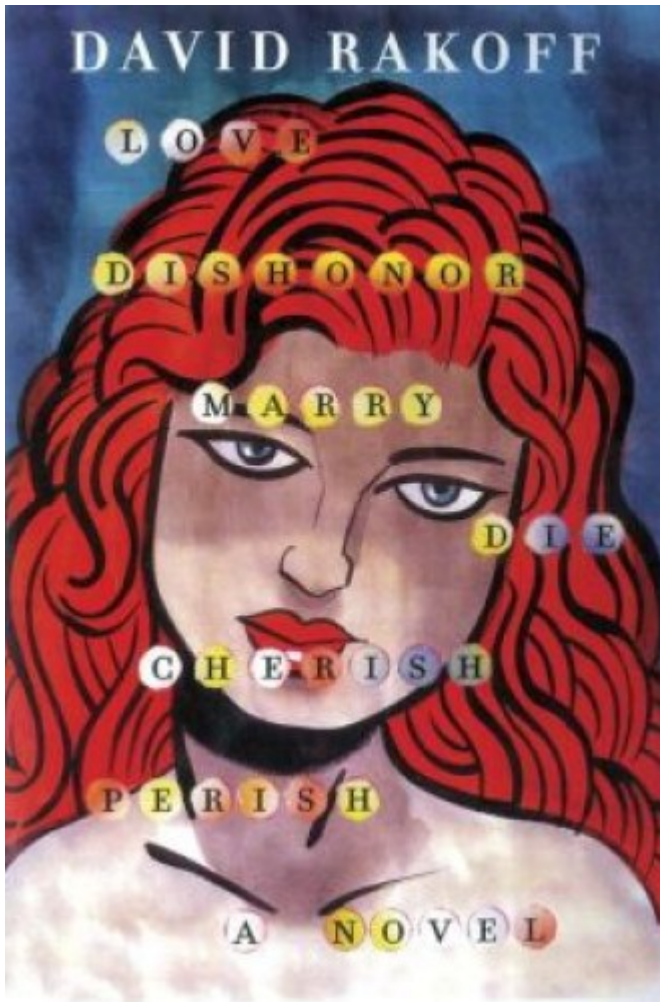


Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish, by David Rakoff

reviewed by [Rachel Marie Stone](#) in the [December 25, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish

By David Rakoff
Random House

There are a number of ways in which this novel by David Rakoff could be written off as cliché. (Read “a novel by” aloud. The phrase completes the rhyme and rhythm—anapestic tetrameter—of the six-word title.) First, and most obviously, the

entire posthumously published novel is written in rhyming couplets—a style used without irony these days only in greeting cards and pop lyrics. Second, and less obviously, a vision of a woman’s beauty stands at the novel’s thematic center. But Rakoff was master enough of his craft that his rhymes lapse into doggerel only when he chose: in a character’s tacky wedding toast, for example. His characters manage to be archetypes that are plausibly, endearingly human.

Those already familiar with Rakoff’s work—his three volumes of essays, *Fraud*, *Don’t Get Too Comfortable* and *Half Empty*, as well as his contributions to the radio program *This American Life*—will recognize his distinctive wit, his melancholy and his belief in the redemptive power of kindness. In the final chapter of *Half Empty*, he recounts some of the things that friends said to him when he was diagnosed with the sarcoma that eventually killed him (including “an unedited, ‘Oh my God, that’s so depressing’”). He said that even in such awkward moments, “people are really trying their best. Just like being happy and sad, you will find yourself on both sides of the equation many times over your lifetime, either saying or hearing the wrong thing. Let’s all give each other a pass, shall we?”

This gentleness pervades the novel, which spans a century of American life in vivid if brief episodes (the entire book, including artist and designer Chip Kidd’s marvelous illustrations, is fewer than 130 pages) in which characters are linked to each other and either fortified or nearly destroyed by acts of kindness or cruelty. Where they are nearly destroyed, they are restored and redeemed—or at least consoled—by beauty.

The crucial parts of each episode, as the title hints, relate to some aspect of conventional Christian marriage vows: love/honor, better/worse, richer/poorer, sickness/health. With sincere respect and tenderness, a wife and a sister-in-law care for a man twisted and palsied by stroke. After a long massage, he is tucked in with a “there you are, Hiram, as handsome as ever!” Decades later, a daughter-in-law’s repulsion at her mother-in-law’s growing dementia drives her to despise her husband’s solicitude: her friends call him a saint; she sneers, “Just the kind I’d like to martyr.”

Similarly, Rakoff plays with the theme of richer/poorer by exploring how excessive wealth confers neither happiness nor class. He gives the freight-hopping immigrant Hiram the courtly manners of someone in “first-class, first-seating,” while the desperate social climber Susan is unable to behave classily at her own wedding. Yet

Rakoff is willing to blur his binaries; Susan's father, for example, is described as wealthy and crass but ultimately a mensch, and Susan herself may not be beyond redemption. The early-20th-century slaughterhouse workers with whom the novel opens are not uniformly "poor but honest"; they are as complicated and human as anyone else. Rakoff emphasizes that for one lascivious group of men, jeering at women has them "feeling like lords" though they are "knee-deep in carrion." It is one of several times in the novel in which the various meanings of class are shown to be anything but straightforward.

It is hard not to see Rakoff himself in the character Cliff—the gay artist who creates the centrally significant picture of his cousin Helen. Both are excluded by peers and become trusted confidants for people older than they, both are fortified by intense parental love (Rakoff elsewhere: "Mine was a golden upbringing" by "two caring and adoring parents"), and both are precocious in talent and insight, able to hold the confidences of people twice their age. But the story is not a roman à clef. Cliff grows up poor in Burbank, whereas Rakoff grew up comfortably in Toronto. Still, Cliff, like Rakoff, longs to remake his world with beauty. In his final moments of life—he dies of AIDS in San Francisco at the height of the pandemic's fury—he is soothed by a memory of the best work he ever has ever done: a portrait of his cousin Helen, in which she is "laughing, delighted, at what's still to come." This is a moment of pathos, for as the reader knows at that point, there is still much pain and suffering to come for her, for Cliff and for others whom their paths cross.

Like Cliff, who was just 45 when the "inkwell tipped over and spread 'cross [the] page" of his life, Rakoff—who died in August 2012 of a rare sarcoma, the result of radiation treatment for Hodgkin's lymphoma when he was 22—has left behind a work of art that, despite its sorrow, is full of hope. The hope it offers is deeply democratic, attainable by almost anyone. Though we may be dishonored, divorced, sick or poor, we can—in a touch, in a word, in a look—participate in *tikkun olam*, that Hebrew practice of "repairing the world."

Marilynne Robinson says that "anything that is written compassionately and perceptively probably satisfies every definition of religious whether a writer intends it to be religious or not." By this measure, *Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish* is the most deeply religious novel I have read in a long time. Rakoff has not only redeemed rhyme and the use of archetypes, he has offered an eloquent brief for kindness and beauty. At this cultural moment, such a work feels anything but cliché.