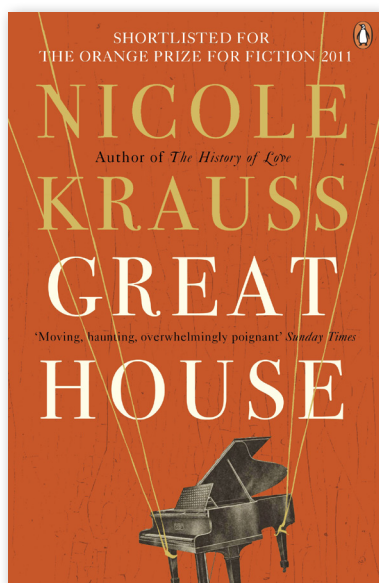


Great House

by Nicole Krauss



PLOT SUMMARY

For twenty-five years, a reclusive American novelist has been writing at the desk she inherited from a young Chilean poet who disappeared at the hands of Pinochet's secret police; one day a girl claiming to be the poet's daughter arrives to take it away, sending the writer's life reeling.

Across the ocean, in the leafy suburbs of London, a man caring for his dying wife discovers, among her papers, a lock of hair that unravels a terrible secret. In Jerusalem, an antiques dealer slowly reassembles his father's study, plundered by the Nazis in Budapest in 1944.

Connecting these stories is a desk of many drawers that exerts a power over those who possess it or have given it away. As the narrators of *Great House* make their confessions, the desk takes on more and more meaning, and comes finally to stand for all that has been taken from them, and all that binds them to what has disappeared.

Great House is a story haunted by questions: What do we pass on to our children and how do they absorb our dreams and losses? How do we respond to disappearance, destruction, and change?

Nicole Krauss has written a soaring, powerful novel about memory struggling to create a meaningful permanence in the face of inevitable loss.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Dreams permeate the characters' experiences in Krauss' novel. Dovik's story about a shark that absorbs all the nightmares of the people wired up to it is a recurring image through the novel, perhaps representing Dovik's excruciatingly empathic nature, and the collective pain and suffering of humanity that Krauss explores so well.

Nadia has a dream that her partner becomes covered in rhinoceros hide, and then, on going back to sleep, dreaming that she finds her father's body washed on up on the shore like a dead whale, only it's



a rhinoceros that she has to spear and drag along behind her. Later, Isabel dreams of Mr Weisz “hanging upside down in the pantry like a bat.” Yoav has a recurring dream where he, his sister and his father live on a wooded shore and every night the tide would wash furniture onto the beach, four poster beds and sofas dressed with seaweed.’

Including dreams as part of her characters’ complex interior worlds means that Krauss gives the reader a deeper sense of familiarity with them as three-dimensional people. Dreams show us the unconscious of a person; they show us the deep motivations and feelings belonging to a character as well as providing a kind of unspoken emotional context for characters and events that the narrators themselves might not say aloud. In dreaming of Mr Weisz as a bat, Isabel might be alluding to a somewhat predatory, vampire-like quality.

Krauss’ descriptions of the dreams are beautifully recognisable in their strangeness and poignancy, adding a masterly thread of sympathy to her character experiences, and ensuring a deep emotional connection with the reader.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Midway through the novel, Aaron says to Dovik:

“You read books on the alienation of modern man. What does modern man have on the Jews?... the Jews have been living in alienation for thousands of years. For modern man it’s a hobby.”

Alienation and loss work in different ways in *Great House*. Aaron, who has lost his wife, is alienated from his son Dovik and is desperately trying to work out how to connect to him again; Mr Weisz travels the world trying to regain the possessions that his family lost, and in so doing, remains a distant figure in his children’s lives. Lotte’s husband feels a profound sense of alienation from her when she begins seeing Daniel Varsky, but it turns out that Varsky reminds Lotte of the child she once lost. Isabel feels alienated from Yoav, who doesn’t seem to want to acknowledge that she is his girlfriend to his father.

What is Krauss saying about loss in *Great House*? Is it inevitable for everyone? Does she present the reader with neat conclusions, or leave the reader with a sense that sometimes loss and alienation can’t be cured?

QUESTIONS

How does *Great House* reflect on what it is to be Jewish, both in the past and now?

What does the desk represent to the different characters? What does it symbolise?



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What was the role of Gigi, the neglected child in the castle turret, in the story?

Isabel visits the Freud Museum in London. What significance does Freud have in the book?

NEXT STEPS

Lotte's husband gives outlines of two of her short stories. Choose one and write it – decide either to make it a modern style and setting, or write it as you think Lotte might. From the other examples of her work that Krauss describes, Lotte's stories tend to be quite dark in theme. If you decide to keep this tone, how will you create a sense of fear and foreboding? Consider your choices of sentence length, imagery and sense detail.

Alternatively, choose an item of furniture that Mr Weisz rescues and describe it in as much detail as you can. Has it lived at many different places, or been hidden away in a crate for years? Has it been damaged, or kept intact? You might do some online research to see what your chosen item of furniture looks like – study it and look at the tiny details – colour, texture, grain, marks and chips. In describing the item, you can also create a story for what happened to it and where it's been, based on any marks and wear it has. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicole Krauss is the author of the international bestsellers *Man Walks Into a Room*, *Forest Dark*, *Great House* (shortlisted for the 2011 Women's Prize for Fiction), and *The History of Love* (shortlisted for the 2006 Women's Prize for Fiction). Her short stories have been published in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *Esquire*, and *Best American Short Stories*, and were collected in *To Be a Man*. Krauss was the inaugural Writer-in-Residence at the Zuckerman Mind, Brain and Behavior Institute at Columbia University.





RECOMMENDED READS

In *To Be A Man*, Nicole Krauss explores relationships between men and women at all stages of life, and from all over the world, in ten short stories. In *This Is Not About Us*, Allegra Goodman gives the reader a story of growing up and growing old, the weight of parental expectations, and the complex connection between sisters.

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