

I LOVE DICK

Chris Kraus



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In *I Love Dick*, Chris Kraus, author of *Aliens & Anorexia*, *Torpor*, and *Video Green*, boldly tears away the veil that separates fiction from reality and privacy from self-expression. It's no wonder that upon its publication in 1997, *I Love Dick* instantly elicited violent controversies and attracted a host of passionate admirers. The story is gripping enough: in 1994 a married failed independent filmmaker who is about to turn forty falls in love with a well-known art and culture theorist named Dick and endeavors to seduce him with the help of her husband, a defiantly unconventional French academic with whom she hasn't had sex in a very long time.

But when the theorist refuses to answer her letters, husband and wife continue the correspondence for each other instead, imagining the fling the wife wishes to have with Dick. What follows is a breathless pursuit that takes the woman across America and away from her husband and far beyond her original infatuation into a discovery of the transformative power of first-person narrative.

I Love Dick is a manifesto for a new kind of feminist who isn't afraid to burn through her own narcissism in order to assume responsibility for herself and for the injustice in the world, and it's a book you won't put down until the author's final, heroic acts of self-revelation and transformation.

I Love Dick Details

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From Reader Review I Love Dick for online ebook

Adam Dalva says

Often spectacular and VERY complex book - I think the (absolutely essential) afterward hits it on the head: the preoccupation with whether or not this is memoir or fiction, epistolary or invented, (a preoccupation, I'll add, that I was a victim of myself) masks the real achievement here, which is a structural masterclass in time management and a brutal look at love. The 3 characters, Chris, Sylvère, and Dick himself, never behave in "expected" ways and yet always move with authenticity and a strange sort of grace. I love, love, loved big chunks of this book. Oh, and the ending, a couple of quick paragraphs, is one of the best I've read.

Before I get into my criticism, I'll also say this: The interpretation and writing about this book has been colored by a misogyny that the book itself anticipates: I'm not sure why male writers are "allowed" to be sprawling, messy, and sexual without being "debased," but all this talk of the novel being bold and honest seems to reduce the accomplishments of the line level prose (delicious turns of phrase), the research (a section on Hannah Wilke, in particular, and also the writing on schizophrenia), and the genre-bending intelligence. I WANTED to give this 5-stars.

But! I don't know. There are issues - I think the focus on cultural criticism hurts it - there are LONG meanders that I had to fight my way through because I was hungry for the plot. The section in Latin America seems to be a floating separate essay that was re-purposed (and the character of Chris is annoyingly effaced for way too long, though she's there.) It repeats itself way too often (I believe this is a problem of assemblage, but it can't be ignored). And the intertextuality occasionally feels arbitrary or imposed. I had a very similar issue with NYRB's recent LETTERS FROM MONTMARTE, which I couldn't get through. Explaining what characters value culturally isn't the same as experiencing culture.

So, 4.2 stars, or so. And a more important lesson than quite a few of the books I've loved more than this.

Also - you'll never get more stares on the subway than when you read this. It must be how 50 Shades of Grey aficionados feel. It must be why people buy Kindles

Madeline says

I had to stop reading this. It feels like I've been tricked into participating in a cruel piece of performance art. The titular Dick is real life Dick Hebdige. He's a cultural critic who hangs out with Chris Kraus and her husband Sylvère one time. Chris and Sylvère then begin to sexually harass and stalk Dick. They write letters about fucking and killing him. They call Dick on the pretext of discussing their "art protect" (aka their sexual fantasies) and record the phone call without his knowledge. They send a sexually inappropriate fax to his work. Dick isn't a willing muse. He finds the whole thing disturbing, which is why I had to stop. By continuing to read, I would have made myself a party to Dick's harassment and I just couldn't do that.

That's not to say there isn't any artistic merit to the book. Chris Kraus is an artist and seasoned intellectual. The book is smart. It's like Gauguin in that the act of sexual violence is itself made into art. However, I read for fun and there are plenty of other books out there.

