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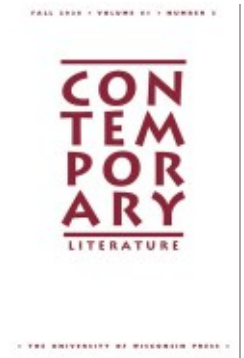
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## An Interview with Nicole Krauss

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NICOLE KRAUSS

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an interview with  
NICOLE KRAUSS  
Conducted by Brett Ashley Kaplan

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**N**icole Krauss is the author of four striking, award-winning novels: *Man Walks into a Room* (2002), *The History of Love* (2005), *Great House* (2010), and *Forest Dark* (2017). *To Be a Man*, her first collection of short stories, came out in November 2020. Her inventive, subtle writing has earned numerous distinctions such as winning the Orange Prize and the Saroyan Prize for International Literature. Her novels have been finalists for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award and the National Book Award and to date have been translated into more than thirty-five languages. Scholars including Victoria Aarons, Alan L. Berger, Dean Franco, David Hadar, and Jessica Lang, have begun to treat Krauss's work both on its own and in contrast to other contemporary writers. Krauss's texts raise questions of memory, trauma, distanciation, scale, and displacement—among other themes. Her novels consistently experiment with form, often juxtaposing different characters whose life trajectories may resonate with each other but do not necessarily cross.

Her debut novel, *Man Walks into a Room*, tells the story of Samson, a man whose memory quite suddenly becomes erased (or nearly erased) due to a tumor. As his relationship with his beautiful wife, Anna, unravels—he cannot remember her, after all—he finds his way into the “care” of a doctor whose experiments with memory implants lead Samson to the inheritance of a traumatic memory of a bomb test that he never anticipated nor wanted and which he cannot blot out. While this first novel is not really “Jewish American fiction” in the way that Krauss's subsequent three novels most certainly are

(Samson is half-Jewish and Jewish histories and stories are barely present), I read the importation of the memory of the bomb as an analogy for the Holocaust legacy that many American Jews (and many characters in Jewish American fiction) feel consciously or subconsciously as part of their psyches. Samson feels the weight of this imported memory and aches to excise it but it refuses to be pulled out and remains, stubbornly, against his will.

Seen from that perspective, Krauss's next novel, *History of Love*, became her first Jewish American text and tells the ultimately interlocking stories of Leo Gursky, a Holocaust survivor and elderly writer who lives in New York in an "apartment full of shit" (3), and Alma Singer, a kid named after a character in a novel which happens to be called *The History of Love*, and whose very fabric is sewn from buried memories. Her brother is named after Emanuel Ringelblum who "buried milk cans filled with testimony in the Warsaw Ghetto" (35). The Holocaust naturally haunts Leo—his entire life unraveled, including his greatest love, due to the displacements of the war. But it also haunts the young girl as she moves through family history and begins to seek solutions to mysteries that have always claimed her. *History of Love* features many formal innovations including switching between Leo's and Alma's perspectives without a clear path to understanding how the stories will intersect; pages with nothing but "LAUGHING & CRYING" (27), "LAUGHING & CRYING & WRITING" (29), and "LAUGHING & CRYING & WRITING & WAITING" (31) written on them; switches between first and third person; and alternative realities presented without resolution. The writing is lyrical and it is easy to see the traces of Krauss's past as a poet—she began her creative life as a poet and gradually morphed into a prose writer.

Continuing these formal innovations and deepening the use of poetic prose, Krauss's next novel, *Great House*, counterintuitively features a great desk as its main character and the thread that ties seemingly disparate stories together. This wooden desk boasts no fewer than nineteen drawers, of varying sizes, which one of the narrators understands as signifying a "kind of guiding if mysterious order in my life" (*Great House* 16). Each of the characters connects to the desk in different ways. It was given to the first narrator, Nadia, by a Chilean poet, Daniel Varsky, who was disappeared as a

dissident. Before returning to Chile, he had loaned it to Nadia, who writes seven novels on its mysterious surface before it is given to a child Daniel never knew he had. As was the case in *History of Love*, the Holocaust is a major force in *Great House*. Some of the characters are survivors or children of survivors (Krauss is the grandchild of survivors) and the traumatic legacy becomes embedded in the desk itself. *Great House* also revolves around Israel in ways that anticipate the major focus on and setting of Israel in Krauss's most recent novel, *Forest Dark*. When one of the characters in *Great House*, Arthur, speculates that the "feeling Jews have when they get off the plane in Israel" is "relief of at last being surrounded on all sides by your own kind—the relief and the horror," he indicates a split consciousness among some Jews of the interface with Israel (91).

