



## ***Me Talk Pretty One Day: Essays***

**by David Sedaris**

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c2000.

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### **Summary**

A new collection from David Sedaris is cause for jubilation. His recent move to Paris has inspired hilarious pieces, including "Me Talk Pretty One Day," about his attempts to learn French. His family is another inspiration. "You Can't Kill the Rooster" is a portrait of his brother who talks incessant hip-hop slang to his bewildered father.

### **Description**

Me Talk Pretty One Day contains far more than just the funniest collection of autobiographical essays - it quite well registers as a manifesto about language itself. Wherever there's a straight line, you can be sure that Sedaris lurks beneath the text, making it jagged with laughter; and just where the fault lines fall, he sits mischievously perched at the epicenter of it all. No medium available to mankind is spared his cultural vision; no family member (even the dynasties of family pets) is forgotten in these pages of sardonic memories of Sedaris's numerous incarnations in North Carolina, Chicago, New York, and France.

One essay, punctuated by a conspicuous absence of s's and plurals, introduces the lisping young fifth-grader David "Thedarith," who arms himself with a thesaurus, learns every nonsibilant word in the lexicon, eludes his wily speech therapy teacher, and amazes his countrified North Carolina teachers with his out-of-nowhere and man-size vocabulary.

By an ironic twist of fate, readers find present-day Sedaris in France, where only now, after all these years, he must cling safely to just plural nouns so as to avoid assigning the wrong genders to French objects. (Never mind that ordering items from the grocer becomes rather expensive.) Even the strictest of grammarians won't be able to look at the parts of speech in the same way after exposing themselves to the linguistic phenomena of Sedarisian humor. Just why is a sandwich masculine, and yet, say, a belt is feminine in the French language? As he stealthily tries to decode French, like a cross between a housewife and a shrewddetective, he earns the contempt of his sadistic French teacher and soon even resorts to listening to American books on tape for secret relief.

What David Sedaris has to say about language classes, his brother's gangsta-rap slang, typewriters, computers, audiobooks, movies, and even restaurant menus is sure to unleash upon the world a mad rash of pocket-dictionary-toting nouveau grammarians who bow their heads to a new, inverted word order. *(From the publisher.)*

## Reviews

### ***Publishers Weekly***

Sedaris is Garrison Keillor's evil twin: like the Minnesota humorist, Sedaris (Naked) focuses on the icy patches that mark life's sidewalk, though the ice in his work is much more slippery and the falls much more spectacularly funny than in Keillor's. Many of the 27 short essays collected here (which appeared originally in the *New Yorker*, *Esquire* and elsewhere) deal with his father, Lou, to whom the book is dedicated. Lou is a micromanager who tries to get his uninterested children to form a jazz combo and, when that fails, insists on boosting David's career as a performance artist by heckling him from the audience. Sedaris suggests that his father's punishment for being overly involved in his kids' artistic lives is David's brother Paul, otherwise known as "The Rooster," a half-literate miscreant whose language is outrageously profane. Sedaris also writes here about the time he spent in France and the difficulty of learning another language. After several extended stays in a little Norman village and in Paris, Sedaris had progressed, he observes, "from speaking like an evil baby to speaking like a hillbilly. " 'Is thens the thoughts of cows?' I'd ask the butcher, pointing to the calves' brains displayed in the front window." But in English, Sedaris is nothing if not nimble: in one essay he goes from his cat's cremation to his mother's in a way that somehow manages to remain reverent to both of the departed. "Reliable sources" have told Sedaris that he has "tended to exhaust people," and true to form, he will exhaust readers of this new book, too--with helpless laughter.

