

Great House Study Guide

Great House by Nicole Krauss

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Plot Summary

The lives of two broken characters collide — both literally and figuratively — in the novel “Great House” by Nicole Krauss. The story is told by five different narrators whose lives are loosely connected by an antique desk. Each character struggles with his own brokenness through the course of the novel as each searches to find wholeness for himself. Interpersonal relationships are a major theme in the novel along with the profession of writing, the importance of dreams and the challenge of dealing with loss.

The first narrator, Nadia, tells the story of how she came to own the desk. She tells her story to a judge who lay in a hospital bed. Nadia had just injured him by hitting him with a stolen car. She describes how she traveled to Israel with the intent of getting the desk back from the girl who had taken it from her under false pretenses.

The second narrator, Aaron, is the father of judge who was injured by Nadia. The judge, Dov, had returned to his home in Israel because his mother had just passed away. He’d been staying with his father since his mother’s funeral but the two had not really talked or worked out their relationship as Aaron hoped they would. Dov was hit by the car driven by Nadia while out on one of his nighttime walks. Aaron narrates his sections of the novel as he sits at the kitchen table waiting for Dov to return. He speaks as if he were talking to Dov in person.

The third narrator, Arthur, talks about his wife Lotte. Lotte was a writer who had a strange, unexpected visit from Daniel Varsky one evening. The two struck up a friendship and Lotte gave Daniel the desk she had owned even since Arthur had known her. As Lotte grew old and sick with Alzheimer’s Arthur learned that she had a baby that she had given up for adoption before she knew him. Arthur discusses his struggle to deal with this new information about his wife. After her death he met the woman who had adopted Lotte’s baby but learned the boy had died at the age of 23.

The fourth narrator, Isabel, discusses her relationship with Yoav Weisz. The two had dated while she was studying literature at Oxford. After she had to go home to the United States for a while to care for her sick mother Isabel returned to find the house in which Yoav had lived closed up. Six years later she got a letter from Yoav’s sister, Leah, describing how their father had killed himself. She and her brother had been so riddled with guilt and grief that they had practically become hermits. She wanted Isabel to come and take care of Yoav so that she could leave. Leah felt it was the only way the two could ever have complete lives.

The fifth and final narrator is George Weisz, that father of Yoav and Leah Weisz. His father had owned the antique desk that is central to the novel. The desk was a fixture in the study of the Weisz family home in Budapest before his father was arrested by the Gestapo. After the war was over Weisz had dedicated himself to recreating his father’s study in a room in his home in Israel. The final item he had to locate was the desk. He’d sent his daughter to retrieve it but instead of bringing it back she hid it in a storage unit in New York. Weisz managed to track down the location of the unit and bribe the owner

to let him see the desk. Instead of the feeling of completeness for which he'd hoped, Weisz felt disappointment as he sat at the desk he'd hunted for so long.



Part I: All Rise

Summary

A female narrator describes her breakup with a man whom she referred to only as "R." They'd dated two years and R felt he had a secret personality he couldn't share with her. As a result of their breakup, the narrator stopped going out and even refused to let anyone come to see her. It was only after she walked for nearly seven hours after a rainstorm that she felt she'd rid herself of her something. The narrator speaks to a person describing how she'd been given a clean t-shirt and had that person's blood washed from her hands. She had been advised to talk to the man to whom she relates the story of her breakup.

It was not until R's piano was moved from the place in which they lived together that the narrator realized he was really gone. A few days after the piano was moved out, the narrator got a call from her friend Paul Alpers. He told her about a dream he'd had. When he'd woken from the dream, which was about the poet Cesar Vallejo, he thought about the narrator. The narrator told him she'd lost her furniture in her breakup with R. Alpers told her Daniel Varsky, a poet friend of his, was moving to Chile and needed someone to keep his furniture.

The narrator arranged a meeting with Daniel Varsky. When she arrived at his apartment, the narrator was surprised how young Daniel was. He told her to look at the furniture while he finished preparing their dinner. The pieces included a sofa, a desk with a variety of drawers and a chest. The two spent hours talking about poetry. They had only one moment of discord when the narrator spoke about Neruda, a Chilean poet who Daniel didn't like. Daniel told the narrator that the desk had been used by Lorca. The narrator thought perhaps Daniel was joking but wasn't sure. The narrator interrupted her own story to describe how the nurse came to check on the patient to whom she was talking.

Before she'd left Daniel's apartment, the narrator and Daniel kissed. The narrator indicated the act was anticlimactic to their conversation. She didn't remember how the evening ended. Two weeks later, Daniel's furniture was delivered to her apartment. For two years she got postcards from Daniel. Then she learned Daniel had been tortured and killed. She dreamed of the things that had been done to him as she slept on his couch. She wrote her first novel at his desk. She was married for a while and had lived alone since.

She tells the patient to whom she was talking that certain events had made her start thinking about Daniel again. She had believed, even though Daniel was dead, that someone would eventually come for the desk. In 1999 a woman who claimed to be Daniel's daughter called the narrator. The woman said her mother had told her about a letter she'd received from the narrator asking if she had any of Daniel's poems. She asked the narrator if she still had the desk. Knowing that she was about to lose the



desk, it took on a new meaning for the narrator, who had written seven novels there and was in the process of writing an eighth book.

The narrator believed that she had derailed her life when she agreed to allow the girl, who said her name was Leah Weisz, to have the desk. The night after the narrator agreed to give the desk away, she had a dream where she met a man in the street who asked her to pull a red thread from his mouth. The next day, the narrator read the beginnings of her eighth novel and decided it was shallow and had been written badly. She accomplished nothing the remaining days she had with the desk. When she cleaned out the desk she found a copy of a book of short stories written by Lotte Berg and signed by her to Daniel in 1970. She mentioned a drawer on the right hand side of the desk that had been locked ever since she'd had the desk. She'd never managed to find the key or break it open so she could see what was inside.

When the narrator first saw Leah she believed Leah looked like her father. At second glance, the narrator realized the similarities were not as strong as on first glance. Leah went to the desk immediately and put her hands on it, rubbing the surface. She looked in all the drawers. Even though the narrator didn't want to hand the desk over to Leah because she felt the girl wouldn't use it as she had, the narrator made arrangements for Leah to have the desk moved out of the apartment and into storage. The narrator made a point to be out of the apartment when the moving men were to come to get it.

While she was away from her apartment, the narrator thought about a party she'd gone to with her former husband S. The dancer who hosted the party had a painting in his bedroom that caught the narrator's attention. When she asked the dancer about it, the dancer said it was painted by a friend of his and that friend's older sister. The children's mother later gave them sleeping pills, took them into the forest, poured gasoline on them and set them on fire. The mother and her children burned to death. The narrator wrote a story about the children and what she imagined their lives were like. She continued to write, including a novel about her father and his death. After that novel was published, she saw the dancer. He mentioned that he had read everything that she had written. The dancer told the narrator he'd taken the painting down after he'd read her short story. He said her story had made the situation clear to him. He tapped her on the cheek with two fingers. At first she thought it was a sign of tenderness and then later realized the dancer was being condescending.

Walking home past a playground, the narrator heard a child cry as if in pain but could find no injured child. Later at home, the narrator heard the cry again and could again find no child who needed help. Even though she didn't hear the cries again, they stayed with her and made it difficult for her to write. She came to distrust both her writing and herself. About the same time, she became obsessed with a ficus tree that had become sick and was dying. She was not able to find any cure for the tree and eventually had to put it out with the trash. After the tree was thrown out, the narrator had a dream about her husband in which he had the hide of a rhinoceros. The corpse changed from that of S to her father to Daniel Varsky.



Her writing continued to go badly. She felt shame and disgust with herself that was even stronger when she was with S. Soon, everything S did began to irritate the narrator. Finally he came home one night and told her that she'd cared more for the ficus tree than for him. As S talked to the narrator, whom he'd called Nadia, she began to think of herself not only as fraud who used the pain of others for her gain but also as a selfish and self absorbed person. She hadn't thought about how her silence and self absorption had affected her husband.

Back in her apartment without the desk Nadia had a panic attack. She had worsening attacks daily for a week. The idea of leaving her apartment filled her with dread. Although Nadia had low spots before, she'd never completely lost the ability to write. Even though it took an immense effort, Nadia went to see her therapist. After seeing her therapist several times, Nadia announced she was planning on taking a trip. Within a week she was on a plane to Israel.

Analysis

A narrator identified only as Nadia talks to a judge in the opening section of the novel. The setting of this section is unclear. Nadia refers to a patient in a hospital but it is not immediately certain who this patient is. She talks to the judge as if she is explaining her role in some crime, as if she were a witness on the stand, even referring to him as "Your Honor" a common term of respect for a judge. It is clear that there had been an accident. Nadia refers to blood being washed off her hands by a nurse but it isn't yet clear what Nadia's role in the accident was or if she even had a role in that accident. In this first section she tells the story of her life from the time she and a boyfriend, whom she calls only R, broke up until the time she decided to visit Jerusalem.

One of the major themes in this novel is the theme of relationships. Sadly, most of the relationships as well as the people attempting to have the relationships in the novel are deeply damaged. For instance, in the relationship between Nadia and R, R was haunted by faults in himself that Nadia didn't recognize. Later in the section Nadia's marriage with S fell apart because S realized Nadia cared more for the ficus tree than she did for him. Nadia described herself as a quiet, introverted person. She loved S because he went to special lengths to give her space and keep from disturbing her work. He would even go so far as to ease himself back into the house after coming home from work by entering through a room she wasn't in so as not to disturb her too badly. Nadia believed S had done this because he respected her and personality. After S told her he didn't want to be married any longer and explained to Nadia why he wanted to separate, Nadia believed instead he had seen her as self absorbed through their entire relationship. The new knowledge about S's opinion of her added to Nadia's feelings of unworthiness.

Relationships between parents and children are also significant in the novel. In this section Nadia learned the story of a mother who had killed her children by giving them sleeping pills and then setting them on fire. She wondered how a mother could do that to her children. She later wrote a short story built around the incident.



Significant also in this section is the beginning of Nadia's relationship with Daniel Varsky. The two spent only part of one day together but his memory haunted Nadia in different ways throughout the rest of her life. She thought of him as a friend and grieved when she learned he had been arrested and tortured to death. One of the things that kept Daniel's memory fresh in Nadia's mind was the huge desk that she got from him. Since he was going overseas, he had no use for the furniture he had in his New York apartment. It was a win-win situation for both of them for Nadia to use the furniture while he was gone. She didn't have to buy furniture and he didn't have to pay a storage fee. The desk she got from Daniel is a central object in the novel as it will come to tie Nadia's story together with the stories of the three other families to be presented later in the novel.

Daniel told Nadia the desk had been used by Lorca, a Spanish poet. Nadia doubted him but didn't question him or ask from where he'd gotten the desk. Up until the time that Leah Weisz, who claimed to be Daniel's daughter, came to get the desk, the desk didn't seem to hold any real significance for Nadia besides being a place to work. She'd written seven novels at the desk and had begun an eighth. Once she was faced with the reality that the desk didn't really belong to her and someone who claimed to be its more rightful owner wanted it, Nadia was suddenly struck by how important the desk was in her life and career. As soon as she knew the desk was being taken, she lost the ability to write. After it was gone from her apartment she fell into a deep depression and despair. It was from this despair that she decided to travel to Jerusalem.

Dreams are significant in this novel. There are three dreams noted in this section. The first is a dream that Paul Alpers had. The dream about the poet César Vallejo reminded him of Nadia and he decided to touch bases with her. It was because of this dream that Nadia was put in touch with Daniel in order to borrow his furniture. A second dream of significance is one that Nadia had. She had just parted with the desk when she dreamed of a man who asked her to pull a red thread from his mouth. She pulled and the thread kept coming. She felt there was something crucial at the end of that string. In the final dream Nadia dreamed of the corpses of her husband, even though he wasn't dead, her father and Daniel.

Writing, particularly those who make a living writing, is another theme in this novel. Nadia is a writer. It was because she and Daniel shared the same vocation that they connected so quickly and Nadia felt the two shared a special relationship even though they'd only met once. She felt honored to have the desk of a man she felt was a great writer. Through the course of this first section Nadia speaks of the career of writing. Although others had often asked her if she had any specific habits associated with her writing Nadia always said that she did not. She believed that she could write anywhere in any position. Despite her belief that she needed no special conditions to write, notice that when she lost the desk, she also lost the ability to write. Apparently the desk had become an important facet in Nadia writing even though she hadn't realized its importance. An aspect of the writing in this novel to notice is the way that there are a variety of references to aspects of writing used in descriptions. For instance, in this section Nadia describes the kiss she shares with Daniel as a "note of punctuation" (p. 11).



