

# **The History of Love Study Guide**

## **The History of Love by Nicole Krauss**

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# Plot Summary

The History of Love by Nicole Krauss intertwines romantic and mysterious elements into a story about love, loss, and identity. Structured as a book-within-a-book, the novel explores the impact that one supposedly lost manuscript has on the lives of several people. Through reading the fictional book, also titled *The History of Love*, the characters begin to define and refine their own personal histories of love.

Leo Gursky makes a point of being seen wherever he goes. He recently responded to an ad for nude models, thinking it would be great to be seen so completely. Leo has written three books. The first was about his hometown in Poland and the second was a fantasy novel. Leo's favorite critic and lover, Alma, did not like either one. His third book was about her. After his heart attack, Leo began to write again. He wrote about a boy who secretly loved a girl. The girl's father sent her to America, and the boy swore he would join her. After World War II ended, the boy, now a man, made it to America and visited the girl. She told him that she assumed that he had been killed in the war, so she married someone else. After seeing a picture of his five-year-old son, Isaac, the man left, never to love another woman. Once Leo finishes the novel, he sends it to Isaac. A few weeks after Leo mails the book, he discovers that Isaac has died. He meets Bernard, Isaac's brother, at the funeral. Leo does not reveal his identity but does say that he is from Slonim. At Bernard's house after the service, he tells Leo that Isaac found some letters written in Yiddish among their mother's things. Isaac believed that the letters were from someone Alma had loved in Slonim, but she never mentioned anyone. Leo returns home from the service and finds an envelope with a copy of his book *The History of Love* in it. With Bruno's encouragement, Leo goes to Isaac's house in Connecticut to try and retrieve his book, but cannot find it. Several days later, Leo reads an excerpt of his novel, which is being published under Isaac's name, in a magazine. He wonders if Isaac read the book, which would mean he knew Leo was his father. He checks the mail and finds a letter asking him to come to the Central Park zoo on Saturday. It is signed Alma.

Alma Singer is named after a girl in a book called *The History of Love*. Her younger brother, Bird, is obsessed with Judaism. Their father, David, died when Alma was seven years old. Alma learned from her uncle Julian that David was a great outdoors man, so Alma decided to learn about surviving in the wilderness. She keeps a notebook called *How to Survive in the Wild*. Charlotte, Alma's mother, shut herself off from the world after David's death. It is only recently that she went back to work as a book translator. One day Charlotte receives a letter from Jacob Marcus requesting that she translate *The History of Love*, Zvi Litvinoff's only published novel. After Charlotte finishes translating the first quarter of *The History of Love*, she asks Alma to mail it to Jacob. Thinking Jacob might make a good husband for Charlotte, Alma encloses a secret letter. She tells her Russian friend, Misha Shklovsky, about her family and her letter to Jacob Marcus.

Nearly a month after Alma mails the package to Jacob, he sends a response. Alma reads the letter, but does not feel she knows anything about Jacob. She picks through



the letter for clues, then decides to read through *The History of Love* for more clues. She finds out from Charlotte that the character's full name is Alma Mereminski. Alma discusses her theories about Alma Mereminski's existence at length with Misha, who is skeptical that Alma is actually a real person. Determined to find out for sure, Alma searches several local government offices for records of Alma Mereminski and finally learns that she married Mordecai Moritz. When she goes to find Alma Mereminski, Alma learns that the woman has died, but that her son, Isaac, is a famous writer. She finds a copy of Isaac's novel *The Remedy*, and discovers that Jacob Marcus was a character in the novel, and the man sending letters to Charlotte is actually Isaac Moritz, Alma Mereminski's son. The next morning, Alma prints a map and directions to Isaac Moritz's house and arranges for Herman Cooper, her neighbor, to drive her there. After a long drive in the rain, Alma and Herman find Isaac's house, but no one is home.

*The History of Love* was originally published in Spanish by Zvi Litvinoff. The original manuscript was written by Zvi's friend, Leo Gursky, and was given to Zvi for safekeeping during the war. Sixteen years later, Zvi copied Leo's book word for word, except for the names, all but one of which he changed. When *The History of Love* was about to be published, Zvi turned Leo's self-penned obituary, "The Death of Leopold Gursky", into the book's final chapter as a tribute to his friend. He did not know that Leo was still alive and living in New York. Zvi's wife, Rosa, had encouraged him to publish the book and later found out that Leo was the true author. She arranged to have Leo's original manuscript destroyed when their home flooded.

Upon hearing from Misha that Alma is looking for someone, Bird reads through her notes in *How to Survive in the Wild* and sees the name Alma Mereminski, then Alma Moritz. The different last names lead Bird to think that David may not have been Alma's father. He finds Alma's copy of *The History of Love* and reads it as well, thinking it may reveal who Alma's real father is. After talking with Bernard Moritz about the connection between Leopold Gursky, Isaac Moritz and Alma Mereminski, Bird prints out *The History of Love* and prepares to send it to Leopold Gursky.

Alma receives a letter from Leopold Gursky, asking her to come to the Central Park Zoo. On the appointed day, she arrives at the park but does not see anyone that could be Leo. Finally she sits down next to a man who pays no attention to her. As Leo sits waiting, he thinks about how Alma loved his imagination and how he used his imagination to survive. At this point in his life, Leo cannot tell the different between what is real and what he believes. He pins an index card to his coat, thinking he may die on the bench.

Alma gets up to leave and notices the card on the old man's chest says his name is Leo Gursky. She tells him her name is Alma and he replies that Alma is his favorite name. When she says that she was named after every girl in a book called *The History of Love*. Leo says he wrote the book. Confused, Alma asks if he is a writer, and Leo says he is, that his books are titled *The History of Love* and *Words for Everything*. Alma tells him that *The History of Love* she is talking about was written in Spanish by Zvi Litvinoff. It occurs to Leo that this Alma may actually be real, and that his book still exists. He looks at her and realizes that she is not his Alma. Alma asks Leo if he was ever in love

with a girl named Alma Mereminski and if his son's name was Isaac Moritz. He does not say anything, merely taps her several times. She reaches for his hand, then hugs him. He says her name several times, and she taps him in return.



# The Last Words on Earth

## The Last Words on Earth Summary

Leo Gursky responds to an ad for nude models—he thinks it would be great to be seen so completely by others. He tells Bruno about the class, but Bruno thinks he signed up to see naked women. Leo and Bruno have been friends since childhood. When Bruno's wife died, he moved into an apartment upstairs. They check on one other regularly. When Leo came to America, he became a locksmith with his cousin. After his cousin died, Leo ran the business for more than 50 years, until his heart attack. Then he reconnected with Bruno.

Leo has enjoyed writing about imaginary things since childhood. As he grew older, he tried to write about reality, to fight off loneliness. He wrote three books before turning 21. The first book was about his hometown, Slonim. The second was a fantasy. Alma, Leo's favorite critic and lover, dismissed them as too real or too imaginary. His third book was about her. Alma left for America and Leo remained, hiding from Nazis to avoid capture.

After his heart attack, Leo resumes writing. He writes more than 300 pages, sometimes believing the last page will coincide with his own death. He writes about a boy who secretly loved a girl. The girl's father sends her to America, and the boy swears to follow. In 1941, the Nazis invade the boy's hometown of Slonim. The boy hides to escape death. Three years later, he makes it to America. He moves in with his cousin and visits the girl. She tells him she was pregnant but never received a reply. She assumed he was dead, and married her boss's son. She shows him a picture of his son, Isaac, now five years old. The man asks her to come with him, but she refuses. He leaves, never to love again.

Leo arrives at a warehouse. He considers not posing, but follows through. At home, there is a note from Bruno. Too tired to visit, Leo goes to bed. The phone rings, waking Leo. A man has locked himself out. Leo agrees to help and arrives at the townhouse, where the man thanks him profusely. Leo opens the door. They enter and the man leaves call for a car for Leo. Leo wanders into the man's library, perusing the shelves. The man owns four of Isaac's books. Leo takes his favorite from the shelf. He reminisces about seeing his son at a reading, but not being able to speak to him. The man comes up behind Leo and asks if he knows the book. Startled, Leo drops the book and says he is the writer's father. The man looks shocked but says nothing. He hands Leo a hundred-dollar bill, then asks if he really is Isaac's father. Leo says he is more like an uncle, but not really. He leaves. When Leo arrives home at 3AM, he thinks his book needs a title and sits at the typewriter. He finally types "Words for Everything." He wraps the page and book to send them to Isaac. Leo waits for something dramatic to happen, but nothing does. At 8:45AM he leaves.



## The Last Words on Earth Analysis

The author introduces Leopold Gursky in this chapter, an old man living in New York. He has survived the Holocaust by becoming invisible, but in doing this, he has also ensured that no one will ever really see him.

Through heavy use of flashbacks, the chapter provides a framework for the novel. Leo is an unpublished writer of more than three books. The reader is not directly told that Leo has a son, Isaac, a published writer also living in New York.

Leo's profession as a locksmith symbolizes his desire to gain access to people and areas that are off-limits to him, such as his childhood sweetheart and their son. It is the act of coming out of retirement that effectively unlocks Leo's resistance to connecting with Isaac. By sending his latest book to his son, Leo unlocks a door he has kept locked for many years.





