

Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish: A Novel Study Guide

**Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish: A Novel
by David Rakoff**

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Plot Summary

Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish: A Novel was written by David Rakoff. It consists of several short stories penned in rhyming verse. The characters include a cross section of American lives from several decades. While their stories are told separately, from time to time their lives become interwoven.

Chapters 1-2 tell the story of Margaret (who is later called Peg) as a crying, redheaded baby. Her recently widowed nineteen year old mother, who had no plans to take care of a baby by herself, believes that Peg is cursed. The mother, who is never named, treats her daughter unkindly. At school, Peg is taunted and bullied. She leaves school and goes to work in a factory. Just as she begins to gain some self-esteem, she is raped by Frankie, her mother's boyfriend. Since her mother thinks that her sweet, innocent daughter has been flaunting herself at men, she takes Frankie's side. She blames Peg for the ordeal. The family's neighbor, Mrs. Kovacs, helps Peg run away. On a train to Denver, Peg meets a young man named Hiram. He is a gentle soul who gives her food. When the cold is too much for her to bear, he wraps her in his arms and sings to her until she falls asleep. Hiram appears in the next chapter as the father of Clifford.

Chapters 3-5 tell the story of a young boy named Clifford, his mother, his Aunt Sally, and his cousin Helen. Clifford is artistic. He dotes on his mother mostly because she is sad. Hiram, Clifford's father, has had a stroke and exists somewhere between life and death. Clifford has a difficult life, being taunted and bullied at school. His mother always encourages him in his art and tells him grand stories of her youth.

Chapter 6 gives a deeper look into Clifford's cousin Helen's life. Clifford sees his Aunt Sally and cousin Helen once a year. His aunt is a vivacious woman who seems to have everything go her way. Clifford refers to her as being in full technicolor. Meanwhile, her daughter Helen is much like Clifford in that she is often taunted, sometimes by her own mother who actually means no harm. Clifford and Helen become very close. Although Helen is older, she trusts Clifford's wisdom. The two play together, discuss books, art, and life. One afternoon Clifford takes a photo of Helen. The photo shows Helen topless with two oranges covering her breasts. Clifford thinks Helen is beautiful and that she looks like Aphrodite. Both cherish the photograph and the memory. The photo is thought of often by both.

In Chapter 7, Clifford has moved to San Francisco. As he settles into the city's gay community, he believes that he has finally found himself. He has words with a lady named Blanche. Blanche calls the activities on Castro Street immoral, obscene, and unnatural. Clifford responds by telling her to look the other way. He is proud of his life and his mate.

In Chapter 8, Susan, a young college graduate, has given up on her lofty dreams about her artistic talent. She is working in an art gallery and receiving an allowance from her father to buy baubles and fine clothes. Susan, her boyfriend Nate, and their mutual



friend Josh go away for a week at the ocean. While there, Susan and Josh have an affair. Nate knows about what is going on, but he never tell that to Susan.

In Chapter 9, the story moves forward to the wedding day of Josh and Susan. Nathan decides to toast the newlyweds by telling the tale of a tortoise and scorpion. It's his way of letting Josh and Susan know that he is aware of their affair while Susan was still with him.

In Chapter 10, the novel switches back to Clifford. The AIDS epidemic is underway. Many of Clifford's friends have already died. Others are ill from the disease, including Clifford. Clifford knows that he probably has less than a year to live; but, he looks back on his life without regret.

In Chapter 11, Josh and Susan are living a successful, yet empty, lifestyle. Susan changes her name to Sloan and enters the world of real estate. Her interest is in material things. Josh keeps busy playing tennis and squash. Josh's mother Hannah has Alzheimers. Susan, who thinks only of herself, is annoyed by Hannah

In Chapters12-13, Josh dies and Hannah's illness worsens.

In Chapter 14, the book is brought to a close. Susan has a spiritual awakening. She decides to live life on her own terms, without Josh. Feeling abandoned, Josh moves into a studio apartment. While unpacking he comes across a box marked "Ted's Stuff." The box is filled with items just as Ted had left them on the day he died from a heart attack when Josh was only ten years old. Also, in the box is the picture taken by Clifford of Helen. The picture that was taken 60 years before shows a young girl's hope.



Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter 1: Margaret

"Margaret" begins with a rhyme:

"The infant, named Margaret, had hair on her head

Thick and wild as a fire, and three times as red.

The midwife, a brawny and capable whelper,

Gave one look and crossed herself. "God above help her,"

She whispered, but gave the new mother a smile,

"A big, healthy girl. Now you rest for a while ..." Page 9

The night after Margaret is born, the attending midwife laments to her own husband that Margaret's mother is nineteen years old and recently widowed. She considers the birth of the baby girl a curse. The mother will not be able to work for two weeks and her family is in no position to help her. The midwife points out that the storm in Chicago and the rotting smell of the streets are warnings that the baby girl will cause trouble.

The young widow meets Frank, dubbed Finn McCool. Soon they become three. Then, she gives birth to twins.

At night, dinner is always the same. A drunk Frank arrives home. He accuses Margaret's mother of cheating or some other crime and beats her. Margaret prays for Frank to die.

Margaret has a terrible time at school, being harassed by students and nuns alike. Margaret leaves school at the age of eleven to go to work in the factory. Margaret loves everything about the work.

At the slaughter house, the men begin to notice twelve-year-old Margaret, often referred to as Peg. Peg's mother berates the men but they do not listen. Peg uses the tools learned from the nuns to ignore the men. Peg's mother tells her to stop enticing the men, that their behavior is her fault.

Peg's mother asks her to leave work early to go home and take care of Frank, who is down with the flu. Peg does as she is told and takes home dinner. She feeds the twins and puts them to bed. Frank confronts Peg and rapes her. Mrs. Kovacs sits with Peg. Peg's mother comes home and thinks she is dead.

Chapter 2: Frankie



Peg's mother asks Kovacs what has happened. Kovacs says it is obvious. Peg's mother screams at her daughter, asking her what she has done.

“She screamed in her face, then she shook her, she slapped her.

‘Don’t dare close your eyes, Miss. We’re nowhere near through.

I asked you, now tell me. Just. What. Did. You. DO?”

Peg’s mother can no longer look at her daughter. Kovacs tells Peg's mother that Frank is gone and won't be back soon. Kovacs continues to try to defend young Peg. Kovacs says if Frank comes back, she will call the cops.

Frank returns a week later after a long drunken binge. By then Peg is gone, having hopped a box car to Denver.

Peg is seen again, just not by the people at home. Mrs. Kovacs sends her off with sausage, bread, and a knife which she, hopefully, will not need.

Peg meets a young gentleman on the train. The man’s only gesture toward Peg – who is in a sad state by this time – is to offer her food. One night the blizzard outside was no match for the uninsulated train. The man stuffed straw into the cracks of the boards and held Peg and murmured a lullaby to her until she slept. In the morning, the man was gone.

The author talks about a husband and wife in Seattle’s harbor in 1928. The father is Japanese and the mother is a redhead. Their children can pass for white. The woman was the midwife who had delivered Peg.

Analysis

The first two chapters of the book tell the story of Margaret (Peg), her widowed mother, and Frank, the mother’s boyfriend. The story begins around 1928. The mother, as yet unnamed, gives birth to Margaret at age nineteen. From the very first, it's as if the mother hates or blames the child. She condemns Margaret for being cursed. From that point on, Peg can do no right. She is tormented in school. So, she quits attending classes at age eleven. She begins to gain some self-worth when she goes to work in the factory at age twelve.

The relationship between the mother and Frank is textbook when it comes to abusive relationships. The mother, feeling as if she has little or no self-worth, clings to Frank. Meanwhile, Frank is an abusive drunk who finally steps over the line when he rapes Peg. The mother, of course, blames Peg for seducing Frank and sides with him. Peg makes the right choice in fleeing the home.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Margaret's mother think the child's is a curse?

Discussion Question 2

Who is Mrs. Kovacs? What role does she play?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Peg run away from home?

Vocabulary

dowsing, haughty, evidence, coward, thrall, captor, senseless, unawares, sullied, tainted, mutter, parse, burrowed, boxcar



Chapters 3-5

Summary

Chapter 3: Clifford

Clifford's mother complains about living in California. The family had moved there for her husband's health, which was continuing to fail. She hates the heat and thinks that they might as well be living in Hades. The grass is brown, and there is no breeze. Although the Pacific Ocean is not far away, there is no sign of the tropical lifestyle for which she had hoped. On top of that, the weather had not improved her husband's health. Since his stroke, he is in a state between life and death.

