DAVID GROSSMAN and NICOLE KRAUSS

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LIVE from the New York Public Library

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Celeste Bartos Forum

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: My apologies. Actually, not my apologies. I think the person who needs to apologize to you is Charlie Rose, so please send all complaints not to the New York Public Library, not to me, but to Charlie Rose, who kept David Grossman much longer than he needed to. So my name is Paul Holden—much longer than he needed to because you wanted to hear him tonight, I think.

My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of LIVE from the New York Public Library. As you know, my goal at the New York Public Library is simply to make the lions roar, to make a heavy institution dance, to make it, if I can, levitate. From time to time, LIVE from the New York Public Library has the pleasure of working together with the Doris C. and Lewis Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers, where Nicole Krauss was a writer in residence last year, and just today was nominated for a National Book Award. **(applause)** So if you think that we are bad at timing, at beginning on time, at least here we timed our event perfectly.

The Cullman Center hosts some wonderful events. Do take a look at their upcoming events programs this fall. You should have a postcard on your seat. I would like to particularly thank Marie D'Origny**,(applause)** the new deputy director at the Cullman Center, for all her work on this event, her very first, as well as, warmly, Meg Stemmler, the extraordinary producer of all LIVE from the New York Public Library events. **(applause)**

I would like to quickly tell you what is on the LIVE menu this season. In fact, I asked the designer to give me a new kind of look this season. And I said, "Give me a new menu," and he took it quite literally. So, look at it carefully, and if you like martinis, come hear Angela Davis and Toni Morrison; tacos, Edwidge Danticat; steak, Lady Antonia Fraser; asparagus, A Night with the *National Lampoon*; pizza, Derek Walcott, a BLT sandwich, Steven Johnson and Kevin Kelly; wine, Zadie Smith; shrimp, Antonio Damasio and Marina Abramovic; cupcakes, Jay-Z; and bananas, of course, Keith Richards. Keith

Richards has written in his autobiography, which is coming out very soon, that when he was growing up, there were two institutions that mattered to him greatly: the church, which belongs to God, and the library, which belongs to the people. Keith Richards as a child wanted to become, as you suspect, a librarian. He veered a little bit from that road, in fact he did want to become a librarian, and so he said the great equalizer is the public library.

And in that spirit, I would like you all to become or consider becoming if you're not already, a Friend of the Library. For just forty dollars, which is rather a cheap date, you will get discounts on all LIVE tickets and much more. Tonight's program is being telecast in real time by fora.tv, so anyone can be live from the New York Public Library and tune into this conversation by going online. To access a live stream, you simply go to fora.tv. Before asking Jean Strouse, the Director of the Cullman Center, to introduce Nicole Krauss and David Grossman to you, I would like to let you know that both Nicole and David will be signing their books after the event. I would as always like to thank our independent bookseller, 192 Books, for their impeccable service. It is now my pleasure to bring to this stage the Director of the Cullman Center, Jean Strouse, who will properly introduce to you Nicole Krauss and David Grossman.

(applause)

JEAN STROUSE: Thank you very much, Paul. I'd also like to thank Marie D'Origny and Meg and everyone else on both of our staffs who helped make this evening work, and

all of you for coming. Paul told you about the menu of LIVE programs. We also have a menu of Cullman Center programs, but we don't actually call it that. The first one, however, you'll find cards by the door, is about food. It's an evening called Locavores' Dilemmas, which is about basically food, farms, families, and restaurants. We will feature Steve Jenkins, who's the cheese guy from Fairway and also a part owner of Fairway. Melanie Reyhak, a former Cullman Center fellow and a journalist. David Shea, who's the chef and owner of Applewood restaurant in Brooklyn, and the journalist Patrick Keefe. So food, farms, more—it seems to be the year of food at the New York Public Library.

Further out we will have the playwrights Will Eno and Edward Albee talking about their new plays and playwriting in general. And that's on November 15th and on December 1st we'll have *New Yorker* writer Ian Frazier talking about his new book *Travels in Siberia*, with Robert Krulwich, the host of NPR and *Radiolab*. So you will find this card as Paul said, at a table to the left of the door as you leave and also there you'll find a sign-up sheet, so if you'd like to give us your e-mail address, if you're not already on the list for either LIVE or the Cullman Center's programs, let us know how to reach you and we'll send you e-mails about what we're up to.

Now it's my immense please to introduce tonight's speakers, and I'm going to do it very briefly so you will have much more time to spend with them. Nicole, as Paul said, was a fellow at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers last year, and she finished there the book she'll be talking about tonight, *Great House*. And as Paul said we were all thrilled

to learn today that she and the book have been nominated for a National Book Award. There will be a fantastic review of the book on the front page of the Sunday *Times* book review next week with a fantastic picture of Nicole, and the *New Yorker* last summer named Nicole one of its twenty under forty top young writers to watch. A short story adapted from this book, a section of the book, appeared in the magazine in June.

The recipient of numerous awards, with her books translated into many languages, Nicole is a brilliant writer, as readers of her previous books, *Man Walks into a Room*, a title I love, and book, but the title's really great, *Man Walks into a Room* and *The History of Love*, her readers already know that, but as both her committed fans and new readers will find in this pure tour-de-force, *Great House*, she's keeping it up really beautifully. The eminent Israeli writer David Grossman has written more books—fiction and nonfiction—and won more awards than I have time to mention tonight. The books that have been translated into English include *See Under: Love*, *The Book of Intimate Grammar*, *Her Body Knows*, and *The Smile of the Lamb*, which was made into a film by Shimon Dotan, and in nonfiction *The Yellow Wind*, *Sleeping on a Wire*, and *Death as a Way of Life*. And those are only a few of them.