# My Mother's Sadness

## My Mother's Sadness Summary

Alma Singer is named after every girl in *The History of Love*. Her brother, Emanuel Chaim, refuses to answer to his name. Once he tries to fly, and thereafter is known as Bird. Bird is obsessed with Judaism, wearing a kippah, writing the Hebrew letters of God's name everywhere, and following Mr. Goldstein, the janitor at Hebrew School. Alma's father David met Alma's mother, Charlotte, on an Israeli kibbutz. When the couple returned to Israel from a honeymoon in South America, Charlotte began translating books from Spanish and Hebrew into English. David was offered a job in America. They relocated to New York, where Alma and Bird were born. When Alma was 6, David was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and died within nine months. For a while, Charlotte kept everything as David had left it, then cleared out all signs he had been there. Alma rescued her father's sweater from the trash. Uncle Julian, Charlotte's brother, sent Alma her father's old Swiss Army knife, saying it helps one survive in the wilderness, and that her father was a great outdoors man. Alma decided to learn how to survive in the wild.

Alma's mother took to bed for nearly a year after David's death. Eventually Charlotte began to translate books again, and Alma began collecting items for her survival kit. She bought a book titled *Edible Plants and Flowers in North America*. For Chanukah, Alma received a sleeping bag, and began to keep a notebook called *How to Survive in the Wild*.

Alma reveals that Charlotte has only gone on two dates since David's death. The first was with an English editor. A year later, Henry Lavender, an emergency room doctor treating Bird's broken wrist asked Charlotte out. He called Charlotte after the date, but she refused to return his calls. Alma is convinced her mother has not met the right person.

On Alma's fourteenth birthday, Bird asks about their father. Alma makes up several facts, then Bird tells her he believes he may be a lamed vovnik, one of the 36 holy people upon which the world's existence depends. He found out about them from Mr. Goldstein, who also told him the Messiah is one of the lamed vovniks and that in every generation one person has the potential to be the Messiah. Alma does not know how to respond. Alma resolves that when she grows up, she will not fall in love, drop out of college and ruin her life. While Charlotte insists that one day Alma will fall in love, Alma resists the idea. The only boy she has ever kissed is Misha Shklovsky, a Russian boy in Brooklyn.

Five months later, a letter arrives for Charlotte from Jacob Marcus, requesting that Charlotte translate *The History of Love*, Zvi Litvinoff's only published novel, from Spanish to English. He offers Charlotte \$100,000 to translate it and says she will retain all rights to the translation. Charlotte used to read *The History of Love* to Alma before



David got sick. Several weeks later, Marcus sends a postcard saying he will immediately wire the first payment and asking her to send him the book in quarters as she translates it.

Soon after, Bird climbs the roof at Hebrew School and falls off, spraining his wrist. He sets up a lemonade stand outside the house but later moves to a vacant lot to get more business. When sales are slow, Bird plays on the lot and clears away the debris. Alma asks him what he is doing there, but Bird will not tell her. She later discovers he has taken her third volume of *How to Survive in the Wild* and written the name of God across the top of every page. She yells at Bird to leave her things alone and to start trying to act normal.

After Charlotte finishes translating the first quarter, she asks Alma to mail it to Marcus. Alma opens the package and reads the chapters and her mother's letter. Disappointed that the letter is strictly business, Alma throws the letter away and writes a new one.

## **My Mother's Sadness Analysis**

The other narrator, Alma Singer, is introduced in Chapter 2. Alma is a 14 year-old girl living in New York. It is interesting to note that the chapters narrated by Alma are broken into small sections, with each section numbered and labeled. The reader can infer from the structure that Alma is fond of making lists.

The name of this chapter refers to Charlotte Singer, Alma's mother. Charlotte's grieving process has deeply affected Alma and her brother Bird. Alma decides that her mother's choice in how to survive the death of her husband is not one that she would choose, tying in with the theme of survival after a loss. It is fitting, then, that Alma instead chooses to focus on how to survive in the wilderness.

Alma begins her narrative by talking about her brother, her father and her mother. This suggests that she believes she is defined, in large part, by these key relationships.

Chapter 2 sets up one of the mysteries in the novel: Who is Jacob Marcus, the man with enough money to afford a private translation of a novel? This chapter foreshadows later developments and discoveries made by Alma as she reads Charlotte's translation of *The History of Love*.

# Forgive Me

## Forgive Me Summary

Nearly everything known about Zvi Litvinoff, the author of *The History of Love*, comes from the introduction his wife, Rosa, wrote when the book was reissued after his death. She met Zvi in Valparaiso in 1951, at a local cafe. After several months of watching him, Rosa began talking with him and the two fell in love. Two months later, Zvi began to read parts of *The History of Love* to her. The book was written in Yiddish, and with Rosa's help Zvi would translate it into Spanish. The original manuscript was lost when their home was flooded. A publisher in Santiago printed 2,000 copies. An original copy wound up in a secondhand bookstore in Buenos Aires, where David Singer bought it.

## Forgive Me Analysis

This chapter introduces the reader to Zvi Litvinoff, the author of *The History of Love*. It is interesting to note that very little is known about Zvi, aside from what his wife, Rosa, has written about him. Like Leo Gursky, Zvi has also made himself virtually invisible as a way to survive his grief.

The reader also gets more information on how David Singer and his wife, Charlotte, came to read *The History of Love*. David found the book during his travels through South America and bought the book. The impact that the book had on his relationship with Charlotte will be explored in later chapters.



# A Joy Forever

## A Joy Forever Summary

Leo winds up at Starbucks and realizes he is happy to be a part of the world. Leo calls Bruno to say that it is good to be alive, and life is a thing of beauty and a joy forever. When leaving, he spies the headlines on a newspaper and stops when he sees Isaac's picture and a headline: "Isaac Moritz, Novelist, Dead at 60." Leo pulls it from the trash and heads home. As he sits in the dark in his apartment, Bruno pushes a piece of paper under the door that reads "Life is Butiful." Leo finally writes on it "And a Joke Forever."

Leo cuts Isaac's photo out of the paper and puts it in his wallet, noticing the memorial service will be held in two days. He buys a new suit for Isaac's funeral, gets very drunk, passes out and wakes up after 10AM. He quickly leaves for the shul, but arrives late. Leo sees Bernard, Isaac's half-brother, and notes he looks much like his father, Mordecai, who died three years earlier. Alma died five years ago. Leo saw her again only in her final days, when he sneaked into her hospital room and sat with her. Bernard thanks Leo for coming and as he turns away, Leo tells him that he is from Slonim. Leo is invited to come to Bernard's house. The house is full of mourners, all talking about Isaac. Pained that he does not know his son in the same way, Leo wanders into a bedroom and falls asleep. Bernard walks in and accidentally awakens Leo. Leo notices a picture of him and Alma when they were children. Bernard tells him Isaac found the photo, along with letters written in Yiddish, among their mother's things. Isaac believed the letters were from someone Alma loved. Leo hides the picture in his pants and goes home.

Leo goes up to Bruno's apartment and finds a note saying "Do Not Disturb. Gift Under Your Pillow." Leo looks under his pillow. There is a brown envelope with his name on it, in an unfamiliar handwriting. Leo opens the envelope, pulls out a stack of printed pages and begins to read. Thinking the text is familiar, he finally realizes they are his words.

## A Joy Forever Analysis

In this chapter, Leo learns of his son Isaac's death. His survival instincts must now include managing his grief over never establishing a relationship with Isaac. Leo's process of doing this ties in with the theme of survival after a loss.

Bernard's comment about the photograph of Alma and Leo as children, as well as the letters, hints that Isaac made an effort to discover who had written the love letters to Alma. This foreshadows later developments in the story.

The envelope with Leo's manuscript inside adds to the mystery: Who sent the pages, and what manuscript is this?



# My Father's Tent

## My Father's Tent Summary

Misha, a penpal, first writes to Alma when she is 12. Over the next two years, Alma tells Misha about David's death, Charlotte's grief, and Bird's strange behavior. When Alma writes the letter to Jacob Marcus pretending to be Charlotte, she tells Misha. Jacob Marcus sends a response. Alma picks through the letter for clues and writes them in code in the third volume of *How to Survive in the Wild*. The clues do not help, so Alma decides to read *The History of Love*. Alma prints the first fifteen chapters and hides them in her backpack.

Alma reads about people talking with their hands and a man who thought he was made of glass. The chapters do not solve the mystery. She muses over why David gave Charlotte the book. On the title page of Charlotte's copy, she reads "For Charlotte, my Alma. This is the book I would have written for you if I could write. Love, David." Alma realizes the Alma in the book must have been a real person. She adds "Alma" to the list of clues and asks her mother Alma's last name. Charlotte says "Mereminski," unusual because all other names in the book are Spanish. She starts looking for Alma Mereminski the next day.

## My Father's Tent Analysis

In this chapter, Alma's quest for finding out more about Jacob Marcus begins. She deduces that he has a vested interest in having *The History of Love* translated, and goes about figuring out the reason.

Through Alma's description of the chapters she reads in *The History of Love*, the reader learns that it is quite likely that Leo was involved in the writing of the novel, for there is a chapter about a man who believes he is made of glass. In one chapter of a book Leo wrote, he includes an excerpt on a young man who believes he is made of glass.

# The Trouble with Thinking

## The Trouble with Thinking Summary

Zvi coughs more as the years go by—there is something he wishes to say but cannot. As a young man in Poland, Zvi had a friend he has not seen since. Zvi thinks of this friend often and their last meeting. Zvi was a journalist writing obituaries. He would hang out in a local cafe with this friend, reminiscing and talking about writing every night. The friend showed Zvi some of his work, which moved and impressed Zvi.

A few weeks later, his friend did not show up, so Zvi went to his apartment and found him very ill. He sat with him until the man fell asleep. Zvi read through some of his friend's writings laid out on the desk, including one titled "The Death of Leopold Gursky." Zvi read it, mouthing the words as a prayer for life. He watched over his friend the entire night, and in the morning his friend seemed better. Zvi left, taking the copy of "The Death of Leopold Gursky" in his pocket, believing he would buy time for his friend.

