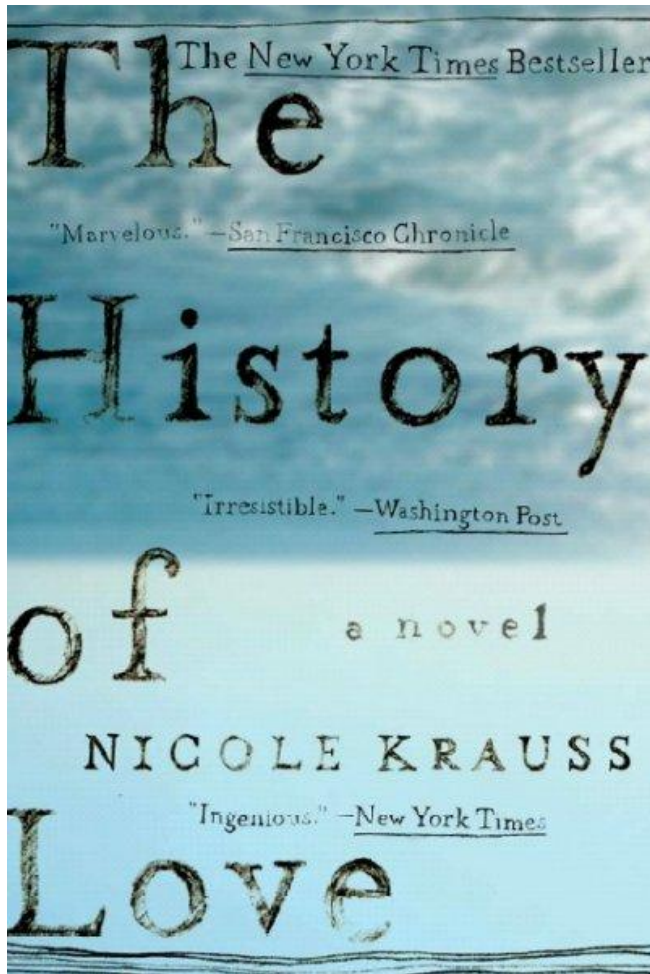


## About the book...



"Leo Gursky is just about surviving, tapping his radiator each evening to let his upstairs neighbor know he's still alive. But life wasn't always like this: sixty years ago, in the Polish village where he was born, Leo fell in love and wrote a book. And though Leo doesn't know it, that book survived, inspiring fabulous circumstances, even love. Fourteen-year-old Alma was named after a character in that very book. She undertakes an adventure to find her namesake and save her family. With consummate, spellbinding skill, Nicole Krauss gradually draws together their stories.

Inspired by the author's four grandparents and by a pantheon of authors, such as Bruno Schulz, Franz Kafka, and Isaac Babel, this book is truly a history of love—a tale brimming with laughter, irony, passion, and soaring imaginative power."

## About this author... (<http://www.wwnorton.com/rqguides/historyoflovergg.htm>)



**Nicole Krauss** was born in New York in 1974. Her first novel, *Man Walks into a Room*, was named Book of the Year by the *Los Angeles Times*. Her fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and *Best American Short Stories*. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

## Reviews

### *Publisher's Weekly*

The last words of this haunting novel resonate like a pealing bell. "He fell in love. It was his life." This is the unofficial obituary of octogenarian Leo Gursky, a character whose mordant wit, gallows humor and searching heart create an unforgettable portrait. Born in Poland and a WWII refugee in New York, Leo has become invisible to the world. When he leaves his tiny apartment, he deliberately draws attention to himself to be sure he exists. What's really missing in his life is the woman he has always loved, the son who doesn't know that Leo is his father, and his lost novel, called *The History of Love*, which, unbeknownst to Leo, was published years ago in Chile under a different man's name. Another family in New York has also been truncated by loss. Teenager Alma Singer, who was named after the heroine of *The History of Love*, is trying to ease the loneliness of her widowed mother, Charlotte. When a stranger asks Charlotte to translate *The History of Love* from Spanish for an exorbitant sum, the mysteries deepen. Krauss (*Man Walks into a Room*) ties these and other plot strands together with surprising twists and turns, chronicling the survival of the human spirit against all odds. Writing with tenderness about eccentric characters, she uses earthy humor to mask pain and to question the universe. Her distinctive voice is both plangent and wry, and her imagination encompasses many worlds.