Nadia's personality is of significance. Notice that after traumatic events in her life, Nadia attaches to objects. After her breakup with R Nadia connected with R's grand piano, touching it as if it were her boyfriend. That piano came to symbolize R. When Nadia faced the loss of Daniel's desk, that desk suddenly took on special significance as she realized it had come to represent Daniel.

Solitude and characters who prefer solitude populate this novel. Nadia is one of the solitary characters. Notice that when Leah came to look at the desk she questioned Nadia about her decision to live alone. In a different part of this section Nadia described the feelings of peace and ease she experienced only when she was alone. When she tried to share music or books she enjoyed with others, she always felt she actually enjoyed them less instead of experiencing the increase in pleasure most people experienced.

Notice in this section Leah's reaction to Nadia's choice to live alone. Nadia felt at first Leah pitied her solitude but instead notice that it appears that Leah wishes she were more like Nadia. In fact, note that Nadia thought that Leah was looking at her apartment as if she were about to take over Nadia's entire life, not just the desk. She remarked to Nadia that she was able to do as she wanted without having anyone tell her what she should do. It almost appeared as if Leah were jealous of Nadia.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the symbolism of the desk in this section of the novel. Why do you think Nadia didn't realize how important the desk was to her until she was in danger of losing it?

Discussion Question 2

How did Nadia's meeting with the dancer after he'd read her story about the dead children affect her writing?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Nadia prefer solitude to relationships? How did she describe her solitude?

Vocabulary

despicable, purged, complicity, vehemently, alliance, pathetic, enigma, retrospect, decipher, benefactor, implicit, collusion, perturbed, parenthetical, machination, demure, jovial, coup, cryptic, oblique, galleon, quaintly, mundane, tentative, repercussions, impasse, capitulate, ashram, superfluous, artifice, irreducibility, foreboding, pragmatic, buoyant, embellishing, pungent, languid, condescending, surreptitious, entropy, eradicated, cavernous, duplicity, acumen, inane, gargantuan, permanence, evocative, sequestered, cordon



Part I: True Kindness

Summary

In the section True Kindness a father, later identified as Aaron, remembers telling his son, Dov, he didn't support his plan to be a writer. Dov wanted to write a book about a great white shark that would absorb all of the bad dreams of a group of people connected to it by electrodes. As Aaron remembers, he sits at his kitchen table waiting for Dov to return from a nighttime walk. Aaron remembers how his wife was afraid she would die and leave Dov and his brother, Uri, alone with their father. When the boys' mother died only a few days before the time of the father's narration, the father called Uri first because he had been at home all along helping to take care of his parents.

Two days before his wife died, Aaron tried to write a letter to her. He'd decided he would bury the letter with his wife. His words dried up when he tried to write. He used his friend's suggestion that he would pretend to write to his seventh grade teacher when he had trouble writing. Aaron couldn't remember any of his teachers' names so he borrowed that of his friend. He got no further than scolding the teacher for not teaching about death. He put the unfinished letter in his pocket and went upstairs to sit in front of the watercolor picture displayed outside his wife's hospital room. He had decided that when she died he would take that picture with them.

After her death, Aaron rode with his wife's body to the mortuary. He tucked the letter next to her body after he pulled the sheet over her face the last time. He remembered turning from the grave and seeing Dov standing there. He'd wanted to slap Dov as he saw him waiting for his turn with the shovel. The family and mourners gathered at Uri's house after the burial. Aaron was so frustrated with the empty grief he saw there that he locked himself in the bathroom. He saw Dov in the garden, calling him and looking for him. He remembered the boy as he was at the age of ten when he thought he was lost but in reality his father was hiding from him, watching his reaction. The man's grandnieces and grandnephews finally located him in the bathroom.

That night, Uri had tried to get his father to stay at his house the night after the funeral. His father refused. Dov took his father home even though Aaron fought against riding with his son. He remembered a pet turtle Dov had. Dov had thrown a fit when his mother brought home the wrong kind of cabbage for the turtle. His mother had gone out to buy the right kind of cabbage. His father had been infuriated by the way his son had acted and the way his wife reacted to the bad behavior.

At the house, Dov's father was surprised to see Dov had brought his suitcase in with him. Aaron realized that his wife's fear had finally been realized. She had died and left her children alone with their father. His thoughts returned to his belief that it wasn't his fault that Dov didn't become the writer he'd wanted to be. He remembered that when Dov had been in the Army he'd sent home packages addressed to himself wrapped in tape and noted that they were not to be opened. The father opened the letters and read



the installments of his son's book that he found inside. He pretended his son had wanted him to do so.

Back in the present, in the house filled with memories, Dov told his father he thought he would stay with his father for a while. Dov said it was for his sake, not his father's. His father remembered how a psychologist had even been seen by his wife at one point to help her deal with Dov's strangeness. His father had believed it was by treating Dov like a special case that had made him one. Eventually his wife gave into to her husband's requests to stop the counseling. In the present, Dov went upstairs, telling his father he had a headache.

Analysis

A different narrator takes over in this section of the novel. The man, who is father of sons Uri and Dov, is later identified in the novel as Aaron. This section of the story is set in Israel. Central to this section is the father-son relationship between Aaron and Dov, Aaron's second son. Aaron describes himself as a tyrant but in reality it appears he really struggled to try to understand his son, a child who was much different from him. Notice also the father's growing concern as he waits for Dov to return from his morning walk.

The reader is struck by the father's ruthless treatment of his son at the very beginning of the section as the father made fun of his son for wanting to be a writer. He tore apart his desire to write as well as his idea for a story. After he discouraged his son, the father seemed intent on defending himself and telling the reader why his son's decision not to write was not his fault. Notice also that the father judged his son's ability to write by his own abilities. When his wife was on the verge of dying Aaron struggled to write a letter to her. Because he had such difficulty writing, he assumed his son would have the same troubles. "To think that you once wanted to make a life of words! Thank God I saved you from that" (p. 51). This entire fight between Dov and his father about Dov's desire to be a writer adds to the theme of writing discussed in the novel.

Loss is also a major theme in the novel. In this particular section Aaron struggled with the loss of his beloved wife. Early on in the section Aaron had indicated his wife had always been afraid of death because she didn't want to leave her children alone with her husband. When she died, Aaron felt her worst fear had been realized. Although Aaron could not connect with his youngest son, Aaron was apparently very close to his wife. He struggled to write a letter to her trying to find a fitting way to say goodbye. He can only get halfway through a letter but left it with her corpse anyway, believing that she would know what he meant by his poor attempt at sharing his feelings in the written word. He'd grown attached to a watercolor painting in the hallway outside his wife's hospital room. Even though he thought it was ugly, he decided he would steal it from the hospital when his wife died. When he tried to take the painting, however, he discovered that it was screwed to the wall.



Aaron is not the only one dealing with loss in this section of the novel. A particular image presented by the author is that of Aaron's grandson clinging to him in his grief because his grandmother was gone. Aaron knew this was the boy's first encounter with death and loss. He wondered why grief and dealing with death were not topics taught in school. At this point in his life Aaron believed this type of knowledge would benefit one better than math or language skills.

Notice also that when Dov told his father he wanted to stay with him for a while there seemed to be something more than just his mother's death that was bothering him. He was truthful with his father and told him that it was for his sake and not his father's that he wanted to stay there. Even though he'd been at his father's house for several days, Dov had still not told his father what was bothering him.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the relationship between Dov and his father. How did it differ from the relationship between Uri and his father?

Discussion Question 2

How did the death of the narrator's wife affect him?

Discussion Question 3

What is your opinion of the narrator's decision to belittle his son's desire to be a writer?

Vocabulary

tyrant, obfuscating, nocturnal, obstinacy, sentience, inoculate, bucolic, abysmal, saunter, fallacy, schlepping, magnanimity, potent, aquiline, fabrications, contort, kinetic, lavished, disassociated, forays, alienation, existential, tutelage, assuage, ascend



Part I: Swimming Holes

Summary

Arthur Bender, the narrator for this section, recalls how Daniel Varsky came to his home in Highgate asking to see Lotte Berg, Arthur's wife. Arthur assumed Daniel was one of Lotte's readers and first scolded the boy for coming so late. Despite his reservations, Arthur let him in the house. Arthur breaks into his story to tell how his life with Lotte ran like clockwork. He describes their daily walks to the swimming hole each morning as well as his work schedule which took him out of town from Tuesday to Thursday.

Arthur admits to the reader that his wife was a mystery to him. She and her family had been forced to leave their home in Nuremberg before World War II and lived in a transit camp for a year. Lotte was seventeen then. Lotte had left the camp and her parents when she'd gotten a visa to chaperone 86 children being transported to England. Arthur had learned that Lotte's nightmares were mostly about her father, that she became falsely friendly when she was hurt, and that when she did get mad, there was only a short time for him to get through to her before she closed off. He also knew how hard she worked to hide and disguise her sadness.

Lotte led Daniel to the kitchen and had him sit at the table. She prepared to fix tea. Arthur left them alone. He felt sadness when he realized that if he and Lotte had a child it would have been about Daniel's age. Arthur thinks about how the time that Lotte met Daniel was the same time of year that she died 27 years later. He also remembers when he saw her the first time 21 years prior at an engagement party. Lotte lived alone in a rented room across the street from buildings that had been bombed. Arthur remembered the most significant piece of furniture in Lotte's room had been her desk, a huge desk with many drawers of varying sizes. Lotte would tell Arthur only that it had been a gift. She indicated to him that it was none of Arthur's business who had given her the desk.

Arthur had tried to talk to Lotte once about having children but she'd only blocked him out. He came to believe his life with her was a matter of protecting the ordinary. A child would have destroyed that. He remembered how he'd been disturbed when Lotte made arrangements to move the desk to his room when he finally persuaded her to move in with him. Lotte seemed lost in Oxford. During a visit to London they saw a house in Highgate that was for sale. It appealed to Lotte and they bought the house. An attic room became Lotte's study. It was in that room that the desk was put. Arthur stayed away from Lotte's study out of respect for her privacy. Arthur remembered a story Lotte had included in her first book. It had been about a dictator who buried bodies of murdered children in a garden. He admitted he had been a little bit afraid of his wife after reading that story.

When Arthur returned from his trip to Oxford the week after Daniel's first visit he realized the boy had been back to visit. He noticed the smell of Daniel's jacket in the hallway and



then found a lighter sitting next to the couch. He was surprised Daniel had been back because his wife was generally not a sociable person. Not sure how to ask Lotte whether Daniel had been there he instead asked where Daniel was from. Lotte told him Daniel was from Chile and that he had wanted someone with whom he could discuss books. Over the next few weeks Arthur continued to find signs that Daniel was still visiting. He even found a leather diary belonging to Daniel that he kept. It was at that point that Arthur became jealous. He planned an out of town trip to test his wife.

Arthur went to Frankfurt. He took Daniel's journal with him. He studied the journal, finding Lotte's name six times. He wondered if he has misread Lotte. If instead of needing an ordinary life with a strict schedule if she had wanted something unexpected. He decided to go back to London early. When he arrived home, he decided he could forgive Lotte for anything she had done. As soon as he saw her, Arthur realized that Daniel would not be coming back. He couldn't ask her what had happened. It was months before he knew she'd given Daniel her desk.

Arthur explains that he had always thought that Lotte's troubles in life were caused by her parents and the loss of her parents. After Lotte was diagnosed with Alzheimer's he learned she had a secret she'd been keeping from him. She had begun wandering off and he'd gotten a nurse to watch her. The first nurse had supposedly been watching Lotte when Lotte wandered out of the house and to the magistrate's office. When the magistrate brought Lotte home she told Arthur how Lotte had appeared in her office. Lotte told her she came to report a crime, that she'd given up her child. She given her son up for adoption five weeks after he was born. The magistrate told her no crime had been committed. Arthur felt numb after he heard the news.