Clifford works hard to entertain his mother and to lighten her somber moods. He does this by creating drawings among other things.

She says:

"You have scads more talent, beyond any other

Kid I've ever seen, and I'm not just your mother.

I'm a good judge of art."

She reminds Clifford that she has traveled the world. Clifford knows the stories well.

Chapter 4: Mother

Mother continues to explain her voyage to Europe, including her first kiss with a Turkish ensign. There is much detail about the atmosphere, tableware, and dresses that Mother and her sister Sally wore.

As they got older, Mother and Sally had to leave school to work. Their father was broke and they had to take in boarders.

Mother decides to send Clifford to drawing class. She warns him that the other students will be old and that he must take it seriously. She also tells him that he will be drawing nude models. Clifford, at fifteen, is intrigued but not put off by the news.

Clifford attends his class and does well. He barely notices the nude female models beyond their geometry. His study of the models simply relates to how he can recreate their likenesses on paper. One day, a nude male comes to pose. When he disrobes, Clifford is very taken with the man to the point of arousal. He faints and hits his head. The teacher calls Mother, who assures the class that Clifford has not been sick.



Every May, Aunt Sally comes to visit. She and Mother sit on the porch and drink while her daughter entertains herself. Clifford is fascinated, yet feels uneasy with this strange creature in his house.

“Everything that came within Sally’s reach
Seemed somehow transformed, and largely because
Of just her, like when the house landed in Oz.”

Chapter 5: Aunt Sally

Sally’s visits are described like the scene in “The Wizard of Oz” when the world turns from black and white to brilliant technicolor. Sally does odd things with great flair; and, everything that she does seems appropriate. She drinks a lot but is always in good humor. She takes time during the day to rub her brother Hiram’s legs, immobile since his stroke.

The story switches to Hiram, once known as Hirschl. Hiram struggles with attempting to make sense of things around him; but, his mind tends to wander. He remembers things from long ago quite well, including the young girl he had befriended on a train so many years ago. The girl was frightened and alone. Hiram cradled her in the night and sang to her in Yiddish.

Hiram is sad that he cannot show open appreciation for his son, whom he adores.

“Clifford is here now, his good, gentle child,
He’d love nothing more than to be able to smile,
To look at the drawings Cliff spread ’cross the bed,
Be anything but unresponsive, half dead.”

Sally, considered the “bestest egg,” has a hard time realizing that not everyone is as outgoing, flamboyant, and resilient as she. Sally constantly teases her seventeen-year-old daughter, Helen. Sally cannot see that the bards and taunts are not taken as jokes. They are seen as sincere; and, they end up as wounds to Helen.

“To Sally, the japing was naught but affection.
She had no idea that her joking fell flat,
That calling her slender girl “Porky” and “fat”
Or just outright fictions like, “Try not to limp,”
Made Helen curl inward: a cowed, sheepish shrimp.”



Clifford sees that Helen was very tall for her age. He understands what it is like to be tormented because he has suffered the same problem. Still, Clifford sees what others cannot. He sees a beauty in Helen and longs to dress her as a Greek goddess so he can draw her.

Helen looks up to the younger cousin and thinks he has wisdom. As the cousins get older, they began to act like siblings. They spend great amounts of time together, although they have different interests. Clifford asks Helen to pose for him while he takes photographs.

Analysis

Clifford is a fifteen-year-old boy who has had a hard life thus far. His family has moved to California with the hopes of improving his father's health. The plan is not working out as hoped. Hiram, his father, is slipping away, leaving his mother "neither widow nor wife."

Clifford is an intellectual boy with a great talent for art. He is often bullied and tormented by others. Clifford only cares about his art and his family. Clifford's mother, a woman given to her own flights of fancy, meticulously details accounts of her past. She wants the best for her son who is her pride and joy. Clifford makes a lot of realizations around this time, particularly when he joins a drawing class and realizes his homosexual tendencies.

Clifford and Helen are quite a bit alike, although they have marked differences. Neither is afraid to act naturally and true to their individual characters. Helen will listen to Clifford. She even poses semi-nude without hesitation or wariness. She knows that Clifford simply loves the art.

