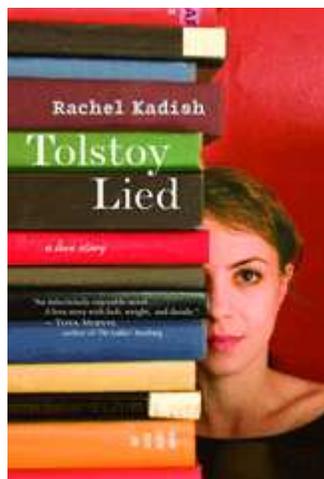


## A Reader's Guide



### Tolstoy Lied

by Rachel Kadish

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### About the Book

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**"An infectiously enjoyable novel...a love story with heft, weight and dazzle." —Tova Mirvis**

**"Cuts to the very core of what a love story should be: not about how we find happiness, but about what it means to do so." — *San Francisco Chronicle***

Rachel Kadish offers a take on modern love in a romantic comedy that is as enchanting as it is intelligent.

In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy famously wrote "all happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." To thirty-three-year-old English professor Tracy Farber, this celebrated maxim is questionable at best. If Tolstoy is to be taken at his word, only unhappiness can be interesting and happiness must be dull and pedestrian.

Tracy secretly nurtures an unusual project: proving that happiness is interesting, in literature and in life. Little does she know that her best proof will come when she meets George, who will sweep her off her feet and challenge all of her theories.

### About the Author

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Rachel Kadish is the author of the novel *From a Sealed Room*. Among her many honors are a Koret Award, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and a Pushcart Prize. She received the John Gardner Fiction Book Award for *Tolstoy Lied*. A graduate of Princeton University, Kadish earned her M.A. in fiction writing at New York University.

### Questions for Discussion

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We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *Tolstoy Lied* for every reader.

**1.** Tracy Farber is a young, educated, professional single woman living in a big city. How is she like and different from other comparable heroines in contemporary literature?

- 2.** Tracy's ex-boyfriend describes her as "the world's most unlikely romantic" (p. 9). What does he mean by that? How is this description apt? In what way does George challenge Tracy's outlook on romance?
- 3.** Tracy states, "For people who claim to want happiness, we Americans spend a lot of time spinning yarns about its opposite" (p. 4). Do you agree that American literature has a fixation on doom and gloom? What lies behind this cultural mixed message? Do you agree with Tracy — does the happiness that we have an inalienable right to pursue deserve our serious consideration as well?
- 4.** On her first date with George, Tracy explains the many reasons for her deep love of literature (p. 42). Do you agree or disagree with her list of the attractions of literature? What motivates you to read? Would you add any reasons of your own to the list of literary pleasures?
- 5.** Tracy goes on to describe her choice of twentieth-century interwar literature — Zora Neale Hurston, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner — as her specialty, after very nearly succumbing to the seductions of Herman Melville and his contemporaries in nineteenth-century American literature. What does her choice say about her as a person? When Jeff says to Tracy, "There's something very nineteenth-century about you," what does he mean by this? In general, how do your own reading choices reflect your personality?
- 6.** How does Tracy's vacillation between the romantic and modern/post-modern literary periods parallel her shifting thoughts on love? Tracy later reflects on the difference between nineteenth- and twentieth-century views of love (p. 280). Which view do you think is healthier?
- 7.** In the course of dating George, Tracy solicits advice from friends and relatives — Hannah, Adam, Yolanda, Jeff, her cousin Gabby, Aunt Rona — each of whom offers different counsel. How do each person's own romantic views color how he or she reads Tracy's situation? What would your advice to Tracy have been?
- 8.** Kadish threads a great deal of humor throughout the novel. Which incidents and observations did you find most entertaining?
- 9.** Aunt Rona and Tracy's mother, in encouraging an otherwise perfectly content Tracy to find a husband, subscribe to a very limited definition of happiness. How do their opinions on love and marriage reflect larger societal trends? Is Tracy's reaction to the pressure typical of professional women of her generation?
- 10.** As it turns out, George, too, has a very narrowly defined idea of what constitutes happiness. How does his revelation of his future plans affect his relationship with Tracy? Do you think Tracy is justified in responding the way that she does?
- 11.** George and Tracy come from different cultural backgrounds — George still grapples with the fundamentalist Christian upbringing he's left behind, Tracy comes from a Jewish family. In what ways are their situations more alike than it would appear on the surface? How do their religious differences play into the relationship?
- 12.** Consider some of the other couples in the novel — Jeff and Richard, Hannah and Ed, Yolanda and Chad. How do Tracy's observations of these very different relationships influence her thinking about her relationship with George? What does each of these couples offer as evidence for Tracy's larger theory of happiness?
- 13.** How does the literary correspondence between Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville factor into the intradepartmental tension among the English faculty? What ironies are inherent in the episode involving the letter? What comment does it make about the relevance of literature?
- 14.** Tracy speculates at various points in the novel that Joanne might be jealous of her, jealous of love, jealous of life. What, in your opinion, is the truest source of Joanne's animosity? Do you think her

actions are justified?

**15.** Tracy's professional life is marked by conflict and betrayal, yet she tries to stay above the political fray whenever possible. What are some examples of actions that could have damaged her career? Do you think she made the right decision in helping Elizabeth?

**16.** Who, in your opinion, is ultimately correct about happiness — Tolstoy or Tracy Farber? How does the novel *Tolstoy Lied* itself support Tracy's claim that the opening line from *Anna Karenina* is misguided?

## For Further Reading

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The following paperbacks from Mariner Books may be of interest to readers who enjoyed Rachel Kadish's *Tolstoy Lied*:

[\*My Latest Grievance\*](#) by [Elinor Lipman](#)

[\*Save Your Own\*](#) by [Elisabeth Brink](#)

[\*Heir to the Glimmering World\*](#) by [Cynthia Ozick](#)

[\*From a Sealed Room\*](#) by [Rachel Kadish](#)

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