

PRAISE FOR *I LOVE DICK*

“*I Love Dick* is one of the most important books about being a woman ... Friends speak of Kraus’s work in the same breathless and conspiratorial way they discuss Elena Ferrante’s novels of female friendship set in Naples. The clandestine clubbishness that envelopes women who’ve read and immersed themselves in the texts shows how little female desire, anger and vulnerability is accurately and confidently explored in literature and culture ... the book reveals far deeper truths than standard and uncomplicated love plots tend to”

—Dawn Foster, *Independent*

“I know there was a time before I read Chris Kraus’s *I Love Dick* (in fact, that time was only five years ago), but it’s hard to imagine; some works of art do this to you. They tear down so many assumptions about what the form can handle (in this case, what the form of the novel can handle) that there is no way to re-create your mind before your encounter with them”

—Sheila Heti

“For years before I read it, I kept hearing about Chris Kraus’s *I Love Dick*. I mainly heard about it from smart women who liked to talk about their feelings ... I didn’t understand exactly what it was, but it had an allure, like whispers about a dance club that only opened under the full moon, or an underground bar you needed a password to get into ... then I read it. I was nearly two decades late to the party—*I Love Dick* came out in 1997—but I loved the party anyway. I was finally part of it, and it made me feel even more part of it—part of something ... I was holding white-hot text in my hands”

—Leslie Jamison, *New Yorker*

“*I Love Dick* is written in a clear prose capable of theoretical clarity, descriptive delicacy, articulate rage and melancholic longing”

—*The White Review*

“*I Love Dick* is a classic. Here pain is the aphrodisiac and distance is the muse. Unrequited love is transformed into a fascinating book of ideas”

—Zoe Pilger

“This book comes with a reputation, though it’s not the one you might expect from the title, which leaps from the gorgeous, faux-innocent cover. Chris Kraus’s ‘novel’ was first published in the US in 1997 and has become recognised as both an influential feminist text and a key intervention in the debate over where life-writing ends and fiction begins ... What remains so brilliant about the book is the real, useful thought that Kraus builds out of her romantic fantasy ... You can call it a novel, then, but it’s as a philosophical and cultural critique that *I Love Dick* bites hardest”

—Jonathan Gibbs, *Independent*

“This is the most important book written about men and women written in the last century... why is this revolutionary 18-year-old book finding its biggest audience only now? The answer lies in its own pages, when Kraus writes that ‘who gets to speak, and why, is the only question’. In the last half a decade, women have been permitted to speak in a different way than before; women artists who use details of their own lives in their work are not as easily dismissed as they once were. The internet enables hordes of frightened, anonymous men to try to silence women via harassment and shaming, but it has also enabled our voices to be heard on a grander scale, with fewer intermediaries, than ever before. We are able to write our own letters to Dick now, and to publish them widely: to tell Dick exactly what we think of him, whether he likes it or not. This book will only become more relevant. Its time is now—and now, and now, for the rest of eternity”

—Emily Gould, *Guardian*

“Read this on the bus—we dare you”

—*Sunday Times Style*

“One of the most important feminist novels of the past two decades”

—Eva Wiseman, *Observer Magazine*

“The intelligence and honesty and total originality of Chris Kraus make her work not just great but indispensable—especially now, when everything is so confusing, so full of despair. I read everything Chris Kraus writes; she softens despair with her brightness, and with incredible humor, too”