Aunt Sally is a dynamic and charismatic women who seems to have everything go her way. When she flies in the face of convention, it is taken with amusement. Sally is caring; but, her personality often does more harm than good to her delicate daughter, Helen.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Clifford's family move to California?

Discussion Question 2

What is the most cherished memory for Clifford's mother?



Discussion Question 3

What is the main regret of Clifford's father?

Vocabulary

malfeasance, climate, languid, specific, befitting, fate-handed, soiree, insouciance, optimal, palsied, teddibly, urbane, rapt, ochre, amber, measly, immobile, bombastic, appended, veils, clasped, marabou



Chapters 6-8

Summary

Chapter 6: Helen

Helen sits in her office dressed in a blue satin dress for the company party that evening. She hears jokes and snickers around her. The other people in the office, prompted by Kay in accounting, gossip about Helen. Helen pretends not to hear. She pretends that the barbs don't bother her.

"So she sits, doing work, ignoring the mounting

Whispers and jokes, led by Kay in Accounting.

She's aware that her dress makes the other girls laugh

As they congregate over the mimeograph."

The co-workers refer to Helen as the Girl Who Ruined Christmas. Helen got drunk at a holiday party and lashed out at her lover/boss in front of everyone. Helen screamed and wept and ended the evening vomiting in the ladies room.

Helen recalls meeting her boss and being swept away by his charm and good looks. Helen is not savvy with men. It was easy for the boss to take advantage of a naïve girl.

The affair with the boss went on for two long years. All the while Helen acknowledged that he had a wife and son. She hoped that somehow she would become the married one. The boss finally ended the affair. Helen learned that she was pregnant. She had an abortion. Helen feared she would lose her job. Instead, she was transferred as a "floater" within the company.

Helen thinks about her co-workers:

"And here is the truth Helen long had resisted

In most of their eyes, she just barely existed,

Except as a source of some acid-tinged mirth,

A punch line, it seems, is the source of her worth."

Helen attends the party, determined not to let her detractors think they have won. Helen finally says something very rude to Kay. At the end of the night, Helen thinks about Clifford and the picture of Aphrodite. Helen, for once, is at peace.

Chapter 7: Captain Cocksure and Throbbin'



The story picks up after Clifford moves to San Francisco. Clifford believes that he has finally found himself.

“Whose wound was pure pleasure; Clifford loved, loved his life.

And credited most of that to his dear city,

He lived the reverse of what plagued Walter Mitty

No secrets, no longing, no desperate hoping

Just reach out and grab from a world cracked wide open.”

The story details many activities of the gay community in San Francisco at the time, including illegal activities that were popular in that region.

The story turns to Blanche, a woman who finds the activities on Castro Street to be immoral, obscene, and against nature. She rants and raves about the gays. Cliff responds by telling her to look the other way, that he is proud of his life and of his mate, even though he is bawdy and loud.

Chapter 8: Susan

Susan, out of college for five years, has given up on her lofty ideals and has given into the shallow society that supports her and art. She works at a gallery and depends upon her father to provide an allowance that will give her baubles and fine dresses. Susan laughs at those she once admired.

Nate arrives at Susan’s gallery, prepared to go away with her for a week at the ocean. Susan sees Nate in his usual Birkenstocks and drawstring pants and looks down on him for his shabby dress, thinking that he had best keep his distance from her while she was wearing a fabulous dress.

“She didn’t want some belching, farting, or toga-

Clad frat boy, but frankly, the wheat germ, the yoga

Seemed ersatz, some also-ran version of “mellow,”

This go-with-the-flow, unassailable fellow.”

Susan, Nate, and their friend Josh go to Wellfleet. The house loses power for a couple of days. Susan is furious with Josh because he thinks the change is nice. Susan tries to get Nate to be annoyed or to pay attention to her, but he is too laid back.



Analysis

This section focuses mainly on how people have changed since their youth. While the time frame is not specifically noted, the reader can surmise that the events take place in the 1960s during the boom of the gay community in San Francisco. The mention of casual drug use by Susan and her friends supports the 60s time frame, too.

