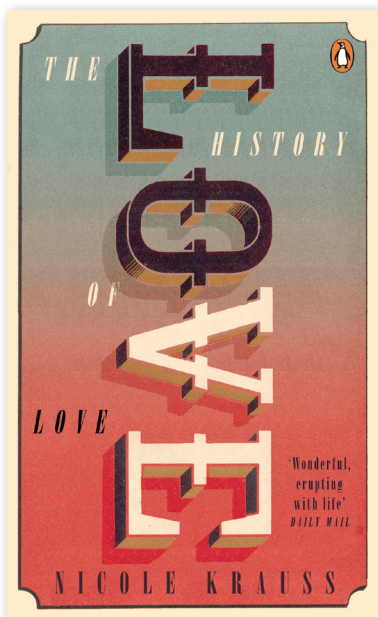


The History of Love

by Nicole Krauss



PLOT SUMMARY

Shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction 2006 and winner of the 2006 Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger, *The History of Love* by bestselling author Nicole Krauss explores the lasting power of the written word and the lasting power of love.

‘When I was born my mother named me after every girl in a book my father gave her called *The History of Love*...’

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 love lost that 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...

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Krauss’ character building in *The History of Love* is masterly, and the character of Alma Singer could be said to be one of the finest. The way that Krauss constructs Alma with a stream of consciousness narrative style means that we connect with her immediately and feel that we have a strong sense of her spunky, self-aware and wry personality.

Alma’s paragraphs are numbered, like a diary, and follow a sort of logical train of thought process that, in itself, tells us much about Alma. Alma has a scientific outlook and wants to grow up to be able to survive in the wild, like her father. Alma’s combination of humour combined with a scientific mindset endears us to her:

“Herman slipped his hand into mine, and I thought, An average of seventy-four species become extinct every day, which was one good reason but not the only one to hold someone’s hand.”



Alma reads a book called *Edible Plants and Flowers* obsessively and even teaches herself the Universal Edibility Test contained within it. This scientific approach to life might explain why her chapters are separated into numbered, discrete chunks, like facts – perhaps Alma is trying to distil order from a life which has experienced disruption with the death of her father.

Ultimately, it's Alma's enquiring mind, as we see when she decides to find Alma Mereminski, and solve the puzzle of who wrote *The History of Love*. Alma also wants to find out who Jacob Marcus is, and follows the clues to discover Leo Gursky at the end of the book.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Love of different kinds permeates Krauss' impressive and heartfelt novel. On one hand, it's Leo's undying love and yearning for Alma Mereminski that causes him to write *The History of Love* in the first place; it's also Leo's book that Alma Singer becomes obsessed with as a means to find love for her mother, who translates it. Leo's love for Alma creates a deep ripple effect, touching people across history, including Isaac Moritz, Alma Singer, Zvi Litvinoff and Bruno.

"Litvinoff watched as Gursky took her face in his hands. She paused, and then lifted her face to meet his. And as Litvinoff watched them kiss, he felt that everything that belonged to him was worthless."

Alma's quest to find love for her mother after the death of her father is a relatable impulse: she's a lonely child that wants her mother to be happy, but also wants a stable and happy family environment for herself. The spectre of her parents' love – their romance, how they met, their history as a couple – hangs over Alma. Alma herself also encounters first love with Misha, even though she sabotages it.

There is also a deep love of friendship between Leo and Bruno: as elderly men living alone, they look out for each other, and yet it also transpires that Bruno was also in love with Alma when they were young. The novel also explores the deep and abiding love Leo has for his son Isaac, also a writer, who never knew that Leo was his father.

What, ultimately, is Krauss saying about love? Is it eternal, transformative, tragic? What can it do and not do? Does love endure, and if it does, what is its purpose?

QUESTIONS

Leo's *The History of Love* exists as a book-within-a-book, inside the main story. What did you think of Leo's writing itself? Is much of it about Alma? What is Leo writing about?

Why do you think that Bird becomes so obsessed with religion, e.g. writing the Hebrew name of God on everything?



If you enjoyed this book try some of our recommended reads on the next page.

Does Leo die at the end of the book? What makes you think this?

“Once I missed six trains because I couldn’t figure out how to ask for a ticket. Another man might have just got on board. But. Not a Jew from Poland who’s afraid that if he even so much as forgets to flush the toilet he’ll get deported” – what does this say about the lasting effect of war and persecution on a person?

NEXT STEPS

Alma gives a list titled MEMORIES PASSED DOWN TO ME FROM MY FATHER, which are numbered one to ten in Hebrew. This reads quite like a poem – using the same title (or, you could substitute “mother” or “friend” for “father”) write down ten short memories you recall that person telling you about their life. Take inspiration from Alma’s list, including the tastes, smells and sounds of the memories.

Alternatively, inspired by Alma’s mother, investigate books on the shortlists and longlists for awards such as PEN’s Translation Prize, the John Calder Translation Prize and other translation prizes awarded by the Society of Authors and the International Booker Prize. What new authors will you discover? You could also consider the issues that might arise in translating a work of fiction or nonfiction, and why more works are not translated – watch authors and translators talk about translated fiction online and understand for yourself what some of the current conversations around translated fiction are. ■

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 ***Forest Dark***, Nicole Krauss tells a vibrant tale of transformation: of a man in his later years and a woman novelist, each drawn to the Levant on a journey of self-discovery. In ***Possession*** by A.S. Byatt, we have another example of a book within a book that forms a mystery for the characters to solve – in Byatt’s case, a long epic poem about the mythical mermaid Melusine, and two academics whose stories entwine around hers.

Want more? Our website is packed full of book recommendations, reading lists, author interviews and more. And our Women’s Prize library is brimming with books, both fiction and non-fiction, that will satisfy every reader from gripping mysteries and inspiring memoirs to magical romances and thrilling historical accounts.

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discusses the impact they have had on her life and career.

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