His new novel, *To the End of the Land*, is simply an exquisite experience to read. It's among other things a portrait, as one of the characters says, of the thousands of moments and hours and days that make one person in the world and of the power of war to destroy such a person. Nicole and David happen to be not only extraordinarily gifted writers but

also good friends. We are greatly fortunate tonight to be able to listen in on their conversation.

(applause)

NICOLE KRAUSS: David and I were saying that we're a little bit cold, and we were worried about all of you. Are you cold? It's cold in here. We can't do anything about it, Jean says, okay. David and I wrestled in the back for who would get to start and I think I won, right?

It's such an honor, really, to be here with you tonight, and I have been reading your books really all my life and I think it was only when I read this most recent novel, *To the End of the Land*, that I found in a way the word, the phrase, you gave me the phrase for what I feel so often when I read your books, which is the fullness of life. I think, you know, there is—you have all of the extremes. You're never afraid of going to the extremes in your work of passion and jealousy and grief, but there's also all of the joy, of the bitter sweetness of life, which one feels, and the physical sensation of life in your books and I think, you know, for me, when I first read *See Under: Love*, I was becoming a novelist, you know, and trying to—I think I was just finishing my first novel. So I figured out I could write one, and then it's a question of what kind of writer did I want to be and when I read *See Under: Love*, I realized there were simply no rules, that's what I sort of discovered. There were no rules. If there were rules, they should all be broken, but anything is possible in the novel. The novel is infinitely flexible. And I took that lesson

sort of with me, really, but I think in this novel, your most recent novel, I sort of learned another kind of lesson or had a different kind of experience. **(laughter)** Thank you. Can you give them out to the rest of the audience, as well?

DAVID GROSSMAN: Do you have a blanket?

NICOLE KRAUSS: I might put that on. I simply read this novel not a writer, which is something I'm afraid I do now, I read novels or I read books as a writer. But I read it—I couldn't resist, I couldn't help it, I read it as a reader. And more than that I felt that all of the words, all of the mechanisms, fell away and it was simply lived experience, I simply felt that I was these people. I was Ora, and I was Avram on this walk, and that I was alive, because I was reading it, so I suppose what I want to ask to begin with is about these characters—And how do you it? And I know that part of the answer, which he won't give, has to do with generosity of spirit and compassion, and you won't say that, so I will. But what else?

DAVID GROSSMAN: The question is much better than any answer that I can provide. First of all, shalom, and again I apologize for the delay. And it's not only Charlie Rose. I must tell you that the traffic in New York is even worse than in Jerusalem. **(laughter)** Characters. I've been asked regarding writing Ora, Ora is the main character in my novel. She's a woman around fifty, more or less, she lives separately from her husband. She has two boys. And I think I wrote her and I really started to understand her when I just surrendered to her, and maybe this is the best thing that we can do as writers. We write

about characters who are totally different from us, sometimes they are contrary to us. I wrote about Palestinians. I wrote in *See Under: Love*, there is a commander of extermination camp, and I learned that within me there are so many options, in every one of us, so many options. And usually we put so much effort in remaining one, one self, you know, but by so doing we are so entrenched in one story life, one option of ourselves.

And when I surrendered to Ora suddenly I was able to become her and to become her in so many walks of life, and to experience things through her. I always, and I'm sure you know it from your work, when I write a character I prioritize this character to my life almost totally. So many things that happen to me, things that I hear or I see or I experience I would first think how Ora would have acted had she been here, what she would have said to this or to that, how she is going to react instinctively even towards this face or this anecdote that she eavesdrops on when she walks in the street, and I think the best moments in the writing process are when you are totally taken by this character, when suddenly the character takes you beyond your borders, beyond your landscapes, and allow you to be someone else, such a sweetness to it, to be someone else.

You know, some of the characters that I've written over the years, they are still very vivid in me. Not all of them, but some of them are vivid, and they have formulated to me an option that otherwise could not have been formulated. Now you tell about your experience in writing, how is it for you?

NICOLE KRAUSS: In writing characters.

DAVID GROSSMAN: I just want to say I read *Great House* and I read the three of your novels and each time you know I am amazed by your ability both to be so many persons so different from each other, in age, in gender, in place of being, and of your ability to evocate so many feelings in depth, to be there, really, I'm amazed. There is in *Great House*, for example, there is the woman—forgive me if I forget the names.

NICOLE KRAUSS: I do, too.

DAVID GROSSMAN: Who falls in love in Jerusalem in Mishkenot Sha'ananim.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Nadia.

DAVID GROSSMAN: Her name?

NICOLE KRAUSS: Nadia.

