House of Mirth

David Rakoff at Lit Night, April 25, 2012 (Jenica Miller)

One of David Rakoff's last public appearances was on April 25, 2012, at the Columbia Alumni Center. The writer and humorist, who died of cancer on August 9, stood before a crowd of fifty for *Columbia Magazine*'s second annual Lit Night and read an essay about his arrival in New York as a student. Afterward, during the Q&A, an audience member asked, "At what point do you know you're funny?"

Rakoff '86CC gathered his breath. "Being funny is never the point," he said. "My hope is that I can tell something vividly and specifically and, for want of a better term, prettily. I like *words*. I'm not one of those hyper-masculine minimal writers. I like words. But writing funny is just sort of what I do. It's as value-neutral as my eye color" — Rakoff's voice then shrank into a small, self-mocking squeak of sadness — "I was going to say my *hair* color, alas, and then I remembered that I totaled that

Mazda a while ago."

The crowd emitted some titters and a couple of outright guffaws.

"What's the final referendum on when something's funny?" Rakoff continued. "You can usually tell when something's close but isn't quite there yet. In many ways it's like baking. You know what all the components are, but there's chemistry involved, and certain things have to be in place in order for the thing to work. When it happens, you sort of know it. If you're lucky, you get older and gain knowledge, and it's nice to have one realm in which I've gotten wiser, because" — Rakoff's voice curled again into a weepy rasp — "everything else is just a fucking mess."

A few people laughed. It shouldn't have been funny, but it was.

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All categories >