Helen was once shy, withdrawn, and very sensitive. She cherishes her memories of childhood, particularly the times spent with Clifford at his mother's house in California. Now Helen is thirty-five and much wiser and hardened against society and her detractors. Susan is angry and embarrassed over her affair with her boss. However, she is determined not to let her co-workers win the war by belittling and mocking her.

Clifford has come into his own in San Francisco. Clifford learned he was gay the day he saw the nude male model in drawing class. Since moving to San Francisco Clifford feels as if he has been set free and dives into new experiences with fervor.

Susan has also changed since her college years. Susan used to mock high society women who primped and fawned over fashion and each other. Since that time Susan has given in to the vapidness of her profession and the art scene, shunning those who once held her same values. Susan mocks Nate and is cruel to him; but, Nate does not take notice or, perhaps, he just does not care.

Discussion Question 1

Why is there a rift between Helen and her co-workers?

Discussion Question 2

What is the company's reaction to the adulterous activities of one of their employees?

Discussion Question 3

How does Clifford's life change when he moves to San Francisco?

Vocabulary

swine, bustling, taffeta, rustling, garbed, trek, congregate, mimeograph, gamely, endures, aplomb, impinge, niggle, rankle, regrettable, oration, tirade, recrimination, lurched, pinpoint, sultry, heady



Chapters 9-11

Summary

Chapter 9: Nathan

Nathan is dating Susan when Josh joins them at the cottage for the week. Nathan isn't nearly as foolish as Susan believes. Nathan knows Susan is cheating with Josh.

The story moves forward to Josh and Susan's wedding day. Nathan has been invited to make a toast after one being given by Susan's sister, Mindy. Nathan had stayed up until 3 AM the night before trying to think of something clever, something that would get his point across without sounding bitter or petulant. Nathan could not come up with anything and, at the last minute, decided to speak off the cuff.

The guests at the reception are stunned that "Poor Nathan" should show up at the wedding. Although he was an invited speaker, he had been seated in the most undesirable spot in the room.

The time comes for Nathan to speak. Nathan tells a tale of a tortoise and a scorpion. The scorpion begs the tortoise for a ride across a river. The tortoise knows the scorpion's nature and is reluctant. Eventually, the tortoise relents. Half way across the river, the scorpion bites him and they both drown.

Nathan meets Susan's father in the bathroom. Nathan expects to be berated for the speech. Instead, Lou, the father, commiserates with Nathan, saying his daughter is unhappy and vicious. At the end of the conversation Lou tells Nathan that tortoises do not swim, only turtles do.

Chapter 10: Clifford

Clifford and his friends begin to notice that many people around them are getting sick and dying off rapidly. At first, it was thought that there was some plague or epidemic that was causing the problem. It soon became evident that something else was happening. It was learned that the disease was AIDS, an autoimmune deficiency that made one high susceptible to a wide variety of diseases including pneumonia. Clifford disregarded the sign of the first lesion under his arm; but, he realized that he was dying when the lesions began to spread like wildfire. The author says Clifford has paid his taxes so there is only one thing left to do.

Chapter 11: Josh

Josh and Susan live at a posh address. Susan changes her name to Sloan and begins to work at a realty company. Josh devotes his time to sports, playing tennis and squash. Sloan increases her devotion to work and the accrual of money. A pillow in their house reads "Nouveau riche beats no riche at all."



Sloan becomes increasingly annoyed with Hannah, Josh's mother, who is suffering from Alzheimer's Disease.

"She felt for Josh, truly. He'd grown up with no father,
But Hannah was now such an unruly bother
That Sloan was quite worried that she'd grow to hate him,
Or soon might resort to some harsh ultimatum."

Analysis

This section shows that people have come to realize the consequences of their behavior. Ill fortune has fallen on some.

Nathan proves that he is not as vapid as Susan thinks. He knows what is happening behind his back. He accepts that Susan has chosen Josh; but, he thinks that she should have been less cruel about it. Everyone is surprised to see Nathan at the wedding. Most people take him for a fool; but, Nathan is determined not to let Susan get the best of him. His barb, disguised as a fable, changes the way people see him. Nathan expects to be greeted with anger by Lou, Susan's father. However, Lou acknowledges that Nathan has dodged a bullet by not marrying Susan.