In *Forest Dark*, as Krauss explains below, the narrative fluctuates between diverse characters who do not necessarily intersect. As was the case with *History of Love*, the alternation here is also between a young woman (in *History* she is really a girl) and an elderly man. *Forest Dark* is set in Israel, as are many recent Jewish American texts. These other novels set all or partially in Israel include Jonathan Safran Foer's *Here I Am* (2016), Nathan Englander's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank* (2012) and *Dinner at the Center of the Earth* (2017), David Bezmozgis's *The Betrayers* (2014), and Joshua Cohen's *Moving Kings* (2017). While Israel is a natural topic for Jewish American fiction and has appeared in classics such as Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993) among others, it is striking that so many recent texts find their characters there. The writer within Krauss's *Forest Dark*, who is also called Nicole, turns to Israel and the Tel Aviv Hilton specifically as a place to settle her existential crisis and her feeling of "being in two places at once," her sense of disaffection and ennui as she gazes out of the window in Brooklyn only to dream of gazing out of the impossible windows of the Tel Aviv Hilton. The Hilton rises above the sea but blocks its views and could be seen as a solid bulwark in stark contrast to the narrator's failing marriage which she describes as a "sea in which I had begun to sense that every boat I tried to sail would eventually go under" (42). Escaping this sinking ship, Nicole decamps to Israel only to be sucked into a curious vortex involving Kafka's unpublished manuscripts, wallowing in a

cat-laden house in Tel Aviv. Jewish history and the history of Jewish literature threaten to take over Nicole's life and being before she re-emerges from the sinking ship to return to Brooklyn. The other major character, Epstein, as we know from the first page, never returns from Israel and is lost in the desert in the guise of King David. *Forest Dark* opens with these lines: "At the time of his disappearance, Epstein had been living in Tel Aviv for three months" (3).

The stories in *To Be a Man* (2020) span roughly the last twenty years with the earliest one, "Future Emergencies," having been published in *Esquire* in 2002 (see fig. 1). Of the ten stories that make up the collection, six were previously published in venues such as *The New Yorker*, *Best American Short Stories*, and *The New Republic*. But there is an a-chronological logic at work in the arrangement of the tales in the book. The whole collection arcs toward the title story, "To Be a Man," which closes the project. The narrator of this story observes her two teenage sons and sees, finally, that "the thinness is in their genes, the sticks for arms and narrow waist and ribs poking out, all of it written into their bodies like an ancient story, but that sooner or later the time will come when this smallness and thinness will be overwritten, subsumed by mass, and the boys they are now will disappear, buried inside the men they will become" (224). This sense of becoming, of the ancient story embedded within the current story is a powerful, magnetic force in Krauss's writing. The archaeological traces of the past seem always to be threatening to become unburied, visible. Israel becomes a literal and metaphorical site of the layers of memory and one character in "End Days" stands atop the "jewel in the crown of biblical archaeology" (78). But ultimately the title is explained by the brute fact that "To become a man in this country was to become a soldier" (212).

Krauss's work analyzes traumatic memory through a variety of lenses, from a mad scientist experimenting on an unsuspecting amnesia victim through the remains of Holocaust memory enshrined first in a love story and then in a desk with a curious, multinational path, through to the endless desire for the shards of Jewish memory as encapsulated in Kafka. Krauss and I talked about these and other topics.

This is a revised and excerpted version of an interview that took place at the Spurlock Museum, University of Illinois, on 9 April

