even though it is understood that the stories are related, it isn't exactly clear *how* until about two-thirds of the way through. And as the stories of Leopold Gursky, Alma Singer, and Zvi Litvinoff are told to us, they leave an imprint on us even before we learn for sure who they are.

The History of Love is a gorgeous novel with gorgeous characters who do what characters do best: they love and they lose, they struggle and they fail, and if lucky they learn how to pick up the pieces and survive. For them, survival is not a destination but a journey. There's no magic cure and there's no end-all. But taken one day at a time, it is possible to live a life worth living. Krauss reminds us that all we really want is to remain visible—to be known, to be loved, and to be remembered by those who knew and loved us.

I won a copy of this book through World Book Night, a program begun in the UK last year to spread the love of reading. That program has now arrived in the US, and even though I technically shouldn't have qualified for receiving a copy of this—WBN books are supposed to have been given only to “light” readers in the hopes that they become “moderate” readers—I will make sure that it will have been worth their while by spreading my love for this book about a book about love.

Violet wells says

The great tragedy of life is this then, our friends are not allowed to finish their stories.

My second reading of this book bore out my feeling the first time I read it. The first two hundred pages are a stunningly beautiful and moving account of love and loss and the stories hidden within stories and then, of a sudden, it's as if Krauss handed the novel over to her distinctly less talented husband to finish off the book. She ruins it with the fourth of her narrators, the entirely preposterous whimsy of Bird who is a kind of identikit of Foer's equally irritating cutesy cutesy little boy narrator in *Extremely Loud*. Bird is a mistake and the attempt to add still more madcap tomfoolery and another search for a missing person, a person who doesn't exist, is just daft. Bird as a character is a joke that simply isn't funny. And to make another mystery of a mystery, to create another story with the honeycomb of stories, backfires horribly so late in the novel. I don't think I've ever read a novel that punctures so catastrophically towards the end and has left me feeling so angry and cheated.

I'd forgotten how beautiful most of this novel is. How poignantly and succinctly Krauss conveys the childhood love of two Jewish children before the Nazis arrive. How magically she recreates Leo's memory. And how alive and full of the heart is the old man recollecting himself as a boy in the narrative. Leo is a brilliant and heartwarming depiction of old age just as Alma is a fabulous evocation of adolescence.

Krauss writes brilliantly about love, in all of its forms. She's got a marvellous eye for epiphanies and evokes them with searing poetic simplicity. And the multi-layered form of the novel where three narrators are each telling missing parts of each other's stories is brilliantly achieved. It also works great as a literary detective story. Almost you have to keep a list of the clues as you're reading.

So, absolutely brilliant until Krauss' ultimate recourse to whimsy, as if she and her husband were sharing some private joke, and which comes very close to spoiling the poignant moving emotional fabric of this novel.

Dolors says

Another book about everlasting love?

How many times has the issue been discussed to death?

Thousands. And yet.

This book is about a rare kind of love; a unique one that is fathomless and can only be expressed by the delicate hands of a virtuoso that reveals in the silences between words left unsaid, between the commas and the semicolons. Because an emotion as deep as the love depicted in *The History of Love* cannot be pinned down by conventional language. Gestures, the aid of several senses working together and intuition intervening at once are required.

Tap Tap.

Nicole Krauss mingles unpretentious intellect with fresh humor and tenderness to present sobering themes such as the permanent damage the Holocaust left on survivors or the clashing of the rigid layers, individual and collective, that compose identity; and uses them as backdrop to solve the puzzle of the four non-chronological narrative voices that fly off the pages to disclose their seemingly unconnected stories.

Appearances tend to be deceitful and the key to solve this tragicomic mystery lies within the written pages of a lost –or maybe usurped?- manuscript, exhibiting a tasteful exercise of metaliterature.