## The Trouble with Thinking Analysis

In this chapter the reader learns that Zvi Litvinoff and Leo Gursky were friends in Poland. Zvi is jealous of Leo's talent as a writer, which could be considered a motive for plagiarizing his work.

The theme of personal histories of love also comes into play in this chapter. It is Zvi's love for his friend Leo that inspires him to stay at his bedside while he is very sick. He steals the obituary that Leo has written for himself out of love as well, for he believes that by keeping it safe, he keeps his friend alive a while longer.



# Until the Writing Hand Hurts

## Until the Writing Hand Hurts Summary

Leo notices that the names he originally used have changed to Spanish names, and Buenos Aires now stands in for Slonim. Leo looks at the envelope, but there is no note or return address. Leo wonders how the book survived—he thought the only copy had been lost in a flood. He had sent excerpts to the woman he loved in America, but these pages cover almost the entire book. Leo suddenly realizes he might be famous. He grabs his coat and heads for the library. He asks the librarian for books written by Leo Gursky. She finds a bullfighting book by Leonard Gursky, but Leo says the name is Leopold Gursky. She finds *The Incredible, Fantastic Adventures of Frankie, Toothless Girl Wonder*.

Leo returns to his apartment and finds Bruno sitting there in the dark. He has been reading the pages scattered on the floor. He tells Leo he likes the writing and had always wondered what he had been working on. Bruno replies that he, too, was writing a book about Alma. Leo remembers a day, 60 years earlier, when he left Alma's house in tears. He had seen Bruno standing next to a tree, holding a notebook and waiting to go to Alma after Leo had left. At that time, the two men were no longer friends, nor speaking to each other. Bruno tells Leo to get his book back. Leo begins to pick up pages, but Bruno tells him he does not mean the book on the floor. Realizing what Bruno means, Leo begins to smile.

## Until the Writing Hand Hurts Analysis

The mystery surrounding *The History of Love* becomes clearer, as Leo reveals that he sent portions of his work to his love in New York. This ties in with the Yiddish letters that Isaac found in his mother's belongings.

The parallels between Leo and Alma Singer involve the mysterious translator of the novel. While Alma knows who has requested the translation, she wants to know why the translation is so important to him and who he really is. Leo does not know who has arranged for the translation, but he, too, wants to know the motivations for sending him the novel. These parallels foreshadow later events in the novel between Leo and Alma Singer.

In this chapter, Bruno's identity appears to be intertwined with Zvi Litvinoff. Like Zvi and Leo, Bruno also wanted to be a writer. In addition, Bruno appears to have also loved Alma and sought her approval. This plot point adds another element to the mystery surrounding *The History of Love* and foreshadows Bruno's role later in the book.



# Flood

## Flood Summary

Alma searches the Internet for Alma Mereminski, but only finds information on immigrants and a list of Holocaust victims. Uncle Julian comes to stay with Alma while he finishes his research on a book. Julian takes Bird's bed, Bird sleeps in Alma's bed, and Alma sleeps on the floor. Misha asks Alma why she thinks Alma Mereminski is a real person. Alma thinks Litvinoff did not give her a Spanish name because he was in love with her—she was the only thing that was real. As the two walk, Misha tells Alma some people think she is his girlfriend. Alma says she is not. After betting him Alma Mereminski is listed, Alma calls information and gets a number for A. Mereminski. Unfortunately, it is for Artie Mereminski.

Alma and Misha return to his apartment. He asks why she thinks Mereminski came to New York, and she explains Litvinoff wrote about a string held by a woman who left for America. Litvinoff had escaped from Poland. The book contains stories about Alma Mereminski as a child, so Alma thinks that she and Litvinoff knew each other as children. Misha looks down at Alma and says he does not think it is bad for her to be his girlfriend, then kisses her. As Misha moves his hand under her shirt, she tells him to stop and says she likes someone else. As soon as she says it, she regrets it. She leaves for home.

Two weeks pass and she still has not spoken to Misha and Uncle Julian has not left. Charlotte has finished translating another 11 chapters, which means that soon she will send another package. Alma locks herself in the bathroom and attempts to write another letter to Jacob but cannot get the words right. She spies a crumpled paper in the trashcan and pulls it out. It is a letter Julian had begun to write to his wife, Frances. He defends his relationship with a colleague and accuses Frances of changing. Alma puts the letter back in the trashcan, thinking maybe Julian will not be finishing his research anytime soon.

The next day, Alma heads for the Municipal Archives, looking for information on Mereminski's death. After two hours of searching, the clerk says if the woman died after 1948, she will need to go to the Department of Health. Alma goes the next day. She calls Misha and pretends nothing has happened. Misha says he is going to the movies with another girl. Alma hangs up, spends a couple hours looking, but cannot find any record of Mereminski dying in New York City after 1948. Alma returns home, watches a movie, then goes to sleep. Julian wakes her in the night to ask what she wants to be when she grows up. To make him happy, she says she might want to be a painter. He says he was hoping she would say that and leaves. Alma lies awake, thinking about Litvinoff marrying another woman and suddenly realizes Alma Mereminski must have gotten married. She reaches under her bed to get her backpack and finds a notebook marked "Private"—Bird's journal. He has written about his attempts to behave normally and about another flood coming.





## Flood Analysis

In this chapter Alma dives right into her search for Alma Mereminski. Her ingenuity and cleverness are remarkable for her age.

Alma's blossoming relationship with Misha and her hesitation to get involved illustrate her mixed feelings about love. Her personal history of love is full of sadness and loss, and as part of her survival, she has decided to shun romantic relationships, even though she really likes Misha.



# Here We Are Together

## Here We Are Together Summary

On Zvi's last morning in Poland, he watched his friend disappear around the corner and then walked back to his room. He took the brown paper package from his coat and looked at it. On the front of the package is written in his friend's handwriting "To be held for Leopold Gursky until you see him again." Zvi put the package in his suitcase, looked around the room one last time and left. He would eventually settle in Chile and do various odd jobs until he found work in a pharmacy. When he was finally able to rent a room of his own, Zvi put the package from Leo in the closet. The war ended and Zvi slowly figured out what happened to his family. To avoid going home and facing the truth of his sorrow, Zvi spent a lot of time at local cafes, where he met Rosa. On the seventh date they shared an awkward kiss. He came home giddy with excitement, but worried Rosa would discover he was an empty shell. He began reciting the words from the paper he had taken from his friend, when he had watched over him and prayed for him not to die. He took the package down and removed the contents. Later, he burned the envelope.

## Here We Are Together Analysis

This chapter confirms that Zvi Litvinoff and Leo Gursky were friends in Poland, and that Zvi possessed some of Leo's writings. Based on the information from previous chapters, it can be inferred that the package contained the only copy of *The History of Love*.

The theme of survival after a loss is shown in Zvi's solitude. His way of managing his grief over losing his family and friends is to avoid being at home. Meeting Rosa and falling in love with her appears to give Zvi the strength to let go of the past and move on, as illustrated by his burning of the envelope with Leo's handwriting on it.



# Die Laughing

## Die Laughing Summary

Leo gets on the train just in time. He has tracked Isaac's whereabouts since he was a small boy. The train arrives in Long Island and Leo takes a taxi to Isaac's house. He knocks on the door. No one answers, so Leo walks to the back of the house, and when no one answers there, begins to pick the lock. After a few minutes, the door is open. Leo walks in, takes off his coat and shoes, and tries on the coat and shoes by the door. There is a dirty dish in the sink and spilled salt on the table. He opens the fridge, finds several items have gone bad, throws them out, then proceeds to clean up.

Leo goes upstairs. He looks through Isaac's closet, sniffing at his clothes and putting on his watch. Leo has come to find his book, but now does not care if he finds it. He spies a typewriter. Years earlier, when he found out what kind of typewriter Isaac used, he bought the same model. He did not use it until he wrote his second book. Leo sits in front of the typewriter and thinks about all the family members he has lost over the years. He has lost so many things, including the only woman he wanted to love and his son. Leo wonders if he has also lost his mind. He does not see his book or any sign of himself in Isaac's house.

## Die Laughing Analysis

Leo's decision to visit Isaac's home is another example of surviving a loss, one of the themes of the book. By putting on Isaac's coat and shoes, Leo is attempting to gain some understanding and closeness with the son he never knew.

The desire for recognition and validation theme is also present in this chapter. Leo wants to see Isaac and create a loving relationship with him, but years of being invisible in order to survive have made it difficult for him to be honest. The fact that he does not find any trace of his book in Isaac's home is symbolic of his belief that he has had no impact on his son's life.



# If Not, Not

## If Not, Not Summary

Alma says she is going to the library. She passes Herman Cooper, who has a driver's license. He asks Alma if she wants to go for a ride sometime, but she declines. She arrives at the Municipal Archives and sees the same clerk, telling him she thinks Alma Mereminski may have gotten married. The man says he only has information on marriages up until 1937. At the City Clerk's office, the old man behind the counter questions Alma and comes back with information that Alma married Mordecai Moritz in 1942, in Brooklyn. Records show she was born in Poland.

Alma calls home to see if anyone has called for her. Julian tells her no one has called and asks if she wants to go out to dinner and she says yes, then hangs up. Alma calls Information and asks for a listing on Alma Moritz, then Mordecai Moritz. The operator gives her an address in Manhattan. She arrives and tells the doorman she is looking for Alma Moritz. The doorman says Alma Mereminski Moritz died five years ago. She asks if he has ever heard of *The History of Love*. He says no and suggests she talk to Alma Moritz's son, Isaac, who is a famous writer. Alma has never heard of Isaac Moritz.