DAVID GROSSMAN: Nadia. Nadia. And the way you describe her love to this young Israeli man, boy, actually, he's very young, with all the depth and all the desire and the humiliation of not being met by him, of being rejected, being manipulated by him, and I mean this is one sensation of this woman—there are so many others—and this book is such a huge landscape with so many things that happen all the time, and, I mean, I just, I mean I stand with awe in front of that, really I do.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Thank you. Well, thinking of that scene of Nadia and I remember that leading up to that, I never know where my books are going to go, ever, I don't know from the outset, and I don't know for a very long time during the writing process, and this uncertainty, this very willful uncertainty that I hold myself to, is what allows for the discovery and what allows for the opportunity to become another life, to go to place that I don't know, to make a discovery, but sometimes as I'm moving along, and that scene takes place very close to the end of the book, I have a moment that I realize I have to move toward, and here's a woman, Nadia, a writer who is fifty years old who is suffering really a breakdown and who is alone in this room in Mishkenot Sha'ananim, looking out over Jerusalem and who is haunted by this question which rises up in her, "what if I had been wrong, what if I had been wrong all my life, to sacrifice, to not have children, to not have, you know, to leave my husband, to be alone, sacrifice everything for my work, to feel that I was chosen somehow, what if I was wrong?"

And I had this moment, she had—there was—she was so much defined by her decision not to have children, that I thought that if she could fall in love with this young man, not really fall in love with him, become obsessed by him, and he would turn to her at one moment and say, "You could be my mother," at just the moment, at just the moment when she felt that there was an opportunity for something and he would look at her with disgust and say "You could be my mother," that was the thing that would undo her completely, and so I simply—I moved—everything moved towards that line, although I

didn't know how to get there. I do feel like I choose characters who—for example, in this book, I chose characters who didn't make the same choices I did.

I wrote this book, I began this book not long, eighteen months or so, after my first son, Sasha, who you know, was born. And he was everything in my mind, in my life, and I finished this book here at the Library and in the rocking chair when Sara was between naps, of my youngest child, so my youngest children, my children are everywhere in the conception of the book, or in the feeling of the book, the vulnerability that happens, but very few of the characters decide to become parents themselves, and those that are, suffer, or struggle with it, and I think this need to go to the place that I haven't chosen has to do with the need to discover something about the place that I am, of course, but I'm drawn to that other, that unknown.

DAVID GROSSMAN: I thought of that, that in your book—I can say even, in your books, not only in this one, but especially in this one, parenthood is not only a great responsibility but a great burden, as if you're even guilty by burdening your children with your heritage or with life itself, and it amazes me, because, as you said, you wrote it when you were as we say in Hebrew, a fresh mother טרייה אמא and with all the energies and the joy of having children and yet in the book itself, there is such a power of refraining from having children and if one, like Lotte, she has a child, she gives him away, and I wrote *To the End of the Land*, I can say I think one of the main motivation that sent me to write this book was fear of loss of a child and you know it happened during the writing of it, and yet, my book is so much full with the joy of having children

and the fullness of life and the intensity of the life of a family, and the family as the great drama of humanity—it's interesting that we took such contrary directions.

NICOLE KRAUSS: I thought about that, as well, a lot, but you of course have—I mean, I think it's something that I was conscious of reading your book, because it seemed to me that you have often written so beautifully about children and about—in *Book of Intimate Grammar*, about becoming an adolescent, and you've written about lovers and friendship and enemies, but it seems to me that parenthood is something that you saved, in a way, that you saved for a long time, and I actually was going to ask you about that, about this—the moment in which you decided, or the period in which you decided that you would write about another phrase from your book that really struck me, "the sorrows of raising children," and of course within that is this incredible—one can't help but feel it's a memory, your own memories, of course, which you invent and expand and do everything that a novelist does with that of what it is to raise children.

DAVID GROSSMAN: I think that until this novel I mostly wrote from the point of view of the child and suddenly a moment came when I felt that I can write from the point of view of the parent, that I have stable enough or solid enough in my position as a father, as a parent, to be able to look back and to write. When I say it, I suddenly think that when my first son, Jonathan, was born, only then I was able to understand my parents, suddenly I got this perspective on life, on the sequence of generations, understanding why my father and mother did this or that thing and what were their motivations, things that I could not have understood beforehand and I knew when I started to write this book I

knew that it would be about the family—I wanted to write a kind of domestic epic, that would be epic in the sense that I wanted to tell the story of Israel, and the story of the conflicts, the wars and occupation and terrorism and this existential fear that we feel there permanently, constantly.

But I wanted it in the center of the story will be a family, this huge drama with the intensity of the family, with the relationship between the people, I'm fascinated by families, always, the fact that they're—and I talk now about the traditional family, two parents, man and a woman and a child, two, three children, just to think that two people created other people—you know, it's so trivial and banal, but two people created the other people so they are made of their own material and everything that happens to each member of the family in a way echoes in the life of the others, each member of the family is a crossroad through which all the information, not only logical information but the emotional information, it pours through every member of the family, and sometimes you look at a child and you see in his face or her face the resemblance between the parents that the parents themselves have not noticed, and the child as if brought it to life by his very presence and, of course, you see a child who is like a battlefield sometimes of his two very different and remote father and mother, and I say then I think—you write, I mean, there are families in your book, and yet there is such loneliness within your families.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Well, I think that for me, the family is not yet—the family as it is from your perspective is not yet my material. One of the things that really overwhelmed

me when I began writing this book was the idea of—I guess what I came to call the burden of inheritance, the idea of what it is that is passed down to us from our parents, and I'm not talking about furniture, although in the novel it is embodied in a desk, among other things, but I'm talking about moods, grief, sadness, an angle at which we face the world, and I thought about what we pass on to our children, and this occupied me almost obsessively when I first had my first child. What was I passing to him without really knowing it? I think it was that that I wanted to explore.

