

On the Problematic Omniscient Narrator in Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love*

Nicole Krauss's critically acclaimed novel *The History of Love* (2005) has four distinct narrators. The first voice in this vertiginously complex novel is that of the octogenarian writer Leopold Gursky, a Jewish-Polish Holocaust survivor who lives in New York City. The second and third voices are those of fifteen-year-old Alma Singer and her brother Bird, who recently lost their father to cancer. The combination of these three limited perspectives leads to dizzying effects, but it does allow the reader to piece together some of the story's different strands. What remains a complete mystery, however, is the checkered history of the inset novel *The History of Love*. That story is revealed only via a fourth, problematic voice in the novel, an unidentified "omniscient narrator" (Salvidar, no pag.) who is capable of filling in the voids that are left in the manuscript's history. In the many reviews and articles that have been published on this novel, no one has ever questioned the puzzling presence of this atypical and unexpected narrator.

The presence of such an omniscient narrator completely runs counter to the project that characterizes Nicole Krauss's work as a member of the third generation of Jewish authors after the *Shoah*. Confined, because of the generational distance, to what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory," authors of the third generation emphasize the radical inaccessibility of a past that is always mediated via narratives that are inevitably limited, subjective, and unreliable.¹ And yet, in this novel, one is confronted with an omniscient narrator who seems to have unmediated access to a past that all other characters are desperately struggling to reveal. Paradoxically, this would suggest that for Mrs. Krauss the opaque traumatic past is, after all, perfectly knowable.

What this narrator reveals are events that are unbeknownst to the other narrators in the novel: he keeps juxtaposing and contrasting the official history of Zvi Litvinoff's life – as captured in a placard on a museum wall (68) or in the introduction that Rosa wrote to her husband's Spanish novel – with unknown information: "What it [the placard] does not say is that his sister, Miriam, was shot in the head by a Nazi officer in the Warsaw Ghetto ... What is *not* known about Zvi Litvinoff is endless. It is not known for example ..." (68). He even manages to correct Rosa's version of Zvi Litvinoff's intimate final moments before his death: "But it wasn't just like that. Not really. ... It would be convenient to imagine that those were Litvinoff's last words. But they weren't" (188). How, then, can this narrator be aware of any of this?

First, one needs to question the assumption that this narrator is really omniscient. His version of the events is clearly based on Rosa's introduction, a text that is "shadowed throughout, almost intuitively, with pauses, suggestions, ellipses, whose total effect is of a half-light in which the reader can project his or her own imagination" (66). This is exactly what the fourth narrator is doing: far from being omniscient, he is just projecting his own imagination. The question remains, however, whose voice it is that we are hearing. Krauss suggests an answer in the avatars that accompany each shift in perspective: Alma's voice is accompanied by the picture of a compass; Leopold's avatar is a heart, and Bird's is an Ark. The fourth narrator's avatar is a book, which suggests that this voice belongs to the main author within this book: Leopold, genuine author of the inset *History of Love*. Indeed, this fourth, unidentified voice is Leopold's as well; Leopold who is *imagining*, on the basis of Rosa's introduction, what could possibly have happened to the manuscript that he wrote so many years ago in Yiddish and that he now discovers on his desk in an English translation. There is sufficient evidence in the text to support this claim.

Throughout the novel, Leopold is shown as someone with a knack for inventing things and even people: in his youth, he convinced himself he once saw an elephant (228 and 230);

in Carnegie Hall, he is convinced he sees a young Alma Mereminski play the violin (131); and while his only companion in New York is his friend Bruno, who also survived the tragedy at Slonim, the final pages of the novel reveal that Bruno is really Leopold's "*greatest character I ever wrote*" (249; original italics); in reality Bruno did not survive Slonim. At the start of Leopold's narrative, he therefore pleads with his imaginary friend: "Forgive me, Bruno" (6). The first words of the fourth narrator – also the title of that chapter – are not coincidentally "FORGIVE ME" (65). More importantly, Leopold once composed his own obituary, "The Death of Leopold Gursky." Feeling qualms about purloining his friend's manuscript, Zvi Litvinoff included this obituary as the final chapter of his novel, making sure that "All anyone had to do was turn to the last page, and there they would find, spelled out in black and white, the name of the true author of *The History of Love*" (189). If we indeed switch to the end of Krauss's *The History of Love*, we discover this very same obituary as the final chapter of Krauss's text. The suggestion is that this final chapter also reveals the "true" author of the text in our hands. This reading confirms and literalizes Leopold's prediction, expressed in the beginning of the novel, that "At times I believed that the last page of my book and the last page of my life were one and the same" (9).

One should not underestimate the impact of this metafictional sleight of hand at the end of Krauss's novel, as it forces the reader suddenly to reassess everything he or she had taken for granted: if Leopold is indeed the author of *The History of Love* (the book in the reader's hands), then what is one to make of Alma's and Bird's voices, and of Leopold's meeting, in the novel's tragic finale, with the 15-year-old Alma Singer? Are they real, or are they just one of the many figments of Leopold's active imagination? Instead of revealing a knowable past via an omniscient narrator, Krauss leaves her readers in complete uncertainty about the truth value of every single account in the novel.

Works Cited

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¹ On third-generation fiction, see Codde "Philomela" and "Transmitted." For a more extensive reading of Krauss's novel, please see Codde "Keeping History at Bay: Absent Presences in Three Recent Jewish American Novels."