Alma and Julian go to dinner that night. Alma asks how he fell in love with Frances, and Julian says he saw her and knew he would marry her. Alma asks him about Flo, the woman in the crumpled letter. Julian chokes, then tells Alma about a self-portrait of Rembrandt that feels intense, yet looks serene. Alma asks what the portrait has to do with Frances and Flo. Julian says he does not know. Alma asks if he thinks David would have wanted Charlotte to fall in love again. Julian says David would have wanted that very much. When Alma and Julian return home, they find Charlotte in the backyard. She tells Alma she sent off more chapters. Upset, Alma asks why she did not have her do it, and Charlotte replies she did not know it meant so much to Alma, plus Alma was gone and Charlotte needed to get it done. Alma searches the garbage for drafts of letters, but does not find any. She decides to give up looking for someone to make her mother happy again.

The summer ends, and Alma and Misha are not speaking. There are no more letters from Jacob Marcus, and Julian prepares to return to London to work things out with Frances. The night before he leaves, he knocks on Alma's door and asks her to forget about their conversation about the Rembrandt and Frances. Alma agrees, and he hands her an envelope. She opens it and finds he has registered her for a life drawing class.

## If Not, Not Analysis

In this chapter Alma finally makes peace with Charlotte's way of surviving the loss of David. While she believes that her method of survival would be most effective, Alma



realizes that her mother is happiest when living within the confines of the world she has created out of her memories of David. This ties in with the theme of survival after loss.

Julian's recounting of how he met Frances, his estranged wife, plays into the theme of personal histories of love. In an interesting parallel to the way that Leo fell in love with Alma Mereminski, Julian also falls in love with a woman who is transfixed by nature. At the end of the chapter, he has decided to attempt reconciliation with Frances, which is very similar to Leo's attempts to connect with Alma Mereminski and Isaac.

Alma's visit to Alma and Mordecai's home in Manhattan brings her closer to solving the mystery of The History of Love. The doorman tells her about Alma's son, Isaac Moritz, thus foreshadowing his connection to Jacob Marcus.



# The Last Page

## The Last Page Summary

Zvi did not sit with the intention of plagiarizing his friend, Leo Gursky, murdered by the Nazis. Nor did he think Rosa would love him if she thought he had written it. Zvi just copied the first two pages, and then he got to Alma Mereminski's name and stopped. He considered changing it to Rosa. When he went to write the letter R, however, Zvi's hand stopped, maybe because he knew the real Alma. Sixteen years later, Zvi copied a chapter from Leo's book every night, word for word, except for the names, all but one of which he changed. When he reached the last page, he took the original manuscript and put it in the trash under the sink. Then Zvi took them out of the trash and put them in the metal trashcans behind the house. Then he buried the pages. The night before he married Rosa, Zvi dug up the manuscript, kept the book in a locked desk drawer and hid the key.

The night before Zvi died, he called out to Rosa. She rushed to his side and sat with him while he coughed. He insisted he needed to tell her something, but she quieted him. He called after her to say he wanted her to love him, and she replied she did love him. When *The History of Love* was about to be published, Zvi made a few changes that the editor suggested and added a final chapter titled "The Death of Leopold Gursky." The editor said it added nothing to the book and he wanted to remove it. Zvi insisted it remain or he would pull the book. In this way, Zvi's secret did not die with him—anyone could turn to the last page of *The History of Love* and see the true author's name.

Rosa never told him about the letter that arrived from America. Several months later, she opened it and discovered it was written by Leo Gursky, alive and well in New York and asking Zvi to return his book. Rosa realized the truth and felt guilty. She had found the original manuscript and had pushed Zvi to get the book published. Rosa took Leo's letter and flushed it down the toilet. She wrote Leo a reply that Zvi was too ill to respond but was happy to hear Leo was still alive and sadly, the book had been destroyed in a flood.

The next day Rosa went to Zvi's study and put the original manuscript on the floor. Then she took Zvi's version of the manuscript and moved it to a lower shelf. She turned on the sink tap and plugged the drain, then shut the door to the study and rushed out to the car.

## The Last Page Analysis

This chapter provides the last bit of background into what happened to make Zvi plagiarize Leo's work. He did not do it out of anger or jealousy, or as a way to get Rosa to love him. It could be suggested that copying the book was merely something to pass the time.

When Zvi tells Rosa that he wanted her to love him, he is saying this as a way of explaining why he allowed her to convince him to get it published. This ties in with the theme of personal histories of love.

By adding the final chapter, "The Death of Leopold Gursky," to *The History of Love*, then insisting that the publisher include it, Zvi acknowledges his friend's desire to be recognized, also another theme in the novel.



# My Life Underwater

## My Life Underwater Summary

After Uncle Julian leaves, Charlotte becomes more withdrawn. Bird continues to work on his pile of junk at the vacant lot and has hung a tarp over the cabin. For her birthday, Bird wakes her by singing "For She's a Jolly Good Fellow." He gives her an orange life jacket as a present, which makes Alma worry about his religious fervor. Alma goes to the library and selects Isaac Moritz's novel *The Remedy*. She opens to the first chapter: "Jacob Marcus stood waiting for his mother at the corner of Broadway and Graham." She realizes the man sending letters to Charlotte was Isaac Moritz. Alma checks out the book. She calls Misha using their coded rings. She has made a list of the things she misses about him, but right now needs to talk to him. He does not call back.

Alma goes into Bird's room, where he is sleeping. She wakes him and tells him to stop talking about God, that he is going to be 12 soon and he needs to stop making strange noises, jumping off things and hurting himself. She adds that he needs to push down his feelings and try to be normal, including having more than one friend. Bird replies that she only ever talks to Misha, and even though Alma denies it, she realizes Bird is right.

On Saturday morning, Alma prints a map and directions to Isaac Moritz's house, using the address she had written down for Jacob Marcus. She heads to Herman Cooper's house and asks him if he wants to go for a ride. He is surprised but agrees. Along the way, she tells him the story about *The History of Love*. Alma feels sad that next year Herman will leave to start his life. Alma and Herman find Isaac's house. No one is there. She and Herman sit on the porch, watching the rain. Herman holds her hand, then kisses her. Alma feels happy and sad as she realizes she is falling in love, but not with Herman.

Over a week later, Charlotte finds an obituary for Isaac Moritz, which she shows to Alma. Alma goes up to Charlotte's study and finds there are five chapters left to translate, but now Charlotte is not translating them for anyone but Alma. She asks Charlotte if she can talk to her, and she says yes. Crying, Alma says that she needs Charlotte to not be sad.

## My Life Underwater Analysis

The mystery surrounding Jacob Marcus is cleared up in this chapter with Alma's discovery of his true identity as Isaac Moritz, the son of Alma Mereminski Moritz. This final revelation enables her to put together the pieces about why Isaac wanted the translation done.

This chapter also gives the reader a clearer sense of the time line between Leo and Alma's narratives. Around the same time that Alma learns of Jacob Marcus's true identity, Leo has sent his second book to Isaac and is waiting for a response. It is quite



possible that the drawing class that Leo modeled for is the same drawing class that Alma was taking, showing yet another parallel between their lives.



# One Nice Thing

## One Nice Thing Summary

In his journal, Bird writes that it has been raining 10 days in a row. Dr. Vishnubakat has told him that he can write his thoughts and feelings in his journal. Bird has tried to buy a ticket to Israel, but it is \$1200 and he only has \$741.50 from his lemonade stand earnings. Dr. Vishnubakat asks Bird to explain the note he left for Charlotte and Alma when he thought he was leaving for Israel. Bird had written that he was going away because he is a lamed vovnik and needs to take care of many things. He also wrote there was going to be a flood, but that he had built an ark for them and Alma would know where to find it. The day the rain stops, the firemen take down Bird's ark, saying it was a fire hazard. Bird is upset but tries not to cry. When he remembers that one of the pieces had the name of God written on it, Bird asks Charlotte to take him to where the firemen put the pieces. They arrive to find that the garbage man has taken it away already. Bird cries and Charlotte tries to hug him, but he will not let her. He is mad at her for allowing the firemen to take down the ark and for throwing away David's things without asking Bird first.

Charlotte takes Bird to see Mr. Goldstein. The janitor is outside, digging a hole to bury broken siddurs. As Goldstein places the siddurs in the ground, Bird says a blessing and notices the man is crying. He shovels dirt into the hole, his mouth moving, and Bird gets closer to listen. Goldstein whispers that a lamed vovnik is humble and works in secret, then he turns away. Bird realizes the man is crying about him, and he feels sad that he disappointed Goldstein and God by telling so many people about being a lamed vovnik. Bird decides that before he does anything, he will ask himself if a lamed vovnik would do it. Misha had called for Alma that day and asked Bird how she was. Bird told him that she was okay, but when Misha asked if she had found the person she was looking for, he did not know what he meant. Misha asked Bird to not tell Alma that he called, and Bird agreed. He tries to think of who Alma could be looking for but comes up with nothing. The next day Goldstein is taken to the hospital after a fainting spell, and Bird feels it is his fault. Bird decides that he will do one good thing to help someone without telling anyone about it, because maybe this will help Goldstein and Bird will be a real lamed vovnik.

## One Nice Thing Analysis

Bird, Alma's younger brother, narrates this chapter. Through excerpts from his diary, the reader learns that Bird has been selling lemonade in order to save money for a ticket to Israel. His belief that he is a lamed vovnik, one of the 36 holy people responsible for saving the world, helps him navigate through his grief over his father's death. Bird's devotion is yet another example of how the characters try to survive a loss, one of the themes of the book.