### ***Library Journal***

Sedaris, noted essayist and NPR radio commentator, is a master at turning his life experiences into witty vignettes that both entertain and comment on the human condition. This latest collection draws on his quirky childhood in North Carolina, where he was subjected to speech therapy sessions to correct his lisp; he countered by conveniently avoiding words that contained "s" sounds. Additional family recollections include his father's desire to create a jazz combo from his offspring—unfortunately, none of them exhibited any talent or desire to follow this career path, but Sedaris uses this opportunity to deliver a stellar Billie Holiday rendition. From there he moves onto a brief stint as a "clearly unqualified" writing teacher in Chicago, where his unorthodox lesson plans included watching soap operas and having the students write "guessays" on what would happen in the next episode. Then it's on to New York and ultimately to France. Sedaris chronicles his attempts to learn French and the confusion experienced by people who don't share the same culture or language. A little sadder at times and overall a little less uproariously funny than in previous works, Sedaris remains the champion of the underdog. Once you listen to him read his own words, it's hard to imagine settling for just the book.

### ***New York Times Book Review***

[Sedaris's] need to hang onto his neuroses permeates his fourth collection of comic pieces... an assortment of frequently very funny, too-often bland and ultimately frustrating essays. This is not to say that Sedaris is not a very funny writer. Many lines and several of the premises are brilliant, worthy of our best comic essayists—Calvin Trillin, Woody Allen, Christopher Buckley, Dave Barry. At his best, he makes you laugh out loud, which indeed may be worth the price of admission.



## Biography

<http://www.barclayagency.com/sedaris.html>

David Sedaris is a Grammy Award-nominated Greek-American humorist, writer, comedian, bestselling author, and radio contributor.

Sedaris was first publicly recognized in 1992 when National Public Radio broadcast his essay "SantaLand Diaries". He published his first collection of essays and short stories, *Barrel Fever*, in 1994. Each of his five subsequent essay collections, *Naked* (1997), *Holidays on Ice* (1997), *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (2000), *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* (2004), and *When You Are Engulfed in Flames* (2008), have become New York Times Best Sellers.

As of 2008 his books have collectively sold seven million copies.[7] Much of Sedaris's humor is autobiographical and self-deprecating, and often concerns his family life, his middle class upbringing in the suburbs of Raleigh, North Carolina, Greek heritage, various jobs, education, drug use, homosexuality, and his life in France with his boyfriend, Hugh Hamrick.

### About the Author (from LitLovers.com and Barnes & Noble.com)

- Birth—December 26, 1956
- Where—Johnson City, New York, USA
- Education—B.F.A., Art Institute of Chicago
- Awards—Thurber Prize; *Time* Humorist of the Year; *Advocate* Lambda Award.
- Currently—lives in London, England, UK

## Bibliography

### Story and essay collections

*Barrel Fever* (1994)

*Naked* (1997)

*Holidays on Ice* (1997)

*Me Talk Pretty One Day* (2000)

*Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* (2004)

*Children Playing Before a Statue of Hercules* (editor, 2005)

*When You Are Engulfed in Flames* (2008)

### Audio recordings

*Me Talk Pretty One Day* (2001)

*The David Sedaris Box Set* (2002)

*Live At Carnegie Hall* (2003)

*Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* (2004)

*When You Are Engulfed in Flames* (2008)

*Live For Your Listening Pleasure* (2009)

### Link to NPR radio broadcasts by Sedaris

<http://www.npr.org/programs/specials/lists/sedaris/>

According to *Time Out New York*, "David Sedaris may be the funniest man alive." He's the sort of writer critics tend to describe not in terms of literary influences and trends, but in terms of what they choked on while reading his latest book. "I spewed a mouthful of pastrami across my desk," admitted Craig Seligman in his *New York Times* review of *Naked*.

Sedaris first drew national attention in 1992 with a stint on National Public Radio, on which he recounted his experiences as a Christmas elf at Macy's. He discussed "the code names for various posts, such as 'The Vomit Corner,' a mirrored wall near the Magic Tree" and confided that his response to "I'm going to have you fired" was the desire to lean over and say, "I'm going to have you killed." The radio pieces were such a hit that Sedaris, then working as a house cleaner, started getting offers to write movies, soap operas and *Seinfeld* episodes.