### *The Washington Post*

"*The History of Love* is one of those spider-web books that reviewers unintentionally tear to pieces in the act of clearing a path for readers. I promise to move delicately, but beware helpful explanations: No one must rob you of the chance to experience Nicole Krauss's new novel in all its beautiful confusion. The *New Yorker* ran an excerpt last year that was funny and touching but gave little sense of the whole novel's complexity. Though it's a relatively short book (some pages contain only a sentence or two), *The History of Love* involves several narrators and moves back and forth through the 20th century and around the world. But that's just for starters: It contains a lost, stolen, destroyed, found, translated and retranslated book called "The History of Love," characters named for other characters, cases of plagiarism and mistaken identity, and several crucial coincidences and chance meetings that are all maddeningly scrambled in an elliptical novel that shouldn't work but does."

### *Kirkus Reviews*

"The histories of several unresolved, inchoate and remembered loves. The first of the stories here is that of New York City octogenarian Leo Gursky, a Polish war refugee who came to America seeking Alma, the girl he had loved, who had emigrated before him. Following a bleakly funny opening sequence that sharply dramatizes Leo's undiminishable vitality, and also reveals teasing details

about Alma's American life, second-novelist Krauss (*Man Walks into a Room*, 2002) shifts the focus to adolescent Alma Singer, who's edging cautiously toward womanhood while dealing with her unstable younger brother Emanuel (aka "Bird") and widowed mother Charlotte (a literary translator). Alma's memories of her late father, a cancer victim, take the forms of a fixation on survival techniques and an obsession with an autobiographical book (which Charlotte translates): a homage to another Alma, and the work of Holocaust survivor Zvi Litvinoff, whose resemblances to and connections with Leo Gursky lie at the heart of this novel's unfolding mysteries. Suffice it to say that each of Krauss's searching and sentient characters is both exactly who he or she seems to be and another person entirely, and that that paradox is expertly worked out as Krauss gradually reveals the provenance of the eponymous History; the relationship that embraces Litvinoff, Gursky and the latter's mysterious upstairs neighbor Bruno; and the woman or women they "all" loved and lost. These enigmas are deepened and underscored by the chaotic "diary" in which Bird records the apocalyptic fantasies that are at heart his own history of love and loss, another son's search for another father, and an affirmation of the compensation for loss through exercise of the imagination that this brilliant novel itself so memorably incarnates."

#### *The San Francisco Chronicle*

" *'The History of Love,'* the title of Nicole Krauss' moving and virtuosic second novel, is also the title of a mysterious Spanish-language manuscript published in 1950s Chile and written by one Zvi Litvinoff, a Polish refugee from the Holocaust. Though this book-within-the-book is said to have been read by only a handful of people, it will profoundly affect the lives of Krauss' memorable characters.

But it is not the only piece of writing here to do so. For Krauss' novel abounds with myriad literary documents -- journal entries, letters, lists, translations, excerpts from an autobiography -- penned by her characters, and done so in cleverly distinctive styles that spark each personality to life. Their role in Krauss' tricky, intriguing plot suggests that all writing, no matter how private or obscure, is potentially filled with transformative power and sometimes in ways neither author nor reader could hope to imagine.

The first of these writings is the memoir of Leopold Gursky, an elderly retired locksmith with a failing heart living alone south of Delancy Street on the Lower East side of New York. Though he is fairly certain he is going to die soon, Leo's voice is wry and funny ("When your pants are down around your ankles, that's when everyone arrives"). He spends his days making sure strangers see him -- as when, at a drugstore, he "accidentally" knocks over a display of KY jelly -- so that, if a day is to be his last, there will have been some witness to his existence.

The story of Leo's life, in the greater sense of the term, began and ended with a woman he fell in love with as a boy in his hometown of Slonim, a place that was "sometimes Poland and sometimes Russia." By the age of 21, he had written

three novels dedicated to his beloved, each more magical than the next. But then history intervened in the form of Russian tanks, and he lost everyone in his life: his lover, who fled to America, and his family, which was slaughtered. Leo immigrated to New York City, only to find his former love happily married and raising a son, who is biologically Leo's.