Arthur did nothing at first about the new information about his wife. He wondered how he couldn't have known that she'd had a child. He wondered who the father of the baby had been and where the baby and father were now. He decided the baby's father must have been the same man who gave her the desk. Arthur realized Daniel Varsky had been about the same age Lotte's son would have been and wondered if that was why Lotte had been attracted to him. He remembered the day Lotte learned Daniel had been tortured and killed. He had tried to comfort her, but hadn't know what Daniel meant to her. Arthur began searching Lotte's study for information about her baby. He finally found a birth certificate and envelope holding a lock of hair.

Analysis

In this section of the novel the reader sees a relationship with an introvert from the flip side. Nadia described in the first section of the novel how ill at ease and jarring being around other people was for her. Now Arthur describes the difficulties he faced in having a relationship with a woman who was secretive, introverted and antisocial. He loved her and believed he was treating her well by respecting her privacy and helping her to maintain her highly structured life.



The desk is a major fixture in this section of the novel as it is in the possession of Lotte at this point in time. She had the desk before Arthur met her. It was a mystery who gave it to her. She would tell her husband only that it was a gift. After she struck up her friendship with Daniel, she chose to give the desk to him. From the beginning of the time that Arthur first saw the desk, it is clear that he did not like it. He described it as a “grotesque, threatening monster, clinging to most of one wall and bullying the other pathetic bits of furniture to the far corner” (p. 83). He explained the desk always provoked a feeling of jealousy in him even before he learned what little he knew about it. He eventually came to his own conclusion that it was the father of Lotte’s baby who had given her the desk.

Lotte is an interesting character as she and her family were among the Jews in Germany who were forced to leave their homes. It is in the character of Lotte that the subject of loss surfaces in this section of the novel. She and her parents lived in a transit camp for a year before Lotte was given the opportunity to leave the camp as the chaperone of a Kindertransport to England. Arthur believed the sadness he sensed in Lotte came from the destruction of home and the loss of her family. Arthur seemed to simplify his wife by attributing all of her personality quirks and her sadness to the loss of her parents. Arthur never seems to consider that having to give up her baby might have been another reason for her sadness. He felt that he knew better than to ask her about any parts of her life she didn’t willingly tell him about and felt he was respecting her privacy by allowing her to keep certain things to herself.

Arthur was shocked, however, when he learned after his wife became sick with Alzheimer’s that she had a child that she had given away for adoption. Although he claimed to respect his wife’s privacy, Arthur was taken aback that she’d been hiding the fact she’d once had a child from him. This new knowledge about his wife sent Arthur for a spin as he wondered what else he had misjudged in his wife. He’d always interpreted his wife’s silence as her desire not to talk about things that upset her. He had apparently never considered there were things about her that she did not want him to know. Arthur felt betrayed by his wife’s secret and felt it must have been the father of the baby who had given Lotte her desk.

Two things to note in this section of the novel. Remember from the first section of the novel that it was a book written by Lotte Berg and autographed to Daniel that Nadia found when she was cleaning out the desk before Leah had it taken away. Notice also that when Arthur was in the depths of his jealousy believing Lotte and Daniel were somehow romantically involved that he wondered if Daniel were repeating lines from the poet Neruda to Lotte. This comment is ironic as the reader might remember from the first section of the novel that Daniel was critical of Neruda and did not consider him the fine poet that others did.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the relationship between Arthur and Lotte.



Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Lotte chose to give up the baby she had before she met Arthur? Why do you think she didn't tell Arthur about that baby?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the significance of the desk as it is described in this section of the novel.

Vocabulary

dissent, plausible, anonymity, abysmal, atrocious, throes, symmetries, allaying, oblivious, perennial, vengeance, relegated, egoist, collaborate, durability, brazenly, ominous, conviviality, banal, oblivion, fathoms, purgatorial, vortex, pantomime, placid, belie



Part I: Lies Told by Children - p. 109-139

Summary

Isabel narrates in this section how she met and fell in love with Yoav Weisz. She and Yoav were studying at Oxford together. Leah was a student at the Royal College of Music. The house in which the Weisz siblings lived was filled with the antique furniture their father kept there. The furniture was always changing as some was crated and taken away with other pieces being added. The house was a twenty minute walk from the home in which Dr. Sigmund Freud had lived for a year before he died.

Isabel describes how Leah had made a trip to New York which had begun a silence between the Leah and Yoav, and their father. The housekeeper had quit by that point so Isabel was in charge of running errands for the siblings. Isabel finally had to leave to care for her mother. After a short while the siblings stopped answering the phone when she called. When Isabel returned to the house, it was closed up and the locks had been changed. Isabel was hurt and returned home to New York. She realized that Leah and Yoav belonged to their father and could never belong to anyone else.

Although she'd never expected to hear from them again, Isabel got a letter from Leah six years after their strange disappearance. Leah shared with Isabel that back in 1999 their father had killed himself in his home on Ha'Oren Street. Leah described in the letter how her father had searched for and acquired a painting for the study just as he'd searched for every other piece that had been in his father's study when the Gestapo had arrested his parents in 1944. She wrote how her father had gone into the apartments of his neighbors with a band of thugs taking back everything that had been stolen from his childhood home after his parents were arrested.

The only thing missing from her father's study that would have made it a perfect replica of his father's study was the desk. Leah knew where it was but refused to tell her father. Leah realized that when her father killed himself, he made it impossible for her and Yoav to ever get away from him. They'd gone home to the house on Ha'Oren Street where they had become hermits. Leah wrote to Isabel that she had been working up the courage to leave, knowing if she did so, she would never be able to go back. She asked Isabel to come to the house because Yoav still loved her and would need her after Leah made her escape. Leah called Isabel to make sure Isabel would take care of Yoav. She apologized for their disappearance and told her how Yoav had punished himself for his father's death by giving Isabel up.

Isabel continues to narrate the story of Leah and Yoav's lives telling how the children had been moved around constantly by their father after their mother's death. They were young, Yoav was eight and Leah seven when their mother died. He gained a reputation as an antique dealer, able to find the family heirlooms people had lost and return them. They lived in fourteen different houses during that time period. Weisz was strict with his children because he was paranoid that he would lose them. He had them under the



care of nannies or drivers. Yoav sometimes tried to protest his father's control but was always crushed and belittled. Leah, who was her father's favorite, never dreamed of disobeying him. Eight years after their mother's death, their father did send the children to boarding school. Two years after they began attending to school, their father returned to live in the house on Ha'Oren Street.

Although Leah and Yoav had more freedom in school than at home they stayed mostly within each others' company. Finally, rumors began to emerge that the two were having an incestuous relationship. The siblings encouraged the rumor. The headmaster finally called their father who told the headmaster he was a fool.

Isabel describes how she met Yoav at a dinner. Isabel had been struggling with her doctoral thesis because her overseeing professor had rejected her original idea for her thesis saying it lacked theoretical integrity. She'd majored in English because she loved to read. After her troubles with her thesis began, Isabel noticed her relationship with books began to change. She began to feel anxious in the library. She had trouble reading, the one activity that had once brought her comfort. She felt as if she were developing an allergy to herself. She longed to go home but didn't want to disappoint her parents. They'd made such a big deal about the opportunities the scholarship she'd gotten in Oxford would allow her to have. Her mother had always wanted to go to school but never had the opportunity. When her parents called, Isabel would make up lies about the wonderful, exciting things she was doing. In reality, Isabel was so depressed she sometimes had trouble leaving her room.

It was after she'd gone to see a movie by herself that she'd run into a fellow student who had invited her to a party that night. Isabel had agreed but regretted her decision once she arrived. She'd been attacked by a wave of nausea and gone to the bathroom to throw up. When she finished Yoav was standing over her. It was at that point that the two forged a friendship. She describes their first, unusual sexual encounter as well as their process of getting to know one another. She soon began to spend her time at Yoav and Leah's house in London. She noticed that when she was with Yoav her mental state improved. She recalls the strange life the siblings lived. Leah had a closet of fancy dresses she never wore. They had a set of unspoken rules they followed. They were both sensitive and indifferent to the antique furniture that surrounded them at all times. Even though the siblings seemed careless around the priceless pieces, Isabel noted they never seemed to leave any marks of their carelessness.

Analysis

A new narrator surfaces for this section of the novel. The story of the Weisz family is told from the point of view of Isabel, Yoav Weisz's girlfriend. This section ties in with the rest of the novel as it was Leah Weisz who contacted Nadia in order to get the desk back. At the time Leah told Nadia that she was Daniel's daughter. As this section of the novel progresses, it seems more and more unlikely that Leah was telling the truth about Daniel being her father. It appears that Leah told Nadia a lie in order to gain control of the desk, a piece of furniture she knew her real father, George Weisz, wanted. When



Leah had visited Nadia, it appeared to Nadia that she was jealous of Nadia's life of solitude and the control Nadia had over her own life. In this section Nadia's read of the girl turns out to be correct as Leah had been planning her break away from the hold her father had on her even though she was the only one who knew what she had planned.

Significant in this section of the novel is the reference to Sigmund Freud's last home located not far away from the house in which the Weisz siblings lived. Isabel points out that there was "poetic symmetry" (p. 110) that she didn't fully understand in the nearness to Freud's historic home. She went on to describe that Freud's family had recreated the study he'd had to leave in Austria in his last home. This description of the act of recreating a space and the importance exiles placed on their ability to recreate the lives they'd lost gives the reader background information about a project being carried out in Weisz's study. Isabel foreshadows that the father of Leah and Yoav was trying to recreate his own life before the exile of his family.

Later in that same section Isabel refers to a trip taken by Leah to New York that seemed to tear the family apart. It is assumed the trip to New York is the same one in which Leah went to visit Nadia and see the desk. It is also mentioned that Leah's father wanted a desk to make the replica of his father's study complete. It appears the desk Leah got from Nadia was originally owned by Weisz's father. Instead of having the desk sent to her father, however, it appears that Leah kept the desk from her father though her motives aren't clear at this time.

Again, loss is an important topic in this section of the novel as Leah and Yoav dealt with the loss of their father by suicide. They stopped communicating with Isabel for a period of six years. She thought she'd never hear from them again. According to Leah the two became hermits in the house in which they had grown up. Leah had thought she had gained the upper hand on her father when she refused to give him the desk but realized he took control of the situation by killing himself, locking the siblings in a life of grief and guilt. It was Leah's strength that made her realize both she and her brother had to break out of the life in which their father had trapped them in order for either of them to have a life. For this reason she called Isabel back to take care of Yoav for her.

Leah and Yoav are not the only ones in their family who suffered a loss. Their father also suffered a great loss. He, like Lotte, lost his family home, belongings and his family when he was just a child. He has spent his life helping others reconnect with the things they lost because of the exile of the Jews. He hoped to do the same for himself believing that by recreating a space similar to the one in which he'd lived as a child would bring some sense of peace. In addition to losing his parents, George Weisz also lost his wife. Because of these crushing losses Weisz seemed determined that he would not be separated from anyone he loved again. He had his children under the watch of nannies and drivers until they were much too old to need these caretakers. He kept his children secluded at home until he realized what a disservice he was doing to them and allowed them to go to boarding school. By this time the brother and sister were already completely dependent upon one another for companionship and did not try to make other friends. Soon rumors were circulating that the two were having an incestuous relationship.



The members of the Weisz family were not the only ones struggling with loss in this section of the novel. Isabel struggled with her own depression and despair. Because the topic she'd chosen for her thesis paper had been rejected and she was having trouble coming up with another topic Isabel was slowly becoming more and more anxious. She'd decided to study literature because she loved to read and found solace in books. As she studied and tried to come up with a new topic Isabel's anxiety became linked to books that had once calmed her, a situation in which she felt as if she were becoming allergic to herself. It was only when she was with Yoav and Leah that her anxiety and depression was relieved.

Relationships between parents and children are significant in this section of the novel as the relationships between both Isabel and her parents, and Yoav and Leah and their parents are discussed. Isabel felt guilty because her parents were so proud of her for getting the opportunity to study in England. She couldn't bring herself to tell them how badly her studies were really progressing. In Yoav and Leah's case, their father tried to watch over and control every aspect of their lives. Although they seemed to resent their father's control they also seemed to not have the strength or the will to fight against it.

Discussion Question 1

How did Weisz's suicide affect Leah and Yoav? Do you think he intended his children to be as hurt as they were by his death?

Discussion Question 2

Why was it significant that Weisz had a pamphlet from the Hemlock Society by him when he died?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Isabel's relationship with books and how this relationship changed during this section of the novel.

Vocabulary

impeccable, symmetry, docent, compromise, inanimate, inertia, vitality, excruciating, ambivalence, demarcated, transitory, pidgin, recede, cajole, incestuous, acuity, fathom, subterranean, encroach, stagnant, apathy, sabotage, accolades, iridescent, anecdotes, auguring, morose, beatific, wizened, banal, incongruity, constituted



Part I: Lies Told by Children - p. 139-168

Summary

Isabel continues her narration describing the part of the house in which Leah lived and how she prepared the music pieces she played. After their father died, Leah hung a piano from the ceiling of the house on Ha'Oren Street using ropes and pulleys. Isabel had been told Leah had stopped playing after her father's suicide. Isabel was afraid that if the piano ever fell it would take the entire house down with it.

Isabel notes that each time Leah and Yoav's father came to visit she would go back to Oxford. The siblings seemed withdrawn after their father's visits. Yoav wouldn't explain why Isabel couldn't be there when their father was visiting so Isabel became more and more unhappy with the arrangement. Meanwhile, Isabel had still not come up with a new topic for her dissertation.

One day Isabel was honored when Yoav asked her to go along with him to pick up a piece for his father. They took the family car to Cloudberg, the home of the Leclercq family. On the drive there Yoav talked about his childhood and how his mother had seen and fallen in love with the house on Ha'Oren Street. Isabel describes the strange visit they had with Mr. Leclercq beginning with the man opening the door of his mansion for them himself. He appeared to be alone with no servants. Isabel fixed dinner for them. That night she stumbled upon Leclercq's great nephew wandering alone in the house. The following morning the child was nowhere to be found. Leclercq said the boy had been living there for a little more than a year. On the way home Isabel learned that it was a chess table they'd been sent to pick up.

It was in March that Yoav and Leah's father called to say he was coming to visit again, would be arriving that night. Isabel insisted she be allowed to stay instead of being forced to go back to Oxford. They argued. Isabel was still there when Weisz arrived at the house. Weisz was polite but let Isabel know that Yoav had told him nothing about her when Yoav introduced the two. Isabel told him she was leaving to go back to Oxford but he would not allow her to leave even though Isabel suddenly wanted to do so. They sat in the living room while Weisz gave Leah the gift of an evening gown that Isabel knew Leah would never wear. Weisz ate and asked Leah and Yoav about their lives. Isabel was surprised by the lies they told him. She felt guilty about the lies she told her own parents to cover up the fact she was living with Yoav and that school wasn't going well. Weisz followed up his questions to his own children with an interrogation of Isabel. He asked what she studied and why she'd come to England. He also questioned her about her parents making her feel even more guilty. Once she was alone Isabel was humiliated and then angry. Isabel swore to herself she wouldn't allow the man to control her like her controlled his children.

Isabel left the next morning before anyone else was awake. It was three days later before Yoav called her. He asked her to come back. Leah was gone. Weisz had sent



her to New York to get a desk he'd been searching for for years. Isabel knew something hurtful had taken place between Yoav and his father. Later when Leah came back from New York Isabel found her standing in the hall with a strange look on her face. Isabel sensed Leah had separated herself from what had moored her. She also comments that they had all underestimated Leah.

Analysis

Most significant in this second section of the story about Weisz and his children is Isabel's meeting with Weisz. She resented Yoav for not letting her meet his father. She felt like he was ashamed of her. When Isabel did finally meet Weisz she couldn't get away from him fast enough. While she observed as Yoav and Leah interacted with their father, telling him lies about the things they'd been doing, Isabel felt guilty for the lies she told to her own parents. When Weisz began questioning Isabel she became angry as she felt that she had to make excuses for herself and make her life better than it really was in order to impress him. She felt judged. She realized Yoav had been keeping her away from his father in order to protect her from the interrogation through which she suffered.

Relationships between parents and children continue to be an important theme as Isabel understands more clearly why Weisz had such a strong hold on his children. Notice that in the end of this chapter Leah foreshadows the change in the family that has already been described at the beginning of this chapter. Apparently it was during the visit in which Isabel met Weisz that the old man asked Leah to go to New York to get the desk. The look on Leah's face that Isabel noticed when Leah first returned to the house from that trip is significant. Isabel indicated it looked as if "she had cut the fraying ties to whatever had moored us" (p. 168).

One aspect of the novel that may give readers trouble is the novel's lack of a linear timeline. The author tends to jump from point to point in time often starting a story at the end, as she did in the section *Lies Told by Children*. The author tells the reader what has happened and then builds the story through a discussion of what led up to that end. In this particular section the author ends with a mention of the look on Leah's face when she returned from New York. Isabel didn't know at the time what Leah had been doing in New York but the reader already knows she had gone to get the desk that had once been her grandfather's and Daniel Varsky's. The reader is left wondering what exactly it was that Leah had done and why it affected Weisz the way it did.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the way that Isabel was affected by her time with Yoav and Leah's father.



Discussion Question 2

Why do you think the author includes the story about Yoav and Isabel's trip to Cloudenberg? Why is it significant?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Isabel indicate that Weisz underestimated Leah? Why is Leah's hidden strength significant?

Vocabulary

infinitesimally, sanctity, tenacity, verboten, blithely, viscount, austere, conundrum, ominous, rhetorical, disheveled, feral, dilapidated, demented, deft, diminutive, atone, debutante, relegated, orifice, virginal, gratuitous, incurious, anarchist



Part II: True Kindness

Summary

Dov's father, Aaron, began to worry when dawn broke but his son still hadn't returned from his nighttime walk. Although they'd been living in the house together for ten days, Dov had said very little to his father. The narrator describes the way the two men had organized their days, including Dov's nighttime walks. He talks to himself telling Dov that he still had time in his life but the narrator didn't have much time left. He felt Dov had things he wanted to tell him before he died. He thought about how the Jews had never discussed what happened after death. As the narrator considered his own death he thought of a time when Dov would not eat. The boy was told he would have to sit at the table until he ate. Dov had brought up the question of death. He'd asked his father if he would die. When his father said he would, the narrator believed Dov had looked at him as if he were responsible for the injustice of death.

The narrator relates the story of Dov's birth and childhood. He says he believed he grew up when Dov was born. Though they already had Uri, his birth had not affected him like Dov's had. Even Dov's cries as a baby seemed like cries of grief that attacked the weakest part of his father. When he was three the narrator remembered Dov saying that when they died, they'd be hungry. His father thought the words were wise beyond Dov's years.

The narrator wonders who had backed away from the other first. If he had alienated Dov with his resentment or if Dov had walled himself off. He admits he was surprised when Dov came to him with his idea to write a book. The narrator understood only after Dov had left that had been the chance he had been given to make things right with his son. Later he'd found the first pages of the book on Dov's desk. He read the pages even though he wasn't an avid reader. As Dov continued to send installments in the mail, his father gave into the story. After Dov was sent by the army to Sinai, he didn't send any more pages home. Dov often wondered what happened in the end of the novel.

It was Yom Kippur when the narrator and his wife first heard the air raid sirens. Their city had been attacked. Uri called from Tel Aviv. He joked with his mother. The army called looking for Dov. They gave his parents a location to which he should report when he returned from his weekend leave. When Dov did come home, his father drove him to the place he was to report. He thought Dov would talk, but he would not. They said goodbye. The narrator had things he wanted to say to his son but did not say them. The narrator and his wife learned from their first son that Uri had been sent to Sinai.

It was two weeks after the war had begun that Dov's parents got a phone call. Dov told them he was in a hospital near Rechovot. His tank had been hit in Sinai. After Dov was at home he told his mother that two soldiers in the tank had been killed. The commander had lost a leg and thrown himself out of the tank. Dov had followed. In the confusion those still alive in the tank had driven away without them. Dov and his



commander were left alone. Dov couldn't carry the wounded man to safety but knew he would die if he stayed with him. The commander begged him not to leave him. The commander was dumbstruck when Dov told him he was leaving. He gave Dov a watch that was his father's. Dov was finally rescued. The commander's body was never found.

Dov drove to visit the family of the commander by himself. He took them the watch. He wouldn't talk about how the visit went. Three weeks later Dov got a letter in the mail from the father of the commander. The father accused Dov of causing his son's death. He wrote to Dov that it should have been him that died. The narrator indicated the letter destroyed Dov. He admitted that he and his wife had not supported each other or Dov as they should have at that time. Aaron remembered an argument with his wife during which they heard the door slam as Dov left. Aaron had gone after his son and convinced him to come back.

One day Dov came to Aaron's office and told his father he'd made a decision. He said he was going to London to study law. Dov was at the top of his class in law school. He made his work his life, leaving no time for anything else. It was not until after Dov was appointed a judge that his father realized his son would not be coming back.

As Aaron waited for Dov to return he sensed something was not right. Since his wife wasn't there to worry Aaron felt must do it. He continues to talk about how he felt as if his life was slipping away from him. He remembered riding in the car with Uri when a rock hit the windshield. Aaron knew if it had broken the glass it would have killed him. It was at that time that Aaron realized that the only person he wanted at his funeral was Dov. He remembered being the one to cut Dov's umbilical cord. He thought the baby had looked at him as if he wanted to remember what the person who had separated him from his mother had looked like. He wondered again where his son was and wished he could have five more minutes with him. He decided to call all of the hospitals to look for him just as his wife would have done if she were alive.

Analysis

In this section of the novel the story that was begun in the chapter titled True Kindness in Part I of the novel is continued. Aaron continued to wait for his son, Dov, to come home from his nighttime walk. He became more and more concerned the longer he waited.

The relationship between Dov and his father takes the spotlight as Aaron talks as if he were addressing his son in person. He wants to try to make a new start with Dov but isn't sure how to start. He believed that Dov had once tried to start a conversation with him but Aaron had not responded and Dov had gotten frustrated and given up.

Aaron reasons that he doesn't have much time left to repair his relationship with his son. He believed his son had many years ahead of him. This reader will later see the irony of Aaron's beliefs when he learns why Dov had not yet come back from his walk.



Loss is also a major theme once again in this section as Aaron remembers Dov's experience in the military. Even though the incident had not been Dov's fault, Dov was devastated when the father of his commander blamed Dov for the commander's death and told Dov it should have been him who died. The commander had suffered an injury that left him unable to walk. Dov knew he couldn't carry the commander to safety. He also knew they would both die if he stayed there. Dov chose to try to go for help. Dov was rescued but when the team went back for the commander, his body was not found.

It was after the incident in the military that Dov gave up his writing, his father said. Even though he had discouraged Dov's plan to write, Arthur had known it was not a good sign when his son stopped writing on his book. Not only did Arthur what happened in the end of the book, he also wondered what he died inside his son to make him give up on his project.

Notice in this section that it becomes more and more obvious that Arthur was jealous of the relationship between Dov and his mother. One sign of this jealousy came when Arthur indicated with some frustration that Dov had told his mother about the incident in Sinai but did not share the experience with his father.

When Dov got out of the military he told his father that he had decided to go to law school. Because his father was a lawyer Dov perhaps thought it would be with this career choice that he could make his father proud. He poured himself into his work ignoring both his parents and the family he had in England. He told his father that before he left England to come home he had quit his position as a high judge.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think tragedies, like the incident with the commander, affected Dov so strongly? Why was he unable to just brush off the hurt like others could?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Arthur's thoughts about death. Consider his statement that Jews ignored the reality of death.

Discussion Question 3

Why did it upset that Arthur that his son, whom he'd discouraged from a career in writing, stopped writing in the novel on which he was working?

Vocabulary

inaugurate, mundane, obtuse, moratorium, nullification, nebulous, peripatetic, crucible, equanimity, ascribing, squandered, repository, pathological, filament, reprieve,

impenetrable, inalienable, gratuitous, complicity, catatonic, barrister, prestigious, meticulous, inert, oblivion, divot, heinous



Part II: All Rise

Summary

Nadia describes to the judge how she felt all of her life as if she had been set apart for something different. It was because she believed she was gifted that she became a writer. She talks about how she had been afraid when the movers had first left Daniel Varsky's desk in her apartment. When she learned Daniel had been kidnapped her mind felt haunted and she had trouble concentrating. The desk began to represent her friend and the torture he had undergone. She tried to ignore the desk but it seemed to grow bigger. After having a dream about Daniel, Nadia was suddenly able to begin writing again. Now, Nadia wonders if she had been wrong all along about her giftedness.

As Nadia talks about her decision to live alone, even though she had always considered she might share her life with someone, she tells the judge she sensed he knew what loneliness was. She remembered an incident at the house of a family friend when a child had woken from sleep, come into the room with the strange adults and begun crying. The mother had picked the child up and comforted her. Nadia knew she would never be that person who could bring immediate and ultimate comfort to another person. He had tried to talk to Nadia about having children but Nadia told him she had to work.

It was at the guesthouse where Nadia was staying that Nadia happened to meet a man, Adam, whom she thought looked like Daniel Varsky. The waiter told Nadia the boy was a troublemaker but Nadia did not listen to him. She believed she'd seen that man because she was supposed to go back and retrieve the desk he had given her. She tried to come up with a reason to tell the waiter that she needed to see Adam again but did not need to use to excuses again because they happened to meet on the street. He gave her a ride to a parking lot with a view of the city before taking her back to the guesthouse. He asked if she would write a book about him. She asked him to take her to Ha'Oren Street the following day. He agreed.

Nadia was happy when they were on their way to Leah Weisz's house. On the ride to the house, however, Nadia thought about how it must have been for Daniel Varsky's mother when he died before she did. At the house they did not get an answer right away. Finally, George Weisz came outside. Nadia told him Leah had come to pick up a desk from her five weeks prior. The man seemed surprised and said he didn't know anything about a desk. Nadia wondered if Leah had given her the wrong address intentionally. She wondered why she hadn't asked for some proof that Leah was actually Daniel's daughter. Adam was hungry and they stopped to eat on the way home. He left her to pay the bill. At the guesthouse he said a friend of his had a desk and he would take her to see it the following day. That night Nadia called Paul Alpers and asked if he knew if Daniel Varsky had a child. Paul said he doubted Daniel had a daughter.



The next morning, the waiter again asked Nadia not to get involved with Adam. At that point Nadia was even more determined to seduce Adam. The desk that Adam took Nadia to see was not the one that Daniel had given her. When Nadia refused the desk, Adam was disappointed. Nadia went out with Adam several more times in the following days. One day Adam took her to Gad's apartment. Adam appeared to be looking for something. Nadia turned on music but Adam told her to turn it off. He walked up behind her and Nadia pulled him to her and kissed him. He shoved her off but Nadia tried to pull him back. He pushed her back so hard she fell and wiped his mouth with his hand. She realized he was disgusted by her. He has the keys to the storage unit full of furniture. Nadia realized all the furniture was stolen. Before leaving the apartment Adam stole Nadia's money from her purse. She was devastated. She stole the keys to Gad's car. She was crying as she drove. Soon she was lost.

She remembered seeing the judge standing in her headlights. She said it appeared he was waiting for her. She hit the brakes but still felt the impact when she hit the judge. The same nurse who had washed the blood from Nadia's hands had encouraged Nadia to talk to the judge. The nurse told her that the judge's father was on his way.

Analysis

It is in this section of the novel that the reader finally is given enough information to put together the pieces of what has happened between Nadia and the judge. In her distress after being embarrassed by a man Nadia had stolen a car and gone for a joyride. As she was driving, Nadia hit the judge as he was walking. Nadia now sits by his bedside as he is being cared for in the hospital. Aaron, who sat at his kitchen table waiting for his son in the sections True Kindness, has called the hospital and learned his son was being treated there for his injuries.

Relationships continue to be a major theme in this section of the novel. Nadia tells the judge about her own relationships and her decision to choose her work over relationships. She indicated to the judge that she had always felt she could split time between her work and a relationship but in the end her plan didn't work out. Ironically, even though Nadia knew nothing of the judge's story, she tells him that she believed he understood what it was like to be truly lonely, as if he, like she, had also neglected relationships in favor of work.

Dreams are significant in this section of the novel. At one point when Nadia doubted her ability to write, she had a dream about Daniel Varsky. Varsky had asked her if she didn't feel she had a special ability and had looked bewildered when she said she didn't. A month later, Nadia found she was able to begin writing again. Nadia additionally had a dream in which she saw a man who she identified as a mashup of both Adam and Daniel undressed in front of her. The dream increased Nadia's sexual desire for Adam whom she associated with her old friend Daniel.

Of course the desk is highly important in this section of the novel as it is why Nadia has traveled to Israel. She hoped to get the desk back from Leah and believed that Adam



was a sign that her project would work out favorably. Adam took her to the address that Leah gave her but was told no one by that name lived there. It was at this point that Nadia realized that Leah had probably been lying to her about her identity. She called Paul who confirmed her suspicion. Meanwhile, Nadia's visit to George Weisz has let him know for sure that his daughter is in possession of the desk for which he had been looking.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the relationship between Adam and Nadia. What do you think Adam wanted from Nadia? What did she want from him?

Discussion Question 2

Why did George Weisz lie about knowing Leah? What did he achieve by lying?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that it was the judge that Nadia hit with her car? How are Nadia and the judge alike? How are they different?

Vocabulary

coalesced, immutable, cowering, immutable, embodied, austerity, repercussions, exhume, emissary, jocular, raucous, alleviate, intangible, extricate, collateral, inscrutable, profundity, chastely, incredulous, incongruous, latitude, rudiments, discordant



Part II: Swimming Holes

Summary

Arthur reports that Lotte knew him until the very end but that she didn't understand him. He also felt like he no longer understood her. When she died, Arthur had put an announcement in the paper with the small hope her son would attend. After the funeral, Arthur began traveling again. One night he was wakened by a fire alarm. The hotel in which he was staying was on fire. A woman died in the blaze. He remembered his lawyer and friend Richard Gottlieb asking him at the funeral if he wanted to revise his will. He had no desire to do so at that time. He decided maybe it was time to do so.

When he was back at home he called Gottlieb. During their meeting he told their friend about the child Lotte had given up for adoption. He admitted he was jealous of the man who had fathered that child. He told Gottlieb about the desk he suspected that lover had given her. He told him about Lotte's solitary trip to the magistrate's office and what he had learned from the magistrate. Gottlieb made notes about where Lotte's baby was born and all the information Arthur could give him. Gottlieb asked what had happened to the desk. Arthur told him Lotte had given it to Daniel Varsky. He now understood Lotte had done that because Daniel had been so close to the same age of the baby Lotte had given away and probably reminded him of the baby. Gottlieb promised to see what he could find out for him.

Gottlieb found the child and adoptive parents in less than a month. Arthur waited for several weeks before he tried to contact the couple who had adopted Lotte's baby. When he finally did decide to go visit he took with him the certificate from the hospital, the lock of hair and a copy of Lotte's book to give her son. Elsie Fiske agreed to meet with Arthur even though the boy had died 27 years ago. During their meeting she told Arthur how she'd been 30 when she'd gotten married. She had gotten pregnant but had a miscarriage. They decided to adopt. They interviewed with an adoption agency but Elsie knew the woman with whom they met would not give them a baby. She found Lotte's advertisement in the newspaper and felt it was just for her. She didn't even tell her husband about the possibility they could get that baby. She told him how Lotte had given her the baby at a train station. She was so calm that Elsie had thought she was a surrogate sent to do the job instead of the real mother. Lotte had told her the discoveries she'd made about her child before handing him over. Elsie took the baby. When she looked up, Lotte was gone. She saw a man whom she thought must have been the baby's father.

After hearing the story Arthur was dizzy and Elsie allowed him to lay down. He cannot believe he shared his life with a woman who had given up her baby so easily. Although Arthur asked, Elsie would not tell him how the boy died. When Arthur woke up Elsie gave him some soup. She told him how he had once thought the baby, Teddy, had cried for his mother. Elsie told Arthur that if he had come to her trying to understand something about his wife, he could not help her because she'd meet Lotte only the one



time. When Arthur returned to his home he found a window had been smashed by a rock.

One evening Arthur had a visitor. It was a small man with a walking stick. It was Mr. Weisz trying to locate the desk. Arthur at first thought this was the man who had given Lotte the desk. As Arthur studied the man he realized he probably wasn't the father of Lotte's baby. He realized, for the first time, it was probably one of the children on the Kindertransport. Weisz described what he did for a living. He provided people with pieces of furniture that were significant. He said sometimes these pieces weren't the exact pieces but he could pass them off as the real ones.

Weisz noticed the window in Arthur's home that had been replaced and asked how it had been broken. He went back to the desk explaining how it was special as the owner couldn't forget the details of it. The owner of the desk was unable to die until the desk was found. Weisz said a new tip had led him to Arthur. Arthur told Weisz the story of the desk and explained he no longer had it. He gave Weisz the journal Daniel had left behind. Before he left, Weisz told Arthur the story of ben Zakkai, a Jewish rabbi. He explained how the temple in Jerusalem that was destroyed was rebuilt in people's minds. Right before Weisz left Arthur asked him if it had been the father of Lotte's baby who sent Weisz to him. Weisz said it was. Weisz wrote the man's name on a piece of paper and handed it to Arthur. Arthur sat in front of fire wondered what he and the man who had loved Lotte might say to one another. After several hours, he put the piece of paper in the fire and watched it burn.

Analysis

After Lotte died Arthur did not immediately try to find her son. It was only after an experience Arthur had during a trip that he decided to look for the boy. Immediately after Lotte's death Arthur's lawyer approached him about changing his will. At that time Arthur had believed a change was unnecessary. After he decided to look for Lotte's son Arthur went back to his lawyer so it can be assumed that he might have been considering changing his will to leave something to this child.

When Arthur did get in touch with the woman who adopted he discovered that she had suffered from her own devastating losses in her life. She had first married a man she didn't really love but came to realize she was only making his life miserable by the way she was treating him. She decided to change her own reactions to the man who was her husband. At this time the two decided to try to adopt a baby as they hadn't been able to conceive one. Lotte's baby had been a gift because an adoption agency had turned them down. Although Elsie had struggled through a phase where she felt the baby missed his real mother the three had molded into a happy family. The child grew to be a young man but was killed in an accident when he was 23. Elsie would not tell Arthur the details of the accident.

It was the desk that brought George Weisz to visit Arthur. Arthur had just returned from his trip to visit Elsie and was still deeply troubled by the way his wife had been able to



give up her son. According to Elsie Lotte had given the boy away easily. Arthur took her words at face value. Even though Lotte didn't appear to Elsie to be emotionally attached to her son, Lotte could have been working very hard to appear unconnected. She cared enough about the baby to notice his likes and dislikes, and pass those along to the woman who would take over the job of being a mother to him. In the days and weeks that Elsie first spent with the baby she felt he was mourning the loss of his real mother. Had Lotte not shown some affection to her baby, he would not have mourned her loss. It is for these reasons that it appears that Arthur judged Lotte harshly for what he believed was an unemotional, cold decision on her part. In the 1940's unwed mothers were still not widely accepted in society. Lotte and her baby would have had a hard life. Despite the cruelty Arthur believed Lotte had to have had in her in order to give her baby up, it is possible that he would not have married her if she'd kept the baby. After all, Arthur admitted he was jealous of a desk another man had given Lotte. It is a fair assumption that he wouldn't have handled life with another man's baby any better.

The conversation between George Weisz and Arthur is interesting. The reader knows that it is George who is looking for the desk that Lotte once owned. Arthur was unaware the desk had belonged to George's father. George told Arthur that person whose family had owned the desk was hounding him for information about it. He said that the man who was looking for it could not die until he was able to see it one last time. The reader recognizes that George was talking about himself and becomes aware at this point that George planned to kill himself after he was able to see the desk again.

Through his research in searching for the desk George was able to provide Arthur with the name of the man who had given the desk to Lotte. Because he has spoken to this man in his search for the piece of furniture, George knew that man was also the one who was the father of Lotte's baby. Before he left Arthur's home, George wrote down the man's address and name on a piece of paper and gave it to Arthur. Instead of looking at the name, however, Arthur burned the piece of paper in the fireplace. It appeared he had grown tired of digging into Lotte's past and knew he wouldn't be satisfied with any answers he might get from the father of her baby.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that Arthur decided to look for Lotte's son? What do you think he hoped to do when he found him?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Arthur never looked at the paper on which George Weisz had written the name of the man who was the father of Lotte's baby?

Discussion Question 3

What was the significance of George's visit to Arthur?



Vocabulary

impassive, pittance, executor, feral, cordon, incontrovertible, reticence, oblique, stoicism, demented, disembodied, nimbus, envoy, surrogate, fetid, provenance, obliterate, promenade, depravity, cataclysmic, besieged, collaborated



Part II: Weisz

Summary

Weisz's section of narration starts with a riddle. He asks where a rock thrown through a window lands as it shattered the life the family inside the house had once enjoyed. He describes his life after he left Hungary. He sent some things ahead of him in a container to his second life in Haifa. He was told his container was lost. The only thing he had was a half lira he found in the sand. Weisz was later invited to a dinner. The man hosting the dinner was wearing one of the monogrammed silk shirts that had been in Weisz's container.

Weisz's father was a history scholar. He'd originally owned the huge desk. He'd given his son the key to the locked drawer but Weisz had not been able to think of anything to put in the drawer. He wound up locking the empty drawer. He bought a house for his wife that she'd fallen in love with even before she'd fallen in love with him. He asked of her only that he be allowed to have one room that she would never enter.

When his wife died, Weisz described how he'd taken his children all over with him. He explained why he took them with him and why he kept them disoriented by moving furniture in the night. He wanted them to depend on each other.

Weisz indicates he realized he had underestimated his daughter when she found the desk and locked it away from him. He realized his daughter had given him the idea he needed to orchestrate his own ending. He tracked down the storage unit in which Leah had his desk stored. Weisz anticipated Leah would never have children. It would be Yoav who would have children. One day the mother of that baby would see something move outside her window. He believed that mother would discover an envelope in her nursery with the key to a storage building and address. When Weisz finally sat at the desk he was overwhelmed with disappointment.

Analysis

It is in this section of the novel that the reader learns why Weisz was so preoccupied with the freshly repaired window in Arthur's home. He begins his section of narration with a riddle that indicates the family's first sign that the Gestapo was after them was a rock thrown through their window.

Weisz verifies for the reader that he was able to see the desk again before he died. He used his money and his charm to be allowed to sit at it for an hour after he located the storage unit in which Leah had left it. Note that even after Weisz sat at his father's desk, the act that he had believed all of his life would give him a feeling of fulfillment, he only felt disappointment. At the conclusion of the novel he noted he'd seen this same disappointment in the other people for whom he'd located pieces of furniture they believed would bring them closure or peace if they were able to see them again. Weisz



apparently thought he would be immune from this feeling of disappointment but it turned out he was unfulfilled by the things of life just as others before him had been.

Note also in this section that Weisz foretells that the desk will wind up in Yoav's possession. He believed that Leah would find a way to get the key and address to the storage building to her brother so that he could claim the family heirloom for himself.

Discussion Question 1

What feelings did Weisz have when he was finally able to sit at his father's desk?

Discussion Question 2

On what level did Weisz connect with Arthur? Why was he preoccupied with the broken window at Arthur's house?

Discussion Question 3

How is the story that Weisz told about the years after the war different from the one his children recounted earlier in the novel?

Vocabulary

sodomizing, desecration, immutable, provenance, mute



Characters

Nadia

Nadia is the narrator of both sections of the novel entitled *All Rise*. She was a writer who had written seven novels and was working on her eighth when Leah contacted her about getting the desk loaned to Nadia by Daniel Varsky back. Nadia believed Leah when she told Nadia that she was Daniel's daughter. Later it turned out that Leah was not Daniel's daughter but instead the daughter of Weisz, whose father had originally owned the desk. After the desk was gone Nadia discovered she had lost the ability to write. She began to have daily panic attacks and had to struggle with herself just to go outside to do the basic necessities. She decided the cure was to look up Leah at her home in Israel and ask if she could have the desk back.

Once in Israel Nadia met a man who looked like Daniel Varsky had when she had met him nearly 30 years before that time. Although this man, Adam, looked like Daniel, he did not act like him. He took advantage of Nadia and wound up stealing from her. Nadia thought he wanted to have a relationship with her but all he really wanted to do was sell her furniture that his friend had stolen. When Nadia made a move on Adam it was obvious he was disgusted by her. It was after Adam made Nadia feel like a fool and stole money from her that she stole the car belonging to Adam's friend. It was during this joyride that Nadia hit the judge (Dov) with her car when he apparently walked into the road in front of her. Nadia narrated her story to Dov as she sat next to his hospital bed.

Leah Weisz

Leah Weisz, described as being small and unassuming, turns out to be the strongest character in the book. Leah was the daughter of George Weisz, a man who loved his children but protected them to the point of smothering them. She was the brother of Yoav. Weisz had trained the two to depend on each other and only each other. At one point in the novel Isabel described Leah as being her father's favorite child. She said Leah would do nothing to offend or go against her father because that act would be the same as physically assaulting her father. It was only a short time later, however, that Leah went to New York for the desk as her father ordered her to do but instead of giving it to her father she had it taken to a storage unit and locked away. She felt she would have power over her father if she knew where the desk was. Her father, however, found where the desk was hidden and was able to see it one last time. He returned home and killed himself, an act that he intended to forever bind his children in a web of grief and guilt. It was Leah who realized she had to leave her brother and her father's house in order for them to ever break away from the hold that their father had on them.

When Leah made up her mind to leave, she arranged for Isabel to come back and care for Yoav. It is foreshadowed in the book that after Yoav was married and had a child



Leah would sneak the key to the storage unit where the desk could be found as well as the address to that unit into Yoav's house so that her brother could take possession of the family heirloom.

Dovik

Dovik was the son of Aaron and Eve. He was the younger brother of Uri. Dovik was a troubled, moody child. His father was unable to connect with him as a child or as an adult. Dovik told his father he wanted to be a writer but his father made fun of his decision to write and also tore apart his idea for a story. Despite his father's criticism, Dovik wrote installments of his book even though the time he was in the military. When the tank in which Dovik was riding was hit he and his commander were injured. Dovik was rescued but he left his injured commander behind and the commander was never found.

In his pain Dovik stopped writing his book. He decided to begin going to law school. He was soon at the top of his class and was made a judge in England. He quit his position before he came home to attend his mother's funeral. Even though his father sensed his son was dealing with something important, Dov never told his father what was wrong.

During one of his evening walks, Dov was hit by Nadia as she drove a stolen car. The reader knows that Dov was taken to a hospital for treatment but isn't ever told if Dov will survive his injuries or not.

George Weisz

George Weisz was the father of Leah and Yoav Weisz. He was overbearing and controlling of his children. Weisz spent his life tracking down antique furniture that other people had lost during the time of World War II and returning the furniture to the proper owners. Weisz felt he could bring these people some sense of comfort by returning their belongings.

Weisz also had his own project in which he was trying to recreate his father's study from his family's home in Budapest. The last piece of furniture Weisz needed to finish his replica was the desk that Nadia had given to Leah Weisz. Leah believed she could control her father by hiding the desk from him, but George managed to find the desk and got to see it again by bribing the people who owned the storage facility. When he returned home from his trip to New York, he killed himself, an action that gave him the last word over his children proving they could not control him.

Lotte Berg

Lotte Berg was the wife of Arthur Bender. She grew up as a Polish Jew. She and her parents were rounded up by the SS in 1938 and forced to live in a transit camp for a



year. Lotte was able to leave the camp because she got a visa to chaperone a Kindertransport to England. Lotte had to leave her parents behind, however.

Arthur believed it was sadness from her childhood that haunted Lotte. He blamed her unusually quiet and introverted personality on her past. It was not until Lotte began suffering with Alzheimer's that Arthur learned she'd had a baby that she had given up for adoption before she had met him.

After her death, Arthur's suspicion that the huge desk she'd used as a writing desk had been given to her by the man who had fathered her baby was confirmed. During the course of her life, Daniel Varsky had come to visit Lotte and the two had developed a friendship. She chose to give him the desk as a gift.

Daniel Varsky

Daniel Varsky was a Chilean poet who was arrested and tortured to death in Chile. Before he went back to his home country Daniel spent some time in England. During that time he located Lotte Berg's home and the two struck up a friendship. Lotte gave Daniel the desk that she had worked at for most of her life.

A couple of years later Daniel surfaced again, this time in New York when Paul Apers suggested to Nadia that she contact Daniel about using his furniture when he was out of the country. Nadia and Daniel met only on the one occasion but spent nearly seven hours talking. Nadia felt she knew Daniel well after the evening they spent together. She mourned when she learned how he had been tortured to death.

Dancer

While Nadia was still married to her husband S, they attended a party at the home of a dancer. Nadia saw a picture in this home about which she questioned the dancer. He told her it had been made for him by a childhood friend of his and that friend's sister. The dancer went on to tell Nadia how the children had been killed by their mother. Nadia took that morbid tale and fashioned a short story around it.

She later met the dancer and discovered he had read the story. He told her he'd taken down the picture after he'd read her story as he never realized what it meant until that time. Nadia felt that he was being condescending of her when he gave her his opinion of the story, then touched her on the face as if pretending to be affectionate.

Aaron

Aaron was the father of Dov and Uri, and the husband of Eve. He is the narrator for the sections entitled True Kindness. Aaron speaks as if talking to his youngest son Dov as he waits for him to come back from his nighttime walk. He was beginning to get worried because Dov's walks had never lasted that late in the morning. Aaron and Dov have



never had a good father/son relationship. Aaron could never connect with Dov because he was such a moody child who was prone to throwing tantrums if things didn't go his way. Aaron had even gone so far as to discourage Dov's dream of writing a novel. Aaron felt he had alienated his son but wanted them to come to some understanding before he died, an event he felt was not too far in the future.

Isabel

Isabel was the girlfriend of Yoav Weisz. She is the narrator for the section of the novel entitled Lies Told by Children. She gives the reader and outsider's view of the Weisz family. At the same time she was trying to make sense of this strange family Isabel was struggling with her own writing woes. The topic she had chosen for her term paper had been rejected and Isabel was unable to come up with a new topic. The more she worked to find a topic the more anxious she became. The only time Isabel was not stressed was when she was with Yoav.

Yoav Weisz

Yoav Weisz was the son of George Weisz and brother of Leah Weisz. Yoav was also the boyfriend of Isabel. Yoav was completely under the control of his father. He was crushed and would spend days in a depression after his father's visits. Yoav completely closed himself off from the world and gave up Isabel as punishment after his father killed himself. Six years after their father's death Leah contacted Isabel asking her to come back and take care of Yoav as she was about to leave him. She believed it was the only way her brother could ever have a life.

Adam

Adam was the man that Nadia met at the restaurant of the guesthouse where she stayed in Israel. Nadia believed that Adam looked like Daniel Varsky had when she saw him 13 years prior. She believed her meeting of Adam was a sign that she was meant to get the desk back. Instead, Adam was trying to take advantage of Nadia. He made her feel like a fool when she tried to make sexual advances on him. When he left her alone in the apartment of his friend, Adam stole cash from her.

Eve

Eve was the wife of Aaron and the mother of Uri and Dov. She had died just previous to the action of the True Kindness portions of the novel. Aaron and Eve had a close relationship even though Aaron admitted at times there could have been more they could have done to support their children, especially Dov. Aaron also indicated he was often frustrated with the way his wife cowed to Dov's emotional tantrums and petted the boy.



Arthur Bender

Arthur Bender was Lotte Berg's husband and the narrator of the sections of the novel entitled *Swimming Holes*. He gave the reader an inside look at his struggle to maintain a relationship with a woman who was secretive and introverted. Although he knew he didn't know all there was to know about his wife, Arthur was still surprised when he learned she'd had a baby whom she had given up for adoption.

Paul Apers

Paul Apers is the man who got Nadia in touch with Daniel Varsky about the furniture that Daniel needed someone to look after while he was out of the country. Nadia later contacted Paul to see if he knew if Daniel Varsky had any children.

Uri

Uri was the oldest son of Aaron and Eve. Uri's role in the story is mostly that of a contrast to Dov and his personality. Aaron described Uri as a happy and normal boy while Dov was temperamental and moody.

Elsie Fiske

Elsie Fiske was the name of the woman who contacted Lotte about adopting her baby. After Arthur's lawyer tracked this woman down she agreed to see Arthur even though Lotte's son was no longer alive.

Teddy

Teddy was the name that Elsie and John Fiske gave to the baby they adopted from Lotte. Teddy died in an accident when he was 23 years old.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Desk

The antique desk once owned by George Weisz's father is the most significant object in this novel. To Weisz the desk symbolized his father and his family's life before the war. To Nadia the desk symbolized her dead friend Daniel Varsky. To Arthur the desk symbolized Lotte's love for the father of her baby. He believed it was that man who had given her the desk. To Leah the desk symbolized her key to freedom as she believed she would have power over her father if she had control of the one thing he wanted most.

R's Grand Piano

There are two grand pianos that are significant symbols in the novel. The first piano mentioned was owned by R, Nadia's boyfriend. Even after they broke up R left his piano in the home where Nadia lived for a short time. Nadia began to touch this piano as she had at one time touched R as she would pass him. The piano became a symbol for R.

Leah's Grand Piano

Another piano of note in the novel is the one that Leah managed to hang for the ceiling of the house on Ha'Oren Street. Leah's ability to get the piano in its precarious position symbolizes her strength and determination. It also symbolizes the change that has taken place in her life since her father killed himself.

A Large Ficus Tree

This large ficus tree was a symbol of the failed relationship between Nadia and S. When S finally confronted Nadia about the problems in their relationship, he told her that she had paid more attention to the plant and had gone out of her way to help it more than she had ever done for him.

Watercolor of a Landscape

This watercolor of a landscape displayed outside Eve's hospital room was a symbol for Arthur of the range of emotions he felt as his wife was in the hospital during the final weeks of her life.



Dovik's Book

Even though his father had discouraged his son from being a writer and had blasted his idea for a book, Aaron read all of the installments Dov wrote for his book and sent home while he was in the military. Aaron had never been able to understand Dov even when Dov was a child. He believed that by reading these books, he could get to know his son vicariously. For this reason the book that Dov was writing came to represent Dov to his father.

A Leather Diary

This leather diary that Daniel accidentally left on Arthur's desk while visiting Lotte became a symbol of the relationship that Arthur believed his wife was having with Daniel.

Walking Stick

This walking stick with a silver handle in the shape of a ram's head was a symbol of Weisz. When the author described a man holding this walking stick, the reader knew it was Weisz to whom she was referring.

George Weisz's Watches

The antique watches that Weisz religiously kept wound were a symbol of Weisz and his meticulous nature. Leah wrote to Isabel telling her all the watches had stopped running after her father's death, a symbol of his parting from life.

The Commander's Watch

A watch is also an important symbol in True Kindness. Dov was given a watch by his commander before he had to leave his wounded commander to try to get help. When rescue teams later returned to look for the commander, he could not be found. The watch was a symbol of Dov's inability to save the commander or even bring his body back.



Settings

Jerusalem

Jerusalem is the city in Israel that is the setting for the sections True Kindness in both Parts I and II of the novel as well as the events in the section All Rise in Part II of the novel. Jerusalem was home to Aaron and his family as well as to George Weisz. Leah and Yoav had grown up there before their mother died. In Part II of the novel Nadia traveled to Israel in an attempt to get Daniel's desk back from Leah. It was later that she later hit Dov with a stolen car while he was out for a nighttime walk. She and Dov were in an Israeli hospital when Nadia told the judge the story of her life and how she had come to be driving the car that caused his injury.

New York City

New York City is the setting for the events of Part I: All Rise. It is the place where Nadia met Daniel Varsky and agreed to keep his furniture while he went back home to Chile. Leah traveled to New York at her father's request to get the desk from Nadia. Instead of taking it to back to her father, Leah locked it in a storage shed in New York and refused to give her father the key. Her father traveled to New York to see the desk one last time before he killed himself.

Bookstore Near Washington Square Park

It was in this bookstore near Washington Square Park that Nadia met the dancer who had told her the story of the children whose mother had burnt them alive. Nadia later wrote and published a story about the family. When she saw this dancer she felt he had a condescending attitude about her story and did not approve that she had written it.

Chile

Chile was the country from which Daniel Varsky came. It was in this country that he was arrested and tortured to death.

Highgate in London

Highgate in London was the place where Lotte and Arthur lived. It was at this home in Highgate that Daniel came to visit Lotte and got to know her. Later George Weisz came to Highgate to speak to Arthur about the desk that Lotte once owned.



House in Belsize Park

An old Victorian styled house in Belsize Park was the home in which Yoav and Leah lived while Isabel knew them. This house is the setting for most of the section Part I: Lies Told by Children. The siblings' father used this house to store antique furniture he'd purchased so the ground floor was often crowded with antiques.

House on Ha'Oren Street

The house on Ha'Oren Street was where Weisz lived when he wasn't traveling. It was where Leah and Yoav had grown up until the death of their mother. Their mother had fallen in love with the house as soon as she had seen it. One room of this house was a private room for Weisz. In it he was recreating the study that he remembered from the house in which he had grown up. After Weisz killed himself in this house his children went to live there and stayed cloistered there for several years until Leah decided something had to change.

Cloudenberg

Cloudenberg was the manor to which Yoav and Isabel traveled to pick up a chess table for Yoav's father. Isabel was disturbed when she found a child wandering around the huge house. This child appeared to be neglected and isolated.

Sinai

Sinai is the place in Egypt where Dov was forced to leave his commander who had been fatally injured in combat. The tank in which the two had been riding left without them after it was hit by a bomb. The commander had thrown himself out of the tank because his leg was injured. Dov had followed him. Dov knew he had to go alone for help or they would both die. The commander's father later accused Dov of causing his son's death. Dov never seemed to get over his guilt associated with this incident.

Mishkenot Sha'ananim

Mishkenot Sha'ananim is the name of the guesthouse in which Nadia stayed when she went to Israel. It was in the restaurant of this guesthouse that she met Adam, a man who reminded her physically of Daniel Varsky.

Brecon Beacons National Park in Wales

It was in the inn at Brecon Beacons National Park in Wales that Arthur was staying when the inn caught fire. It was after this incident that he decided he wanted to try to find the people who had adopted Lotte's son and perhaps alter his will.



Themes and Motifs

Relationships

Relationships - or the lack thereof - is an important theme in this novel. Relationships discussed include those between husbands and wives as well as those between parents and children. There are also those who choose to put off having relationships, favoring instead their work.

The relationship between a husband and wife is explored most fully in the sections of the novel about Arthur Bender and Lotte Berg. Arthur was a socially normal man who lived with a wife whom he described as deeply private and secretive, even with him. It was only after Lotte became sick that Arthur learned his wife had a baby she'd given up for adoption before they met. In his sections of the novel Arthur describes how he learned to act around Lotte so as not to disturb her rigid organization and how he learned to try to trust her even when he felt uncertain of her intentions.

Relationships between parents and children are discussed in two different scenarios. In one scenario, George Weisz ruled over his children with the threat of anger. They dared not disobey him and were often in terror and depression for days after he paid them a visit. Weisz killed himself, an attempt to lock his children in a web of guilt and depression. In a different parent/child relationship Aaron admitted that he never really understood his son Dov. As he believed death was approaching for him, Aaron wanted to find some peaceful solution to their distance. Aaron didn't realize, however, that death might come to Dov before it came for him.

Another aspect of relationships discussed in the novel is those characters who put off relationships in favor of their work. Nadia is one of these characters. She'd been married before but her husband and she had separated because Nadia stayed so consumed in what she was doing. As she talked to the judge, Nadia told him she'd always assumed there would be time for a family and relationships later but those relationships haven't appeared as she thought they would. The judge is very similar to Nadia. For his father's description, it seems that the Dov was so hurt by his relationships with people that he chose his work over everything. When he came home for his mother's funeral, it appears that Dov had realized how lonely his life was.

Loss

Loss is a major theme in the novel as almost all of the characters are dealing with some type of loss. These losses can be as far reaching as the loss of family and home to the Gestapo in World War II or are more personal losses like loss of a loved one. The way each character deals with his loss ultimately affected the other characters around them.

Both Lotte and George Weisz suffered with losses associated with World War II. Lotte and her family were forced to leave their home and live in a transit camp because they



were Jews. Lotte left her family in the camp when she got a visa to chaperone a Kindertransport to England. Arthur believed all of Lotte's problems stemmed from the loss of her family. He was unaware that she had also had a baby that she'd given up for adoption. Even after he learned about this baby Arthur never considered that Lotte could also have suffered with guilt and depression because she gave her baby away.

George Weisz also lost his family and home during World War II. He tried to ease his sense of loss by recreating the study in which his father had worked. Even after Weisz had collected all the pieces that had once been in the study, he was surprised because he felt disappointed instead of feeling fulfilled. In addition to the loss of his childhood home and family George also tried to deal with the loss of his wife. Because his children were still small he overprotected them, almost to the point that he was crippling.

Other characters dealing with the loss of spouses include Arthur and Aaron. After he lost his wife Arthur was faced with the fact she never told him about the baby she had given up for adoption. He struggled not only with the loss of his wife but also with the betrayal he felt. Aaron, on the other hand, didn't know how to deal with the death of his wife. He felt the grief of the others mourners was empty in comparison to his. He had a vague feeling that he needed to make things right with his youngest son, but wasn't sure how to reach out to him.

Another loss suffered in the novel is Nadia's loss of the desk. Although she'd been a little bit afraid of the huge piece of furniture when it was first moved into her apartment, she'd become accustomed to it and had written seven novels while sitting at it. When Leah contacted Nadia about getting the desk back, Nadia immediately felt a sense of loss. It was almost as if she were losing a friend. She lost the ability to write after she was first contacted by Leah. After the desk was gone Nadia began having panic attacks. Her grief was so strong that she even made a trip to Israel to try to reclaim the desk.

Writing

Writing is another theme that is often noted through the course of the novel. Writing is significant because many of the characters are writers while some study literature. In places the technique of writing is discussed. In others, other characters learn surprising things about their loved ones when they read what they've written.

Daniel Varsky, Nadia and Lotte are among the characters who are employed as writers in the novel. Nadia described at one point her technique for writing. Though people had often asked her if she had some special ritual she followed in order to write, Nadia believed she could write anywhere. She went into a deep panic, however, when she lost the ability to write after Leah came to claim the desk that Daniel Varsky had given to her. Isabel, meanwhile, is among the characters in the novel who are students of literature. Isabel was on a scholarship to study at Oxford when she met Yoav. When Isabel's topic for her thesis was rejected, Isabel went into a panic. The more she tried to come up with a topic for her paper, the more even the idea of reading scared her.



Finally, two characters in the novel use the things their loved ones have written in an attempt to learn more about them. Arthur, for instance, remembered being a little bit afraid of his wife after he read a short story she'd written about a dictator who buried children in the garden. Aaron, on the other hand, hoped to find some clues that would help him understand his son by reading the novel that his son was writing.

Dreams

Dreams are significant in the novel. It was because of a dream that Nadia's friend Paul Apers had that resulted in Nadia meeting Daniel Varsky and getting involved in the story of the desk. It was this dream, perhaps, that touched off the events that led to Dov being hit by the car Nadia was driving.

Another aspect of the novel in which dreams are important is in the story that Dov was writing. In his story a great white shark was hooked up to several humans so that it was able to absorb the bad dreams these humans had. Through the course of the novel the shark grew sicker and sicker as he dealt with the ill effects of the dreams. The plot of Dov's novel seems to indicate that Dov had some kind of underlying desire to have something that could absorb all of the bad dreams and bad experiences he'd had in life and take away the pain he felt.

The Desk

A final theme of significance is that of the desk. The desk changed hands several times during the course of the novel and was the one thing that held all of the stories told by each of the sets of characters together. The desk had first belonged to George Weisz's father. It had been in his study in the family's home in Budapest until it was invaded by the Gestapo. Weisz spent the rest of his life looking for the desk. It was not until he located it that he was able to allow himself to die.

After the desk disappeared from the Weisz home there is a spot of missing time before it wound up in Lotte's possession. Lotte would tell her husband only that the desk had been a gift. She would not elaborate who it was from. After Lotte became friends with Daniel Varsky, she gave the desk to him. Daniel then passed it to Nadia when she needed furniture for her apartment.

Nadia had it many years before Leah Weisz, who said she was Daniel Varsky's daughter, asked to have it back. Leah tried to use the desk as leverage against her father by hiding it from him. In the end her plan backfired because her father managed to find the desk by himself. In his portion of narration near the end of the novel Weisz forecasted that Leah would eventually tell Yoav where the desk was stored and give him the key to the storage unit so that the desk would pass to his possession.

Styles

Point of View

This novel is written from the first person point of view from a total of five different narrators. Each similarly titled section of the novel is written from the point of view of a different first person narrator. For instance both the True Kindness sections in Part I and II are narrated by Aaron. Likewise, the Lies Told by Children section is narrated by Isabel. The sections titled All Rise are narrated by Nadia while the Swimming Holes sections are narrated by Arthur. The final section of the novel, Weisz, is narrated by the father of Leah and Yoav. The first person point of view is important as each character goes into long, introspective passages as they explore their relationships, their feelings about other characters and various other topics like death and writing. No other point of view could be used that would be able to give the reader such a close personal look into the relationships between characters.

