

# Nikolski

By Nicolas Dickner

Translated by Lazer Lederhendler

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Category: Fiction

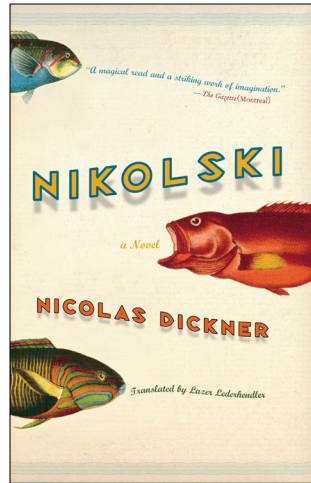
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## Description of *Nikolski*

Spring 1989. Three young people leave their far-flung birthplaces to follow their own songs of migration. Each ends up in Montreal, each on a voyage of self-discovery, dealing with the mishaps of heartbreak and the twisted branches of their shared family tree.

Filled with humor, charm, and good storytelling, this novel shows the surprising links between cartography, garbage-obsessed archaeologists, pirates past and present, a mysterious book with no cover, and a broken compass whose needle obstinately points to the Aleutian village of Nikolski (a minuscule village inhabited by thirty-six people, five thousand sheep, and an indeterminate number of dogs).

## Reviews of *Nikolski*

“Despite the preponderance of clues and artifacts scattered throughout the story, Dickner does not tie everything up in a neat package. He lets certain threads dangle, giving *Nikolski* more substance and nuance. The story lingers in the mind long after the last page has been read, leaving the reader in its strange and wonderful orbit.”—*The Gazette* (Montreal)

“*Nikolski* offers a breathtakingly original perception of the world, mixing geography, cartography, and longing in a language and construction both intellectually sophisticated and emotionally affecting.”—*The Globe and Mail* (Toronto)

“The characters are so infused with vitality and surprise that they become unforgettable; the language (and in translation—remarkable) is as lively as the characters; and the humorous, sweetly sad view of life in general is engaging. . . . This novel is so richly textured and multilayered that a single short review may do it a disservice. But its comic brilliance is undeniable—a hugely enjoyable read.”—*Edmonton Journal*

“Chock full of arcane detail about the sea, fish lore, antique books, travel, and archaeology, *Nikolski* is the product of an eccentric mind propelled by an exuberant spirit.”—Marianne Ackerman, *The Walrus Magazine*

“Lederhendler’s cadences and elegant vocabulary are a pleasure to read, while Dickner inexorably sweeps the reader along with the tide as the characters mature. This novel will bring a smile to your face and will be one you will want to read again.”—*Winnipeg Free Press*

“One cannot say it enough: this book is the discovery of the year. . . . The humor is striking; his vision stunning.”—Carole Beaulieu, *L'actualité*

“Nicolas Dickner has a limitless imagination, great erudition, and an inventive pen.”—Pierre Cayouette, *L'actualité*

“If you are interested in the great wide world, submerge yourself immediately in this phantasmagorical, lively, and fascinating novel.”—Hugues Corriveau, *Lettres québécoises*

“A carefully crafted, sumptuous first novel that will restore your taste for flights of fancy and for treasure hunts in time and space.”—Benoît Jutras, *Voir*

“Stylish, offbeat, poignant, and perceptive.”—David Mitchell, author of *Cloud Atlas*

“Dickner excites the imagination of the reader to the point of ecstasy.”—*Le Monde*

“Nicolas Dickner, who uses beautifully spare prose which can be as darkly comic as it is affecting, isn't trying to tell a conventional story, he's trying to tap into a very modern idea: that we need to understand that we all connect with each other somehow, family or not. And he does so impressively well.”—*Metro* (UK)

### **Book Awards**

Governor General's Literary Award (Translation)

Awards for the French-language Edition:

Prix des libraires du Québec

Prix littéraire des collégiens

Prix Anne-Hébert

Prix Printemps des lecteurs—Lavinal

### **Author Bio**

Born in Rivière-du-Loup in 1972, Nicolas Dickner grew up in Quebec and studied visual arts and literature in college. Afterward, he traveled extensively in Europe and Latin America before settling in Montreal, where he now resides. Dickner won two literary awards for his first published work, the 2002 short story collection *L'encyclopédie du petit cercle*, including the Prix Adrienne-Choquette for the best collection of short fiction of the year. Dickner's first novel, *Nikolski*, was originally published in Quebec by Éditions Alto in 2005, and then in 2007 by Éditions Denoël in France. It soon garnered rave reviews and prestigious awards, including the Prix des libraires du Québec, the Prix littéraire des collégiens, the Prix Anne-Hébert for best first book, and France's Prix Printemps des lecteurs—Lavinal. He is currently a literary columnist for *Voir* and is working on his next novel.

### **Translator Bio**

Lazer Lederhendler is a four-time finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award, and he won the award in 2008 for his translation of *Nikolski*. His translation of *The Immaculate Conception* by Gaétan Soucy was short-listed for the 2006 Scotiabank Giller Prize and won the French-to-English Translation Prize from the Quebec Writers' Federation in 2007. Lederhendler lives in Montreal, where he teaches English and film at the Collège international des Marcellines.

## Discussion Questions

1. *Nikolski* takes place over the course of a decade, 1989 to Christmas 1999, and the narrative often leaps over years at a time. What effect do these leaps in time have on your ability to relate to the characters, and on the novel as a whole? Why do you think Dickner has chosen this trajectory?
2. Why is Noah's narrative developed more fully than Joyce's or the unnamed narrator's? Discuss the interweaving technique Dickner uses to tell their stories.
3. Does Joyce change at all over the course of the novel? How so, or why not?
4. Discuss the relationships—or non-relationships—of Noah, Joyce, and the unnamed narrator with their parents and extended families.
5. In contrast to the three protagonists, who tend to be loners, Maelo exemplifies family and community support: finding jobs and rooms for all manner of newcomers, hosting jututo gatherings every Sunday, even setting Joyce up with his grandmother in the Dominican Republic. Why has Dickner given him this role in the novel?
6. Besides being Joyce's uncle, who left Tête-à-la-Baleine at age fourteen to roam the world, Jonas Doucet is the father of both Noah and the unnamed narrator. In what ways do memories of him pervade and guide the lives of our protagonists?
7. Discuss the notion of “trash archaeology” and what it says not only about the characters in *Nikolski*, but also about real life. Do you think it's possible to understand a person based on what he or she throws away or keeps? Is it possible to know a culture this way?
8. What makes the protagonists pick up, pare down, and take off so many times in *Nikolski*? What do these acts symbolize? Does this nomadic tendency reflect reality—a natural human need to move on—or just the urges bred into each of the characters as individuals?
9. Dickner goes to great lengths to juxtapose land and sea in this novel: there are nomads and pirates, wide prairies and wider oceans, and the sense that characters are more often lost or adrift than in control of their journeys. Discuss the ways Dickner evokes land and sea throughout the novel, and their respective pulls.
10. More than one critic has commented on the short chapter “Little Dipper,” during which we as readers see Joyce's abandoned room. No characters are present, but a story is told—as Dickner puts it, “the character was the room itself.” Discuss how such attention to the details of characters' lives, as opposed to the characters themselves, ties in with broader themes of the book.
11. Why does Joyce leave Montreal? What might she do next?
12. In the end, our unnamed narrator decides to escape the “gravitational pull of books” and get rid of his possessions. Discuss how holding on to the past, whether in memories or in property, is treated in the novel—is it a positive or negative compulsion?
13. Why don't we get to know Arizna better?
14. Both the house on Margarita Island and the Doucet house outside Tête-à-la-Baleine serve as repositories of history—yet also as refuges. Talk about the significance of these houses to Noah and Joyce. We never learn the fate of the Margarita Island house after the floods, but the Doucet house falls into the ocean. What could that signify?

15. Talk about the significance of ancestry in the novel. Why do the ghosts of Noah's Chipewyan forebearers hang around inside Sarah's trailer? Why does Joyce not care for her family in Tête-à-la-Baleine but she obsesses about the pirates on her mother's side? Why do a Bonneville station wagon called Grampa and an abandoned yacht named Granma appear?

16. Why doesn't Noah travel back to the prairies and track his mother down? Do you think he ever will?

17. What is the significance of Noah buying Simón every dinosaur book he can find in the bookshop, yet declining to buy back *The Book with No Face* (and just handing over the Caribbean map page instead)? And why does our unnamed narrator put the book back in the bin?