Bird also learns of Alma's quest in this chapter by way of Misha's phone call. He does not know what she is doing, but the reader can infer from the last two sections in this chapter that Bird has decided to help Alma with her search.



# The Last Time I Saw You

## The Last Time I Saw You Summary

Bruno wakes Leo, shouting that Leo has been written about in a magazine. Leo finally reads a sentence and realizes it is from the book he sent to Isaac. The title "Words for Everything" is printed at the top of the page, with Isaac's name beneath it. The contributor notes the piece was excerpted from Isaac's final manuscript. Leo calls the magazine's fiction department and argues about whether or not Isaac Moritz wrote the story. The man asks for his name, and when Leo gives it to him, thinks he is joking. Leo hangs up and calls back, asking when the book is coming out and if it is any good. The man replies it will be out in January and some believe it is Isaac's best work. Leo asks to receive an early copy.

Leo considers that if his manuscript had been found at Isaac's house and mistaken for his work, that could mean that Isaac read it, which would change everything. He thinks that if Isaac read the book, then he knows Leo is his father. He heads downstairs to check the mail—maybe there is a letter from Isaac, posted prior to his death. He sees an envelope with his name typed on it. Leo rips it open and reads a message asking him to come to the Central Park zoo entrance at 4:00 on Saturday. It is signed Alma.

## The Last Time I Saw You Analysis

Another mystery begins to resolve in this chapter as Leo discovers that his final book will be published. It is interesting to note that both of Leo's books have been published under the names of other men in his life. Fame never comes for Leo through his writing, but this does not seem to upset him too much.

This chapter also provides a little more background on Bruno, who we learn was a redheaded child that Leo knew in Slonim. It now seems possible that Bruno, Leo, Zvi and Alma Mereminski were childhood friends in Poland.

Leo's realization that Isaac knew about him prior to his death foreshadows the meeting with Alma in the final chapter of the novel. Their personal histories of love will bring them together.



# Would a Lamed Vovnik Do This?

## Would a Lamed Vovnik Do This? Summary

Bird sneaks into Alma's room and grabs *How to Survive in the Wild* Volume 3 from her backpack. He pretends to be sick and Charlotte allows him to stay home from school. Bird begins reading to see if he can find out for whom she is searching. He finally comes to the list, reads it, but does not understand it, nor the name Alma Mereminski. He thinks maybe Alma is in love with someone with that last name, but on the next page sees she has written "Alma Mereminski = Alma Moritz" and becomes more confused. He wonders if Charlotte was in love with someone before David, and that man was actually Alma's father. Bird asks Charlotte she ever loved someone else before David. She says yes. Thinking he knows how he can help Alma, the next day Bird pretends to be sick again. He sneaks out of bed and goes through Alma's backpack for clues. He finds the pages from *The History of Love*. Bird wonders if *The History of Love* reveals who Alma's real father is.

Charlotte leaves for a little while. The phone rings and the person asks for Alma Singer, saying his name is Bernard Moritz. Bird asks the man to leave a message. Bernard says he found a note Alma left on his brother's door, probably while his brother was in the hospital. Her note said she needed to talk to him about *The History of Love* and she left her phone number. Bernard continues to say his brother died, and he would not have called except for the fact that before he died, he said he found letters in their mother's drawer and got the idea from these letters that his real father was the author of a book called *The History of Love*. Bernard did not believe it until he saw Alma's note, where she mentioned the book, and decided to call to let her know Isaac had died. Thinking Bernard is Alma's real father, Bird is confused. He asks if Isaac thought his real father's name was Zvi Litvinoff, and Bernard replies no, he thought it was Leopold Gursky. Bird asks him to spell the name, then Bird asks why Isaac thought Leopold Gursky was his father. Bernard answers Gursky was the man that sent their mother the letters with parts from his book, *The History of Love*. Bird says he will give Alma the message and hangs up. He knows now that Alma's father gave Charlotte *The History of Love* because he had written it. He decides to find Leopold Gursky, so gets down the phone book and looks up his address. On Saturday, Bird prints out *The History of Love*, puts it in a brown envelope, writes "For Leopold Gursky" on the front, hides it under his coat and leaves to find Leopold Gursky.

## Would a Lamed Vovnik Do This? Analysis

This is the second, and last, chapter that is narrated by Bird. He has decided that he can redeem himself in the eyes of God by helping his sister find the person she is looking for, who Bird believes is Alma's real father. The theme of recognition and validation comes through in Bird's actions, for he believes that by helping Alma reunite with Leo, he will prove himself worthy to be a lamed vovnik.

Bernard Moritz's conversation with Bird indicates that Isaac was indeed aware of the relationship between Alma Mereminski and Leopold Gursky but had not quite confirmed that he (Isaac) was actually Leo's son.



# A + L and The Death of Leopold Gursky

## A + L and The Death of Leopold Gursky Summary

Alma receives a letter with no return address, asking her to come to the Central Park Zoo at 4 on Saturday, signed Leopold Gursky. On Saturday, Alma puts on a skirt and sets out for the zoo. Finally she sits down next to a man who pays no attention to her. It is after 4 o'clock. She waits for 40 minutes. The old man sitting next to her is the only one still there. Alma gets up and notices the card stuck to the man's chest. It reads, "My name is Leo Gursky. I have no family. Please call Pinelawn Cemetery—I have a plot there in the Jewish part. Thank you for your consideration." She says her name is Alma. He replies Alma is his favorite name. She says she was named after every girl in a book called *The History of Love*. Leo says he wrote the book. Alma says she is serious, it is a real book, and he replies he is being serious as well. Confused, Alma asks if he is a writer, and Leo says he is; his books are titled *The History of Love and Words for Everything*. Alma tells him *The History of Love* she is talking about was written in Spanish by Zvi Litvinoff. Her mother is translating it into English. Leo laughs and asks if she was in love with Zvi too as well as he and Bruno. Alma apologizes and says she does not understand. Leo asks which parts she liked in the book. He wrote "The Age of Glass" to make her laugh and cry. Alma looks at him, frightened and surprised. It occurs to Leo that the Alma in front of him may actually be real. Leo asks a passerby if there is a 15 year-old girl sitting next to him. Puzzled, the man replies yes. Leo looks at Alma and realizes that she does not look like his Alma. She asks him who Bruno is and he replies that Bruno died in July 1941, and was the greatest character he ever wrote. Alma continues to stand in front of him, listening. Leo adds that he had a son named Isaac, who never knew he existed.

Alma realizes she has been searching for the wrong person. She asks Leo if he was ever in love with a girl named Alma Mereminski, but he is silent. She asks him if Alma Mereminski left for America, and Leo taps her twice on the arm, then twice more. She asks if his son's name was Isaac Moritz. He does not say anything, and Alma continues to speak, but Leo taps her again. She reaches for his hand, then puts her head on his shoulders and hugs him. He says her name several times, and she taps him twice. Leopold Gursky started to die on August 18, 1920. He was a great writer who fell in love and that love was his life.

## A + L and The Death of Leopold Gursky Analysis

Rich with symbolism, this chapter brings together the two narrators, Leo and Alma. Because Leo has always blended reality with his imagination, he still sees Alma Mereminski as the teenaged girl he loved many years ago. It is only fitting, then, that he will see the 15 year-old Alma Singer as being the embodiment of his long lost love.

As it ties in with the theme of desiring recognition and validation, Leo becomes famous for loving one woman all his life and writing about it.





# Characters

## Leopold (Leo) Gursky

Leopold Gursky, also referred to as Leo Gursky, is a Jewish man in his eighties. He grew up in Slonim, a small town in Poland, along with Alma Mereminski and Zvi Litvinoff. When the Nazis invaded his town, Leo managed to escape capture by hiding in the woods and making himself invisible. Once he emigrates to America, Leo becomes a locksmith under the mentorship of his cousin. Over the course of his life, Leo does strange things in order to be seen, such as make scenes in public places and posing nude for an art class.

Leo's unwavering love for Alma Mereminski is what helps him survive his years of hiding. When he finally arrives in New York, he looks for Alma only to find that she has had their child, a son named Isaac, and married her boss's son. He tries to persuade her to leave with him, but she refuses. From that point forward, he decides he will never love another woman. He watches Isaac grow up from a distance, and sends Alma a birthday card every year. It is not until she is on her deathbed that Leo takes the opportunity to see her, going so far as to sneak into her hospital room after hours. Unfortunately, he does not have the same opportunity with Isaac, as Isaac dies before the two actually have a chance to know each other as father and son.

It is also Leo's love of Alma Mereminski that inspires him to write his first book, *The History of Love*. The heavily autobiographical book is essentially a love letter to Alma. When his childhood friend, Zvi, leaves Poland for a life in South America, Leo gives him the manuscript for safekeeping until they are reunited. Sixty years later, Leo discovers that Zvi had the book published under his own name, changing only the names and places, except for Alma's name. Oddly enough, Leo has written another book, *Words for Everything*, which he sends anonymously to his son Isaac, who has grown up to become a famous writer. Upon Isaac's death, the book is published under Isaac's name, with one of the key character's names changed to Leo Gursky.

Leo has a rich fantasy life. Since his childhood, he has seen things that others could not, such as an elephant in the town square. It is his imagination that enthralls Alma Mereminski, and out of his love for her, Leo embraces the fantasies he has created. At the end of his life, he meets Alma Singer, a 15 year-old girl whose mother has been translating *The History of Love* for a mysterious man named Jacob Marcus, who is actually Leo's son Isaac. When Alma tells him that Isaac knew Leo was his father, Leo is finally able to finish his personal history of love for Alma Mereminski and Isaac.

## Alma Singer

Alma Singer is a 15 year-old girl living in Brooklyn with her mother, Charlotte, and her younger brother Bird. She is named after every female character in a book named *The*



History of Love, which her father, David, gave to Charlotte as he was courting her. David died of cancer when Alma was seven years old, and this loss greatly impacts her life. When Alma learns that her father was a great outdoors man, she becomes obsessed with learning how to survive in the wilderness, in the event that something should happen to her mother and brother. She studies books on edible plants and writes three volumes of notes entitled How to Survive in the Wild.

Alma is also obsessed with finding a new husband for Charlotte. As a child, she attempts to set up her mother with several men, but Charlotte never goes beyond one or two dates with any of them. When a letter arrives from Jacob Marcus, requesting that Charlotte translate The History of Love for him, Alma decides that she will try her hand at matchmaking once again. With the first batch of chapters, Alma secretly writes a cover letter to convey Charlotte's interest in knowing Jacob better. As she gets more into the matchmaking, however, Alma becomes preoccupied with finding out who Jacob Marcus is and why he wants the book translated, which leads her to read The History of Love. After reading the book, Alma then turns her obsession toward finding out about her namesake, Alma Mereminski, and her relationship to Jacob Marcus.

Like the other characters in the novel, Alma struggles with her love life. She forges a friendship with her Russian emigrant, pen pal, Misha Shlovsky, and spends many weekends with him watching old movies and playing at the beach. When he kisses her and tells her he would like her to be his girlfriend, Alma panics and rebuffs him. She instantly regrets it and spends the rest of the novel trying to reclaim his affection, to no avail. On her day trip to Connecticut, she has a romantic moment with Herman Cooper, a childhood friend from the neighborhood but does not feel the same way about him that she does about Misha.

Alma is a very clever girl, as evidenced by her love of reading and her ability to deduce the truth behind The History of Love. Throughout the novel, she tracks down every clue that she finds in Jacob's letters and in the book itself. Her sleuthing takes her from the library, where she finds out that Jacob Marcus is actually a character in a book written by Isaac Moritz, Alma Mereminski's son, to as far as Connecticut, where she visits Isaac Moritz's house to talk to him about The History of Love. Her efforts eventually lead her to Leo Gursky, the true author of The History of Love and biological father of Isaac Moritz. Although she is unable to meet her namesake or Isaac, Alma's meeting with Leo brings him the resolution he desperately needs, and brings her a deeper understanding of what it means to love someone.

## Zvi Litvinoff

Zvi Litvinoff is a childhood friend of Leo Gursky and Alma Mereminski. He writes obituaries for a local paper in Poland, taking great pride in his work. By sheer coincidence, Zvi and Leo reconnect at a café and re-establish their friendship. The two men discuss politics, writing and other topics. When Leo takes ill, it is Zvi who cares for him. During his visit, Zvi discovers that Leo has written his own obituary. He takes the piece with him as a sort of good-luck charm, thinking it will ward off death for Leo.



Prior to the Nazi occupation, Zvi leaves Poland and emigrates to Chile. When he learns of what happens to his family and friends that remain behind in Poland, Zvi feels a great deal of guilt for escaping the Holocaust, since no one else from his family or village survived. His guilt and sadness seem to sink into the walls where he lives in Chile, and he avoids being home as much as possible.

While living in Chile, Zvi meets and falls in love with Rosa, a young woman who sees him at the cafe every day and becomes intrigued by him. During their courtship, Zvi begins to transcribe Leo's book, *The History of Love*, in his own writing, changing all the names and places except for Alma Mereminski. He shares the book with Rosa, who enjoys it immensely. It is in an attempt to please Rosa that Zvi allows her to convince him to publish *The History of Love*, despite his protests that it is a private, personal work. To assuage his feelings of guilt, Zvi adds Leo's obituary to the end of the book. In this sense, he pays tribute to his friend and allows the world to see who the real author is.

## Charlotte Singer

Charlotte Singer is the widowed mother of Alma and Bird Singer. Her husband, David, died of cancer approximately eight years prior to the novel's setting. She is from England and is small and fair-skinned. After David's death, she struggles to overcome her grief and be a good parent to her children. Skilled in foreign languages, Charlotte works as a translator of books. When she receives a request from Jacob Marcus to translate *The History of Love* for \$100,000, Charlotte takes the assignment, not only to support her family, but also in honor of her late husband, as the book was a significant part of her relationship with David.

Her daughter, Alma, makes several attempts at matchmaking Charlotte with a man, but the attempts fall flat. Charlotte has made the decision to hold on to her memories of her husband and avoid the outside world as much as possible. Even her attempt at gardening is a failure, both on a practical level and a personal one, as Charlotte is not interested in growing herself.

## Isaac Moritz

Isaac Moritz is the oldest son of Alma Mereminski Moritz. He is a famous writer of several books. His point of view is never provided directly in the novel, yet he plays a pivotal role.

After his mother's death, Isaac discovers several love letters written to her by Leopold Gursky. The letters include excerpts from Leo's book, *The History of Love*. Based on what he finds in these letters, Isaac believes that Leo may be his biological father. Prior to his death, Isaac uses a pseudonym to arrange for Charlotte Singer to translate *The History of Love*.



While the reader never learns for certain if Isaac read Leo's book, *Words for Everything*, it is very possible that he did, and that his final act of love was arranging for the book to be published under his name, with Leo's name inserted as one of the key characters.

## **Bird (Emmanuel Chaim) Singer**

Emmanuel Chaim Singer is Alma's younger brother. He has been nicknamed Bird because of his attempt to fly at the age of 6. After his father's death, Bird finds his inscribed copy of *The Book of Jewish Thoughts* and becomes obsessed with Judaism. He puts mezuzahs on every door frame and wears a kippah almost constantly. As a result of his devotion, Bird loses many friends and ends up spending most of his time alone or with Mr. Goldstein, the Hebrew School's janitor, who is also a very devout Jew.

Bird begins to believe he is a lamed vovnik, one of the 36 holy people that are responsible for saving humanity. He takes on the task of building an ark to hold Alma and Charlotte in the event of a flood. He also sets up a lemonade stand to raise money for a trip to Israel, which he believes is a necessary part of his role as a lamed vovnik. When he is stopped at the airport and his ark is torn down, Bird goes into therapy, but does not give up on the idea of being a holy man. Instead, he decides that by secretly helping Alma in her quest, he will be redeemed in the eyes of God.

## **Rosa Litvinoff**

Rosa Litvinoff is Zvi's wife. She befriends Zvi after seeing him several times in cafes in Valparaiso, Chile. The two start dating and eventually marry. It is Rosa who encourages Zvi to publish *The History of Love*, and it is also Rosa who later realizes that the book was not actually written by her husband, but his friend Leo Gursky. She arranges for Leo's manuscript to be destroyed in a flood in order to protect her husband's reputation.

## **Misha Shklovsky**

Misha Shklovsky is a Russian boy that emigrates to New York. Alma meets him by way of Tatiana, her Russian pen pal. He exchanges letters with Alma for a while, then the two begin to meet in person, often at his home in Brighton Beach. He plays Beatles songs on an accordion that his grandfather willed to him and attempts to learn American slang from Alma. When he proposes that they be boyfriend and girlfriend, Alma panics and pushes him away. He ends up seeing another girl, Luba, instead.

## **Jacob Marcus**

Jacob Marcus is a pseudonym used by Isaac Moritz in arranging for the translation of *The History of Love* from Spanish into English. The name is taken from Isaac's novel *The Remedy*.



## **Bruno**

Bruno is Leo's friend that lives upstairs. The two men were childhood friends in Poland. After Leo's heart attack, he hears Bruno's voice on the street and the two re-establish their friendship. At the end of the novel, Leo reveals to Alma Singer that Bruno is not a real person, that the real Bruno died in July 1941.

## **Alma Mereminski Moritz**

Alma Mereminski Moritz is the childhood sweetheart and lover of Leo Gursky and the subject of his book *The History of Love*, as published under Zvi Litvinoff's name. She grew up in Slonim, a village in Poland, and escaped to America when she was 20 years old. Based on the information given in the novel, it can be assumed that she was pregnant with Leo's child when she left Poland.

## **Uncle Julian**

Uncle Julian is Charlotte Singer's brother and uncle to Alma and Bird. He comes to live with them for several months in the summer while he works on finishing his research on a book about the sculptor and artist Alberto Giacometti. Estranged from his wife, Frances, Julian struggles to make sense of his marriage.

## **David Singer**

David Singer is the father of Alma and Bird Singer and husband to Charlotte Singer. He died of cancer approximately eight years prior to the novel's setting. He purchased a copy of *The History of Love* and gave it to Charlotte as a present while they were dating.

## **Bernard Moritz**

Bernard Moritz is Isaac's half-brother. He meets Leo at Isaac's funeral and invites him to his home. It is Bernard that tells both Leo and Alma about the letters Isaac found among their mother's things.

## **Herman Cooper**

Herman Cooper is a boy that lives in Alma's neighborhood. He has flirted with Alma in the past, but she has not been attracted to him. She asks Herman to drive her to Isaac Moritz's house in Connecticut.



## **Mr. Goldstein**

Mr. Goldstein is the janitor at Bird's school. Bird befriends the man and talks to him at length about the Jewish faith. It is Mr. Goldstein that tells Bird about the lamed vovniks, the 36 holy people that are responsible for the world's existence. When he takes ill suddenly, Bird feels that he has disappointed Goldstein so greatly that it has made him sick, and Bird decides that he will go about making his friend proud.