It's like, you know, also at the beginning it's only happy—it's only happy when you first have a child, it's complex, it's rich, but it's overwhelmingly happy to bring a child into the world, it's stressful and all of these things, but, but, and so the fullness of life is incomplete in a way. And I felt that I wanted to write about this question of what is passed down, and I felt quite comfortable doing it by writing about, for example, a woman who chooses, who has experienced so much trauma, I'm talking about Lotte now, who is a German Jewish refugee who becomes pregnant and simply cannot—does not feel she can have the child, because she feels that she will infect this child with this tremendous sadness and makes this quite radical decision to pass this child to another and I felt that I could write about it by writing about Aaron, this Israeli father who is at the end of his life facing his death and who has still not given up hope that he can be understood by his son, that he can understand his son, and who is dealing with the moral doubt of what it is to wonder whether one's been a good parent.

I felt that I could be that and I felt I could examine this idea that I was looking at from the beginning of a child's life from the other side of it, and I think this way of somehow touching one's material, touching the red-hot thing by coming at it from the other side is, for me, still a kind of thrilling way to do it. It's like if I were to write about a family now it would be a little like writing about a birthday where only good things happen and the child comes and everyone sings to him and he gets presents and everyone leaves. Well, it's not a story, ultimately. A story happens when everyone comes and, with bated breath, the uncles and aunts hold their breath, and the child, you know, pushes the birthday cake off the table and leaves the room. It's in that moment of darkness, the moment of difficulty and struggle, that we find something out about ourselves.

DAVID GROSSMAN: When you spoke I thought how difficult it is for us to write in a very objective way about our children, not *our* children, but about children, about character of children. It is so easier for us to be critical and opinionated and objective when you write about our parents or the generation of our parents, **(laughter)** but we are very careful, you know, it's a kind of almost a taboo, and I feel that in my book I worked hard to be able, you know, to look objective, I did not describe exactly my own children but, of course, part of them infiltrates into the book, it's inevitable. I know how hard it was, it was on me to do that.

I just want to go back to—I mentioned loneliness, and when I was reading your book I thought how many kinds of loneliness you describe—loneliness of children and of elderly people and, of course, men and women, and loneliness within a couple who lives together

for years and loneliness within a desire that is not being responded. And I also noticed, it's very noticeable, that all these lonely people, they have to tell their story to someone, there is this need, you'll recall it, to confess, yes. Maybe it is to confess. And usually they come and tell the story not to the right person, you know, not to the person who deserves to hear the story, because he or she has paid such a heavy fee for this story even without knowing this story, he lived under the silence of the secret of the story. What is that, I mean, what is this need to go and to share the most intimate things with the wrong people, yes, not the people who are the real addressee of these secrets?

NICOLE KRAUSS: I'm not sure if I'd thought of it that way, although it's an interesting way to look at it. Certainly Nadia addresses this judge, who I can't give away who he is, if anyone hasn't read the book, and I'm sure most of you haven't, since it just came out. But I do feel, I feel all of my characters, and when we spoke the other night, you said, "You've only written three books," and I thought, I kept thinking, "I've only written—only three," so that's stayed with me since then, but in those only three books everyone is lonely, it's true.

And I think that this—there is for me a great interest in not the loneliness per se, not the alienation and isolation, the effort to transcend it, but there is again—and all of my books are filled with writers, because of course for me literature holds a kind of singular role. It is this unique opportunity we're given as readers, as writers, to inhabit fully, completely, the inner life of another, to know what it is to feel like him, like her, and therefore to have empathy, to have compassion, and I feel that all of my characters are not content with

their situation, they don't wish to go misunderstood. They wish to be known, they wish to be seen, but I think in *The History of Love* it was—in a way, it was more redemptive and I let them be seen and known more easily and here in *Great House* I was more committed to the struggle. What is it to sit and to make this effort constantly, perhaps to anyone, perhaps to the wrong person, to be known, to be seen, and somehow to know others.

I wanted to go back, I keep having questions to things you say and then we move forward, but I wanted to talk about what you said about writing about children, your children, children in general. Two of the moments in your book which have stayed with me, I mean really I have just—I sort of can't get over them in a way are two stories that one of them is the moment when Avram hears this story about Ofer when he's young and he finds out what meat is for the first time and he screams, "I can't live with you, you're like wolves!" and Avram for the first time hears the words he has been looking for of what he feels about the rest of the world. And this story, because I know you, because one night we went out to dinner and Jonathan was there, your older son, and you both told us this story, it was his story when he was four, and the other story, the amazing moment in your novel which haunts me, is the moment when Adam, the older son, has his tics and he can't stop doing these amazing tics, and then Ofer, his younger brother finds a way to save him by taking them on himself, and he exacts this punishment when Adam does the tic without—does "the thing with the fingers," I think is what you call it, and I remember when I wrote you a letter after I read the book, and we spoke on the phone, and I did what no reader should be allowed to do and a writer should be hung from the ankles for asking this, but I said to you, "Is it real? The thing with the tics, did it

really happen?" And you said—very kindly, you said, "Well, something like it, but I, you know."

I wanted to ask about that because it seemed so a tender a thing to write, oh out of life always to write about those we live with, our family or loved ones, but of course it always becomes an invention, and in the book you took this story of Jonathan and I don't know fully but you change it to something else, it became Avram's moment, not the boy's, it became his, and that was the novelistic sort of genius and I wanted to ask you about this, particularly in this book which feels so intimate, about this for you—I think you once said something about how you have to dismantle your personality, or your books, you dismantle yourself, and I wanted to know about this idea of taking the real, taking you, and dismantling it and becoming, you know, the other.

