

Searching for Nikolski

Nicolas Dickner

Nikolski is the debut novel from the incredible storyteller Nicolas Dickner. Charting the lives of three interconnected characters, Dickner crosses continents and opens up new worlds in this fascinating novel.

Nicolas Dickner's debut, *Nikolski* is captivating, combining all the great facets of storytelling. Dickner has created an intricately woven plot, which focuses on the lives of Noah, Joyce and an unnamed narrator born thousands of miles apart, but whose lives are interlinked. The fragile bond between the three characters is an adventurer called, Jonas Doucet and his association with a tiny Alaskan village, called Nikolski.

Nikolski won four literary awards in Canada and is translated from French by Lazer Lederhendler for its UK publication. Dickner's first book was a collection of short stories, *L'encyclopédie du petit cercle*. He was born in Rivière-du-Loop, Quebec in 1972. He began writing in maths classes in high school. He recounts: "I wasn't very talented at algebra — although I dreamed for a long time of having a career in science. Eventually, it seemed more natural for me to have scientific fantasies rather than an actual scientific career." Dickner travelled widely throughout Europe and Latin America, before moving to Montreal. "I dreamt for a long time of being a great traveller, but I'm really not the globetrotter type. I managed to live abroad for long periods, which gave me a crucial distance from my own culture, but I'm more a dweller than a traveller. I'm the stay-at-home type of guy, a characteristic quite common among fiction writers."

Nikolski is a magnificent example of the fine art of crafting a narrative. Over the course of a 10 year period, from 1989 to 1999, Noah, Joyce and the unnamed narrator's lives collide in the most unexpected of ways. The three stories grow organically. Noah leaves his mother and their itinerant existence living on the road to go and study archaeology at university in Montreal, where he becomes intrigued by his Inuit ancestry and the archaeology of garbage. Joyce runs away from an overbearing family and ends up in Montreal. She is in search of her roots after being told numerous stories of her pirate ancestry by her grandfather. Joyce's decision to leave is accelerated by the discovery of a newspaper report on a potential relation, Leslie Lynn Doucet, who is captured by the FBI for her crimes as a modern day pirate, who steals credit card numbers and commits acts of fraud. The unnamed narrator works in a second-hand bookshop in Montreal and links the three lives and assorted stories together. "*Nikolski* started as a family story. Québec is such a small place. It sometimes feels like a big family. You're always a few handshakes away from someone you know. Whenever I meet

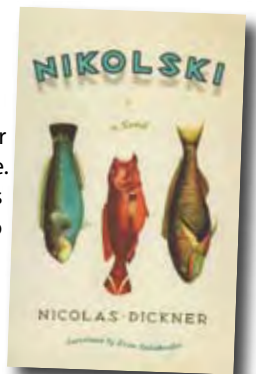
new people, I end up asking them about their family names, trying to fit them into the picture. I think it's a very Québécois characteristic, this genealogical way to organise our society. So using a fictional family as a metaphor of North America was an obvious thing to me."

The stories Dickner tells in *Nikolski* function as an exposition of the characters' lives. The elaborate links between the three are a series of narrative threads ranging from Pirates (past and present), the Nikolski compass and a Three-Headed book. "My stories always start with disorder, too many ideas — the same kind of disorganised wandering as surfing the Internet. Then, I slowly find a spine around which I can build something. It feels like the story grows by itself. It is a fascinating, but tedious process. I wrote around eight versions of *Nikolski*, and I published it mainly to avoid writing a ninth."

Dickner explores the vibrant city of Montreal where Noah and Joyce settle for a period of time. Dickner's evocative descriptions of Montreal's landscape conjure up a city rich in culture and with a lively immigrant population. All three characters share a common factor — they have all shed the parental sphere of influence, whether through choice, in the case of Noah who leaves his mother to study, or circumstance for the unnamed narrator whose mother has died. Then there is Joyce, who works by day in the Poissonneire Shannon, a fish market, and in the evenings hunts through the business district of Montreal for discarded computers. The personal events of all three characters are punctuated by the historic events of the 10 year period.

Dickner tells a trio of extremely personal stories, which relate to globalisation and the dispersal of family groups through migration, alongside significant global events. "It's a fascinating period, from a Western perspective. Although many things happened during that time, we often think of it as wavering time, a period stuck between the fall of the USSR and the second Gulf War. A bit like the Sargasso Sea or, less poetically, the Great Pacific Plastic Trash Vortex. It felt like a perfect period to stage three characters going through their 20s. An age that is, at least in North America, a kind of a Sargasso Sea, a moment when you haven't decided what you want to do with your life yet."

The historical events that Dickner includes attach *Nikolski* to a specific period in recent history — one that saw many advances, including the





© Antoine Tanguay.

“My stories always start with disorder, too many ideas — the same kind of disorganised wandering as surfing the Internet. Then, I slowly find a spine around which I can build something. It feels like the story grows by itself.”

advent of the Internet and the democratisation of communication for the people who can access it, but also the tragedy of numerous acts of war and destruction, including the first Gulf War. These global events flash into the characters’ lives through mass media, such as the news report on the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina, providing *Nikolski* with a worldwide appeal. “Choosing the historical events was a little tricky. They’re not just time beacons, they give a historical rhythm to the story. You have to synchronize everything, but of course you can’t rewrite historical events. It was quite challenging to develop the storyline while worrying about chronology and accuracy of external events. Many writers like to feel absolutely free, but I prefer a good constraint.”

Throughout the 10 year period that Dickner examines, Noah, Joyce and

the unnamed narrator seem to be searching to find a centre point, which anchors them in the world. Dickner has triumphed in connecting global and personal concerns in *Nikolski*, a multi-layered book, which superbly blends

fact and fiction, analyses the function of archaeology and contemplates the way our civilisation will be viewed by future generations.

Dickner plans to continue writing and is currently working on his next book, which he describes “as a novel about the end of the world. I started working from a simple question: How can a whole society living with the constant idea of the end of the world cope with the end of the world *not* happening?”

Nikolski is available now from all good bookshops published by Portobello Books. For further information on Nicolas Dickner please visit: www.nicolasdickner.net.

Shona Fairweather