## **Dr. Vishnubakat**

Dr. Vishnubakat is Bird's therapist. He encourages Bird to share his journal during therapy sessions, rather than vocalize his feelings.

## **Mordecai Moritz**

Mordecai Moritz is the husband of Alma Mereminski Moritz. His father, a dressmaker, was Alma's boss.



# Objects/Places

## The History of Love

The History of Love is the title of a book originally written by Leo Gursky. The only copy in existence was given to Zvi Litvinoff for safekeeping before the Nazis invaded Poland. Leo gave the book to Zvi on the condition that he would return it after the war. Believing Leo to be dead, Zvi publishes the book under his name, changing names and places and adding a final chapter on Leo's alleged death. The book has limited success. David Singer finds a copy of the book in a shop and shares it with his wife, Charlotte. They name their first child Alma in tribute to the one name given to all the female characters in the book. It is the same book that Jacob Marcus hires Charlotte to translate for him. Alma reads the translation and is inspired to find her namesake.

## Leo Gursky's Apartment

Leo Gursky lives in an apartment on Grand Street in New York. It is a small place full of junk that Leo refuses to throw out. His friend Bruno lives in the apartment upstairs. Using a special code, the two men bang on the pipes to indicate if they are still alive.

## Alma Singer's House

Alma Singer lives with her mother, Charlotte, and her brother Bird in a two-story house in Brooklyn. After David's death, Charlotte takes to her bed for a month and keeps all of his possessions intact. One day, Alma and Bird come home to discover that Charlotte has disposed of everything that belonged to their father.

## How to Survive in the Wild, Vol. 1, 2, 3

Alma writes three volumes entitled How to Survive in the Wild. She bases these books on what she has learned from her father while he was alive, as well as what she has learned from reading books on edible plants, wildlife, and survival guides. These notebooks also include the clues she has found in her search for the true identity of Jacob Marcus and Alma Mereminski.

## Bird's Lemonade Stand

Bird sets up a lemonade stand in a vacant lot near the Singer apartment. Through his lemonade sales, Bird saves up \$741.50 toward a plane ticket to Israel.



## Bird's Ark

Bird builds an ark on the same vacant lot where he keeps his lemonade stand. Using scrap metal, pieces of wood, and Styrofoam, Bird creates a large structure that he covers with a tarp during the heavy rains. When he prepares to leave for Israel, he writes a note to Charlotte and Alma notifying them that he built them an ark in order to survive the flood that is coming. After the rains have stopped, the local firemen tear down Bird's ark, claiming it is a fire hazard.

## Zvi and Rosa Litvinoff's House

Zvi and Rosa Litvinoff live in a small house in Valparaiso, Chile. Rosa arranges for the house to be flooded when she discovers that Leo Gursky is still alive and wants his copy of *The History of Love* returned to him.

## Words for Everything

After his heart attack, Leo Gursky writes a novel titled *Words for Everything*. The novel's plot is autobiographical, as it is a story about a young Polish man whose lover went to America, had his child, and married another man. He sends it to his son, Isaac Moritz. The novel ends up being published under Isaac's name, which Leo discovers when an excerpt from the book is printed in a magazine.

## Letters from Jacob Marcus

Charlotte receives several letters from Jacob Marcus, a man who has paid her to translate *The History of Love* from Spanish into English. Alma secretly reads his letters and rewrites her mother's responses in an attempt to forge a romantic relationship between them.

## Isaac Moritz's House

Isaac Moritz's house is located in Connecticut. After Isaac's death, Leo goes to his home and finds it unlocked. He cleans up a little and finally begins to feel a deeper connection to the son he never knew. Alma also comes to visit the house, not knowing that Isaac has died.

## Slonim

Slonim is the town in Poland where Leo and Alma Moritz grew up. It is also the hometown of Zvi Litvinoff and Bruno.





## **Bird's Journal**

Alma finds Bird's journal under her bed. Even though it is marked "Private", she reads through it and discovers that Bird believes he may be the Messiah, and that he believes a flood is coming. He has been building an ark or raft of some sort at the vacant lot where his lemonade stand is located.

## **Alma Mereminski Moritz's Apartment Building**

Alma Mereminski Moritz's apartment building is in Manhattan. After Alma finds the record of Alma Mereminski's marriage to Mordecai Moritz, she gets their address from Information and sets off to find them. When she arrives at their building, the doorman tells her that Alma Moritz died five years earlier. He also tells her that she had a son, Isaac, who is a famous writer.

## **Herman Cooper's Car**

Herman Cooper borrows his father's car in order to take Alma to Isaac Moritz's house in Connecticut. Along the way, they talk about their futures and begin to bond as friends.

## **New York City Municipal Archives**

Alma heads to the New York City Municipal Archives to find out if Alma Mereminski was a real person. When she cannot find any records of Alma Mereminski's death there, the clerk recommends that she visit the Division of Vital Records. She returns to the Municipal Archives once she realizes that Alma Mereminski could have gotten married. When they determine that Alma Mereminski must have gotten married after 1937, the clerk redirects Alma to the City Clerk's office.

## **New York City Department of Health, Division of Vital Record**

Alma visits the New York City Department of Health, Division of Vital Records in order to find information on the death of Alma Mereminski. She is unable to find anything, and she later realizes it is because Alma Mereminski got married and changed her name.

## **City Clerk's Office**

It is at the City Clerk's office that Alma finally gets useful information on Alma Mereminski. The elderly Jewish clerk that staffs the desk makes small talk with Alma about how difficult life would have been for a new Polish immigrant in New York. After

the small talk, the clerk searches the records and finds out that Alma Mereminski married Mordecai Moritz in 1942.

# Themes

## Desire for Recognition and Validation

The innate desire to be recognized and validated is a key theme in the novel. Not only do several characters struggle to be recognized as talented individuals, they also fight to be validated as merely existing and being part of the human race. This is painfully evident in Leo's experience during World War II, as he made himself invisible to the Nazis in order to avoid being killed. Now as an elderly man, Leo pulls crazy stunts just to be seen by other people. He admits to toppling displays in stores and making a huge fuss at Starbucks, all in the name of being validated as a person. It is interesting to note that the only validation and recognition that seems to matter to Leo must come from Alma Mereminski and his son, Isaac. Sadly, these are the two people who never quite validate Leo in the way he wants, or so he believes until the end of the novel.

The desire to be recognized as a talented writer shows up in several characters as well. As young men in Poland, Zvi is jealous of Leo's skills as a writer and feels threatened and betrayed when he discovers that Leo has taken to writing obituaries, the job that Zvi believes he himself does exceptionally well. With this in mind, it is difficult to see Zvi's plagiarism of Leo's book as being anything but malicious and an attempt to capitalize on Leo's talent. It should be noted, however, that Leo does not seem angry to find out what Zvi has done. As previously stated, Alma Mereminski provided the only validation Leo ever needed as a writer, so publishing his writings was never an issue for him. For Zvi, however, he admits that he only wanted his wife, Rosa, to love him.

Bird's preoccupation with Judaism and his alleged status as a lamed vovnik suggest that he seeks validation through his religious devotion. Even though he is ridiculed by his peers and misunderstood by his family, Bird continues to behave as if his religious fervor is the only way he will be recognized as a person. It is easy to assume that it is his grief over the death of his father, a man he barely knew, that compels him to find solace and validation in Judaism. At the end of the novel, Bird's desire to be validated in the eyes of God lead him to help Alma connect with Leo. While Bird's motivation may have been selfish, the act itself proves to be truly selfless.

## Survival After a Loss

Each of the main characters in the novel are grieving over the loss of a loved one. As a result, one of the key themes focuses on survival tactics used after suffering a loss. Each character chooses a different way to manage their grieving process.

The most obvious instance of this theme is in Alma Singer's decision to become an expert at surviving in the wilderness. When she hears that her father loved the outdoors, she decides that she will learn survival techniques in the event that something happens to her mother. Her brother, Bird, goes to extreme lengths to ensure the survival of his



family when he builds an ark in the vacant lot so that Alma and Charlotte can survive the flood that he believes is coming. Charlotte, however, chooses to survive by insulating herself with her memories of her life with David. It is interesting to note that Alma wants her mother to survive by getting remarried, and it is not until very late in the story that she realizes that it is not up to Alma to dictate how Charlotte survives the loss of her husband.

As Polish immigrants who have lost loved ones in the Holocaust, Leo and Zvi have similar ways of attempting to survive their losses. Zvi avoids going home to his small apartment in Chile, where the truth of what has happened to his family surrounds him. He survives by spending time with Rosa and allowing her love to help him heal. Leo survives by using his imagination. His closest friend, Bruno, turns out to be an imaginary character based on a childhood playmate that died in Poland. Even Alma Mereminski Moritz chose to survive her grief over losing Leo by moving on with her life and marrying her boss' son.

The creative process is also used as a method for survival. Leo has written several novels to cope with the loss of Alma Moritz and his son Isaac. Zvi chooses to alter Leo's novel, *The History of Love*, as a way to process his grief over losing his entire family. Charlotte makes a career out of translating books as her way of grieving over her husband, David. Alma lists things that she remembers about her father and writes books on surviving in the wilderness. Bird also writes in a journal about his attempts to be normal.

## Personal Histories of Love

It is only fitting that the title of the book, as well as the book-within-the-book, is one of the key themes. Each of the main characters dictates their personal history of love through the course of the book. It is seen in Leo's promise to never love anyone other than Alma Mereminski Moritz, in David and Charlotte Singer's relationship, and in Zvi's love for his wife Rosa.