In subsequent appearances on NPR, Sedaris proved he wasn't just a velvet-clad flash in the pan; he's also wickedly funny on the subjects of smoking, speed, shoplifting and nervous tics. His work began appearing in magazines like *Harper's* and *Mirabella*, and his first book *Barrel Fever*, which included "SantaLand Diaries," was a bestseller. "These hilarious, lively and breathtakingly irreverent stories... made me laugh out loud more than anything I've read in years," wrote Francine Prose in the *Washington Post Book World*.

Since then, each successive Sedaris volume has zoomed to the top of the bestseller lists. In *Naked*, he recounts odd jobs like volunteering at a mental hospital, picking apples as a seasonal laborer and stripping woodwork for a Nazi sympathizer. The stocking stuffer-sized *Holidays on Ice* collects Sedaris' Christmas-themed work, including a fictional holiday newsletter from the homicidal stepmother of a 22-year-old Vietnamese immigrant ("She arrived in this house six weeks ago speaking only the words 'Daddy,' 'Shiny' and 'Five dollar now'. Quite a vocabulary!!!!").

But Sedaris' best pieces often revolve around his childhood in North Carolina and his family of six siblings, including the brother who talks like a redneck gangsta rapper and the sister who, in a hilarious passage far too dirty to quote here, introduces him to the joys of the Internet. Sedaris' recent book *Me Talk Pretty One Day* describes, among other things, his efforts to learn French while helping his boyfriend fix up a Normandy farmhouse; he progresses "from speaking like an evil baby to speaking like a hillbilly. 'Is thens the thoughts of cows?' I'd ask the butcher, pointing to the calves' brains displayed in the front window."

Sedaris has been compared to American humorists such as Mark Twain, James Thurber and Dorothy Parker; *Publisher's Weekly* called him "Garrison Keillor's evil twin." Pretty heady stuff for a man who claims there are cats that weigh more than his IQ score. But as *This American Life* producer Ira Glass once pointed out, it would be wrong to think of Sedaris as "just a working Joe who happens to put out these perfectly constructed pieces of prose." Measured by his ability to turn his experiences into a sharply satirical, sidesplittingly funny form of art, David Sedaris is no less than a genius.

- Sedaris got his start in radio after *This American Life* producer Ira Glass saw him perform at Club Lower Links in Chicago. In addition to his NPR commentaries, Sedaris now writes regularly for *Esquire*.
- Sedaris's younger sister Amy is also a writer and performer; the two have collaborated on plays under the moniker "The Talent Family." Amy Sedaris has appeared onstage as a member of the Second City improv troupe and on Comedy Central in the series *Strangers with Candy*.

- If I weren't a writer, I'd be a taxidermist," Sedaris said in a chat on Barnes and Noble.com. According to the *Boston Phoenix*, his collection of stuffed dead animals includes a squirrel, two fruit bats, four Boston terriers and a baby ostrich.

- *When asked what book most influenced his career as a writer, he's what he said:*

I guess it would be *Cathedral* by Raymond Carver. His sentences are very simple and straightforward, and he made writing seem deceptively easy—the kind of thing anyone could do if they put their mind to it. (*From Barnes & Noble.*)

## **BookPage 2000 Interview with David Sedaris Talking pretty with David Sedaris INTERVIEW BY MICHAEL SIMS**



Many of us still remember when we first heard the dry, droll voice of David Sedaris on public radio. He was the only person in the early 1990s more amusing than George Bush. Sedaris talked about his hilarious adventures doing such seemingly innocent tasks as cleaning New York apartments or working as a Christmas elf at Macy's. Gradually, collections of his essays appeared: *Barrel Fever*, *Naked*, *Holidays on Ice*. With these books, Sedaris fans could keep him nearby rather than waiting for a broadcast on *All Things Considered*.