Cliff has become very ill and knows that he has maybe a year to live. His lesions spread quickly. Having seen what has happened to friends and lovers, he knows what to expect. Cliff reflects on his past and seems to have no regrets except that he will have to give up his art.

Josh seems to be happy although Susan (also known as Sloan) seems to have other ideas. Her mother-in-law Hannah's illness has interfered in Susan's idea of a perfect life. People think Josh is a saint. Sloan is ready to put an end to the unfortunate situation. Josh remains devoted to his mother.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Nathan decide to give a toast at the wedding of Josh and Susan?

Discussion Question 2

What do Cliff and his friends name the new and rapidly spreading disease in the community?



Discussion Question 3

How do you think Helen would react if she knew Cliff was dying?

Vocabulary

vaulted, subdued, hermetic, rococo, aesthetic, maximal, milieu, moneyed, befitting, palazzo, horas, Torahs, Tiepolo, frequency, outlying, mulled, benediction, addendum, referendum



Chapters 12-14

Summary

Chapter 12: Clifford

Clifford is lying in his bed, wracked with pain and bouts of coughing. His aide, Luis, is by his side. Clifford thinks about the people that have died before him, including friends, lovers, and his parents. Clifford dies at age forty-five.

Chapter 13: Hannah

Hannah continues to get worse.

“You look like my Josh, only handsome,’ she’d say.

She said or did one heartbreaking thing every day.

If Tuesday’s mere hygiene was markedly worse,

By Wednesday she’d Homerically re-named her nurse.”

It comes to the point where Hannah no longer recognizes Josh. Josh feels alone and sad that Hannah sees him as a stranger. In many ways Hannah has already died, but her body is still intact. The decision to take care of his mother has cost him his marriage and family.

Chapter 14: Josh

One day at work Sloan has a spiritual awakening and becomes convinced that she needs to change her life in a dramatic way.

“Her life was a cancer, her spirit was sick.

Her impulse in coming was out of pure love,

And a spiritual yearning to cleanse herself of

The secular world that had previously taught her

To name their girl Dylan, like Ralph Lauren’s daughter.”

Sloan, now known as Shulamit, tells Josh that he has sacrificed his soul for a swimming pool while all along that is what Josh thought she wanted. It didn’t matter that he had given her everything she had asked for during their marriage.



Josh feels abandoned. He moves to a studio apartment and begins to get rid of things from his past. He thinks of how he had been disloyal to Nathan and feels that he deserves punishment for his misdeeds.

While sorting through boxes Josh finds a box marked “Ted’s Stuff.” The box had belonged to his father who had died of a heart attack when Josh was only ten years old. Everything had remained in the box as the day Ted left – a half roll of LifeSavers in the pocket, letters that had been sent to Josh at camp, and a collection of foreign stamps. Josh opens one of the envelopes to find the picture of Helen taken by Clifford more than 60 years earlier. The face of the young girl in the picture shows hope.

Analysis

This section notes the end of Clifford's life. He thinks about Helen once again. He remembers the picture he took of her on that June day in 1954. He still considers it to be the best thing he has ever done.

The remainder of the story focuses mostly on Josh who is now 50 years old. He has worked hard to build a fortune to suit Susan/Sloan/Shulamit but it turns out to be the wrong thing. Josh begins to question his whole life. He believes that he is a bad person and has done something to deserve his misery.

Discussion Question 1

What are Clifford's final thoughts?

Discussion Question 2

How does the picture of Helen keep reappearing in the story?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think will happen to Josh?

Vocabulary

scandalized, shattered, posit, olfactory, myriad, camphorous, fug, wicking, fused, irretrievably, scuffed, irrevocably, supplicant, scalloped, illegible, rune, lichen, shrouded, shmimah, hematite, perjuring



Characters

Susan

Susan is one of the main characters in *Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish* by David Rakoff. Susan began her adulthood by looking for some major purpose and a devotion to all things good and moral. About five years after Susan graduated from college, she began to shun those beliefs and took up with an artsy, shallow, and self-involved crowd that only lived for their possessions and the next big thing. Susan took pride in being mean and vicious to everyone around her, including Nathan, her boyfriend. Susan takes joy in hurting and humiliating people. Her father says it is because she is unhappy that she must make everyone else miserable as well.