This son, Isaac Moritz, is now a famous literary novelist, the kind whose work Edmund Wilson dubs "incandescent," and whom Leo has watched from afar, attending his readings at the 92nd Street Y but never braving an introduction. That will change with the manuscript he sends to his son -- the memoir Leo has just completed, revealing their true relationship.

"The History of Love" isn't mentioned until we get to the quirky, list-laden diary of teenager Alma Singer, a journal with subheadings such as "18. My Mother Never Fell Out of Love with My Father." Alma was named after the adored love object in "The History of Love," a novel her father had bought while traveling in South America and later gave to her mother. Alma's father died of cancer when she was 7, leaving the family bereft and unbalanced.

Indeed, resilient Alma is all but stranded in her tiny, miserable New York City family. Her brainy, elegant mother, Charlotte, works as a literary translator and is still so depressed over her husband's death that she barely leaves the house. Charlotte makes stifling professions of love to Alma -- so much so that Alma wishes her mother would "love me less." As far as Alma is concerned, love has destroyed her mother's life.

Meanwhile, Alma's little brother, called Bird for the time he tried to fly out a window, is ostracized at his Hebrew school. That's because Bird believes he is a "lamed vovnik," one of the 36 people, according to Jewish tradition, upon whom the fate of the world depends. He might even be the Messiah, but he's not sure.

One day a letter arrives, postmarked Venice, asking Charlotte to translate "The History of Love" from Spanish into English for a hefty sum. Alma believes this extraordinary coincidence means that the letter's author, a Jacob Marcus, is the man her mother must marry. Alma also becomes engrossed in the magical book itself. And Alma decides she must know if its heroine, her namesake, is a real person, and -- if so -- to find her.

As Leo searches for his writer son, and Alma searches for a character in a novel, Krauss keeps the reader guessing -- not about whether the two alternating stories are linked, but how. We are in Borges country here, sometimes literally: The Singers' copy of "The History of Love," we are told, once passed through a used-book store near Borges' Buenos Aires home. More figuratively, Krauss beautifully maps a literary labyrinth on which the hopes and desires of her characters depend.

The novel's final journal excerpts are by Alma's little brother, Bird, from a diary he's directed to keep by his new psychiatrist. Bird's own senses of mission, curiosity and love play a profound role in bringing Krauss' novel to its marvelous close."

**Discussion questions** <http://www.wwnorton.com/rqguides/historyoflovergg.htm>

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?

## Multimedia

Author Interview "Next Garde: Nicole Krauss" on YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=AU&hl=en-GB&v=NconupPRAEc>

## Readalikes

- *The World to Come*, by Dara Horn.(2006) <http://www.darahorn.com/worldtocome.htm>.

"A million-dollar painting by Marc Chagall is stolen from a museum during a singles' cocktail hour. The unlikely thief is Benjamin Ziskind, a lonely former child prodigy who writes questions for quiz shows and who is sure the painting used to hang on a wall of his parents' living room. As Ben tries to evade the police, he and his twin sister, Sara, seek out the truth of how the painting got to the museum, whether the "original" is actually a forgery, and whether Sara, an artist, can create a convincing forgery to take its place. Eighty years prior, in the 1920's in Soviet Russia, Marc Chagall taught art to orphaned Jewish boys. There Chagall befriended the great Yiddish novelist known by the pseudonym "Der Nister," The Hidden One. And there, with the lives of these real artists, the story of the painting begins, carrying with it not only a hidden fable by the Hidden One but also the story of the Ziskind family -- from Russia to New Jersey and Vietnam."