Blair says

It's difficult to say what *I Love Dick* actually is. It's not strictly a novel, but nor is it exactly right to describe it as non-fiction. Rather, it's a sort of semi-fictionalised memoir that takes in critical theory, feminist critique, art history, etc. In her afterword, Joan Hawkins dubs it 'theoretical fiction'. At its heart is the story of the infatuation Chris Kraus the character (not necessarily to be confused with Chris Kraus the author) has with Dick, an acquaintance of her husband Sylvère, whom the couple have dinner with at the very beginning of the book. It's made up of letters Chris and Sylvère write to Dick - some are actually sent to him, but most aren't - and everything that results from the infatuation and the expression of it through these letters: proposals for art projects (of which this book is arguably the final incarnation), a continuous system of critique, Chris's 'lonely girl phenomenology', a deconstruction of the idea of a love triangle.

There's a lot I could say about this, but I don't feel qualified to. I hope one day someone else will write the review of it I'd like to see (the closest thing I've found so far is this LRB piece by Jenny Turner). *I Love Dick* is thought-provoking, certainly, but also infuriating, narcissistic and soaked in the author's/characters' privilege. In particular, I felt aggravated by Chris's attempts to assume a kind of starving artist identity while frequently referencing the swathe of properties she owns (with Sylvère), and then there's the namedropping... oh god, the namedropping. With the current climate of online feminism being what it is, I'm really surprised I haven't seen wider critique of this - especially from intersectional perspectives - along with the recent resurgence in the book's popularity.

I Love Dick is not 'unreadable', as its harshest critics call it; that's the least of its problems, and it is, in fact, very much what most people would consider readable, with strong momentum and enough of a conventional plot - the continued question of whether there is or isn't, will or won't be a relationship between Chris and Dick, and how he will respond to Chris and Sylvère's obsessive project - to keep even casual readers invested in its outcome. I can even see why the ending might be deemed shocking (if you related to and/or empathised with Chris), but I greeted it with a shrug rather than taking it like a punch to the gut. I never felt I was reading/experiencing this story and its philosophical revelations as a 'fellow woman' but rather as an outsider to a story that belongs to a wealthy American artist. But I was, admittedly, reading it from a personal perspective and not in any kind of critical or theoretical context.

Jimmy says

I've never read a novel like this before. A blending of the epistolary novel, feminist manifesto, art criticism, tell-all reality-memoir, critical theory, personal essay, and diary. Somehow it all works together, and I would even say that it is a Great Novel.

The first part, which establishes the narrative impetus (Chris, the author, falls in love/crush with an acquaintance (Dick) and, together with her husband, writes love letters to him but doesn't send them).

The conceit can only go so far (although conceit is the wrong word here, since I think this is pretty much non-fiction, or maybe slightly edited non-fiction), so after the first part, the rest of the "novel" is a slowly evolving amalgamation. The obsession for Dick continues and changes. Her relationship with her husband changes. Her life and relation to her art changes. Her view of feminism changes. She begins to see everything through the lens of Dick. Dick-lens.

It's really hard to describe, but it's super smart, very funny, and sad all at the same time. By the end, the letters get long, and ramble about all types of subjects, but they're written so well that it doesn't matter if it's about an obscure painter or performance artist, it somehow still fits into the book's unique structure. I still flipped the pages maddeningly because I started interpreting everything through the Dick-lens, through what she is discovering about her current situation. It's amazing that she was able to bring these different intellectual subjects so much into the sphere of the personal... where it actually feels like it matters.

Bonus: makes for great reading in the men's locker room.

Mimi says

A friend who is a sociology teacher asked me to read this book and give her feedback. She's thinking about teaching it in a class next semester. I have no idea what class she's teaching or why it has to be this book, but I'm certain of one thing--this book will get people talking. The title alone will accomplish that much.

I Love Dick is not so much a story as it is a journey for a bored-of-married-life filmmaker who falls for, or thinks she falls for, one of her husband's colleagues, the titular Dick. The filmmaker sets out to seduce Dick with the help of her husband, who is open-minded and consenting enough to help. Dick, however, is not interested and the connection goes nowhere. The filmmaker's husband doesn't want to see his wife disappointed, so he takes on the role of Dick and the two of them carry on a role-playing correspondence where the husband pretends to be Dick and then pretends to carry on an affair with the filmmaker as Dick. Then, a lot of other things happen to blur the line between fact and fiction and makes you question whether or not these things are actually happening, or maybe they're a product of a mind on the verge of a breakdown.

This is a true story, "true" in the sense that a sequence of events similar to the narrative actually happened but probably not in that exact order or not to the extent exaggerated in the text. This book is comprised of letters, journal entries, essays, and annotations that attempt to piece together what exactly the filmmaker is looking for when she attaches herself to the idea of being with Dick, a man she barely knows but is convinced she's in love with.

This chase for Dick is an attempt to avoid life-altering complications, like a marriage possibly falling apart or a film career going nowhere or repressed psychological issues, but these problems don't get addressed directly and are pushed aside as the filmmaker and her husband get caught up in this "Dick project."

I'm not certain Chris Kraus finds whatever she's looking for in the end, but she is convinced she has. This book is one of those that you can discuss forever without making any headway, and it might even lead to a few screaming matches. And *that* is precisely why I think it will be perfect for a sociology class, even better if it's for Intro. to Sociology.

If this is your response to this review

then there's no need to read the book, which I doubt anyone would on his/her own.

Alexicon says

Finally the ordeal of reading a book with this title on public transportation is over.

Emily says

If there is an afterlife (probs no) and you can pick your own heaven from all the moments of your life I'd like mine to be eternally reliving the first time I read this book.

F says

Hated this.
Abandoned.

Lee says

Loved the opening pages, the first 20 or so, the introduction of the conceit, but found it irritating and kinda smug/self-satisfied by page 75, and then boring by page 95 (her drive east) where I skimmed ahead to an unremarkable chapter toward the end called "Dick Writes Back." Didn't find it all that interesting or original or "theoretical" or funny -- the most enjoyable bit is probably the title. I was very aware of the title on the cover as I rode the subway to and from work. But it's ultimately not for me (I prefer to read better books, hardy har). Goes firmly in my "too many books etc etc" pile . . .

Suanne Laqueur says

Bailed at 25%. I really didn't get wet for this.
(crumples up paper, tosses over shoulder)

This book failed to rise to the occasion....
(crumples up paper, tosses over shoulder)

I thought it would be harder...
(crumples up paper, tosses over shoulder)

Life's too short to hang with a book that doesn't....perform
(crumples up paper, tosses over shoulder)

I didn't finish. And that's all you need to know about dick.
(I give up)

Brianna says

this premise and the actual story behind this book just seems mean. I have no idea why a book about a woman who continually forces her sexual/romantic/intellectual fantasies on a strange man who asks her to please stop repeatedly is so radically feminist. the fact that this was a real situation just kind of makes it worse. is it radical because it proves that, like men, women can also violate peoples boundaries for their art with no qualms? I feel like a lot of reviewers try to absolve Kraus/her character of her actions by throwing a bunch of academic language and feminist theory at it. Going on about mimetic desire and the radical recognition of female abjection, while totally ignoring what is actually happening in the text itself. I'm just like nah. i've read reviews that discuss the way Dick Hebdige was deeply upset by this book but that it shouldn't matter because men having been using and discarding female muses for centuries. like.. true. but also that seems like such a perversion of any type of liberation. like i have a lot of bitterness in my heart just as much as the next girl.. but the praise for this book is so utterly tone-deaf. i can't even imagine what jill soloway is going to turn this in to but i'm going to need to stay far far away from it. I feel no connection to this as a feminist text what so ever. it makes me feel gross. the adoration for this book in certain circles is so confusing to me. I think about this all the time and still just don't get it. ?????