DAVID GROSSMAN: I always thought we all do it, but this is how I see writing, or how writing should be. To take all the materials that I know from my life or from the life of people who are close to me and really to break them to crumbs and to try to re-create the anew, to juxtapose them in a new way and that somehow creates something that is both familiar and new. Both very concrete and yet it has an aura of something more general or archetypal. You mentioned the two stories in *To the End of the Land* about how the child becomes vegetarian, and yes this was a true story taken from my son Jonathan when at the age of four he discovered that we are eating animals and when you think about it, it's really hard to—hard to digest I wanted to say **(laughter)**—it's really hard, and his reaction, which was so strong, and he wanted to run away from us, and I

remember his face became like a fist, you know, and he shouted, "You are like wolves, you men, you are like wolves—I don't want to live with you." And, you know, when something like that happens to you you really start to think anew about the whole thing of eating meat, Jonathan is here somewhere in the audience—your Jonathan.

And of course when you tell this story just like that it's an anecdote, but when you put it or weave it into the fabric of a story suddenly it gets so many echoes and more meaning that probably I myself I'm not all aware of all the meanings of that and the words that the child in the book chose echoes in such a strong way in the mind of Avram, who all his life feels like he's surrounded by wolves, and he doesn't want to live with human being, and suddenly when he hears this declaration coming from Ofer, who is very close to him, I cannot say more than that, and suddenly it creates, or re-creates, or retells the story of his life.

And there was the other story that you mentioned about Adam, who started to develop these tics, OCD, I think it is called in professional language, and, you know, I don't know if you've experienced it in your life yourself or you saw people, and it starts with one tic and then the magic of these tics, the temptation to organize your life or to cut your life in a certain order, and the life is being cut by this tic or the other tic, and you touch the joints here and the knees and the elbows, and suddenly you understand the attraction in it, you cannot reject this attraction. And, as a mother, Ora witnesses her son being swept into all this bureaucracy of the body and bureaucracy of the manners and she doesn't know how to pull him back, and then Ofer, his younger brother, he comes, as you said, he

suggests to him to take upon himself some of these tics and to do it instead of Adam, and Adam is infuriated, “How dare you, you know, even interfere with something so private?” but he understands the logic of it.

This is something that did not happen in my life, I never know someone who had something like that, but I thought that there is such, this is such an act of love—to accept on yourself part of the disease of the other, and I thought that if we want to cure, to heal someone from a disease, we must contaminate ourselves with this disease in a way. It doesn’t have to be a physical disease. And of course for psychology stuff or people who treat people, they must do it, you must be a little sick with this disease if you really want to understand the mechanisms of it and the ability to emerge from it, and of course it applies also when we want to solve a political conflict, it is also there. You cannot solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict unless you allow yourself, you expose yourself to the misery and to the deep anxieties of both peoples and to understand why they act the way they act, why they are doomed to make the mistakes that they are doing. Only by so doing will you be able to help them out of it.

NICOLE KRAUSS: I remember hearing you speak a number of times about how you so embody your characters that you actually will practice walking down the street like them. And so I imagined you in your study in Mevaseret with these tics.

DAVID GROSSMAN: I did it. I mean. Don’t you, how you create a character like that?

NICOLE KRAUSS: No, I don't get tics. I think we're different in that way. I feel I never lose sight of the fact that my characters are my own creation, an extension of me in some way. They do—of course, they take on a life of their own. Their language, which slowly develops, begin to dictate who they are, I do hear them speaking sometimes the way that they speak. They are mysteries to me, and I feel I have to uncover their psychology, and eventually their psychology tells me what would happen next, but I feel that writing is ultimately such a willful act. I don't really feel that it's magical somehow. Yes, it's true, if things happen, if you throw yourself into this position of the unknown where you are working very, very close to failure, where the thing could fall apart, quite extraordinary things do happen, but I always feel that I am—that they are coming from me, that they depend on me, and as such they are not somehow, they don't somehow spin themselves.

DAVID GROSSMAN: But I need to understand something. In, especially in the last book, also in the previous books, people are so careful to touch each other, as if their touch contains some power that can really destroy the other, sometimes even within a couple there is such—distance, but there is even a void between the two, questions that are not being asked, secrets that are not being revealed, it reminds me of one of your characters in *The History of Love* who thought that he is made of glass and that every touch can break him, and this feeling prevails also in this, in the last novel, that we contain such an enormous power that can be such a destructive power when we approach another human being that we must all the time refrain from being fully—all the time

there is this effort which has an enormous power in the storytelling, yes, the avoidance from telling things, from expressing things.

NICOLE KRAUSS: I think I feel like the possibility for understanding is so enormous, the possibility of what we can be when we really could be completely known to one another, the full extent of who we are could be seen and understood, but I feel the tension of that constantly, and I think they're, I mean, I find that in the fissures of life, you asked me on the phone about the abyss that's below this sort of domestic life, I feel like that abyss is quite friendly to me as a writer, I almost feed it and keep it in my pocket, as it were. Because it's a place where if I can get my characters into this abyss, into this place which is for them, whatever that abyss is, this dangerous place which may have to do with contact with another or may have to do with any number of things, then they can break open, they themselves can break open, and this potential, this enormous potential, which is too small to say it has to do with being understood, it's everything, whatever the potential is that we feel as human beings, all we want to be, all we imagine life can be but always endlessly fall short of, could happen, and I feel like there is my characters or I as a writer, as a person, never lose sight of that enormous desire and our endless failing to arrive at it, the continued desire and loss of hope for this sort of possibility but feeling that it never quite measures up, and yet in the study of that abyss where we live, where we make our lives, I think, is a chance for change. I mean, of course, I feel all of my characters have an opportunity for change, I don't want to stick them in a static place, well, no novelist really wants to do that. You want to bring them to the edge and you

hope that they'll sort of leap off and that revelation, that transcendence somehow is possible.