Susan marries Josh after cheating on Nathan. She continues her extravagant lifestyle until one day she has a spiritual awakening and discards the material things for the peace of the eternal.

Margaret

Margaret is the first character introduced. She was born a fiery redhead, a baby that her mother believed was cursed. Margaret ran away from home after being raped by her mother's boyfriend.

Josh

Josh is a friend of Susan and Nathan. Josh ends up dating and finally marrying Susan. The couple raise a family and Josh provides for Susan's every whim. When Josh is fifty, Susan leaves and takes the children.

Clifford

Clifford is a sensitive and artistic boy who is very close to his parents. He is wise for his age. The only person Clifford feels comfortable with is his cousin, Helen. When he gets older, he moves to San Francisco to explore an alternative lifestyle. It is at the height of the AIDS crisis. Cliff dies at age forty-five.

Aunt Sally

Aunt Sally is Helen's mother. She is a vibrant and dynamic woman that everyone seems to admire.



Helen

Helen is a gawkish seventeen - year - old at the beginning of the story. She is often mocked and bullied, which may be why she connects so easily to Clifford. Helen is the subject of a photograph that travels through the hands and memories of several characters.

Hannah

Hannah is Josh's mother. She suffers from Alzheimer's.

Frankie

Frankie is the boyfriend of Margaret's mother. He is a loud, abusive drunk.

Hiram

Hiram is Clifford's ailing father.

Mother

Mother is Clifford's mother, a woman who tries diligently to raise her son with self-esteem and respect.

Symbols and Symbolism

Photograph

One of the main items that travels throughout the story is the photograph of Helen taken by Clifford in June, 1954. The photo shows Helen topless, her breasts covered by oranges. Everyone who sees the photo thinks that it is artistic and beautiful, much like Aphrodite.

Art

Art is Clifford's gift and his outlet.

San Francisco

San Francisco represents freedom to Clifford. It is the place where he can finally express his true self.

Money

Money is a symbol of Susan's greed and her attempt to fill a void with material possessions.

Zion

Zion is where Susan goes to try to find peace. It is another way to fill the void within herself.

Settings

California

California is the setting for the part of the story revolving around Clifford and his family. The family moved to Burbank so that Hiram, Cliff's father, might regain his health.

New York

New York is the setting for Helen's story. Helen works for a large firm in the city.

Themes and Motifs

Friendship

Friendship is a theme that flows throughout the story. Clifford and Helen are great friends, as well as cousins. Clifford makes many friends in San Francisco that show him a whole new world. Susan, Josh, and Nathan were friends in the beginning of the story.

Masks

Everyone in the story wears some kind of mask. For Clifford, it is the mask of a man trying to hide his sexuality. Helen tries to make herself appear as a strong woman who has hardened to the point of not caring. Susan wears the mask of a socialite and bon vivant, while in truth she is miserable.

Regrets

Some of the characters bear regrets for their lives/actions. Josh regrets betraying Nathan by cheating with Susan. Clifford regrets the fact that he had to watch his friends die. Hiram regrets being ill and not being able to communicate or play with his child.

Styles

Point of View

Since David Rakoff has chosen to write the Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish in rhymed verse, the point of view is third person omniscient. Using a narrator works well because there are several components that could not be revealed otherwise. Only third person omniscient would allow the reader to follow and understand the activities of all of the characters, as well as their interwoven lives over a seventy-year time-span.

Language and Meaning

Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish: A Novel is written in rhymed verses. As such, the phrasing and sentence structure are not the usual prose. While the vocabulary is not complex, the syntax takes awhile to synthesize.

Another challenge is that the stories span almost seventy years. Rakoff does not give an exact time period for many of the stories; but, he offers clues to the reader that might help to pinpoint a general era. For example, in Clifford's stories there are dates or clues mentioned starting with 1954 and continuing through the Reagan administration. Helen talks about 2006.

Structure

The most striking feature of the novel is that the story is told in rhyming verse. It flows like a song, giving credence to the characters' lives over several decades.

The work is chronological in nature. It is comprised of fourteen chapters. The shortest chapter is one page in length; the longest chapter is five pages in length; the average number of pages per chapter is three pages.

Each chapter is devoted to a particular character. The stories are often broken into one chapter and picked up in the next chapter. This is true in the majority of chapters, including Margaret and Frankie, wherein Margaret leaves school to work in a factory. Her mother lives with Frankie, an abusive drunk who eventually rapes Margaret and causes her to run away.

