

# Paratexts in Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love*

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**Abstract:** In *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, the literary theorist Gerard Genette defines "paratext" as a zone between text and off-text. The contemporary American novelist Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love* (2005) carries paratexts like dedication, photographs, icons and pie graphs. Paratexts are important to the themes and structure of *The History of Love*. The dedication page consists of four photographs and the dedication: "For My Grandparents, who taught me the opposite of disappearing and for Jonathan, my life." Another important instance of paratexts is how each character is associated with an icon that appears at the head of each chapter: Leo with a heart; Alma with a compass; the narrator's voice with an open book; and Bird with an ark. These icons may be used as a starting point for defining these characters. Finally, the novel includes interesting typography, such as cross-outs (in Alma's journal) and a series of pie graphs of her ancestry. The pie graphs and accompanying context illustrate how identity is not an open-or-shut question or a yes-or-no proposition. My paper will focus on these paratexts and attempt to bring out their significance.

**Keywords:** paratext, graphic design, dedication, photography, icons.

## INTRODUCTION

Paratext is a concept in literary interpretation. The main text of published authors (e.g. the story, non-fiction description, poems, etc.) is often surrounded by other material supplied by editors, printers, and publishers, which is known as the paratext. These added elements form a frame for the main text, and can change the reception of a text or its interpretation by the public. Paratext is most often associated with books, as they typically include a cover (with associated cover art), title, front matter (dedication, opening information, foreword), back matter (endpapers, colophon) footnotes, and many other materials not crafted by the author. Paratexts are those liminal devices and conventions, both within and outside the book, that form part of the complex mediation between book, author, publisher, and reader: titles, forewords, epigraphs, and publishers' jacket copy are part of a book's private and public history. Literary theorist Gérard Genette defines paratext as those things in a published work that accompany the text, things such as the author's name, the title, preface or introduction, or illustrations. Genette states "More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold." It is "a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition

but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that ... is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (1-2). My paper attempts to pick out the paratexts found in Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love*, and discuss their significance.

Krauss, who grew up on Long Island, was born in Manhattan, New York City to a British Jewish mother and an American Jewish father. Krauss's maternal grandparents were born in Germany and Ukraine and later emigrated to London. Her paternal grandparents were born in Hungary and Slonim, Belarus, met in Israel, and later emigrated to New York. Many of these places are central to Krauss's 2005 novel, *The History of Love*, and the book is dedicated to her grandparents. Krauss stated in an interview: "The novel is filled with stories I heard growing up from my four grandparents, born in Hungary, Poland, Germany, and White Russia, and from my parents, one who grew up London and the other in Israel and New York, at the same time the novel is entirely imagined - and more than that, I wanted it to be a celebration of the imagination" (Norton 6). Krauss was a published poet by age 19 and was a finalist for the Yale Younger Poet's Prize.

The plot of *The History of Love* may be summarized thus: Elderly Leo Gursky is afraid of dying unnoticed, and he plans his days so that people will see him and remember him. Decades before, in a small town that was then part of Poland, he fell in love with a girl named Alma. He wrote a book about her before the two fled at different times and circumstances to safety during World War II. Despite the disappointments in his life, Leo continues to write, convinced that he will die when this next book is finished. Meanwhile, a teenager also called Alma, named after a character in a book titled *The History of Love* by a Chilean named Litvinoff, finds herself in the heart of a mystery: her mother is hired by a mysterious man named Jacob Marcus to translate *The History of Love* from Spanish. Since Alma's father passed away years before, her mother has been overcome with sadness, and Alma sets out to find Jacob Marcus as a possible suitor. Oblivious to Alma's quest, her brother Bird has decided he is one of thirty-six holy men, a "lamed vovnik", and might even be the Messiah. And then there's Litvinoff himself, in the past, with his personal story

and connection to the manuscript and to Alma and to his own beloved Rosa. The stunning coup of this novel is how Krauss brings these diverse elements into a single, concluding moment.

The dedication which appears on the first page reads thus: "FOR MY GRANDPARENTS, who taught me the opposite of disappearing and FOR JONATHAN, my life". This paratext teaches us something about what this book is about, specifically, the struggle to be visible or to be in a world where disappearing, forgetting or being forgotten is all too easy. The struggle to remember origins is at the center of this novel, as is Leo's attempt to be visible. There's a row of photographs in the middle of the page. They look like passport photos and we may safely assume that they are photos of the grandparents of Nicole Krauss.

All Nicole's Jewish grandparents were able to flee Europe before Hitler's deadly net caught and annihilated them. However the same good fortune did not hold true for their families who perished in the Holocaust. Nicole's great-grandparents perished in concentration camps and great aunt died in the Warsaw Ghetto. It was a story that made a deep impression upon her. Nicole was introduced to her grandmother's recollections of how her own father had been rounded up with other Jews and taken to a field outside of Nuremberg. Her grandmother also recalled the concentration camp, located on the border of Germany and Poland, where she caught the glimpse of her parents. Nicole's grandmother ended up in a transit camp in Poland. While there, she met a doctor who was to become instrumental to her survival. Years later, her grandmother who had assumed the doctor had not survived the holocaust, received a letter from his home in South America. Although all four grandparents came from different countries, Hungary, Poland, Germany, and White Russia, their harrowing tales had the common threads of love and loss, forming the back bone of *The History of Love*. Indeed the novel could just as aptly have been titled *The History of Loss*. Krauss's dedication points to the scene in the book where Leo realizes that he has lost the ability to be seen by other people. He is a person who thinks a lot about his invisibility. The opposite of disappearing is survival; it is the theme of her grandparents' lives and of *The History of Love*.