Leo Gursky wants to be noticed, to be made tangible through interaction with strangers, for he has led a phantasmagorical existence that is only real in his memories of life before the war. Now an elderly man in New York, he is trapped in a deadlock between his traumatic past in occupied Poland and his insipient present. Also an aspiring writer with a vast imagination, which he misspent writing obituaries, he dreams of angels that Resemble his first and only love, *Alma M-E-R-E-M-I-N-S-K-Y...* or was it *Alma Moritz*?

Alma Singer is only fourteen-years old but very mature for her age. She has set her mind on tracking down the woman she was named after following the thread of a special book that her mother is translating into English, which was a cherished present given to her by her deceased husband, whom she still mourns seven years after his death.

Zivi Litvinoff shared his youth and his desire to become a writer with Gursky and published his only literary work, once established in Chile, because his devoted wife Rosa insisted on its precious and rare value.

The Bird is the nickname of Alma's younger brother, who believes himself to be one of the 36 holy righteous, or *lamed-Vovnik*, who is sent by the Messiah to help lost souls and he picks his sister as the

beneficiary of his mystical powers.

The pieces are set. Do you want to play?

Tap Tap.

The result of this game is what first-rate, inventive storytelling should be. Light and weighty. Witty and heartbreaking. Tragic and serene.

The result is also a cinematic alternation of overlapping story lines, which in spite of its fragmentary layout, achieves a common, poetic atmosphere capable of prevailing over the dissimilar menagerie of narrators and the atemporal maps from where they leap off the page and become real to the baffled reader.

Ultimately, the result is a profuse contemplation on the consequences of forced **Exile**, loneliness, chance and of course, the restorative, uplifting power of _____ love, words and literature that won't leave any lover of good literature indifferent.

"Really, there isn't much to say.

He was a great writer.

He fell in love.

It was his life."

Can you think of anything grander than that?

Neither can I.

Tap Tap.

Seemita says

Words.

This book is all about words – words written, words unwritten, words spoken, words unspoken, words imagined, words deleted, words carried, words discarded, words believed, words treasured. And why wouldn't it be? At the heart of this book, is the book 'The History of Love' and its author, and his many intended and unintended recipients.

Does that make the book complex? Oh no, no; it makes it *magical*. Magic, as I see, is a beautiful truth suddenly broken to us. And in Krauss' tale, she does it many times over.

Leopold Gursky is a recluse 80-years old Jewish Man of Polish origin, presently residing in America in a quiet neighbourhood whose silence is splintered by his only (and eccentric) childhood friend, Bruno. Having lost in love 60 years ago, he has survived most of his life drinking the fleeting images of his son, Isaac (a famous writer), from afar. His only wish now – his son reads the manuscript his scrawny fingers have jabbed on the typewriter in the past few years post a heart attack. In the same country but another world, lives the curious and awkward 14-year old Alma Singer who is trying hard to reignite the love her mother has relinquished after losing her husband to cancer. When a letter arrives one day from a certain Mr. Jacob Marcus, requesting her translator mother to translate 'The History of Love' from Spanish to English for a princely sum, Alma's hopes are upped – she might have found a match for her mamma, after all.

As I read page after page, the sentiments seeped into the words became clearer – like some kind of a haze that one slowly peels off a window, one brush at a time. And the scenery that emerged as a result, was a

gossamer of young dreams and old lessons, assimilating into each other to keep the magic called *love*, alive. None of the characters hurried; because love doesn't come easy, it makes us wait and pass numerous tests. It is the bird that flutters on many windows but settles on that one which shelters it across all seasons. And this love is visible, in all its pulsating vigour and dogged longevity, in Krauss' tale. The exchanges between friends, the response to tragedy, the adrenaline rush to fight impersonation, the willingness to sacrifice, the aspiration to pull off the unthinkable - the delightful narrative arc contained these themes with a mystery angle on one side and a biblio-slant on the other. And this approach imparted such a refreshing suppleness to the story that when the finale played out, I was transported to the venue and was made to feel completely at home.

From unearthing little truths about the past to embracing the extrapolations into future, this book presents *love* as an emotion that can outlive any person as long as the person, while living, never left its territory, and that includes the times he/ she chose to wear it over his/ her sleeves or hide it underneath.