I wanted to ask you, we spoke a little bit about language, about the creation of the language to create a character, but I also thought a lot about as I was reading your book, when of course I was just in Israel for four months, I began to think about the idea of private language, of private language, both because in certain ways Hebrew is, I suppose, for the Jews a kind of private language, a language in which they express themselves largely to each other, I also thought about a wonderful story that I once heard because Kieślowski, you know, the Polish film director, tell, which is this change, this shift that happened the moment for him when communism fell in Poland and he simply stopped wanting to make movies, that he felt until then that he shared with his audience this kind of private language, that there was a complete understanding of these veiled gestures, that everything was understood without saying it, and that as soon as that was lost for him, there was no longer this desire to make movies.

I thought about that reading your book, and I wondered—it felt to me that while the story of Ora and this tremendous love she has which can't stop the violence but sustains her and I think sustains us as a reader, this love she has for her son, for her lover, for the land, but I wanted to ask you sort of about whether you were aware, writing the book, whether you felt it was a deliberate choice to almost at the same time of writing this universal story just to be speaking a private language that all Israelis who would read this book would understand about what it is to live there now.

DAVID GROSSMAN: I think that part of the of our situation, they are part of the general shrinking of everything that is spiritual, emotional, is the reduction of the language, and it is, it is understandable, it is normal, I think, because the language is one of the main vehicles for us to sense reality, and the more nuanced the language is, the more nuanced reality is for us, and we can approach it easier. And when reality is so violent and painful and threatening, the natural tendency is to close yourself down and to buffer, to defend yourself, and you can see it in the way it affects the language of the people, the way the Hebrew language was a really a rich and nuanced language twenty, thirty years ago is now a very functional language. It shows also in great part of our literature, I'm afraid, and of course it shows itself in our media.

The media looks more and more like a graffiti, yes, very short declarations with passwords that are understandable to everyone. It happens everywhere, of course, in the world, we are all brainwashed and narrowed down by the language of the media that gradually prevents us from exploring and experiencing the world. It suggests to us a world that is much more digestible, but it is not the real world, and when I wrote this book, even more than in previous books, I mean, in all my books, the language is for me very important. It is the most intimate, personal print of the human being, yes, it's your—the language that you speak is yourself, is your very intimate signature and almost every one of us even if he or she is not aware of that, has a very special language, a language, I mean, there are certain idioms that we shall use again and again and certain words, of course, and even certain clichés, but we shall use them in our own way.

And in this book I insisted on the most nuanced language and everything has a name—the fauna and the flora and the noise that the feets do when they pass through the bushes and even the voice of the Israeli ground, soil, that is unlike any other place, with all the (makes guttural noises), all these Israeli and also Arabic sounds. And the whole dictionary of the family and the lovemaking and the raising up of children, all that are describing in a rich way because against the temptation to reduce, which is, as I said, is understandable, because who wants to describe his nightmare with high resolution? And I wanted in this book to protest even against that and to say, I want to reclaim the wholeness of my reality, of the Israeli reality, and I want to give it names, and I know that in Israel, the people who read it in Hebrew, they reacted to it because if you use the right language you immediately connect people with their identity. Immediately you remind them what home should be and can be, yes, this is the place that you understand all the codes, all of the nuances of its reality and—

I remember when I was writing *The Yellow Wind*, then I noticed what extent the language is being manipulated by the authorities, by the government, by the army, and by the media, and I myself I was part of it. I was the narrator of the morning newsmagazine in Israel for four years, and there was a special dictionary—words that were created in order to cover things in order not to allow us to know what is being done by us, in a way, words that are meant to protect us, it came from a kind of an overprotective attitude, words that citizens who should not know, who should be kept as children, but once you use the right words, words that really describe reality, and they are poignant and they are painful, and

suddenly people have to react, and I remember that the reaction of people to the publication of *The Yellow Wind* in Israel, all the facts were known, all the facts were known to most Israelis, but suddenly the idea that—or the fact that it was described in a new dictionary, a dictionary that the people were not protected from, and immediately it engaged them, sometimes against their will, in some kind of taking a new position. They had to rearticulate, reformulate their position anew, vis-à-vis the new reality that was revealed to them. So this is private language and general language. You said, you mentioned that you stayed now four months in Israel. Did you write when you were in Israel?

NICOLE KRAUSS: No, I took my children to the Gan everyday, that's a kindergarten in Israel. No, as is always the case, one has the aspiration and even the expectation that one will write on these sort of trips but in the end the reality is is that so much energy is spent just adapting to the place, to the experience, that nothing gets done.

DAVID GROSSMAN: But I wonder, if you lived there in Israel, not for four months, but for years, in what way do you think it would have affected your writing?