—Rachel Kushner

“A joyful riposte to all those stories in which clever women fall victim to the pressures of convention—from *The Yellow Wallpaper* to *The Bell Jar* and beyond—and also to the countless books by men in which women are crushed by romantic encounters: from *Madame Bovary* to *Anna Karenina* to Laclos’s epistolary *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* and André Breton’s autofiction, *Nadja* ... What makes now the right moment to publish Kraus’s debut novel for the first time in the UK, after 18 years? There is a hint of retrospective gratitude: without Kraus, we might not have had the philosophers in high heels of Zoe Pilger’s *Eat My Heart Out*, or Susana Medina’s *Philosophical Toys*. Without her challenge to what she called ‘the “serious” contemporary hetero-male novel ... a thinly veiled Story of Me’, Sheila Heti might never have asked *How Should a Person Be?* and Ben Lerner might never have written *Leaving the Atocha Station*. A whole generation of writers owes her ... You can get high on the book’s passion, its humour, on the creation of a still-fresh style that not only says new things about female experience, but is able simultaneously to comment, tongue-in-cheek, on how this experience has been written, filmed and made into art. Kraus writes with an elegance that includes enough rough edges to make *I Love Dick* a game for real”

—Joanna Walsh, *Guardian*

“A literary must-have accessory, a relentlessly clever-clever book that fits neatly into the radical space recently opened up by semi-autobiographical novelists such as Nell Zink and Elena Ferrante ... It has some hugely arresting things to say about women’s relationships with creative self-determination”

—Claire Allfree, *Metro*

“The skill of the book allows the reader to enter into the fantasy (the one sex scene is torturous, but hot) while knowing it’s destructive and one-sided. Chris recognises how vulnerable—ridiculous even—infatuation has made her. But she glories in the surrender ... This is a brilliant, experimental rollercoaster of a book ... there’s something radical about a woman who pushes herself to the edge, finally to recover”

—Liz Hoggard, *Observer*

“Genre-defying and dare I say it seminal ... It has possibly even more to tell us now than it did on first publication—or perhaps we’re just more ready to hear it ... *I Love Dick* is one of the most important books about the limited ways in which women are permitted to speak”

—Lauren Elkin, *TLS*

ALSO BY CHRIS KRAUS

Aliens & Anorexia

Torpor

Summer of Hate

Video Green: Los Angeles Art and the Triumph of Nothingness

Where Art Belongs

I

LOVE

DICK

CHRIS KRAUS



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PART I: SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE

SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE

December 3, 1994

Chris Kraus, a 39-year-old experimental filmmaker and Sylvère Lotringer, a 56-year-old college professor from New York, have dinner with Dick _____, a friendly acquaintance of Sylvère's, at a sushi bar in Pasadena. Dick is an English cultural critic who's recently relocated from Melbourne to Los Angeles. Chris and Sylvère have spent Sylvère's sabbatical at a cabin in Crestline, a small town in the San Bernardino Mountains some 90 minutes from Los Angeles. Since Sylvère begins teaching again in January, they will soon be returning to New York. Over dinner the two men discuss recent trends in postmodern critical theory and Chris, who is no intellectual, notices Dick making continual eye contact with her. Dick's attention makes her feel powerful, and when the check comes she takes out her Diners Club card. "Please," she says. "Let me pay." The radio predicts snow on the San Bernardino highway. Dick generously invites them both to spend the night at his home in the Antelope Valley desert, some 30 miles away.

Chris wants to separate herself from her coupleness, so she sells Sylvère on the thrill of riding in Dick's magnificent vintage Thunderbird convertible. Sylvère, who doesn't know a T-bird from a hummingbird and doesn't care, agrees, bemused. Done. Dick gives

her copious, concerned directions. “Don’t worry,” she interrupts, flashing hair and smiles, “I’ll tail you.” And she does. Slightly buzzed and keeping the accelerator of her pickup truck steady, she’s reminded of a performance she did called *Car Chase* at the St. Mark’s Poetry Project in New York when she was 23. She and her friend Liza Martin had tailed the steelily good-looking driver of a Porsche all the way through Connecticut on Highway 95. Finally he’d pulled over to a rest stop, but when Liza and Chris got out he drove off. The performance ended with Liza accidentally-but-really stabbing Chris’ hand onstage with a kitchen knife. Blood flowed, and everyone found Liza dazzlingly sexy and dangerous and beautiful. Liza, belly popping out of a fuzzy midriff top, fish-net legs tearing up against her green vinyl miniskirt as she rocked back to show her crotch, looked like the cheapest kind of whore. A star is born. No one at the show that night had found Chris’ pale anemic looks and piercing gaze remotely endearing. Could anyone? It was a question that’d temporarily been shelved. But now it was a whole new world. The request line on 92.3 The Beat was thumping, Post-Riot Los Angeles, a city strung on fiber optic nerves. Dick’s Thunderbird was always somewhere in her line of sight, the two vehicles strung invisibly together across the concrete riverbed of highway, like John Donne’s eyeballs. And this time Chris was alone.

