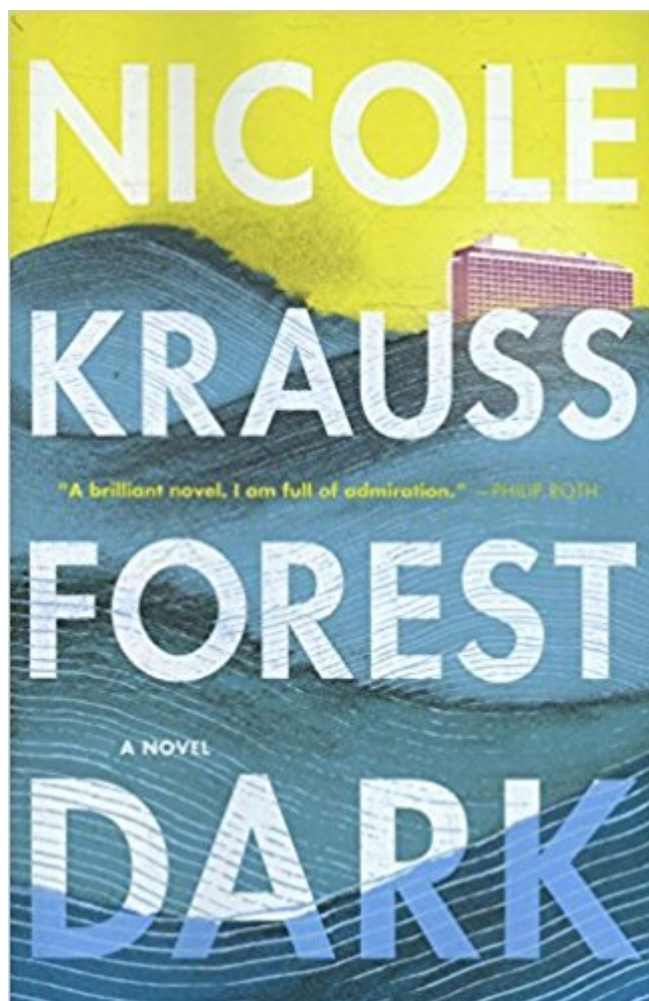


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Forest Dark: A Novel



Synopsis

"A brilliant novel. I am full of admiration." —Philip Roth "One of America's most important novelists" (New York Times), the award-winning, New York Times bestselling author of *The History of Love*, conjures an achingly beautiful and breathtakingly original novel about personal transformation that interweaves the stories of two disparate individuals — an older lawyer and a young novelist — whose transcendental search leads them to the same Israeli desert. Jules Epstein, a man whose drive, avidity, and outsized personality have, for sixty-eight years, been a force to be reckoned with, is undergoing a metamorphosis. In the wake of his parents' deaths, his divorce from his wife of more than thirty years, and his retirement from the New York legal firm where he was a partner, he's felt an irresistible need to give away his possessions, alarming his children and perplexing the executor of his estate. With the last of his wealth, he travels to Israel, with a nebulous plan to do something to honor his parents. In Tel Aviv, he is sidetracked by a charismatic American rabbi planning a reunion for the descendants of King David who insists that Epstein is part of that storied dynastic line. He also meets the rabbi's beautiful daughter who convinces Epstein to become involved in her own project — a film about the life of David being shot in the desert — with life-changing consequences. But Epstein isn't the only seeker embarking on a metaphysical journey that dissolves his sense of self, place, and history. Leaving her family in Brooklyn, a young, well-known novelist arrives at the Tel Aviv Hilton where she has stayed every year since birth. Troubled by writer's block and a failing marriage, she hopes that the hotel can unlock a dimension of reality — and her own perception of life — that has been closed off to her. But when she meets a retired literature professor who proposes a project she can't turn down, she's drawn into a mystery that alters her life in ways she could never have imagined. Bursting with life and humor, *Forest Dark* is a profound, mesmerizing novel of metamorphosis and self-realization — of looking beyond all that is visible towards the infinite.

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Nicole Krauss is the internationally bestselling author of three novels: *Man Walks Into a Room*, a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book of the Year; *The History of Love*, a New York Times bestseller and winner of the Saroyan Prize for International Literature; and *Great House*, a New York Times bestseller and finalist for the National Book Award. In 2007 she was selected as one of Granta's Best Young American Novelists, and in 2010 she was chosen for the New Yorker's "Twenty Under Forty" list. Her fiction has been published in the New Yorker, Harper's, Esquire

and Best American Short Stories, and her books have been translated into more than thirty-five languages. Nicole Krauss lives in New York.

This rather strange novel follows two different people in their quest for meaning which in both cases leads them to Israel. The first is Jules Epstein, an aging millionaire who has lost his way in life and is now giving away his vast fortune and prized possessions. The second is a well-known novelist (possibly or maybe probably based on the author) whose marriage is falling apart and who has succumbed to writer's block. Both wind up at the Tel Aviv Hilton, a strangely ugly building built in the brutalist style which sticks out at an odd angle toward the sea. There are many interesting reflections here about Israel, about American Jews and their response to the state of Israel, about philanthropy, and about Kafka. Biblical references abound. The author imagines a situation whereby Kafka did not die in Prague but made his way to a kibbutz, living in quiet anonymity. The book itself becomes increasingly Kafkaesque as it goes on, and more and more detached from reality. One keeps thinking the two principles will meet and it will all be tied up in a neat bow -- but that never happens. It seems the author seems to be concerned with alternative realities, roads not taken, doors not opened in life. Between the pages is a chilling depiction of a marriage that has lost its way from which all love has drained away. Various different paths toward meaning and fulfillment are suggested -- and then not acted upon. Ultimately I found the book baffling. It seems to suggest big ideas but they float into the air and disappear. It's well written and interesting -- but at the end of the day elusive, perhaps awaiting a smarter reader than me to decipher.

I have to apologize for this review in advance because I'm finding it difficult to adequately describe this novel, but I'll do my best. "Forest Dark" is not a casual read, or the kind of book you can dip in and out of. Instead it's sort of an examination into the nature of what it means to exist and move through the world as the person you are (or the person you aren't). This isn't a book that is based on traditional narrative structure. There's a lot of philosophical "meandering" (both in first and third person) that provides the main structure of the book - instead of a series of actions and exchanges driving the characters' thoughts, it as if the characters' thoughts and choices and motivations are the main characters and everything else is secondary. Reading this book is almost like snooping on someone recording stream-of-consciousness and noticing what's happening behind them and trying to piece everything together. I kind of enjoyed that, since I'm so used to opening a book and basically having my hand held the entire time by the author. This book did not provide that experience, and I liked the challenge. Definitely not a "cozy" read that you can just tuck in with and

lose yourself inside of. I'll admit that I did find it sort of dense and frustrating at times, but it forced me to slow down while reading and really *think* about some of the ideas that various characters had. For example, when the character of Rabbi Klausner first spoke, I found myself thinking "wait, WHAT did he say?" and re-reading back over the passage and working out the philosophical implications in my head. When I took the time to really think about different things that were addressed in the novel (a lot of ontological stuff), it stayed in my mind even after I had to close the book and move on to another task. So for me, it was food for thought- but I can see how for others, it might seem like a lot of nonsense. It depends on whether or not this is your cup of tea. It reminds me a lot of when we had to explicate poems in college- basically read them over and over, word by word, line by line, until different interpretations became apparent. All I can say is that this is a strange novel, and a bit of a challenge to someone who is used to dipping in and out of novels whenever time permits (not possible with this book, at least for me), but ultimately very satisfying. "Forest Dark" is another one of those books that makes me realize that reading can be more than just grabbing the latest novel and breezing through it.

There are two actors in this novel. One, Jules Epstein, is a lawyer, a wealthy and successful man, who has suddenly and fairly dramatically remade his life: left his law firm and his wife (that's pretty much the order of priority of the two in his mind) and sold off or given away his earthly goods. He's gone to visit in Israel fairly regularly through his long life but now he wants to go there again, maybe even stay, but for different reasons than in the past. And because he's still wealthy --his giving away of his goods is an act in process--he still runs into people who would like to relieve him of it. That's Epstein. We read about him in third person narrative and the novelist has given us his name. Even in the writing about him, there is a distance. This is a quotation describing what's happening inside him: "the slow unfurling of self-knowledge" He did not wish to be sure. Had lost his trust in it. The other actor is a novelist, unnamed. Her narrative is presented in the first person. She talks out in her head what is going on both inside and outside her. She's come to Israel too. Something's come unglued, in her work (novels) and home life (husband and children). Here's a quotation about her thought (feeling?) processes: "What if, I thought, rather than existing in a universal space, each of us is actually born alone into a luminous blankness, and we who snip it into pieces, assembling staircases and gardens and train stations into our own peculiar fashion, until we have pared our space into a world? What if it's human perception and creativity that are responsible for creating the multiverse? Or maybe- Ambiguous, yes. But she's

thinking about possibilities, of growing to where she is now in a different world/set of circumstances, and maybe, just maybe then, a different set of outcomes. In some respects, you see, there's not all that much difference between Epstein and Ms. A. Nonymous. Both have been successes but don't feel like successes. Both feel as if a wrong turn has been taken, or maybe (Epstein) it's just time to take a new one. And this novel is, kind of, their taking one. Epstein is cornered by a rabbi, charismatic and a bit of a con man, who is planning a reunion of King David's great great great great great (by now you get the point) grandchildren in Israel. It'll be a big deal and maybe Epstein would like to bankroll it as a memorial to his long dead parents? The writer is cornered too, by a man who may be a literary scholar and may also at some point in his murky past have worked for Mossad, Israel's premier spy organization. He spins a story about lost Kafka manuscripts that need completing (by her, of course) and about Kafka having faked his death and lived out the remaining years of his life as a gardener in different parts of the Holy Land. Kafka for her, David for Jules. Nothing is nailed down in this novel, which is, by the way, exceptional in writing and plotting. Krauss's second and third novels received critical acclaim (the third, *Great House*, was a National Book Award finalist) and the New York Times has proclaimed her "one of America's most important novelists." She is a superb stylist but it is an unusual style: concrete and vivid details combined with an allusive, away-from-the-center quality to her discussion of the protagonists' actions and thoughts "particularly what they're thinking. She's an observer, not a participant: not engaged with her characters so much as alert to what is going on with them. I love the descriptions, particularly descriptions of place. In one paragraph, on page 66), details tumble over each other as the writer describes the city where she has just landed. Tel Aviv is a Mediterranean city up at all hours that got more frenetic the later it became. Dirty leaves and pages of old newspapers blew down the streets. People plucked them out of the air and put them over their heads to protect themselves from the occasional rain. Her apartment is cold with stone floors and there is no central heating because in the hot months, which felt interminable, no one could imagine it would be cold again. The narrator exits her cab and in the sea air mixed with the rain I could almost smell the metallic scent of electric heaters, their brilliant orange coils aglow in people's apartments like artificial hearts, forever threatening to explode, or at the very least to short-circuit the city. A brilliant simile (like artificial hearts), in the middle of an extended metaphor, and it all points toward the edginess of the city where she has just arrived.

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