NICOLE KRAUSS: I did feel when I was there that there was this—something extraordinary happened to me that never happens to me here in America, in New York, where I've lived all my life, for the most part, which is that I felt that every story I heard, every old man in the playground or some shopkeeper who would grab me to tell me the story of his Polish aunt or whatever, that I felt it was my material, I could take it if I

wanted, it was being offered to me and I could take it, and I felt this sense that is often described to me but I never really fully felt because I'd never lived in Israel for so long, of this familial, and this sort of straining at the seams, that everything is pouring out onto everybody else's business, and I mean, you know, there are these wonderful moments that—

One night I was walking home with a friend from a bar and it was late and we said good-bye and gave each other a hug and man sped by on his moped with his girlfriend on the back and he screamed out, "Don't strangle him! He wants to live!" You know, he gave me a line for a story. It was so wonderful, the way in which he intruded on this moment and made it something much better, he wrote the moment in a way. I had a friend who told me this story as I was telling her this story, she told me a story, this is an Israeli woman, she had gone to—her son had become a professor and so she went to buy him a shirt, a few shirts and ties, but this is in Israel, nobody really knows what a shirt and tie is, and the shopkeeper said, "You mind I ask, I know your husband and it's not his size, so who are you buying the shirts for?" **(laughter)** So she told him the story, and then immediately the five people in line at the cash register behind her saying, "You know, the tie doesn't go so well with the shirt," **(laughter)** and everybody was out together celebrating this professorship and finding the right shirt for him, and I thought, this is the writer's dream in a way, you were born into—as much as you are born into a nightmare in a way, as a political reality of your life in this country, but as a writer you are born into this enormous gift, and I felt when I was there an envy of that.

Because in America, I mean, we have in a way our sort of greatest definition is this notion of privacy, of the fence, you know, "this is your side and this my side," "this is my space and this is yours." And so what is left as a writer, particularly a writer as I am who—my grandparents are not American, my mother is not American, and in a way it's sort of an accident that I ended up here and grew up here. I feel that I couldn't possibly begin to have America as a subject. It's like having—it's like the universe, it's enormous, it's not sort of my own in a way, and I felt intimately that if I lived in Israel I would have a kind of this gift.

On the other hand, and as much as I feel that it must be a gift to be born into Hebrew, I can't escape the feeling that the knowledge that if I were an Israeli writer, exactly me, the same, the same age, the same sad "only three" books, **(laughter)** they would only exist in Hebrew. I mean, they wouldn't exist in other languages. I mean, I've had the strange fortune of having my books translated into other languages and meeting readers across the world, which has been one of the great—the most gratifying of experiences I've had really as a writer, the most surprising, but in Israel it is incredibly difficult to have your books translated as a young writer, as any writer, and I feel that to be born into English has been a great gift, a gift partly because I love the language. One loves one's mother tongue, naturally, but also because I feel somehow that it has allowed me a kind of chance to live as a writer that I might not otherwise have had, and at the same time, language aside, I feel that somehow this position I have of being on the outside, a position I feel in a very deep emotional way, but also in a kind of national way, I mean, you know, this position of always being not the one who belongs there, to be on the

outside, to be in a way a little bit homeless, I guess what one would call an exile in some way. I feel that that's somehow also a kind a gift as a writer to have that, partly because you can go anywhere in a way, and because you are never inside you see things, of course, that others don't see because you're looking—didn't you once say that you sometimes think of Kafka looking through the window? Suddenly that image came to me of a writer looking through a window, looking at life from the outside.

DAVID GROSSMAN: From the outside.

NICOLE KRAUSS: From the outside. All my lonely characters.

DAVID GROSSMAN: What you told about the tie I thought Israel is really it's not a state, it's a family, and the symbiosis between the people is so deep and the expectation of each other, the expectation that each one has regarding the other are so intense and committing and even limiting and yet it has—I mean, one becomes addict to it. You know, the space that you describe here is something that I don't know that we allow space to each other. People will come to me on the street and tell me what I have done wrong and how should I write, I mean, they give me pieces of advice, and they do it in a very warm and straightforward way and I accept it as such. In a way I like it.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Yes, no, and the passion is enormous and this sort of passion I think finds its way into the work.

DAVID GROSSMAN: But you said that you feel homeless, in a way, and it's interesting, because for me Israel that should be a home, and it was created as the homeland of the Jews, and one of my greatest sorrows is that it is not yet the home it should be and I—the home I wish it to be—and I do not feel that we are there, that we do not have this comfortability, or self-assuredness that one should feel in one's home. It's I feel, you know, even we don't have fixed borders to Israel. The borders all the time are receding and expanding and changing. And I feel it is like someone who lives in a house that the walls are moving all the time, and the ground is shaking under our feet, and it amazes me that you are here, you know, in the most stable place, in the place that has such solidity of existence as I wish for Israel all the time, and we do not have it, and still you feel homeless, which, of course, it's kind of an existential feeling, very personal and intimate, I can feel it sometimes in Israel as well, I mean, can feel very much a built-in outsider in Israel.

NICOLE KRAUSS: I—one of the things that I was haunted by in *To the End of the Land* was this feeling that Ora, as she was crossing this land, she was, of course, in a certain way rehearsing the loss of her son and trying to stay that loss by telling the story of his life, but she was also, of course, rehearsing the loss of the land and the loss of Israel, and this was to me kind of a shattering thing to face, and I remember from the very first time that this entered into any conversation I had with you was a few years ago, and now it's become a sort of quite accepted idea, but this notion of existenti—the topic is turned now in Israel, now it's a question of an existential sort of right to exist, and the possibility—for the first time it encompasses the possibility that it might not. The

question of—somehow this seems to me very Israeli, this rehearsal for loss, but also very Jewish at its core, this endless rehearsal that we've been doing now for two thousand years or more of what will happen when there is no longer this thing.