By secretly arranging for the translation of *The History of Love*, Isaac writes a history of love for Leo. It could also be suggested that the publication of Leo's final book, *Words for Everything*, is another way that Isaac shows his love for his father. Even though the book is published under Isaac's name, the presence of Leo's name in the text suggests that Isaac engineered the publication as a way to let his father know that he knew of his existence and that he loved him. His actions also show deep respect for the love Leo had for his mother, Alma.

David Singer buys *The History of Love* on a whim and gives it to Charlotte as a token of his affection, writing that this was the book he would have written about her if he were a writer. In Charlotte's view, their love was so strong that her history of love only has enough room in it for him and their children. Her love for David parallels Leo's love for Alma Mereminski, in that both people refuse to ever love anyone else.



The copying and publication of Leo's book are the two ways that Zvi writes his own history of love. By including Leo's obituary in the final draft, Zvi not only attempts to overcome his guilty conscience but also ensures that the name of the friend he loved and supposedly lost is immortalized in print. The actual publication of the novel is part of Zvi's history of love for Rosa, for she encouraged him to publish it, and he went along with it in order to make her happy.

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is told using first person and third person omniscient. Leo and Alma's narratives are in first person, while Zvi's story is told in third person. It can be inferred that the author chose third person for Zvi because the man was deceased. Later in the novel, Bird's point of view is presented as well, giving the reader insight into Alma's behavior through someone else's eyes.

While all the narrators speak easily and coherently, there is a marked difference in their expression. This difference can be attributed to the fact that the narrators have very different life experiences. Leo is an old man who evaded capture in Nazi-occupied territory, while Alma is a teenage girl born and raised in New York. The narrator that relates Zvi's story is objective and impersonal, which is fitting considering that Zvi could be seen as a sort of villain based on his plagiarism of Leo's work. Bird's narration is very youthful and idealistic, while Alma's perspective is slightly more jaded.

## Setting

While the main story is set in present-day New York, the novel includes many flashbacks to events that happened over the past 60 years in Poland, Chile and New York. Even though there are moments when it is hard for the reader to distinguish between the past and the present, this uncertainty is actually an important plot device, for it illustrates how Leo Gursky, one of the key narrators, views the world.

Leo and Alma begin the novel in present time, with each character providing some important background details. Leo discusses his love of writing and his first book, as well as his childhood sweetheart, Alma Mereminski, and their son, Isaac. His completion of his second manuscript, *Words for Everything*, acts as a starting point for the current story. Once Leo sends the second book to Isaac, his life dramatically shifts. As the tale unfolds, Leo sets out to recover his manuscript as well as find a way to connect with the son he never knew. His efforts take him from New York City, where he has lived since right after the war, to Long Island, where he pays a visit to Bernard Moritz's home after Isaac's funeral. Several days later, Leo takes a trip to Isaac's house in Connecticut to see if he can find his book.

As for Alma, she offers background into how her parents met and fell in love in Israel, then emigrated to New York, where she and her brother Bird were born. Her narrative focuses mainly on her adventures in Brooklyn and Brighton Beach, where her friend Misha lives. She also ventures out to Connecticut to Isaac's house, hoping to speak with him about *The History of Love*.

The plot involving Zvi Litvinoff takes place in Poland and Chile. He leaves Poland right before the Nazi occupation and winds up in Chile. It is in Chile where he meets Rosa



and transcribes Leo's book in his own hand. Zvi makes one trip to New York during his lifetime but never returns to visit New York after that one time.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is very simple and straightforward. When the reader considers the fact that there are several main characters and multiple tales unfolding over the course of the story, simplicity becomes extremely important. The author cleverly uses metaphors to explain the motivations and personalities of the characters, such as Alma's obsession with survival techniques and Leo's work as a locksmith.

Several excerpts of *The History of Love* are included in the book, showing Leo's lyrical, philosophical style of writing. Excerpts from other writings, such as Isaac's book *The Remedy*, Jacob Marcus' letters, and Bird's diary illustrate the profound importance of words for all the characters in the novel. It could be suggested that the book is not only about loving others but also love of the written word.

The humorous elements of the book are presented plainly and conversationally, thus adding to the simplicity of the text. Bird's exploits in building his ark and collecting money for his trip to Israel are written honestly, which adds to the humor and yet also brings a wistful tone to the story.

## Structure

The book consists of 17 chapters, with each chapter given a distinct title that ties in with the chapter's content. The point of view alternates with each chapter, giving the reader insight into how Leo and Alma find each other at the end.

The time line is somewhat unclear, which can be attributed to the use of three different points of view, as well as many flashbacks. Leo's narration covers the period from a few weeks prior to Isaac's death to one month after. Alma's story begins with Jacob Marcus' letter to Charlotte requesting a translation of *The History of Love*, which is approximately eight months prior to Isaac's death. Zvi's story is told as flashbacks, since he has died prior to the novel's opening.

The pacing moves along nicely and plot twists are revealed gradually and fluidly throughout the story. While Leo and Alma both appear to be eager to get at the truth, neither one seems hurried to find answers.



## Quotes

"The words of our childhood became strangers to us - we couldn't use them in the same way and so we chose not to use them at all. Life demanded a new language." *The Last Words on Earth*, p. 6

"Once upon a time there was a boy who loved a girl, and her laughter was a question he wanted to spend his whole life answering." *The Last Words on Earth*, p. 11

"She'd stroke my hair and say, 'I love you so much,' and when I sneezed she'd say, 'Bless you, you know how much I love you, don't you?' and when I got up for a tissue she'd say, 'Let me get it for you I love you so much,' and when I looked for a pen to do my homework she'd say, 'Use mine, anything for you,' and when I had an itch on my leg she'd say, 'Is this the spot, let me hug you,' and when I said I was going up to my room she'd call after me, 'What can I do for you I love you so much,' and I always wanted to say, but never said: Love me less." *My Mother's Sadness*, p. 43

"My mother is lonely even when we're around her, but sometimes my stomach hurts when I think about what will happen to her when I grow up and go away to start the rest of my life." *My Mother's Sadness*, p. 50

"It's not that we've forgotten the language of gestures entirely. The habit of moving our hands while we speak is left over from it. Clapping, pointing, giving the thumbs-up: all artifacts of ancient gestures." *Forgive Me*, p. 73

"Only now that my son was gone did I realize how much I'd been living for him. When I woke up in the morning it was because he existed, and when I ordered food it was because he existed, and when I wrote my book it was because he existed to read it." *A Joy Forever*, p. 80

"It's one of those unforgettable moments that happen as a child, when you discover that all along the world has been betraying you." *My Father's Tent*, p. 93

"Even now, all possible feelings do not yet exist. There are still those that lie beyond our capacity and our imagination. From time to time, when a piece of music no one has ever written, or a painting no one has ever painted, or something else impossible to predict, fathom, or yet describe takes place, a new feeling enters the world. And then, for the millionth time in the history of feeling, the heart surges, and absorbs the impact." *My Father's Tent*, p. 107

"Sometimes no length of string is long enough to say the thing that needs to be said. In such cases all the string can do, in whatever its form, is conduct a person's silence." *The Trouble with Thinking*, p. 111

"Unlike our father, who spent his life in the clouds, my mother was propelled through the universe by the brute force of reason." *Until the Writing Hand Hurts*, p. 125





"In my loneliness it comforts me to think that the world's doors, however closed, are never truly locked to me." *Until the Writing Hand Hurts*, p. 132

"At the end, all that's left of you are your possessions. Perhaps that's why I've never been able to throw anything away. Perhaps that's why I hoarded the world: with the hope that when I died, the sum total of my things would suggest a life larger than the one I lived." *Die Laughing*, p. 165

"Sometimes I think: I am older than this tree, older than this bench, older than the rain. And yet. I'm not older than the rain. It's been falling for years and after I go it will keep on falling." *A + L*, p. 220

"The truth is that she told me she couldn't love me. When she said goodbye, she was saying goodbye forever." *A + L*, p. 226

"There's even a moment when it becomes exhilarating to realize just how little needs to stay the same for you to continue the effort they call, for lack of a better word, being human." *A + L*, p. 236

"And that's when I saw her. It's strange what the mind can do when the heart is giving the directions." *A + L*, p. 242



## Topics for Discussion

Both Zvi and Isaac plagiarized Leo's work over the course of his lifetime. Discuss their motivations for passing off Leo's writings as their own. How do their actions impact Leo?

Alma takes it upon herself to find a new husband for her mother, Charlotte. If she found a suitable partner for Charlotte, do you believe that Charlotte would consider remarriage? Why or why not?

Isaac Moritz uses a pseudonym in his letters to Charlotte Singer about the translation of *The History of Love*. What might be his motivation for doing this? If Charlotte had known who he really was, what could have happened as a result?

There are several lengthy sections of the book that contain passages from *The History of Love*. Are there portions of this book-within-a-book that do not move the main plot forward? What parts enrich the overall story?

*The History of Love* is the name of the novel as well as the book-within-a-book. What would have been an appropriate alternate title for this book? Is it important to the story that the names be the same?

At the end of the novel, Bruno is revealed to be a figment of Leo's imagination. What does this tell the reader about Leo's personality?

Charlotte's intense grief over the loss of her husband deeply affects Alma and Bird. Is her behavior as a grieving widow believable? Why or why not?

The only knowledge the reader has of Alma Mereminski Moritz is through the experiences of Leo and Zvi, and through the depiction of her in *The History of Love*. Would it have benefited the novel to provide her point of view?

The name Alma has great significance for Leo and Zvi, as evidenced by *The History of Love*. Do you think they are more in love with the idea of Alma Mereminski, or the actual woman?

The reader is never told if Zvi and Alma Mereminski had a romantic relationship. What might have been the outcome if they had been lovers?