Laura says

this book is fucking amazing. i read it straight through without doing anything else all weekend. it's rare that a book would inspire such monomania in me. chris kraus is just so savagely smart and dissects the role of women in the art world like a surgeon. she's confessional and angry and theoretical (in the clearest way) and poetic all at once. she says all the things that you want to say but aren't supposed to say: like that academic feminism is full of shit, that artists who don't conform to pre-made theoretical/critical categories are made marginal, that women's heterosexual desire is considered abject. this book set a little part of me free.

Melki says

... Chris and I are sensible people. We don't do anything without a reason. . . . and then you came . . .

What a disappointment! I picked this one up because it appeared on a list of funniest books, though other than the absurdity of the premise, there's not a whole lot of chuckles here. Chris and her husband Sylvère are not exactly embroiled in marital bliss. To put it bluntly, it's been a long time since they've had sex. (I'm guessing it's laziness, not love that's keeping these two together.) Then, after the couple spends one evening with the utterly charmless Dick, Chris inexplicably falls head over heels in love with him. Go figure . . . AND, instead of breaking his rival's nose, or at least keying his car, Sylvère helps Chris attempt to woo Dick. The two begin bombarding Dick with letters and faxes. Though I must say, for Sylvère , there's an upside to all this - he and Chris have started having sex again.

... thanks to Dick, Sylvère and Chris have spent the four most intense days of their lives together. Sylvère wonders if the only way that he can feel close to her is when someone else is threatening to tear them apart.

But, poor Chris is quickly going off the deep end in her passion for the Dick. She likens her feelings to a religious experience -

Knowing you's like knowing Jesus.

Like Saint Paul and Buddha who'd experienced their great conversions as they hit 40, I was Born Again in Dick.

Yeah, that's creepy enough. Now, let's add some stalkery:

Today I phoned your colleague Marvin Dietrichson, to find out what you did today. What you said in seminar. What you were wearing. I'm finding new ways to be close to you. It's okay, Dick, we can do the relationship your way.

I will not be ignored, ~~Dan~~ Dick!

This one started out okay, but I lost interest about 75 pages in. It became too much like reading an intellectual's diary . . . an intellectual who is trying to prove to herself, and others, just how much of an intellectual she can be by making as many literary allusions as possible. Only the fact that I'm a cheapskate, and dammit, I paid good money for it, made me finish the book.

Confession time - one strange thing occurred during the reading of this book, which I will relate only because I'm assuming you're reading this review because it had dick in the title, and you're hoping for something stimulating.

I had a really hot sex dream about Matt Damon, a guy whose Howdy-Doody face I'd normally like to punch. Ugh! I blame you, Dick.

Hope Chris boils your rabbit!

Jennifer Slack says

I really dislike this book. It is self-absorbed and mean-spirited, a deadly combination. I read it in November 2015 but gave it time before I felt comfortable sharing my response. You see, I have read many reviews that praise the book highly. I have tried to believe them; I don't. I think this is a book you are supposed to like, as if liking it is a kind of litmus test of how sophisticated you are. I am happy to be unsophisticated if that means rejecting the stalking and toying with the life of a real person as this book does. Disclosure: I have met Dick Hebdige; he is a decent guy. But NOBODY deserves to be used this way. I often evaluate texts or situations by switching genders of the actors. In this case, if a man wrote a book like this about a real woman: holy cow, it would (should) be drug (rightfully so) across the coals. And here it is reprinted and once again receiving acclaim. Disappointed in the book and all those who have praised it.

Liza says

I just try, and try, and try, and try to love this book the way that every respectable person seems to, but the whole time I'm reading it I want so much for her to join a lesbian separatist commune. Like, I'm totally through with hearing about dick, you know? I know this is not a morally defensible position. Maybe one day I'll realize I actually secretly loved it all along, rom-com style, because otherwise I don't know how to explain how mad it makes me.
