Key Passages

Here are some interesting passages to think about as you read The History of Love by Nicole Krauss. As you read and reread, look for other quotes that you think are significant for generating ideas about the novel.

Once upon a time there was a boy. He lived in a village that no longer exists, in a house that no longer exists, on the edge of a field that no longer exists, where everything was discovered and everything was possible. A stick could be a sword. A pebble could be a diamond. A tree a castle. (11)

Every fourteen-year-old should know something about where she comes from, my mother said. It wouldn't do to go around without the faintest clue of how it all began. (51)

And then I started to think about her. Alma. Who was she? My mother would say she was everyone, every girl and every woman that anyone ever loved. But the more I thought about it, the more I thought she also must have been someone. (108)

The truth is the thing I invented so I could live. (167)

...I thought, An average of seventy-four people die every day, which was one good reason but not the only one to hold someone’s hand... (202)

Connections

“Connections” is the theme that UT Arlington Conversations has selected to frame our discussions about The History of Love. How does the book that Charlotte Singer is translating connect characters together? Look for unexpected instances in which references to astronomers, paleontology, gravity, evolution and botany connect to the novel’s broader themes. Think about the barriers that keep people apart and the ways in which different characters overcome them.
The literary worlds of thirty-six men and women humbly according to Jewish tradition, these existence of the world depends. Tzaddikim upon whom the continued lamed vovniks are thirty-six special treated with respect. In Judaism, anything with in the word God, writing it instead as God’s proper name, and to pro God, often transliterated as YHWH יהוה. The world of one of the Hebrew words for literally “thirty-sixer,” Home of Zvi Litvinoff. Valparaíso, Chile. Nicanor Parra, 1914-. Home of Leo Gursky New York City, New York Home of Leo Gursky and Alma Singer. New York City, New York Home of Leo Gursky and Alma Singer. Buenos Aires, Argentina City where David Singer bought The History of Love. Tel Aviv, Israel Birthplace of David Singer. Odessa, Ukraine Birthplace of writer Isaac Babel, 1894-1940. Słonim, Belarus (Formerly Poland) Birthplace of Alma Mereminski and Leo Gursky. London, United Kingdom Birthplace of Charlotte Singer. Saint Petersburg, Russia Birthplace of Misha Shklovsky. Drogobych, Ukraine (Formerly Poland) Birthplace of writer Bruno Schulz, 1892-1942. Lyon, France Birthplace of writer and aviator Antoine de Saint Exupéry, 1900-1944. Valparaiso, Chile Home of Zvi Litvinoff. Chillan, Chile Birthplace of poet Nicolás Parra, 1914. Glossary

One of the Hebrew words for God, often transliterated as YHVH or Yahweh. Jews consider YHVH as God’s proper name, and to pronounce it is blasphemy. Hence, when writing, some Jews omit the vowel in the word God, writing it instead as “G-d.” Because words carry symbolic power in Judaism, anything with sacred words written on it must be treated with respect.

Lamed vovnik Literally “thirty-sixer.” Lamed vovniks are thirty-six special Tzaddikim upon whom the continued existence of the world depends. According to Jewish tradition, these thirty-six men and women humbly bear the world’s suffering and sins. This tradition also holds that these people exist in secret, unknown to each other, or even themselves. Although the term lamed vovnik appears to include the English word lame (disabled), it is actually the Hebrew word for thirty, with vov being the word for six. The number thirty-six has mystical significance in the Jewish culture, because it is the product of eighteen times two, with eighteen being a number symbolically associated with life.

L’chaim A toast meaning “to life!” From chai, the Hebrew word for life. Each letter in the Hebrew has a numerical value, and since the letters in chai add up to eighteen, that number has gained symbolic meaning in Judaism.

Mezuza Literally means “doorpost.” Refers to the miniature parchment scroll and decorative holder affixed to the right side of doorposts in Jewish homes, businesses, and institutions. This scroll contains a handwritten text of the first two paragraphs of the Shema prayer. It is thought to protect homes and the people who live there, and to serve as a daily reminder to sin.