The use of photography is a recurring motif in the novel. Photography is proof of existence. For instance, Leo is troubled by the fact that when he is with his cousin the locksmith, he cannot get any photo of him to appear properly, whereas his cousin is representable: "Three times he tried to take a picture of me . . . and three times I failed to

appear. . . . I took a photograph of him, and . . . his face appeared. . . . It was I who'd taken the picture, and if it was proof of his existence, it was also proof of my own. . . . Whenever I took it out of my wallet and looked at him, I knew I was really looking at me" (81-82).

Photography is used as a substitute for human contact, as a way of knowing others, as in the case when Leo admits that he has studied all known photographs of his son. Once, on the pages of a newspaper, he suddenly comes across a photo of his son Isaac, which he has never seen before. "I wanted to call out to him. It was only a newspaper, but I wanted to holler it at the top of my lungs: *Isaac! Here I am! Can you hear me, my little Isaac?*" (77).

Photography is a way of knowing the world that we see. There is a distinction between knowing and seeing. This is best illustrated by the blind man who takes a photo of Charlotte Singer so that, when he recovers his sight, he can know what he has been seeing. "When he raised up the lens and looked through it, my mother asked what he saw. . . . 'A blur' he said. 'Then why do it?' she asked. 'In case my eyes ever heal,' he said. 'So I'll know what I've been looking at.' (39).

Photography is also the conceit of a perfect memory, and of the promise of memorializing change, as when Leo wishes he could photograph Alma every day of her life, trying to capture her growth and change over time. "If I had a camera, . . . I'd take a picture of you every day. That way I'd remember how you looked every single day of your life. . . . You're changing all the time. Every day a tiny bit. If I could, I'd keep a record of it all" (90).

Photography is also the illusion of clarity, as when Alma refers to vivid memory as a photograph. But faded memories are also photographs -- just photographs of other photographs."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"(192). In all of these examples of photography, the novel undermines the authority of photography. Photography is supposed to do those things. The characters want it to do those things, but photography fails. As an act of representation that is supposedly authoritative and complete, never lying, always transparent and self-evident, photography is peculiarly insufficient as far as the characters of the novel would have us know.

The icons which appear at the top of the chapters define the character of the narrators of the respective chapters. The chapters narrated by Leo Gursky carry the icon of the heart. The heart shape is an ideograph used to express the idea of the heart in its metaphorical or symbolic sense as the center of emotion, including affection and love. Leopold Gursky, the writer-protagonist, is both life- and love-giver, a duality made obvious by the small illustration of the human heart that opens each chapter he narrates. It is Gursky's love for Alma Mereminski that, through a whirlwind of felicitous encounters and events, inspires a woman to name her daughter Alma. It is Gursky's entrusting of his novel, also called *The History of Love*, to his friend Zvi Litvinoff that gives the latter the means to woo his own object of affection, Rosa, by publishing Gursky's work as his own. And it is Gursky's virility that allows Alma Mereminski to bear a son, Isaac, who, by contacting Alma Singer's mother Charlotte, inadvertently gives Gursky the chance to meet his lover's nominal descendent and reach a kind of heartbreaking serenity. His actions are pulmonary pulsations, catalysts that allow events to course through Krauss's work like warm blood.

The chapters narrated by Alma carry the icon of a compass. A compass is associated with explorations, and finding directions. It makes sense that Alma is associated with a compass because she spends much of the novel doing research, asking questions, and investigating her past and the past of the mysterious book called "The History of Love." *The History of Love's* 14-year-old narrator, Alma Singer, wants to be a survivalist, compiles obsessive lists, and is an avid collector. Alma Singer, named "after every girl in a book . . . called The History of Love" (35), the book written by Leo Gursky to commemorate Mereminski, learns quickly that her namesake is dead, as are the other people whose names inspired hers: "Alma Mereminski, and my father, David Singer, and my great-aunt Dora who died in the Warsaw Ghetto, and for whom I was given my Hebrew name, Devorah" (176). Much of Alma's life in the novel sees her morbidly preoccupied with her nominal ancestors: questing for traces of Mereminski and her son Isaac; finding a new man for her mother Charlotte; and, finally, meeting the purgatorial Leo Gursky. Alma Singer embarks on her own tentative journey of love, even as she sinks into the romantic history of her predecessors. She is very mature for her age and loves adventure and nature. She is upset that her mother is so depressed and lonely that she makes it her mission is to find her mother a new man. Try as she may her mother turns everyone down. She begins to think that if she can discover the writer to the book *The History of Love*, she can find the way to make her mother happy. She even writes letters to

Isaac (John Marcus) pretending to be her mother in hopes that he may be the new man for her mother. This adventure takes her all over New York City in her quest. Ultimately, the man she discovers, is Leo Gursky.

The chapters narrated by Bird have the icon of the ark. The "ark" is a container that protects something sacred. It is not a literal ship or a boat; rather, it is like the "hull" of a seed: it protects the life-giving elements inside. In Judaism, the ark refers to Noah's ark or the ark of the covenant. Alma's younger brother Bird, so called for jumping from the second story of a building hoping he could fly, seeks refuge in Judaism and believes himself to be one of God's chosen people, thus distancing himself from reality. He is convinced that he is a *lamed vovnik*, one of the 36 people the world depends on – he may even be the Messiah. His exploration of mysticism and spirituality makes him believe that he is the protector of life like the ark.

Finally, the fourth unnamed narrator carries the icon of an open book. An open book is someone or something easily understood or interpreted. The main story is revealed through the unidentified omniscient narrator, who is capable of filling in the voids that are left in the manuscript's history. He seems to have unmediated access to a past that that all other characters are desperately struggling to reveal.

To sum up, the paratexts found in the novel *The History of Love* contribute to a better understanding of the novel.

#### REFERENCES

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