In addition to the text, Seth, an illustrator, adds drawings of each character which rounds out the look and feel of the characters and how they are viewed by the author.



Quotes

The infant, named Margaret, had hair on her head Thick and wild as a fire, and three times as red. The midwife, a brawny and capable whelper, Gave one look and crossed herself. "God above help her," She whispered, but gave the new mother a smile, "A big, healthy girl. Now you rest for a while ... (Chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote shows the state of affairs at the time Margaret was born and that the midwife knew she was going to have a difficult life.

She screamed in her face, then she shook her, she slapped her. 'Don't dare close your eyes, Miss. We're nowhere near through. I asked you, now tell me. Just. What. Did. You. DO?

-- Margaret's mother (Chapter 2 paragraph 1)

Importance: The quote is important because it shows Margaret's mother's lack of concern for her daughter and her choice to take Frankie over her own child.

You have scads more talent, beyond any other Kid I've ever seen, and I'm not just your mother. I'm a good judge of art.

-- Clifford's mother (Chapter 3 paragraph 6)

Importance: Clifford's mother worked hard to support and encourage her son, particularly due to the difficult circumstances of the family.

Everything that came within Sally's reach Seemed somehow transformed, and largely because Of just her, like when the house landed in Oz.

-- Clifford (Chapter 3 paragraph 18)

Importance: Clifford shows his amazement over his Aunt Sally and how her life seems so colorful and wonderful.

Clifford is here now, his good, gentle child, He'd love nothing more than to be able to smile, To look at the drawings Cliff spread 'cross the bed, Be anything but unresponsive, half dead.

-- Hiram (Chapter 4 paragraph 9)

Importance: Hiram laments the fact that he can no longer communicate to Clifford.

To Sally, the japing was naught but affection. She had no idea that her joking fell flat, That calling her slender girl "Porky" and "fat" Or just outright fictions like, "Try not to limp," Made Helen curl inward: a cowed, sheepish shrimp.

-- Clifford (Chapter 5 paragraph 12)

Importance: The narrator notes that while Sally is jovial and funny, her barbs toward Helen are often damaging instead of jocular.



So she sits, doing work, ignoring the mounting Whispers and jokes, led by Kay in Accounting. She's aware that her dress makes the other girls laugh As they congregate over the mimeograph. (Chapter 7 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote shows that Helen is still being mocked as an adult and how she chooses to handle the situation.

And here is the truth Helen long had resisted In most of their eyes, she just barely existed, Except as a source of some acid-tinged mirth, A punch line, it seems, is the source of her worth. (Chapter 7 paragraph 25)

Importance: Helen refuses to cower under the withering gazes and insults of her co-workers.

Whose wound was pure pleasure; Clifford loved, loved his life. And credited most of that to his dear city, He lived the reverse of what plagued Walter Mitty No secrets, no longing, no desperate hoping Just reach out and grab from a world cracked wide open. (Chapter 8 paragraph 7)

Importance: This quote shows the beginning of Cliff's exploration of himself and of his sexuality.

She didn't want some belching, farting, or toga- Clad frat boy, but frankly, the wheat germ, the yoga Seemed ersatz, some also-ran version of "mellow," This go-with-the-flow, unassailable fellow. (Chapter 8 paragraph 6)

Importance: Susan begins to loathe the very things she used to like about Josh including his dress and laid-back attitude.

She felt for Josh, truly. He'd grown up with no father, But Hannah was now such an unruly bother That Sloan was quite worried that she'd grow to hate him, Or soon might resort to some harsh ultimatum. (Chapter 11 paragraph 6)

Importance: Susan realizes that Josh does not fit into her life, and she resents him for it.

Her life was a cancer, her spirit was sick. Her impulse in coming was out of pure love, And a spiritual yearning to cleanse herself of The secular world that had previously taught her To name their girl Dylan, like Ralph Lauren's daughter.
-- Susan/Sloan/Shulamit (Chapter 14 paragraph 3)

Importance: After Susan/Sloan/Shulamit's spiritual awakening, she realizes how her choices have made her sick and that she must change immediately in order to heal and find peace.