Language and Meaning

Because writing is a consistent theme in the novel it makes sense that a good deal of the descriptive passages would include references to aspects of writing. For instance, Nadia describes his kiss with Daniel Varsky as being “a note of punctuation in our long conversation, a parenthetical remark made in order to assure each other of a deeply felt agreement” (p. 11). In another section of the novel narrated by a student studying English that student borrowed a common phrase “a struggle ensued” (p. 133) from Russian literature to describe the difficulty that Yoav encountered when trying to undress her the first time. When Isabel finally got a call from Yoav asking her to come back to him she compared the change in her life to the continuity of sentences. “One sentence ends and another always begins, though not always in the place the last one left off, not always continuous with the old conditions” (p. 168). In another section as Aaron thought about his own death he compared his end to that of the end of a sentence. “The first stone to mark my grave. The first stone placed like a period at the end of my life. Soon the mourners will come bringing stone after stone to anchor the long sentence that was my life to its final, strangled syllable” (p. 196).

Structure

The structure of this novel is quite complex and its timeline confusing as the author moves her story back and forth through time freely and quickly. Making a timeline of some of the more important events in the novel can help the reader to keep up with where events are taking place in relation to one another. The earliest mentioned date is 1944 when the Gestapo arrested George Weisz’s parents. It was in 1948 that Lotte gave up her baby. A year later in 1949 Arthur met her. In 1970 the desk changed ownership from Lotte to Daniel. Nadia got possession of the desk in 1972. Lotte died in



1997. In the years of 1998 and 1999 Isabel lived with Yoav and Leah. In 1999 Leah got the desk from Nadia. It was in 2005 that Isabel got the letter from Leah asking if she would go back to Yoav. It is known that Nadia went to Israel to try to retrieve the desk just a few weeks after Leah took it from her. George Weisz was still alive at the time so it can be gathered that the central event of the novel, Nadia hitting the judge with the stolen car, happened in 1999.

The book includes stories of four different groups of people each loosely connected to each other because of their connection to an antique desk. There are two main parts of the novel. Each of these parts contains four chapters. With the exception of one chapter in each part the remainder of the chapters have an installment for Part 1 and an installment for Part II. The chapters True Kindness deal with the relationship between Aaron and Dov. This family is connected to the desk only because Dov was hit a car driven by Nadia when she came to Israel to try to get the desk back. In the sections All Rise Nadia tells Dov how she came to get the desk and then lose the desk. She also explains why she was driving a stolen car so recklessly the night that Dov stepped in front of her. The family featured in the section Swimming Holes once had possession of the desk. In the chapters Lies Told by Children and Weisz the Weisz family was the one that originally owned the desk and the ones who owned it in the end of the story.

The main plot of the story deals with the desk and the way it affects the people who owned it through the years. The story of the desk leads up to the main action of the novel, the accident in which Nadia hit Dov with a stolen car resulting in him being sent to the hospital. There are a variety of complex subplots as the Weisz children tried to break free from their father's rule, Arthur tried to find out who the father of Lotte's baby was, Isabel tried to come up with a new thesis topic and tried to determine the inner workings of the Weisz family, and Nadia tried to reclaim her ability to write.



Quotes

Perhaps there were other details that I missed, because as she spoke I found myself struggling to accept the idea that I was about to hand over the single meaningful object in my life as a writer, the lone physical representation of all that was otherwise weightless and intangible, to this waif who might sit at it from time to time as if at a paternal altar.”

-- Narrator (Part I: All Rise paragraph 47)

Importance: Nadia thinks that Leah, the girl who claimed to be the daughter of Daniel, was not worthy of the desk that had belonged to her father. At the same time she realized how important a fixture the desk had become in her writing.

I championed the writer’s freedom — to create, to alter and amend, to collapse and expand, to ascribe meaning, to design, to perform, to affect, to choose a life, to experiment, and on and on — and quoted Henry James on the ‘immense increase’ of that freedom, a ‘revelation,’ as he calls it, that anyone who has made a serious artistic attempt cannot help but become conscious of.”

-- Narrator (Part I: All Rise paragraph 56)

Importance: Nadia defends her ability to write about anything she wished without having to give reasons for her creations. In this case Nadia refers to a book she wrote about her father that all of her critics believed was a real life story about her father.

I am embarrassed to admit this, knowing that it reveals some essential lack or selfishness in my nature, and aware that it runs contrary to the instincts of most, whose passion for something leads them to want to share it, to ignite a similar passion in others, and that without the benefit of such enthusiasm I would still be ignorant of many of the books and much of the music I love most, not least of all the third movement of Opus 132 that bore me up one spring night in 1967.”

-- Narrator (Part I: All Rise paragraph 63)

Importance: Nadia admits to the reader that unlike other people, when she shared something like music or a book that she had enjoyed with others, it actually decreased the enjoyment she got out it.

I suppose it’s what I’ve battled most often in my life as a writer, a sort of entropy of care or languishing of will, so consistently, in fact, that I barely paid it any attention — a pull to give in to an undertow of speechlessness.”

-- Narrator (Part I: All Rise paragraph 65)

Importance: In this quote Nadia spoke of what she thought was her greatest battle as a writer, the fight to keep her words flowing.

Because no one taught him anything, not even here in this country where death overlaps life, and now he is getting his first taste of it. And he isn’t crying for her, not for



his grandma, he's crying for himself: that he, too, is going to die one day."
-- Narrator (Part I: True Kindness paragraph 24)

Importance: Aaron realized as his crying grandson clung to him that his grandmother's death was the first experience that he had with death or loss. Aaron was suddenly grieved because there was no course of studies in school teaching students about loss and grief.

And at that moment, looking at you in the light of the hall, I saw something in your eyes. She was gone, she had finally abandoned us, left us alone with each other, and I saw something in your face and I was overwhelmed."
-- Narrator (Part I: True Kindness paragraph 29)

Importance: Aaron realized that his wife's worst fear had finally been realized. She had died and had left Aaron alone with their two children. It was when he saw Dov in the hallway that he realized the reality of his wife's death.

What is it like, I once demanded of you, to be a man of such high principles that no one else can live up to them?"
-- Narrator (Part I: True Kindness paragraph 35)

Importance: Aaron had once accused Dov of being a man of such high standards that no one could live up to them. The accusation had come after Dov had returned home to recover after a girl had dumped him.

We search for patterns, you see, only to find where the patterns break. And it's there, in that fissure, that we pitch our tents and wait."
-- Narrator (Part I: Swimming Holes paragraph 25)

Importance: Arthur indicates that it was when he found breaks in patterns that it was when he began to learn things about other people.

After Leah's trip to New York, and the beginning of the terrible silence between the siblings and their father, they stopped leaving the house altogether."
-- Narrator (Part I: Lies Told By Children paragraph 5)

Importance: In this quote Isabel notes that something happened during Leah's trip to New York that affected the relationships in her family. The reader later learns that although Weisz had sent Leah to retrieve a desk for which he had been looking she instead moved this desk to a storage unit and refused to tell her father where the desk was.

For forty years my father labored to reassemble that lost room, just as it looked until that fateful day in 1944. As if by putting all the pieces back together he might collapse time and erase regret."
-- Leah (Part I: Lies Told by Children paragraph 10)



Importance: In her letter to Isabel, Leah described how her father had spent 40 years searching out the pieces of furniture that had been in his father's study in their house in Budapest so he could recreate that room.

And the furniture they so coveted, the desks or bureaus or chairs they longed for, had long ago sat in and thought they would never sit in again, all that furnished the lives they lost or the lives they dreamed of living, arrived into George Weisz's possession via sources, channels, and coincidences that remained the secrets of his trade."

-- Narrator (Part I: Lies Told by Children paragraph 16)

Importance: Just as Weisz wanted to recreate his father's study as it had been before his family and home was destroyed by the Gestapo, other Jews also wished for pieces of furniture they thought they had lost forever. Weisz went into a business where he was able to find the pieces of furniture with which the Jews who had once been exiled wanted to reconnect. Weisz must have felt he was helping those former exiles to put their lives back together and help them heal.

As for Leah, she had always done what her father asked because she lived with the special burden of knowing that she was her father's favorite, and that to stand up to him, or God-forbid disobey him, would be a betrayal of the highest order, akin to a physical assault."

-- Narrator (Part I: Lies Told by Children paragraph 18)

Importance: Leah turns out to be the strong character in the novel as she was the one who had the nerve to stand up against her father even though Isabel had felt that as the favorite child, Leah would never do anything to disobey him or stand up to him.

The fact that the panic was bound up in reading — the thing that had been at the center of my life for as long as I could remember, and which in the past had formed a bulwark against despair — made it especially difficult."

-- Narrator (Part I: Lies Told by Children paragraph 32)

Importance: Isabel describes the panic she felt as she tried to come up with a new topic for her thesis. Even though she had always loved reading, reading was tied up with her search for a new thesis topic so Isabel began to dread reading, an activity that had always calmed her in the past.

But however accidental, there was beauty in them: In life we sit at the table and refuse to eat, and in death we are eternally hungry."

-- Narrator (Part II: True Kindness paragraph 10)

Importance: Aaron wondered over a statement that Dov had made about death when he was only a toddler. Even though he sensed Dov hadn't realized how significant his statement was, Aaron was impressed by his son's realization that once he died he would be hungry.



Terrible things befall people, but not all are destroyed. Why is it that the same thing that destroys one does not destroy another?"

-- Narrator (Part II: True Kindness paragraph 32)

Importance: Aaron wonders why his son, Dov, was not able to deal with the things that happened to him during the course of his life. He was frustrated because Dov could not come to terms with his reality and instead let the things that had happened to him destroy him as a person.

And yet for a long time I continued to believe it was possible to dedicate myself to my work and share my life, I didn't think that one need cancel out the other, though perhaps I already knew in my heart that if it were necessary I would not side against my work, could not any more than I could side against myself."

-- Narrator (Part II: All Rise paragraph 9)

Importance: Nadia explains to the judge why she was alone and had no boyfriend or husband. She reasoned that she could no longer split her time between her work and a significant other.

And that might have been the end of the story, Your Honor, and I wouldn't be here talking into the semi-darkness, and you wouldn't be lying in a hospital bed, if that evening, unable to forget the fallen look on the waiter's face, holding it up as proof of my chronic indifference to all but my work, I hadn't returned to the restaurant clutching a copy of one of my books, bought an hour earlier and signed to Dina."

-- Narrator (Part II: All Rise paragraph 15)

Importance: Nadia told the judge that she probably wouldn't have hit him with a stolen car if she had not tried to make the waiter feel as if she cared about his daughter and her future by giving her a signed copy of her book.

The sight of his young face, of his big nose and full lips and his long hair that I knew would smell like a dirty river, sent a shock through me no greater than if the boy I'd known for one night so long ago had at last emerged, perfectly preserved, from hiding for a quarter-century in the underground tunnels of Bar Kochba."

-- Narrator (Part II: All Rise paragraph 16)

Importance: Nadia was shocked when she saw Adam, a boy who looked like Daniel Varsky had back when she first met him. Nadia thought her meeting with Adam was a sign that she was supposed to go and try to retrieve the desk from Leah.

Maybe you sense that I am coming to the end, that the story that has been hurtling toward you from the start is about to turn the bend in the road and collide with you at last."

-- Narrator (Part II: All Rise paragraph 48)

Importance: The language Nadia uses in this description of the turn her story is about



to take is significant as she indicated that the story was “hurtling” toward the judge just as the car Nadia was driving collided with him.

This desk was something else entirely: an enormous, foreboding thing that bore down on the occupants of the room it inhabited, pretending to be inanimate but, like a Venus flytrap, ready to pounce on them and digest them via one of its many little terrible drawers.”

-- Narrator (Part II: Swimming Holes paragraph 15)

Importance: Arthur describes the desk that Lotte gave Daniel, the boy who he believed reminded Lotte of what the child she gave up might have become, to his lawyer.

I learned something about controlling certain kinds of feelings, about not giving in to the first emotion that presents itself, and I remember thinking at the time that such discipline was the key to sanity.”

-- Elsie (Part II: Swimming Holes paragraph 35)

Importance: Elsie told Arthur how she learned through her husband that if she could control her emotions and first reactions, she and her husband could have a better, more sane life together.