Fans will rejoice again, because Sedaris is back with a new laugh-out-loud collection, **Me Talk Pretty One Day**. The book's title, after one of the essays, records Sedaris's first official stroke of genius -- choosing to present his own garbled English translations of the garbled French uttered by students in an introductory French class. Sedaris's version is the first time this trick has worked since Mark Twain pulled it off with one hand tied behind his back.

"Sometime me cry alone at night," Sedaris laments about his sadistic French teacher. A fellow sufferer replies, "That be common for I, also, but be more strong, you. Much work and someday you talk pretty. People stop hate you soon."

"The school read that story, and I got kicked out," Sedaris said in a recent interview. "And the only thing that saved me was that every word of it was true."

Being expelled from French class for accurately portraying his teacher is all in a day's work for David Sedaris. About half of **Me Talk Pretty One Day** deals with family and childhood, and half with his recent move to France and its ramifications in his life, ranging from having to defend the U.S. at cocktail parties to discovering a preference for movies over tourist traps. "I didn't care where Hemingway drank or Alice B. Toklas had her mustache trimmed," he writes.

This essay, like most of Sedaris's others, grows out of everyday circumstances -- riding the subway, working as a furniture mover, seeing a photo of Jodie Foster carrying dog excrement in a plastic bag on the beach. Sedaris likes to make his essays out of the unremarkable strands of his own life.

Not one to propound manifestos, Sedaris is nonetheless articulate about his reasons for this attitude. "It seems like literature, or at least recent American literature," he says in his signature dry voice, "teaches you that unless you grew up living in the back of a car, or

unless your folks were in prison, you really don't have a story to tell. It's funny how a lot of rich people and middle-class people think, 'Gosh, if I were poor, I'd have such a good book.'

"They don't see any value in their own lives," Sedaris notes. "When actually it all depends on how you write about it. Instead of being jealous of these people who had incredibly dramatic lives, who grew up in foster homes and were kept chained in the basement -- the notion that if you had bunk beds that just didn't cut it -- it took me awhile to realize, 'Well, I took guitar lessons from a midget.' "

Sedaris taught briefly at the Art Institute in Chicago, where he saw these attitudes every day. "To hear my students talk, they had been raised by wolves. Then graduation day would come and their parents would drive up in BMWs, and these kids were dying of embarrassment."

Sedaris doesn't describe himself as an essayist, a humorist, or even a writer. "When I fly back and forth into the country, and I'm asked for my occupation, I just say typist. I would have no problem saying I'm an accountant or a dental assistant, because that's just a job and it's on your W2 form. I mean, it seems like the world can call you something, but don't call yourself that. You know, it's like when you meet somebody and you ask, 'What do you do?' and they say, 'I'm an artist.' I just cringe."

In retrospect, Sedaris also cringes at the memory of his early years as a performance artist in, of all places, North Carolina. His descriptions of the smug posturings of these self-proclaimed artistes is one of Sedaris's most perceptive and heartfelt works -- not only hilarious and smart, but also candid (and darkly humorous) about his addiction to crystal methamphetamines.

While Sedaris's essays give the sense of ordinary reality, they are unquestionably reflected through the distorting mirror of his outlook. "I've been trying, especially with this book, to pull back a little bit from exaggerating, which of course is my natural inclination. But I found with this last book that what people thought I was making up were the things that were true. I did hitchhike across the country with a quadriplegic."

The stories take place at various times in Sedaris's life, so no matter how solid the bones that are being excavated, some reconstruction is required. "Of course, I can't remember every word of what someone said to me 20 years ago. So that's where I tend to exaggerate the most, in the dialogue, because I want to make it as entertaining as I can."

He mentions a story in **Me Talk Pretty One Day** in which an American man on the Paris Metro thinks Sedaris is a French pickpocket. Assuming that Sedaris can't speak English, the man loudly catalogues his suspicions to his wife. "Reading it aloud," Sedaris adds, "I could feel the anticlimax. But I didn't want to make up an ending." Actually, the story doesn't feel anticlimactic. It's a vignette, but an astutely observed and funny one, sort of Chekhov meets Thurber.

