

STYLE

# Chris Kraus, Author of 'I Love Dick,' Returns to the Bronx

Encounters

By BONNIE WERTHEIM    MAY 11, 2017

When Chris Kraus walked into the New York Botanical Garden on a recent rainy Saturday, it felt like a homecoming. Ms. Kraus, a writer, has lived in Los Angeles since 1995, but the first chapter of her life was set in the Bronx, and her last apartment in New York was a short subway ride from the garden. Its flora and fauna were familiar friends.

“This is a classic,” she said, looking up at a just-bloomed cherry blossom tree. “This is my Facebook cover photo.”

Ms. Kraus, 62, spends little time on social media, but she is well aware that her first novel, “I Love Dick,” has become an internet phenomenon. Young readers post photos of its cover on Instagram with the hashtag #chriskraus. (Moderators have censored #ilovedick.) They quote from the novel in posts on Twitter. The writer Emily Gould even started a Tumblr account where she solicits selfies from the book’s growing audience, a group that includes Lena Dunham, Tavi Gevinson and Lorde.

Ms. Gevinson, the editor and actress, has been a fan of Ms. Kraus’s since 2013, when she was 17 years old and working on the second Rookie Yearbook. “I have two journals where the spines say something like ‘Mostly “I Love Dick”

Quotes: Part 1' and 'Mostly "I Love Dick" Quotes: Part 2," she said in a phone interview.

First published in 1997 by Semiotext(e), the book had anemic sales. It was reintroduced in 2006 with a foreword by the poet Eileen Myles and, according to its publisher, sold over 50,000 copies worldwide in 2016 after a steady drumbeat of endorsements from *n+1*, *Jezebel* and other publications. Now it will get an even bigger publicity boost from its adaptation by Ms. Myles's former girlfriend, Jill Soloway, into an Amazon mini-series that begins streaming Friday. It stars Kathryn Hahn, Griffin Dunne and Kevin Bacon, and has an all-female writing staff.

"On a certain level, your first reaction is to cringe," Ms. Kraus said of the increased exposure, "especially because the character names in the book are not changed."

"I Love Dick" tells the story of Chris Kraus, a 39-year-old experimental filmmaker who sees herself as more of an "academic groupie" than an artist. She and her husband, a 56-year-old professor named Sylvère Lotringer, invite a fellow scholar (named in *New York* magazine as Mr. Lotringer's colleague Dick Hebdige) out for a casual sushi dinner that turns into an intellectual ménage à trois, and then more. The book unfolds in an epistolary format, and Dick becomes Chris's "perfect reader," reflecting her desire to be taken seriously as an artist.

In real life, Mr. Lotringer was the founder of Semiotext(e), and he is still an editor at the press, along with the writer Hedi El Kholi and Ms. Kraus. He married Ms. Kraus in 1988, a few years after she invited him to see her first avant-garde performance, "Disparate Action/Desperate Action."

"I wrote letters to 10 famous people that I wanted to have see my work," Ms. Kraus said. "Susan Sontag was one, Richard Foreman was another. Sylvère was the only one who came."

She has always been open about the autobiographical elements of "I Love Dick," which include obsession, consummation and rejection at the hands of the title character.

"It seemed so stupid to us that we would have to dissemble it any other way," Ms. Kraus said. "I mean, who hasn't had an affair? Who hasn't had a crush? What

is the big secret?”

She and Mr. Lotringer lived on separate coasts in 1995, when Ms. Kraus moved to California for a job at ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena. They had an open marriage, and they eventually met other partners and divorced in 2013. They remain close, however, and now live “around the corner from each other” in Los Angeles. Both have homes in Baja California, Mexico, where they often retreat to write.

Her background is fairly traditional, if itinerant. Her father, Oswald, worked for Cambridge University Press, and her mother, Ruth, had a series of clerical jobs. Chris was born in 1955, and her sister, Carol, followed three years later. They lived in the Bronx until 1960, and then Milford, Conn.

When Ms. Kraus was 13, the family moved to New Zealand on the Assisted Passage Migration Scheme, and after a whirl through high school, she enrolled at the Victoria University of Wellington when she was 16. “Maturity is being increasingly delayed and deferred these days,” she said. “Here, you’re on your parents’ health insurance until you’re 26. But in New Zealand, at 16, you’re pretty much an adult.”

After graduation, Ms. Kraus became a journalist but was ambivalent about how she had to “bond with people and then betray them by writing about them.”

At 21, she moved to the East Village in New York and studied acting. “I wrote a lot for a feminist newspaper called Majority Report, where they paid you in restaurant vouchers and subway slugs,” she said. To pay her rent, she took up odd jobs and artist assistantships, including one with Louise Bourgeois.

In the early '80s, she began writing and directing films, but they weren't successful commercially or critically, causing frustration that she later explored in “I Love Dick” and her second novel, “Aliens & Anorexia.”

Then, in 2006, Ms. Kraus published “Torpor,” a well-received prequel of sorts about a faltering couple (with different names) seeking to heal their marriage through the adoption of a Romanian child, prompting Mr. El Kholti to reintroduce “I Love Dick.”

It was a “moment where all of these brilliant people who hadn't published

books yet were keeping blogs,” Ms. Kraus said.

Continuing to draw from life, she will in September publish “After Kathy Acker,” a book that “may or may not be a biography” of Ms. Acker, an experimental novelist who died in 1997 after a battle with breast cancer. She appears as a figure throughout Ms. Kraus’s novels and was also once involved with Mr. Lotringer.

“But that’s a long time ago, and that certainly isn’t why I chose to write about her,” Ms. Kraus said. “In fact, that’s why it took so long to write about her.”

Watching a white-dress-and-veil wedding amid an Earth Day parade in the garden, Ms. Kraus described her comparatively modest wedding to Philip Valdez, a psychologist, a little over two years ago. The ceremony took place in front of a dozen or so friends, on the patio of their home in Los Angeles, with decorations from a 99-cent store, a homemade cake and an officiant they found online.

Ms. Kraus continues to teach part time at ArtCenter, subsidizing her salary with money she makes as a property manager. And she hasn’t given up acting: She and Paul Giamatti appear in the artist Frances Scholz’s “Amboy,” a 2015 film about a fictional artist.

“We staged this thing at Cal Arts where I was going to be giving a lecture as part of their series to the art students, about the American artist Amboy,” she said. “They all showed up for it, and they didn’t know it was fake.” In fact, they pretended they had heard of him.

The neighborhood where she and Mr. Valdez live, near MacArthur Park, is “as close as you can come” to New York in California, Ms. Kraus said with a touch of wistfulness. “But it’s not the same.”

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