DAVID GROSSMAN: Yeah, this is a very permanent feeling I feel among Israelis and I think those of them who do not feel it, I think they put a lot of effort and energy to suppress it, because it is there, it is almost inevitable. It is still a country that hopes more than everything to survive, to survive, not to live for life, I always think of it that we are a people who throughout our history we survived in order to live our life and now we live to survive only. We do not really believe that we should be able to survive more than that, and whenever I think of Israel years away from now, I, you know, I'm reluctant, you know, am I able to? Am I allowed to do that? And of course there are very concrete reasons to it. There is not any other nation on earth that there is death penalty hanging over its head like us. The president of Iran, Ahmadinejad, declares openly he wants to eradicate us, so not all our fears are imaginary, and the Middle East is a very dangerous place for us to be. The Middle East never has accepted Israel. Never Arab countries really did accept the right and the legitimacy of Israel to exist, so the fears are real and true, and Ora at a certain point when she walks in the gallery with Avram and they stand on the top of Mount Meron, she tells him, "isn't it always like that with Israel that every encounter with it is also bidding farewell to it?" And this is something that I feel very strongly and I think for me the main motivation to fight for peace is this—that I deeply believe that only having peace will give us this feeling of stability, this solidity of existence, that we should not feel this doubleness, that Jews have felt throughout our history.

In that sense Israel has not yet succeeded in healing the deep wound of the Jewish soul, this tragic feeling of someone who never felt at home in the world. Israel was meant so that we shall feel at home in the world, and yet we are not there, and I always say to people with whom I argue, and it happens to me too often, you know, what is more important, to be the governor or the dominator of this town or this hill in the West Bank, or to be able to start to recover from this historic wound of really getting to this place in which we shall feel rooted in our land having fixed borders that would be recognized by everyone, in the solidity of existence, having future in front of us. This seems to me so much more important. It is not politics that I am talking about.

NICOLE KRAUSS: You told me to stay away from that.

DAVID GROSSMAN: It is something really that affects and infects every part of our life and it is in my book and in many other Israeli writers' books, it is there, this is the— I mean, you feel, how you say, a flickering of the heart when you talk about it.

NICOLE KRAUSS: I felt in this book this—always in your work there is this feeling of that do you have to make a choice as a writer and the choice you it seems to me you have often made in your work in the past is to explore the normal life, to give the opportunity—yourself the opportunity to explore the intimate and the ordinary life, and here in this novel, you didn't do that and yet you did both. You took the most ordinary life—extraordinary and ordinary life of a family and yet allowed us to see it in this

circumstance which you describe. I want to ask you about what you're working on now. I know a little something about it, but the question I wanted to ask was do you feel that the novel is too small for you, and I know that somehow what you're working on is more than a novel.

DAVID GROSSMAN: I wrote an opera for children a year ago, that was on our philharmonic orchestra for the year composed by Yoni Rechter. Yoni's one of our most talented composers, and I'm writing now something I can say very little about it. It is about the main fact of my life now, yes, the thing that happened to my family, and I feel that I cannot write about anything else, and I tried to write about other things, but somehow they feel irrelevant for me, and I think if I was destined to be in this place at least I will map it, at least I will try to document what does it mean to be there, because I haven't found in other books that I have read about this human situation I haven't found the answer to my very intimate private questions and I feel I need to put it into words, maybe it will make it more understandable or bearable for me, because when something like that happens to you, you get to know so much more about life, and so much is being revealed that I was not aware of before, once death is so present and so predominant, life suddenly gets another dimension, so to say, and I write something that is a combination of prose and a play and poetry. I find myself writing more and more the poetry, which really surprises me deeply, and I feel that probably the language of my grief is poetry, that is what I feel and maybe after this very thick novel I feel I need to take some distance from prose and I need something that for me is more refined and more delicate and this is the language of poetry but of course I am sure I will go back to writing prose, because

I'm a prose icon, yes, I love to write, usually I love to write prose, and I love all the playfulness of prose writing, and, you know, the different points of view and all that you know very well that I don't have to tell you. I mean, should I ask if you are writing something new, it's just fresh, you just gave birth to it, so do you have any idea of where you are going next?

NICOLE KRAUSS: I feel that I don't hold anything back in my work, I don't keep anything in reserve with the novels, and I really, especially with this one I feel I put everything I had into it and I don't have anything left right now, and it will take some time to sort of, to discover again what it is that needs to be written, and I've made the mistake before of trying to write too quickly, which can be, I think, sort of terrible, terribly frustrating and quite depressing, but I do know that it will be, and probably for a long time for me a novel, I feel like just now, now I've just written three, and now I'm just beginning to understand what can be done with such a thing. It's so expandable, it can become anything, really, this is something, and now we've come full circle, because it's something I began by saying about *See Under: Love*, but I do feel that now I'm discovering it for myself, that there really is, there's no definition for the form in a way, it's quite unique in art as a form. That it really—we can't say what it is, and each time we sit down to write it, I think it's up to us as novelists to define the form, to define it anew for ourselves, for that book, for the reader, and that's to me so thrilling and I feel I'll never tire of that thrill, I'll never run sort of dry or short of it, to think what's possible, what can it be now, so I think we're out of time.

DAVID GROSSMAN: That's a perfect ending.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Thank you.

(applause)