Back at Dick’s, the night unfolds like the boozy Christmas Eve in Eric Rohmer’s film *My Night At Maud’s*. Chris notices that Dick is flirting with her, his vast intelligence straining beyond the po-mo rhetoric and words to evince some essential loneliness that only she and he can share. Chris giddily responds. At 2 a.m., Dick plays them a video of himself dressed as Johnny Cash commissioned by English public television. He’s talking about earthquakes and

upheaval and his restless longing for a place called home. Chris' response to Dick's video, though she does not articulate it at the time, is complex. As an artist she finds Dick's work hopelessly naive, yet she is a lover of certain kinds of bad art, art which offers a transparency into the hopes and desires of the person who made it. Bad art makes the viewer much more active. (Years later Chris would realize that her fondness for bad art is exactly like Jane Eyre's attraction to Rochester, a mean horse-faced junky: bad characters invite invention.) But Chris keeps these thoughts to herself. Because she does not express herself in theoretical language, no one expects too much from her and she is used to tripping out on layers of complexity in total silence. Chris' unarticulated double-flip on Dick's video draws her even closer to him. She dreams about him all night long. But when Chris and Sylvère wake up on the sofa the next morning, Dick is gone.

December 4, 1994: 10 a.m.

Sylvère and Chris leave Dick's house, reluctantly, alone that morning. Chris rises to the challenge of extemporizing the Thank You Note, which must be left behind. She and Sylvère have breakfast at the Antelope IHOP. Because they are no longer having sex, the two maintain their intimacy via deconstruction: i.e., they tell each other everything. Chris tells Sylvère how she believes that she and Dick have just experienced a Conceptual Fuck. His disappearance in the morning clinches it, and invests it with a subcultural subtext she and Dick both share: she's reminded of all the fuzzy one-time fucks she's had with men who're out the door before her eyes are open. She recites a poem by Barbara Barg on this subject to Sylvère:

*What do you do with a Kerouac
But go back and back to the sack
with Jack
How do you know when Jack
has come?
You look on your pillow and
Jack is gone...*

And then there was the message on Dick's answerphone. When they came into the house, Dick took his coat off, poured them drinks and hit the Play button. The voice of a very young, very Californian woman came on:

Hi Dick, this's Kyla. Dick, I—I'm sorry to keep calling you at home, and now I've got your answering machine and, and I just wanted to say I'm sorry how things didn't work out the other night, and—I know it's not your fault, but I guess all I really wanted was just to thank you for being such a nice person...

"Now I'm totally embarrassed," Dick mumbled charmingly, opening the vodka. Dick is 46 years old. Does this message mean he's lost? And, if Dick *is* lost, could he be saved by entering a conceptual romance with Chris? Was the conceptual fuck merely the first step? For the next few hours, Sylvère and Chris discuss this.

December 4, 1994: 8 p.m.

Back in Crestline, Chris can't stop thinking about last night with Dick. So she starts to write a story about it, called *Abstract Romanticism*. It's the first story she's written in five years.

“It started in the restaurant,” she begins. “It was the beginning of the evening and we were all laughing a bit too much.”

She addresses this story, intermittently, to David Rattray because she’s convinced that David’s ghost had been with her last night for the car ride, pushing her pickup truck further all the way up Highway 5. Chris, David’s ghost and the truck had merged into a single unit moving forward.

“Last night I felt,” she wrote to David’s ghost, “like I do at times when things seem to open onto new vistas of excitement—that you were here: floating dense beside me, set someplace between my left ear and my shoulder, compressed like thought.”