Mishnah Messiah. Jewish tradition holds that the messiah has not yet come. The Jewish messiah must be descended from King David, will appear during a time of great crisis to save the Jews, will lead Israel, and will gather together exiled Jews before ushering in an age of peace in which the world will unite under the Jewish God.

Shema gulaa adona, eloahnu adonal echad A Jewish prayer. “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” According to the book of Deuteronomy, these words should be recited when one lies down, rises up, and should be bound to one’s arm and forehead, and should be inscribed on doorposts and upon gates.

Tzaddik Literally righteous one; a kind of saint or holy person. Tzaddikim are experts of the Torah (the first five parts of the Hebrew Bible), community leaders, and spiritual role models. Traditionally, this role is passed from father to son.

Yiddish A Germanic, predominantly Jewish language. The word Yiddish literally means “Jewish.” It uses the Hebrew alphabet and is written from right to left. Traditionally, Yiddish is the language spoken at home, while Hebrew is the language of the synagogue.

The Literary Worlds of The History of Love

The history of love by Nicole Krauss contains references to many authors and books from around the world. Below are a few examples that are important for an understanding and appreciation of the book:

Isaac Babel (Russia, 1894-1940): Babel is the author of The Odessa Tales (1916) and is widely admired for his sophisticated treatment of place and language. The Soviet authorities found Babel’s aesthetic sensibility a threat and had him killed. Both Leo Gursky and Zvi Litvinoff in The History of Love are admirers of Babel. Notice how Leo’s description of Babel echoes Zvi’s description of Leo’s writing style. (114-116)

Miguel de Cervantes (Spain, 1547-1616): Charlotte Singer tells her daughter Alma that Cervantes is “The most famous Spanish writer.” Cervantes is the author of Don Quixote de la Mancha (1605), a novel about a man who loved reading so much that he went mad. Like The History of Love by Nicole Krauss, Don Quixote is full of multiple voices and stories. (146)

Antoine de St-Exupéry (France, 1900-1944): St. Exupéry (or Saint-Ex as Alma Singer calls him) was a French aviator who wrote one of the most beloved children’s books of all times, The Little Prince (1943). Saint-Ex is one of Alma’s heroes for a good reason: like her, he is an explorer who connects people together. (50, 104)

Nicanor Parra (Chile, 1914-): Parra is one of Latin America’s greatest living poets. He is the author of Poems and Anti-Poems (1954), which Charlotte Singer translates into English. Jacob Marcus reads the translation and asks her to translate Zvi Litvinoff’s book The History of Love. Parra wears an astronaut lapel pin, like Jacob Marcus does. (55, 94, 103)

Bruno Schulz (Poland, 1892-1942): Both Jacob Marcus and Alma Singer read Schulz’s The Street of Crocodiles (1934). Schulz’s style is similar to episodes from Zvi’s The History of Love. Schulz, who was Jewish like Leo, was killed by the Nazis in 1942. (103, 144, 194)

For more information, visit two exhibits that will be on display at the UT Arlington Central Library in Fall 2008: Looking for Don Quixote in Brooklyn (September 2008) and The Best Books Never Written (October 2008). If you pay close attention to these exhibits, you’ll glean some invaluable information and great ideas for your English 1301 papers!

Characters

Bruno Leo’s boyhood friend who became Leo’s companion during his later years.

Leo Gursky Polish Holocaust survivor living in New York who seeks to maintain visibility.

Zvi Litvinoff Friend of Leo’s from Poland who immigrated to Chile during the Holocaust. He later publishes the novel The History of Love in Chile.

Isaac Moritz Successful author and son of Alma Mereminski and Leo Gursky.

Alma Mereminski The love of Leo’s life and the name of every female character in the novel The History of Love.

Misha Shklovsky Russian boy from Poland who immigrated to Chile and befriends Alma Singer.

Alma Singer 14-year-old living on Long Island who writes about her family’s past in her journal and becomes interested in her mother’s mysterious correspondant, Jacob Marcus.

Bird Singer Alma’s brother. He believes he is a lamed vovnik and is obsessed with building an ark.

Charlotte Singer The mother of Alma and Bird.

David Singer The father of Alma and Bird.