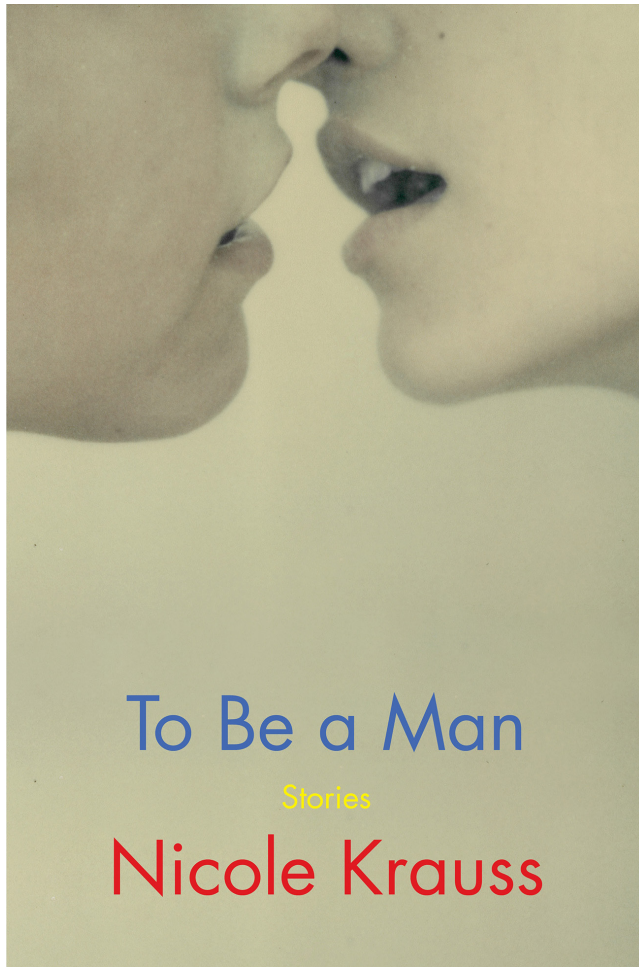


Figure 1. Cover of *To Be a Man*. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins.

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2019. I have modified the interview, added citations from Krauss's novels, and included a few questions from the audience.

Q. Before we plunge into a discussion of your books, can you tell us about your background and how you decided to become a writer?

A. My grandparents were all from Europe, and my dad grew up in Israel; my mom grew up in London. My parents met in Israel and then moved to New York, so I grew up in New York. I knew from

the time I was about fourteen that I wanted to write, but I thought I wanted to be a poet. For ten years I was very serious about becoming a poet. I went to Stanford and a few weeks into my freshman year, I met an incredible poet called Joseph Brodsky, a Russian poet who won the Nobel Prize. He became a mentor to me. If you had told me then that I was going to become a novelist, a lowly prose writer, I would have been totally shocked. I finished at Stanford and I had a Marshall Scholarship, which brings about thirty or thirty-five students to graduate school in the UK for two years. I went to Oxford and I was doing a doctorate in English, but I just found myself at the library every day with all these books of theory and I was too far from my love of literature. I still wanted to be a writer and it seemed absurd to be in the library at the age twenty-one or twenty-two with a lot of books of theory. So I used the second year of funding to get a Masters in Art History at the Courtauld Institute, which is in London; I studied seventeenth-century art and wrote about Rembrandt. Then I came back to New York and I was faced with a choice of what to do next. One option was to continue studying—doing a PhD in Art History. Poetry certainly was not going to be any way I could make a living, but it also had become really, really closed down for me: the poems I was writing became smaller and smaller. Joseph Brodsky had encouraged me to write, but somehow this formal verse rather than free verse became really tight and not free. Brodsky had died by that point and I felt like I just needed to break a window in my writing and get some air into it. I had friends who were trying to write novels and I thought, why not, maybe I should try to write a novel. So I sat down and I thought of an idea and I took a year and I wrote my first novel, which became *Man Walks into a Room*. The moment I was writing that book I felt a wonderful freedom that I still search for as writer and find in writing novels. There's that freedom because a novel is so ill defined formally. It's just a long story with a beginning and an end, but otherwise it's really an invitation to the writer to try to reinvent the form every time she tries to write one. I found that liberating and I felt at home in the form. That was when I was twenty-five and I haven't looked back since.

Q. You've said that you write without a map. I find this a bit surprising because the intensely complex and wonderful plots of your



novels seem as though you knew ahead of time where they were heading.

A. I never knew where any of my books were going until they got there. I never knew how any of them were going to end until they ended. I wouldn't recommend it as a way to write. And it can be really trying because, of course, it could not come together and it could fail. But I find that an improvisatory approach allows for happy accidents and allows for error in a way that I wouldn't have if I tried to plan things out in advance. I love solving those structural problems—I don't mean in an engineering way, because often the structural problems are about meaning. So, those moments where some small twist can create something elegant in the structure or meaning are what I live for as a writer and those are always discoveries. You just can't find those until you're there in the midst of it. So I really allow things to unfurl themselves.