She thought about David all the time. It was uncanny how Dick had said somewhere in last night’s boozy conversation, as if he’d read her mind, how much he admired David’s book. David Rattray had been a reckless adventurer and a genius and a moralist, indulging in the most improbable infatuations nearly until the moment of his death at age 57. And now Chris felt David’s ghost pushing her to understand infatuation, how the loved person can become a holding pattern for all the tattered ends of memory, experience and thought you’ve ever had. So she started to describe Dick’s face, “pale and mobile, good bones, reddish hair and deepset eyes.” Writing, Chris held his face in her mind, and then the telephone rang and it was Dick.

Chris was so embarrassed. She wondered if the call was really for Sylvère, but Dick didn’t ask for him, so she stayed on the scratchy line. Dick was phoning to explain his disappearance the night before. He’d gotten up early and drove out to Pear Blossom to pick up some eggs and bacon. “I’m a bit of an insomniac, you know.” When he’d gotten home to Antelope Valley he was genuinely surprised to find them gone.

At this moment, Chris could've told Dick her own far-fetched interpretation: had she, this story would've taken another turn. But there was so much static on the line, and already she was afraid of him. She feverishly considered proposing another meeting, but she didn't, and then Dick got off the phone. Chris stood in her makeshift office, sweating. Then she ran upstairs to find Sylvère.

December 5, 1994

Alone in Crestline, Sylvère and Chris spent most of last night (Sunday) and this morning (Monday) talking about Dick's 3 minute call. Why does Sylvère entertain this? It could be that for the first time since last summer, Chris seems animated and alive, and since he loves her, Sylvère can't bear to see her sad. It could be he's reached an impasse with the book he's writing on modernism and the holocaust, and dreads returning next month to his teaching job. It could be that he's perverse.

December 6–8, 1994

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday of this week pass unrecorded, blurred. If memory serves, Tuesday that term was the day that Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer spent in Pasadena, teaching at Art Center College of Design. Shall we attempt a reconstruction? They get up at 8, drive down the hill from Crestline, grab coffee in San Bernardino, hop on the 215 to the 10 and drive for 90 minutes, hitting LA just after traffic. It's likely they talked about Dick for most of the ride. However, since they planned to move out of Crestline in just 10 days, on December 14 (Sylvère to Paris

for the holidays, Chris to New York), they must've also briefly talked logistics. A Restless Longing...driving through Fontana and Pomona, through a landscape that meant nothing, with an inconclusive future looming. While Sylvère lectured on poststructuralism, Chris drove out to Hollywood to pick up some publicity photos for her film and shopped for cheese at Trader Joe's. Then they drove back out to Crestline, winding up the mountain through darkness and thick fog.

Wednesday and Thursday disappear. It's obvious that Chris' new film isn't going to go very far. What will she do next? Her first experience in art had been as a participant in some druggy psychodramas of the '70s. The idea that Dick may've proposed a kind of game between them is incredibly exciting. She explains it over and over to Sylvère. She begs Sylvère to phone him, fish around for some sign that Dick's aware of her. And if there is, she'll call.

Friday, December 9, 1994

Sylvère, a European intellectual who teaches Proust, is skilled in the analysis of love's minutiae. But how long can anyone continue analyzing a single evening and a 3-minute call? Already, Sylvère's left two unanswered messages on Dick's answerphone. And Chris has turned into a jumpy bundle of emotions, sexually aroused for the first time in seven years. So on Friday morning, Sylvère finally suggests that Chris write Dick a letter. Since she's embarrassed she asks him if he wants to write one too. Sylvère agrees.

Do married couples usually collaborate on *billets doux*? If Sylvère and Chris were not so militantly opposed to psychoanalysis, they might've seen this as a turning point.

EXHIBIT A: CHRIS AND SYLVÈRE'S FIRST LETTERS

Crestline, California

December 9, 1994

Dear Dick,

It must be the desert wind that went to our heads that night or maybe the desire to fictionalize life a little bit. I don't know. We've met a few times and I've felt a lot of sympathy towards you and a desire to be closer. Though we come from different places, we've both tried breaking up with our pasts. You're a cowboy; for ten years, I was a nomad in New York.

So let's go back to the evening at your house: the glorious ride in your Thunderbird from Pasadena to the End of the World, I mean the Antelope Valley. It's a meeting we postponed almost a year. And truer than I imagined. But how did I get into that?

I want to talk about that evening at your house. I had a feeling that somehow I knew you and we could just be what we are together. But now I'm sounding like the bimbo whose voice we heard, unwittingly, that night on your answerphone...

Sylvère

Crestline, California

December 9, 1994

Dear Dick,

Since Sylvère wrote the first letter, I'm thrown into this weird position. Reactive—like Charlotte Stant to Sylvère's Maggie Verver,

if we were living in the Henry James novel *The Golden Bowl*—the Dumb Cunt, a factory of emotions evoked by all the men. So the only thing that I can do is tell The Dumb Cunt's Tale. But how?

Sylvère thinks it's nothing more than a perverse longing for rejection, the love I feel for you. But I disagree, at bottom I'm a very romantic girl. What touched me were all the windows of vulnerability in your house...so Spartan and self-conscious. The propped up *Some Girls* album cover, the dusky walls—how out of date and déclassé. But I'm a sucker for despair, for faltering—that moment when the act breaks down, ambition fails. I love it and feel guilty for perceiving it and then the warmest indescribable affection floods in to drown the guilt. For years I adored Shake Murphy in New Zealand for these reasons, a hopeless case. But you're not exactly hopeless: you have a reputation, self-awareness and a job, and so it occurred to me that there might be something to be learned by both of us from playing out this romance in a mutually self-conscious way. Abstract romanticism?

It's weird, I never really wondered whether I'm 'your type.' ('Cause in the past, Empirical Romance, since I'm not pretty or maternal, I never *am* the type for Cowboy Guys.) But maybe action's all that really matters now. What people do together overshadows Who They Are. If I can't make you fall in love with me for who I am, maybe I can interest you with what I understand. So instead of wondering 'Would he like me?', I wonder 'Is he game?'

When you called on Sunday night, I was writing a description of your face. I couldn't talk, and hung up on the bottom end of the romantic equation with beating heart and sweaty palms. It's incredible to feel this way. For 10 years my life's been organized around avoiding this painful elemental state. I wish that I could dabble like you do around romantic myths. But I can't, because I

always lose and already in the course of this three-day totally fictitious romance, I've started getting sick. And I wonder if there'll ever be a possibility of reconciling youth and age, or the anorexic open wound I used to be with the money-hustling hag that I've become. We suicide ourselves for our own survival. Is there any hope of dipping back into the past and circling round it like you can in art?

Sylvère, who's typing this, says this letter lacks a point. What *reaction* am I looking for? He thinks this letter is too literary, too Baudrillardian. He says I'm squashing out all the trembly little things he found so touching. It's not the Dumb Cunt Exegesis he expected. But Dick, I know that as you read this, you'll know these things are true. You understand the game is *real*, or even better than, reality, and better than is what it's all about. What sex is better than drugs, what art is better than sex? *Better than* means stepping out into complete intensity. Being in love with you, being ready to take this ride, made me feel 16, hunched up in a leather jacket in a corner with my friends. A timeless fucking image. It's about not giving a fuck, or seeing all the consequences looming and doing something anyway. And I think you—I—keep looking for that and it's thrilling when you find it in other people.

Sylvère thinks he's that kind of anarchist. But he's not. I love you Dick.

Chris

But after finishing these, Chris and Sylvère both felt they could do better. That there were things still left to say. So they began a second round, spending most of Friday sitting on their living room floor in Crestline passing the laptop back and forth. And they each wrote a second letter, Sylvère about jealousy, Chris about the Ramones and