- *Austerlitz*, by W.G. Sebald. (2001)

"*Austerlitz*, Sebald's fourth novel, is his most approachable work to date. It is a

novel in the traditional sense. It has a plot, although it takes a long time to get under way: A young expatriate German (call him "Sebald," although, as in all Sebald's books, the narrator always avoids mentioning his name) traveling in Belgium in the late 1960s notices a backpacker sketching the interior of the Antwerp train station. Intrigued, Sebald introduces himself, and the two men fall into a conversation that continues for months, over a series of chance encounters. Their talks range from the lethal gases released in the manufacture of Victorian mirrors, to the iconography of Masonic temples, to the obsolete science of city-fortification. . . After thirty years the two characters meet again, once more by chance, and the backpacker, Jacques Austerlitz, who turns out to be an art historian, tells the story of his life. Rescued from the Nazis as a small child, raised in Wales, Austerlitz has spent his adulthood in flight from the horror of his origins. He refuses to ask where he comes from; World War II is a blank to him; he can't even write letters to Germany. Not surprisingly, he has never been able to finish his dissertation, much less make friends or keep a lover. He is a miracle of repression, but now his repression has begun to break down and Austerlitz has gone in search of the truth about himself."

- *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, by Jonathan Safran Foer. (2005) (Husband of Nicole Krauss, this novel shares interesting parallels with *History of Love*.) [http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers\\_guides/foer\\_extremely.shtml](http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers_guides/foer_extremely.shtml).

"Meet Oskar Schell, an inventor, Francophile, tambourine player, Shakespearean actor, jeweler, pacifist. He is nine years old. And he is on an urgent, secret search through the five boroughs of New York. His mission is to find the lock that fits a mysterious key belonging to his father, who died in the attack on the World Trade Center. An inspired creation, Oskar is alternately endearing, exasperating, and hilarious as he careens from Central Park to Coney Island to Harlem on his search. Along the way he is always dreaming up inventions to keep those he loves safe from harm. What about a birdseed shirt to let you fly away? What if you could actually hear everyone's heartbeat? His goal is hopeful, but the past speaks a loud warning in stories of those who've lost loved ones before. As Oskar roams New York, he encounters a motley assortment of characters who are all survivors in their own way. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* boldly approaches history and tragedy with humor, tenderness, and awe."

- *Inheritance of Loss*, by Kiran Desai (2006)

"In a crumbling, isolated house at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga in the Himalayas, lives an embittered judge who wants only to retire in peace from a world he has found too messy for justice, when his orphaned granddaughter, Sai, arrives on his doorstep. The judge's cook watches over her distractedly, for his thoughts are claimed by his son, Biju, who is hopscotching from one gritty New York restaurant to another, trying to stay a step ahead of the INS on an elusive search for a green card that "was not even green."

"When an Indian-Nepali insurgency in the mountains interrupts Sai's exploration of the many incarnations and facets of a romance with her Nepali tutor, and causes their lives to descend into chaos, they are forced to consider their colliding interests. The cook witnesses the hierarchy being overturned and discarded. The judge must revisit his past, his own journey and role in their intertwining histories."

- *Whole World Over*, Julia Glass. (2006)

"Greenie Duquette, openhearted yet stubborn, devotes most of her passionate attention to her Greenwich Village bakery and her four-year-old son, George. Her husband, Alan, seems to have fallen into a midlife depression, while Walter, a traditional gay man who has become her closest professional ally, is nursing a broken heart.

- *Lipshitz Six, or Two Angry Blondes*, by T. Cooper. (2006)  
[http://us.penguinroup.com/static/rguides/us/lipshitz\\_six.html](http://us.penguinroup.com/static/rguides/us/lipshitz_six.html).

"Upon landing at Ellis Island in 1907, Esther and Hersh Lipshitz discover their son Reuven is missing. The child is never found, and decades later, Esther becomes convinced that the famous aviator Charles Lindbergh is her lost boy. Esther's manic obsession spirals out of control, leaving far-reaching effects on the entire Lipshitz lineage for decades to come. In present-day New York City, we meet T Cooper—the last living Lipshitz—who struggles to make sense of all that came before him, and the legacy he might leave behind as well."

- *The Book Thief*, by Marcus Zusak. (2006)

"Set during World War II in Germany, Markus Zusak's groundbreaking new novel is the story of Liesel Meminger, a foster girl living outside of Munich. Liesel scratches out a meager existence for herself by stealing when she encounters something she can't resist – books. With the help of her accordion-playing foster father, she learns to read and shares her stolen books with her neighbors during bombing raids as well as with the Jewish man hidden in her basement before he is marched to Dachau. This is an unforgettable story about the ability of books to feed the soul."



Ann Arbor District Library