Q. I like this idea of freedom, writing mapless; can you talk more about the process for you?

A. I think there has to be suppleness in the approach toward a novel where you are both guiding and being led as a writer. I write a few pages and then I think a lot about what's there and I'll tweak them a little and go back to the pages before. For the longest time, every day when I sat down to write, I'd reread what I'd written from the beginning. There's a constant evolving and changing and thinking about things, but I don't know where I'm going. It's not like I have something I want to say and the novel is the vehicle for saying it. The novel ends up saying all kinds of things that I didn't even know that I had to say or wanted to say. They are said through the truths of the characters and their circumstances and how they deal with and resolve or don't resolve those circumstances. Just giving oneself that opportunity allows for all of the stuff one wants to say to come out. It's a little bit like in your dream life. Whether you like it or not, what you're thinking about, what's bothering you, all kinds of understandings you have, will come out in your dream life that aren't available to you in your daily waking life. Then afterwards, these dreams will stay with you and you might think "wow, that was amazing that I dreamed that." It's the same thing with writing,

in that you have to give in to that dreamlike state a little bit, but you have the reins, so you can pull back a little, go faster, go slower, change course. That give and take is very much part of how I work.

Q. Tell us about your newest novel, *Forest Dark*.

A. *Forest Dark* is a novel made up of two voices that first alternate then begin to intertwine as the novel progresses. One of the narratives (the book opens with this one) is the story of Jules Epstein, a sixty-eight-year-old American, a New York lawyer. He is larger than life, one of those people who never needed to be silent because he always knew exactly what he wanted to say. He is an enormously successful attorney who over the course of his lifetime has acquired all kinds of material wealth, including a beautiful art collection. In the wake of his parents' deaths (they died somewhat quickly one after the other), he leaves his marriage of more than thirty years. He begins to feel a doubt that rises up in him for the first time in his life and that doubt is something along the lines of "What if I was wrong, what if all the certainty was not based on something solid? And, what if I neglected some other way of living?" He turns away from the material, begins to give away everything he owns, and goes to Israel in search of something he can do in his parents' memory with the last of his wealth. In that turning away from the material he begins to turn toward the spiritual. His story begins with his disappearance in the Israeli desert and it backtracks to trying to figure out what happened to him. The second narrative is the narrative of a writer at a moment in her life when all of the forms she's chosen for herself, whether they be the novel as a writer or wife and mother, no longer seem to fit her—or at least she feels the constraints of those life forms. She begins to wonder about the narratives we tell ourselves about our lives and how they can confine us. She's stuck in a moment of a certain despair about her work. She's obsessed with the idea of setting a novel at the Tel Aviv Hilton Hotel, which is on the cover of the hardback of *Forest Dark*. The Tel Aviv Hilton is massive, the least inspirational architecture you can imagine (see figs. 2 and 3). So, it's odd that someone would be drawn to it aesthetically or as a location, as a setting for art. But she begins to describe why she's drawn to that place, what it means to her. She ends up going



Figure 2. Image of Tel Aviv Hilton. Reprinted by permission of Nicole Krauss.

to Israel, checking into that hotel, ostensibly to do research on this novel, but then all kinds of other things begin to happen to her. She's pulled into a journey by a man who may or may not be a former Mossad, may or may not be a former professor of literature at Tel Aviv University, but he brings her to the house on Spinoza Street where the remains of Kafka's archives are and begins to draw her into a project involving Kafka. Her story really begins in Israel.

Q. From the very beginning of the text, *Forest Dark* structures Epstein as outside of time and Nicole, from her first chapter, as outside of space—she is in two places at once and he has fallen out of time. Epstein is in the present while also being in the biblical time of King David whereas Nicole is in Brooklyn and Tel Aviv. Nicole becomes fascinated with the idea of the multiverse—the notion that multiple universes exist simultaneously. The novel enacts, in a sense, a multiverse concept of reality—it takes an almost sci fi turn by the end. *Man Walks into a Room* also has a tinge of sci-fi with its central conceit that Samson has lost twenty-four years of his thirty-six years' worth



Figure 3. Image of Tel Aviv Hilton. Reprinted by permission of Nicole Krauss.

of memories but that a mad scientist is able to import another, traumatic memory—of witnessing a nuclear bomb test in 1957—into his brain. Samson finds himself, “at the frontier of science” and a beat later, “the terror of it occur[s] to him: a future where memories could be hijacked . . . where memories could be loaded unwittingly into the mind of a man who has forgotten everything. Who else would make such a perfect host?” (141). This idea of importing memories and the whole depiction of the tan, mad scientist, bring a slight sci-fi taste. Are you a sci-fi reader/fan?

A. I haven’t read much sci-fi so I haven’t given myself the opportunity to be a fan. Maybe I would be if I read more. I don’t normally think of genres because those distinctions seem like things that get put on art rather than the ones that the artist herself constructs. When we say that Epstein is outside of time or Nicole is outside of space, I would revise that a little and say that their author plays with the accepted ideas of how we inhabit time and space and suggests that there may be more flexibility there than we like to allow for

ourselves. This notion of the multiverse is really only mentioned once as a way to give some credibility to Nicole's thinking about the possibility of occupying two places at once. For Nicole, it's much less theoretical. It's actually something very visceral and instinctive because her earliest memory is of looking at the television and seeing herself as a two-and-a-half-year-old there in the studio audience of the children's show she's watching. Her whole memory is built on this foundation of the absolutely sound belief that she was both here and there. I think that that gets unpacked in the book. There's a sense in which it's something we've all experienced. As Judah ha-Levi says, "My heart is in the East, yet I am in the utmost West." This expresses the sense that we can be somewhere, but our longing and our imaginations can be elsewhere. I was born in America, but all of my family were from elsewhere and those other places where my four grandparents were from were lost in the war; nobody ever returned to them, so there's the here and then there's the there of that lost place. For many American Jews, there is the "there" of Israel that we often think of. We are always going back and forth between America and Israel. The "elsewhere" is very real and there's also that other gnawing sense of what would have happened in my life if I had turned left instead of right and not met so and so; the infinite progressions of ways in which our lives panned out. Those ideas are very real. Falling outside of time, I think, is something that happens to all of us. To some of us, it happens on a daily basis. One might wonder, "I was driving . . . but how did I get home?" I was in my mind that whole time, somewhere else. Time is definitely something collapsible and expandable depending on our experience; those two things don't feel like sci-fi to me as so much as very real.

Q. By the end of the novel, Nicole is able to recall, past tense, things that have not yet happened, future tense. There's a lot of exploration of memory and the role of memory in this text and many of your other texts. In *Man Walks into a Room*, the plot revolves around a man named Samson who loses a long stretch of memory because of a tumor. Are you thinking explicitly about memory? How does memory function for you?

A. Do you think my books have more in them about memory than other novels? To me, it seems like memory is everybody's subject. How could it not be our subject? It's what we have to reconstruct the past, and therefore our sense of selves and everything we imagine about the future is predicated on what we can construct of our past. To me, it's so completely interwoven with identity and our sense of being that it's hard to imagine memory not being a subject.

Q. Your novels definitely have more about memory than some other novels, maybe not more than *À la recherche du temps perdu* or something that is explicitly about memory (and you cite the beginning of Proust's novel when you have that moment where Nicole experiences a corporeal envelope). There is definitely a Proustian tinge here and an explicit concern with memory, especially in *Man Walks into a Room*, where somebody else's traumatic memory is forcibly implanted into Samson's brain and he rails against that. There are also beautiful moments, like this one in *Man Walks into a Room*: "You told us about an angel in the Talmud or something, the Angel of Forgetfulness, whose job it is to make sure that when souls change bodies they first pass through the sea of forgetfulness. How sometimes the Angel of Forgetfulness himself forgets, and then fragments of another life stay with us, and sometimes those are our dreams" (103). But *Forest Dark*, too, is very much about memory, about forgetting, about time. Near the beginning, for example, the narrator explains that toward the end of Epstein's life, "Time expanded between them because it had expanded in him: the twenty-four hours he'd once filled with everything under the sun was replaced by a scale of thousands of years" (4).

A. The question of to what degree we are bound by the past (and to what degree we can become free of it) is one that's occupied me throughout my career as a writer. In *Man Walks into a Room*, there is definitely this sense in the beginning of the book of the possibility of being freed from nostalgia or the various ways we're confined to a life. Samson is exploded into this shapeless place of the desert, but it turns out to be alienating, because without memory, we don't have the ability to empathize with others and if we can't empathize, then we remain locked in the experience of ourselves. Samson is given

the difficult experience, instead, of arriving at empathy through the structures of memory and the ability to relate to another memory because they just planted it in his mind, which is terrifying.

Which is not the way to learn empathy. Underneath all that I was thinking that this is the unique value of literature—it gives us this opportunity to step into another person's shoes so vividly and become him or her. When we read a character or read a really great book that we love and feel for, we become those people and they become us, and it adds a whole dimension to our being. That's an extraordinary thing, and I don't think we can find that experience almost anywhere else. Not in film, not in painting, just in literature. Those questions have been on my mind from the very beginning.

