

The History of Love by Nicole Krauss (Viking Penguin), R150
Review: Michiel Heyns

2 April 2006

The History of Love is a novel about a novel called *The History of Love*. If that description sounds depressingly post-modern, relax: it's also a rich and entertaining mix of pathos and comedy, with a cast of entirely convincing characters, and a plot that resolves itself as neatly as any realist novel. The novel has two central characters, who also act as narrators of their sections. The first narrator is Leo Gursky, an 80-year old Polish immigrant in New York; having very much against the odds survived the Nazi occupation of Poland, he needs to persuade himself of his own existence by making other people notice him, for instance by creating a disturbance at the milk station in Starbucks. The other main character, Alma Singer is a fourteen-year old girl living with her widowed mother and her brother who believes he may be the Messiah. Alma precociously assumes responsibility for both her abstracted mother and her obsessed brother.

At the centre of Krauss' novel is the book that Gursky wrote as a young man in Yiddish, a novel in which all the girls are called Alma, after the girl Gursky was in love with. Gursky believes the novel was lost in a flood before it was ever published. Alma's mother is translating a novel called *The History of Love* written in Spanish by one Zvi Litvinoff. She was given the novel by her late husband when he fell in love with her, and their daughter Alma is named after all the girls in the book . . .

This is the somewhat confusing basis of this elaborately plotted novel. Part of the pleasure of reading the book is, of course, seeing how such an apparently impossible sequence of coincidences is resolved, but there is more to Krauss' novel than skilful plotting.

The History of Love is, if not quite a history, then an imaginative survey of different kinds of love: parent-child, brother-sister, friend-friend, man-woman. But to love is to be vulnerable to loss, and this novel is also about loss: Gursky's loss of his Alma, who emigrated to America before him, and his whole family, who died in the war; Alma's mother's loss of her husband to cancer.

Gursky devotes his life to his memory of Alma, and to watching, at a distance, the son he had by her, who does not know who his real father is. Alma's mother, too, lives only in the memory of her dead husband: "She's kept her love for him as alive as the summer they first met," says Alma. "In order to do this, she's turned life away."

Much of the novel's plot mechanism derives from Alma's attempts to restore her mother to "life", that is the possibility of loving again. She decides that the mysterious stranger who has commissioned the translation of *The History of Love* might be a likely love interest for her mother, and sets about finding out who this person might be; she also decides to find out who the original Alma was after whom she'd been named.

Much of Alma's quest is written as comedy, and works very well as that; but in her indefatigable energy is contained something more serious, the relentless life force that refuses to accept loss and disappointment as the natural human state. For if the novel's negative theme is loss, its positive theme is survival; if on one reading these characters have suffered terrible losses, on another reading they are survivors of those losses, fashioning for themselves the conditions of their survival.

Krauss has dedicated her novel to her grandparents, presumably holocaust survivors, whose passport photos form the frontispiece to the book and who, she says, "taught me the opposite of disappearing." In an interview she has said that in her book, the opposite of disappearing is survival.

"Show me a Jew that survives, and I'll show you a magician," says Gursky's cousin to him, and in that sense all these characters are magicians, from Alma's young brother who keeps on falling off roofs, and is building an ark to save the world in case of another flood, to Alma's mother who seems to live on water and air: as Alma comes to recognise, her apparently incapacitating memories are what keep her alive, "because she'd built a world out of them she knew how to survive in, even if no one else could." Alma herself is writing a book called *How to Survive in the Wilderness, Volume Three*.

At one point Alma's uncle, himself negotiating a possibly doomed marriage, tells her about a late Rembrandt self-portrait: "It's as if he knew there wasn't much time left. And yet there's a serenity in his face, a sense of something that's survived its own ruin."

In Gursky Krauss has attempted such a figure, a survival of his own ruin. Her success is all the more remarkable in that failure and ruin would seem to be such remote subjects for a thirty-year old author whose second hugely successful book this is. In fact she inhabits her subject with complete assurance; if there is something dangerously close to cuteness in the resourceful young Alma, it is more than counteracted by the sober realities that form a backdrop to her machinations, realities against which the history of love seems a fragile fiction that can indeed survive only by a miracle.