

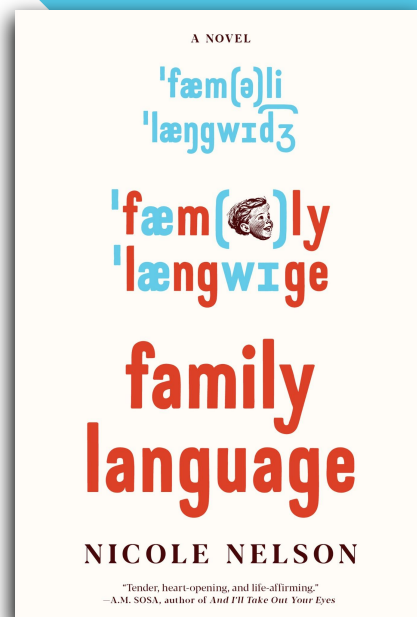
Family Language

A Novel

Nicole Nelson

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“In this post-Roe era, it’s a joy to meet a narrator who is unapologetically feminist! Mona’s story is about ordinary words that have extraordinary complexity and consequences. How does language narrow—or open up—the actual possibilities in our lives? Nicole Nelson writes with compassion and humor about gender, ambition, academia, and the politics of care.” — **Leni Zumas**, author of *Red Clocks*

“Amidst tragic loss and injustice, *Family Language* affirms the power, the reparative work of showing up for one another. It asserts, language can heal, alchemize, and hold us. Nelson has created a salve, order among chaos. Tender, heart opening, and life affirming.” — **A.M. Sosa**, author of *And I’ll Take Out Your Eyes*

INTRODUCTION

In this striking debut, an ambitious academic faces new and unwanted choices when she is confronted with overnight motherhood ...

Dr. Mona Melamed is a happily married, purposefully childfree linguist at a top Southern California university. Her days are spent researching and stressing about finally, finally securing tenure. That is, until her brother-in-law and his wife die, leaving their six-year-old son orphaned.

Everyone in Mona’s orbit expects her to take the lead in caring for the child, including—to some extent—Mona herself. Motherhood is not something she wanted—it is still not something she wants. And yet, she finds herself negotiating a temporary leave to start looking after the boy. Along the way, as the gender expectations thrust upon Mona intensify, her tenure becomes threatened.

Family Language confronts that age old question—Can women really have it all—and uncovers the misogyny behind it. As Mona tries to balance her new responsibilities as a mother, she has to ask herself how hard is she willing to fight for the career she’s earned, and is it fair that she even has to?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The chapters of the novel are interspersed with brief “research notebook” sections. How did these chapters contribute to the overall story? Did you have a favorite fact or example?
2. In what ways did her move with Tommy from the city to the suburban beach town impact Mona’s situation of overnight parenthood?
3. How do you think Mona sees herself? How do the other characters see her? Did your feelings about her change as the story evolved?

FAMILY LANGUAGE

4. Mona and Darya repair their friendship after it had gone cold following the birth of Darya's child. Do you think they would have reestablished a friendship if Miles had never come into Mona's care? Have you ever experienced a second round of friendship with someone following a major disappointment or disagreement?
5. In addition to Darya, Mona's new situation with Miles also offers an opportunity for her to revisit her relationship with her mother. Do you think that Mona treats her mother fairly? Do you believe their relationship will continue to grow? What gives you that impression?
6. During a lecture, Mona muses on the different expectations infused in the phrase "to mother" versus "to father" and "to parent." Did the differences highlighted there resonate? If so, how?
7. Parenting aside, gender and power play a role in the story generally. Could you relate to/recognize the ways in which Mona encounters misogyny (e.g. in her medical journey, the disrespect from a male student, or in the way she is treated by the visiting professor)? What was one example?
8. Mona's research focuses on beginnings and endings in words. This work leads her to reflect more broadly on transitions. Can you relate to her hesitancy to embrace change? If so, in what way?
9. Why do you think the author ended with a "research notebook" section, rather than Mona going into surgery? Do you agree with that choice?
10. When Miles eventually grows up and leaves home, do you think Mona will feel good about the choice she made to care for Miles? How do you think she will feel about him leaving their home?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicole Nelson earned her MFA from Bennington Writing Seminars. Her work has appeared in *The Masters Review Blog*, *Literary Mama*, *Fiction Writers Review*, and elsewhere. For several years, she was a co-host of the podcast "Writers on Writing." She also holds a PhD in linguistics from Rutgers.

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