Q. Yes, I see that. The arc of your four novels indicates an increased distanciation between your characters. *Man Walks into a Room* tells the story of someone who, although he has forgotten, longs for a connection to his wife Anna. Apart from the beginning and the end, the novel is focalized through his point of view and the character unfolds with ever-deepening complexity. In *History of Love* you begin the switching consciousness that characterizes the next novels—often a switch between a young and a quite old character, a man and a woman. But in this novel, Alma and Leo Gursky ultimately connect. In *Great House*, myriad perspectives emerge, but all the characters connect through the mysterious great desk. In *Forest Dark*, Epstein and Nicole remain parallel—they share some connections, yes: The Tel Aviv Hilton, Itzhak Perlman, Kafka, King David, reflections on time, space, and memory, trees, birds, Gilgul, but their paths never converge. Do you see this as indicating increased distance between people? How do you read that?

A. No, I think it has something to do with the fascination with structure and the possibilities that are afforded to us as novelists when we try to reinvent the form of the novel in such a way that suits perfectly the content of that novel. In the case of *History of Love*, that book just wouldn't have worked unless Alma and Leo were brought together. In *Great House*, it wouldn't have worked had those people been brought together. It would have felt sort of cloying; it really wasn't the point. In *Forest Dark*, Epstein and Nicole are not people

who don't relate. Epstein's life was full of relationships. He has children. Nicole has children. But the novel is not about that relating; it is about a moment unto themselves. I think that the need to have storylines connect is one we can slowly disband. I think that if we allow for richer subterranean connections to begin to speak to us, we can get a much more subtle meaning than if we have to go through all the contortions of bringing a story together. And yet I am obviously trying to create a whole. In these books, I wasn't interested in short stories. I'm really creating a whole. It's a bit like the instrumentation of a symphony. I'm very much aware of where harmonies are being formed and where there are echoes and repetitions; I find meaning in those and hope that the reader will too. I'm thinking, for example, in *Great House* of the stone that goes through the window and the stone that is thrown by the SS officers who come to arrest Weisz's family when he's in Budapest. There's that moment where his life is one way and the stone is thrown through the window and his life changes forever. The stone reverberates through the novel and ends up with Arthur and Lotte, when he finds his window broken; it ends up in Israel and it hits Aaron's windshield when his son is driving. In *Forest Dark*, there's a moment toward the end of the book where a taxi driver who drops off Epstein becomes the savior of Nicole in a sense. I like moments when we're aware that these stories are happening in the same world. But I don't think that we need things necessarily to tie up on the narrative level.

Q. Another thing that I always find compelling in your work are the portals that open through things. In *Great House*, there's a desk and the desk contains drawers and in the drawers there are postcards and the postcards are portals or possible portals, and you often have the image of a door closing and another door opening, a whole other thing opening. It seems like the stone is a metaphor that runs through all the different stories. *Great House* is one of those moments where the portal is quite literally pierced by the stone and then it opens into something else. It seems to be very present. I want to capture the image, as you present it, of the desk: "Nineteen drawers of varying size, some below the desktop and some above, whose mundane occupations . . . hid a far more complex design, the blueprint of the mind formed over tens of thousands of days of



thinking while staring at them, as if they held the conclusion to a stubborn sentence, the culminating phrase, the radical break from everything I had ever written that would at last lead to the book I had always wanted, and always failed, to write" (16).

A. Those are often accidents that happen in the writing. They're not deliberately planned. The scene of the stone going through the window in Weisz's study is not written until the end of the book, but I had it in my mind for a long time and I was thinking that one of the ironies of Israel is that stones get thrown against windows all the time; that stone hit there and I found that connection and then it got woven in. But a lot of times, what begins with a pattern or becomes a pattern starts with an accident. A lot of writing is recognizing the useful accident, the accident that is worth saving and extending into something valuable.

Q. It's amazing. Both Epstein and Nicole are the inheritors of long Jewish, historical lines. Epstein (somewhat to his amazement) is told by Klausner that he is a direct descendant of King David and we know from the first line that Epstein is doomed to disappear. As it happens, he disappears into the desert with the crown of David on his head; he fades, as it were, into his own historical line. Nicole, on the other hand, is interpellated into the long line of Jewish literature by the expectation that she will produce the magical script based on Kafka's lost works; while it seems at one point that she might similarly disappear, she in fact re-emerges out of the blank pages she has been given to write and goes home—home, in this case, defined as Brooklyn, and not, as she tells us at the opening, as Tel Aviv. Can you talk about the gender component of these long lines, one literary, and the other historical?

A. I didn't think of this as inheritance. I think *Great House* was a lot about the question of inheritance and the question of what is passed down to our children that we don't necessarily want or mean to pass down. All of the thousands of years of psychology and trauma and difficulty that came to us and we pass onto them and the burdens of that inheritance. In *Forest Dark*, I didn't think of Epstein as the inheritor of David nor Nicole as the inheritor of Kafka—although there's a moment where there's a suggestion that she should be,

but she laughs at it. It's totally absurd to her. I think what I thought about vis-à-vis Epstein and David had more to do with how the story of ourselves is so largely shaped by the narratives we have available to us. If we are told from early in our lives the story of the Old Testament, the story of Moses and Abraham and David, and we keep calling our children Moishe and David . . . there's a saying which we're kind of not necessarily doomed to repeat, but all of the values that we have find their original meanings in those or in stories that we tell about ourselves and who we are. There's this moment when Nicole is talking about reading to her children and she's talking about that wonderful look that children get in their eyes when you're reading them the stories of *The Odyssey*, the wonderful Greek myths. These are the stories we've been telling for many thousands of years and they're amazing, they're wonderful. But Nicole has this sort of rumble of doubt about closing the door on all of the other possibilities of being that, as children, they still have available to them because they're not yet cultured by, socialized by all those stories: what are all the other possible ways of being if it wasn't Moses and Abraham and David and Odysseus but stories of other ways of being? Epstein is given this little tip, barely mentioned, by Rabbi Klausner who says to him something like, "Epstein, that name goes all the way back to King David" (as apparently a few names like Diane and Abravanel supposedly do). Epstein laughs at it, he scoffs at it, but it does begin to percolate down into his consciousness, where he reflects on this warrior king who was beloved by so many but who was also cutthroat and wily just like he was, but who also was the author of some of the most beautiful poetry ever written, the Psalms. There's grace at the end of David's life or his story that is lacking for Epstein's life and I think for Epstein. It's not so much that he models himself on the David of that story but he turns toward the possibility of that grace. I was using those ideas—playing with those ideas in different ways rather than trying to think of the characters simply as inheriting those long traditions.

Q. This is another topic, not one that we've talked about yet. I just attended a Philip Roth conference (I always have Roth on my brain but even more so now) and it strikes me that Roth's novel *Operation*

*Shylock* haunts *Forest Dark* along with *Ghost Writer* and Roth's early Kafka short story. As is the case of the main character in *Operation Shylock*, Roth calls him—actually both of them—"Philip Roth" just as Nicole is named "Nicole"; like the fictional Roth, Nicole feels doubled and, perhaps most importantly, both novels are set in Israel. Were you thinking of Roth when you wrote *Forest Dark* or is this resonance merely accidental?

A. I always think of Roth too, but he was a really dear friend of mine and we talked about this book a lot when I was writing it. It did happen to me that soon after the *History of Love* was published, I was going to Israel and my father's cousin wanted me to meet somebody who had this great story he wanted my help with. My dad said, apparently this guy is from the Mossad and I was like, come on, you know, right? I did meet with the guy so that story gets sort of thwarted and changed, but it appears in *Forest Dark*. When Philip and I would talk about it, I would say, "except it actually did happen to me." I'm not making it up—it's real. And, of course, he called *Operation Shylock* a confession, not a novel, which I sort of love. Calling a character by your own name unfortunately is no longer a novelty. There have been countless books and more and more writers seem to do it. Of course, there's not a real shortage of Jewish novels in America that turn to Israel or are interested in the double. But I think of Roth for another reason, which is that he so constantly engaged himself with the idea of what it is to break from the reins of duty. His whole life as a writer was in response to the expectation of being dutiful and the need to be free to say the unsayable, to agitate, to upset. . . . I think of that struggle, that wrestling with duty—because he's not a complete rebel, there's also the sense of being the good son, being a good boy too. That's always there and also at play in his work. That wrestling is something that always spoke to me, even as a young writer. And I hope there's the imprint of that in my work.

Q. There's definitely the imprint of Roth. . . . There are a lot of scalar changes in in your work (Dean Franco discussed this) and I was thinking that the scalar could be brought in in the sheer size of the behemoth of the Hilton with its endless windows versus the tiny

golden earring which became a necklace that Nicole remembers finding in the watery depths of the pool. In *History of Love* there is a scalar model between the ur-Alma of the original novel within the novel (also called *History of Love*) and the mini-Alma of the kid at the center of the text. *Man Walks into a Room* begins with the epically huge atomic bomb testing in the Nevada desert that is balanced against the tiny, cherry sized tumor that eradicates most of the half Jewish Samson's memory. The central object of *Great House*, the huge desk, contains within its very wood scalar variance in its oddly shaped and too multiple drawers, some of them containing portals to or traces of other worlds (snapshots, postcards). How do you view scale in your work? Is it something you think about consciously or does it just intuitively appear?

A. No, didn't think about that at all. It's a nice thought. I like it. But it's not a design that I had consciously in mind. But, again, I think so many of the aesthetic and design choices we make have to do with an instinct we have of what works well together. So, if I have an old man and a young woman, it's because to me, that sort of works aesthetically and I can come at things from both sides. It makes sense that if you have something monumental, you might also have something tiny and delicate. So as you say it, it sounds right to me, but I certainly didn't have it in mind as a design.

Q. Can you say more about the pull of Kafka for so many contemporary authors? Roth, of course, but also, as you probably know, the South African writer J. M. Coetzee includes many references—both direct and oblique—to Kafka and his writing. The work of German writer W. G. Sebald also contains many allusions—not least an incredible scene where his main character is quite sure Kafka is sitting on a bus with him! To what do you attribute this geographically diverse and profound return to this particular writer? And, does this attachment speak to the alienation that some of your characters experience?

A. If Kafka had lived to a ripe old age of eighty-five, I don't know if we'd have the same fascination. Part of it is that his life was extraordinary, so short. He was just forty when he died, you know? He was such an unusual person, in the way that he didn't really fit into the

world. He wrote about never feeling at home in the world. He only felt at home in his writings and his literature, and that's something that many writers relate to. Then, of course, so much of his sensibility, whether he was tapping into his time or whether he influenced the time that followed or some of both, gave us the word for a whole sensibility that would come. But I think there's something more. When I think of Kafka—I remember even before I read him when I was in high school, there was something familial about him, like Uncle Kafka. He was just in the family somehow. Then when I read him, there's the strangeness of him, but part of the strangeness is how familiar he is at the same time. I only think of him as Uncle Kafka just as sometimes a person in a family is so different than everyone else, such as a great uncle who opens up a path for being that you otherwise couldn't have had coming from where you came from. There's a whole number of people who cling to his coat and follow that path.

Q. The idea of metamorphosis is central to *Forest Dark*. Epstein is lightening himself of everything, his wife, his possessions, his millions; he transforms into a light creature who eventually disappears. When he was accumulating and younger he offered his cousin Moti a lobster that Moti received as a "terrifying insect" (213). More importantly, though, both Epstein and Nicole are dealing with Gilgul, the translated name (in both Yiddish and Hebrew) of "Metamorphosis" which means "wheel" in Hebrew and is of course the name of Klausner's outfit. What does Gilgul mean to you?

A. What does Gilgul mean to me? Well, I wanted to call this book *Gilgul*.

Q. That's what I was hoping you would say.

A. I wanted to call the book *Gilgul* but my publishers wouldn't let me—and, that shouldn't be legal. They have wonderfully little say and they give me a lot of freedom to write whatever feels right to me, but the title is a place where you have to be in agreement because, in a sense, it's the packaging of the book and it's a publisher's job to sell the book. I had a long debate with my publisher and argued about this and they said, you just can't, you can't—it's

not English. In other words, they were saying this is an American book and you have to use a word that people understand—"Gilgul" sounds to us like a medieval dragon or something; this is going to be about dragon slaying. I said, it's really not the case, literature brings us words for things, concepts, feelings that we don't yet have words to describe. For example, before Isaac Bashevis Singer called his story "Golem," I don't think anyone in America knew what a Golem is and now—at least some people in America know what a Golem is, thanks to that story. I argued about this and I said listen, I promise you (this was the summer or the spring of 2017) if we call this book Gilgul, you'll see, very soon afterwards, there's going to be a *Vanity Fair* article entitled "Trump's Gilgul." And it will be part of the language. They were so polite. They're so lovely, my publishers, and they said, we'll think about it. But no, oh no, I can't. So I came up with *Forest Dark*, which of course is from Dante's *Inferno*, and then right before the book came out, a friend sent me a link, a YouTube link to—what's that television show called? *Fargo*! These two characters were sitting at a bar and one of them said to the other, you know what this is? And, the character says, this is my Gilgul. The other character is like "Gilgul?" It's, you know, it's a circle or a wheel but it also means the reincarnation of life. I thought, I can't believe it, that was going to be *my* cultural gift!