

# DECONSTRUCTING KRAMER

WHEN YOU'RE APPALLED BY THE ACTIONS OF THE ARTIST, CAN YOU STILL ENJOY HIS WORK?

After Michael “Kramer” Richards went into his hideous tirade against some black members of his audience at the Laugh Factory in Los Angeles, I stopped watching *Seinfeld*.

It had become my habit to watch a few minutes or more of the quintessential '90s sitcom. I'd prep my bedroom/yoga studio for my evening *Power Yoga with Rodney Yee*. I find it relaxing to have a few laughs while getting ready to sweat and stretch.

I was appalled at Richards' N-word-laden tirade. I watched him go over the edge on YouTube. I listened to the commentators discuss it for a couple of news cycles. I talked about it with my friends and family, and even with a comedian acquaintance of mine. The upshot was that I was disgusted by his bigotry, and couldn't bring myself to watch *Seinfeld* re-runs.

That lasted about a week.

One night, with a twinge of guilt, as I lit the incense and candle, laid out the yoga mat and changed clothes, I tuned the TV to *Seinfeld*. And I laughed. Not just at George and Jerry and Elaine, not just at the same ridiculous plot lines I'd laughed at for more than a decade, but at Richards' portrayal of Kramer.

I'd heard about him from my comedian friend: how Richards rehearses his physical comedy over and over, how he's a perfectionist, how, apparently, he simply snapped on stage and that his fellow comics were both horrified by him and concerned for him.

Richards said that his bigotry – or, as he awkwardly called it, his rage – was inexplicable. He's no racist, he claimed. Then he disappeared, off to get therapy – and to get off the public and media radar.

But hearing these possible explanations was not why I laughed. I laughed because he was funny.

On that evening I turned back to *Seinfeld*, I wanted to laugh more than I wanted to deconstruct Kramer.

From Oscar Wilde to Richard Pryor to Sean Combs, artists and entertainers

have gotten into trouble for their personal lives and foibles. Yet bigotry is harder for people to forgive and forget than sexual preference (Wilde – in his day, he ended up in prison), drugs (Pryor), or allegedly punching out some dude at a party (Combs). Public hatred seems more ominous, be it the festering bigotry of Richards, or the emerging anti-Semitism of a drunken Mel Gibson. Going back, we find the fascist sympathies, racism and anti-Semitism of poet Ezra Pound, a figure of undeniable importance and influence on modern literature.

What are we to think about these talents who have manifested and perpetrated disgusting acts of hatred? If we shut out everyone who has violated our sense of human decency, who would we have left to watch, read, listen to, admire? How do we know what goes on behind closed doors, much less behind closed minds?

I struggle with this. Should I not watch Kramer's antics on *Seinfeld*? Should I never rent *Apocalypto*, Gibson's movie about the demise of the Mayan civilization, even though I find the subject matter fascinating?

We all have our own baselines of justification, it seems. While I can't bring myself to read Pound and probably never will (I can't help but despise him), I'll probably watch Gibson's films again. I wince every time I read something racist or anti-Semitic in Ernest Hemingway's writing, yet I still read him, chalking up his occasional ignorant language to the time in which he lived.



The world is filled with hatred, which seems to be growing every day. Increasingly, as a society, we argue with each other, we rage at real and perceived enemies, we scream at one another on television, and insult those with whom we don't agree. Conservative commentator (a term I use loosely) Ann Coulter calls John Edwards a “faggot,” smiles, and waits for her applause, which she gets. She's a proud beacon of political hatred, and she continues to collect more royalties and speaking fees for propagating her viciousness.

I once taught Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*, which is as powerful a book on the destructiveness of racism as one could hope for. I used to sit and talk with

Gaines, who was a great inspiration and mentor to me one summer. But I still watch *Seinfeld*. You may enjoy the gorgeous poetry of, say, Maya Angelou, but how do you know if a bigot didn't write the bestseller you're reading?

We can't see inside the artist's heart. So we make our choices, and justify them. We laugh at the comic ripping Catholicism, because she's witty. We giggle at the homophobe, because he's outrageous.

We ignore the N-word when it's in a comedy routine, but cringe when it's said in anger.

I can only explain my own confusion – and possible hypocrisy – about choosing not to deconstruct Kramer with a quotation from D.H. Lawrence: “The fairest thing in nature, a flower, still has its roots in earth and manure.”

Sometimes I just want to enjoy the flowers. ■

To reach the author, visit [www.scottlax.com](http://www.scottlax.com).