In Sedaris's world, nothing turns out as expected. Just as she gets off the subway, his sister turns to him and calls out, "Good luck beating that rape charge." He is left to face the hostile stares of strangers -- and to write up the account for those of us who enjoy seeing the world through the eyes of David Sedaris.

## Discussion Questions

Source: Madison Public Library (Madison, Wisconsin)

1. Sedaris has certainly had some odd jobs. Was there one description that was especially hilarious to you?
2. Fake battered woman bruises, drug addled performance art, poop—it's all here. Were there any essays that were just too much for you? Do the members of your group disagree on what (if anything) was over-the-top?
3. In one chapter Sedaris details the way our beloved holidays are celebrated... quite differently... elsewhere. Were you aware of any of these variations on our American traditions? Do you see our holidays in a different light now that you've read this?
4. In her review for the New York Times, Michiko Kakutani calls Sedaris "a self-dramatizing narcissist, by turns egomaniac and self-deprecating, needy and judgemental." Are these dichotomies what makes his work so funny to so many?
5. What do you think of the Sedaris family as a whole? Are the stories about his family the result of situations that could have happened to any family, or from extraordinary events particular to his own?
6. Not every member of the Sedaris family is included in David's books-- by their individual choice. If David were your son or brother, would you let him include you in his work?
7. How would you describe Sedaris's style of writing? Would you call this a collection of essays, short stories, memoirs or something altogether different?
8. Have you been to France? Did you have anxieties about speaking French with the native speakers? What did you do? Did you have any particularly embarrassing gaffes?
9. Were you aware that the rights to a film version of four of the stories in *Me Talk Pretty One Day* had been sold to Columbia Pictures and had a completed script when David asked director Wayne Wang to quit [See the rest of the discussion guide for more information]? What would you have envisioned for a film version? Which actor would make a good David? Hugh?

## Discussion Questions from LitLovers.com

1. What better place to start a discussion of a Sedaris book than with the parts you find the funniest? Which parts make you LOL (laugh out loud)? Go around the room and share your belly laughs with others.
2. Are there sections of the book you feel are snide or mean-spirited? Perhaps his criticism of Americans who visit Europe dressed "as if you've come to mow its lawns." Or perhaps the piece about his stint as a writing teacher. Is petulance a part of Sedaris's schtick...his charm?
3. Talk about the Sedaris family, in particular his parents. How do they come across? Whom does he feel closest to? Sedaris makes an interesting statement about his father: it was a mystery that "a man could father six children who shared absolutely none of his interests." Is

that unusual?

4. David Sedaris is a descendant of Woody Allen's brand of humor—personal idiosyncrasies or neuroses raised to an art form. What does Sedaris reveal about himself, his insecurities, angst, secret hostilities, and do you find those parts funny or somewhat touching, even sad? Actually, do you like Sedaris as he reveals himself in his book?

5. Are there parts of *Me Talk Pretty* that you disliked, didn't find funny, found overworked or contrived?

6. For a book club meeting: it would be fun to get the audio version and listen to selected segments. I especially recommend the French lessons in Paris.

## For Further Reading

Running With Scissors: A Memoir by Augusten Burroughs

Dry: A Memoir by Augusten Burroughs

Magical Thinking by Augusten Burroughs

The Partly Cloudy Patriot by Sarah Vowell

Take the Cannoli by Sarah Vowell

Assassination Vacation by Sarah Vowell

Fraud: Essays by David Rakoff

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius by Dave Eggers

I Like You: Hospitality Under the Influence by Amy Sedaris

A Young Man's Passage by Julian Clary

Paris to the Moon by Adam Gopnik

Red Carpets and Other Banana Skins: The Autobiography by Rupert Everett

America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction by Jon Stewart

I Was Told There'd Be Cake by Sloane Crosley

Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides