



Sedaris, David (b. 1956)

by Victoria Shannon

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Using his and his family's experiences, particularly his childhood in Raleigh, North Carolina, and his own wacky perspective on life, David Sedaris has become a world-famous humorist, comedian, writer, playwright, and radio personality. His first five collections of mostly autobiographical essays sold more than 4 million copies, and have been translated into 25 languages. As of 2008, his books have sold more than 7 million copies.

Sedaris's fans also know that he is openly and happily gay and living mainly in France with his partner, Hugh Hamrick, a painter, set designer, and theater director. The couple divide their time between a Left Bank apartment in Paris, a house in Normandy, and a flat in London's Kensington neighborhood.

Sedaris was the second child born to middle-class, Greek-American parents on December 26, 1956, in Johnson City, New York. When he was seven, his father, Lou, an IBM engineer, and his mother, Sharon, moved to the suburbs of Raleigh, North Carolina to raise their six children. Sedaris's childhood is the source of a great deal of his humor and may account for his quirky outlook on life.

When he was a child, Sedaris suffered from a lisp, an obsessive-compulsive disorder, and juvenile Tourette's syndrome. The lisp was treated in speech therapy, and Sedaris claims the Tourette's syndrome improved immensely when he started smoking cigarettes. These childhood tribulations have yielded richly comic anecdotes in his books.

After graduating from high school, Sedaris attended Kent State University in 1977, but dropped out. He moved to Chicago in 1983, where he studied writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He graduated in 1987.

During his time in Chicago, Sedaris was heavily involved with drugs and alcohol. He scraped by with a series of odd jobs, including picking apples and painting houses. He also experimented with visual and performance art, but, as several of his essays attest, he was pitifully unsuccessful in those areas.

Sedaris's life turned around in 1990 when he met Hugh Hamrick, who soon became his lover. Sedaris explains the attraction simply: he needed a ladder and Hamrick had one.

When asked about coming out to his family, Sedaris says he never really had a coming out moment; he just referred casually to "the guy I'm seeing." His parents did a double-take, then dropped it. "We're not very direct people," Sedaris explains. "My dad, he's a product of his generation. For him to have become as accepting as he has is really something. For me to expect more would be greedy."

In 1992, Sedaris met Chicago radio host Ira Glass who asked Sedaris to appear on his weekly local program, *The Wild One*. Sedaris's success on *The Wild One* led to his National Public Radio debut on December 23, 1992, on *Morning Edition*, on which he read his now-classic story "SantaLand Diaries," about his stint working as an elf at Macy's department store during the holiday season.



David Sedaris in 2005.
Photograph by Aaron Matthews.
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Sedaris says, "I owe everything to Ira . . . my life changed completely like someone waved a magic wand." Sedaris became an instant radio star. Soon, he was recording a monthly segment for NPR's *This American Life*, edited and produced by Glass and distributed nationally by WBEZ in Chicago. He also began publishing essays in *Esquire* and *The New Yorker*.

Sedaris's first book, *Barrel Fever: Stories and Essays*, was published by Bay Back Books in 1994. The first part of the book is short fiction; the second part contains autobiographical essays. The book became a national best-seller and was selected as one of the *Village Voice Literary Supplement's* "Favorite Books of the Year." It was a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award.

The essays in *Barrel Fever*, written in Sedaris's deadpan prose, focus on the mundane, ludicrous aspects of modern life though they often have an undercoat of seriousness and transgressiveness that borders on the tragic. Critics praised the book, and Sedaris was called "the Dave Barry of the NPR set." *Publishers Weekly* called him "Garrison Keillor's evil twin."

Sedaris followed *Barrel Fever* with another best-seller, 1997's *Naked*, a collection of autobiographical essays about his upbringing, his drug-filled college days, and the string of dead-end jobs he held as a young adult. With dark humor and sharp wit, Sedaris writes about his obsessive-compulsive behavior and his juvenile Tourette's syndrome, his grandmother, and even his mother's death. The collection was a Lambda Literary Award finalist.

The collection includes the essay "I Like Guys," in which Sedaris recalls the discovery of his homosexuality. The essay is both hilarious and genuinely moving, as it reveals his acute awareness of the shame of homosexuality and the pervasiveness of homophobia even as he also conveys his recognition of the absurdity of prejudice. "What are you," screams a summer camp counselor in "I Like Guys," "a bunch of goddamned faggots who can't make your beds?" Sedaris writes, "I giggled out loud at his stupidity. If anyone knew how to make a bed, it was a faggot."

In 1997, Sedaris also published *Holiday on Ice*, a collection of six holiday-themed essays that poke good-natured fun at the absurd traditions of the American holiday season. The audiobook version was nominated for an Audie (the highest audiobook honor). *Publishers Weekly* called the collection of Christmas stories "highly likable and spirited throughout." The book is dedicated to Ira Glass.

Sedaris's next book, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, was published in paperback and audiobook in 2000. Sedaris wrote the book in France over a period of seven months. Upon publication, it received nearly unanimous rave reviews and a fairly rapid rise to the top of several best-seller lists. It won Sedaris his first Lambda Literary Award.

When asked if *Me Talk Pretty One Day* was difficult to write, Sedaris said, "No. I mean, I'm always happy if I have, like, humiliating asshole things that I did. I think: Oh good, that's a good story. Because if you write about humiliating asshole things other people do it doesn't work as well. I mean, you can, but you can get away with it better if you talk about what an asshole *you* are. It's much easier. And I'm the biggest jerk in every one of those stories, but that's not faked."

Indeed, Sedaris is the butt of much of his humor. As Walter Kirn has observed, "Sedaris' usual target is himself--vulnerable, vain, afflicted with bad habits and perpetually defending his sacred right to self-destruct in peace. Compared with him, Woody Allen is a rock of psychological stability." Yet his self-revelations, delivered with a kind of wide-eyed innocence, actually incisively skewer broader American cultural pretensions and euphemisms. His self-absorption is not solipsism but a means of illuminating the human condition generally.

As Donna Seaman observed in *Booklist*, "A self-described 'smart-ass,' Sedaris is a gifted satirist with an uncanny knack for re-creating dialogue and revealing fantasies. And his targets are always worthy: people of wretched insensitivity and prejudice, be it sexual or racial. Brutally honest and brilliantly eloquent, Sedaris is positively tonic."

Director Wayne Wang bought the film rights to *Me Talk Pretty One Day* and planned to adapt four stories from the book for a film he planned to begin making in late 2001. However, after a conversation with his sister aroused concerns as to how his family might be portrayed on screen, Sedaris asked Wang to reconsider making a film based on the book and the project was subsequently dropped.

Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim (2004) reached the top spot on the *New York Times* nonfiction best-seller list on June 20, 2004. It garnered Sedaris his second Lambda Literary Award. The audiobook, read by Sedaris, was nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album. Sedaris was also nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Comedy Album for his recording *Live at Carnegie Hall* that same year.

Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim is a collection of twenty-two autobiographical essays. In "Hejira," Sedaris's father kicks him out of the house because of his homosexuality. In one of the most famous essays from this book, "Rooster at the Hitchin' Post," Sedaris lampoons his brother Paul's impending wedding.

Sedaris's latest book, *When You are Engulfed in Flames* (2008), was published by Little, Brown. Like his previous books, it is a collection of autobiographical essays, but these focus less on his family and more on his relationship with Hamrick.

In "Keeping Up," for example, Sedaris writes about how Hugh annoys him by walking too quickly. In "Old Faithful," Sedaris enlists Hugh to lance a boil on his back, which Hugh does without complaining. Sedaris tells him, "I know you'll do it again if I need you to. We're an aging monogamous couple, and this is all part of the bargain."

The matter-of-factness of Sedaris's descriptions of his domestic life with Hamrick is characteristic of his straightforward presentation of his homosexuality throughout his work.

In "The Smoking Section," Sedaris describes his three-month stay in Japan where he went to quit smoking. He says he recommends this smoking cessation method, but adds that the trip cost \$23,000. When asked why he went to Japan to quit smoking, Sedaris said, "The world was turned upside down so it made perfect sense that I couldn't smoke."

When Sedaris returned to the United States for a book tour promoting *When You Are Engulfed in Flames*, he found himself dealing with the legacy of James Frey, the author of *A Million Little Pieces*, who, after being exposed by critics, admitted to making up much of the content of his book, which was marketed as a memoir.

In the aftermath of Frey's exposure and admission, Alex Heard, the editorial director of *Outside* magazine, published an essay in *The New Republic* called "This American Lie" in which he accused Sedaris of fabricating many of the details in his essays. Heard did some "fact checking" and interviewed many of Sedaris's acquaintances, including his 83-year-old father Lou. He found, for example, that Mr. Mancini, Sedaris's junior high school guitar teacher, was not quite the "perfectly formed midget" that Sedaris depicted. What he discovered, Heard claims, is that Sedaris "exaggerates too much for a writer using the nonfiction label."

In response, Sedaris said that of course he exaggerates for effect, especially in dialogue. He also admitted that some of the details in his essays are obviously fictionalized, but added that a little embellishment in humor is "hardly the crime of the century."

In addition to writing essays, Sedaris is also a playwright. He and his sister, actress Amy Sedaris, have written several plays under the name "The Talent Family." These include *Stump the Host* (1993), *Stitches* (1994), *The Little Frieda Mysteries* (1997), and *The Book of Liz* (2002). All were produced and presented by Meryl Vladimer, artistic director of the Club Cabaret Theater at La MaMa Experimental Theater Company, and Ania A. Shapiro.

In 1995, David and Amy Sedaris won a "special citation" Obie Award for their play *One Woman Shoe*.

Another Talent Family work is *Incident at Cobbler's Knob*, which was presented and produced by David Rockwell at the Lincoln Center Festival in 1997. Hugh Hamrick designed the sets for those performances; he also directed *The Book of Liz* and *Incident at Cobbler's Knob*.

In 2001, Sedaris received the Thurber Prize for American Humor. In the same year, he was named "Humorist of the Year" by *Time* magazine.

David Sedaris lives a sheltered life with Hamrick. He has no cell phone, no caller ID on his land line, nor does he have, or want, an e-mail address. He does not drive. He says he stays away from the Internet because it is too time-consuming. He spends most of his time in Paris watching American movies.

He claims that he has only two friends in France, a journalist and a tour guide from Alabama. "Hugh has lots of friends," he says, "and I can sometimes use his friends."

Sedaris plans to continue writing essays and plays with his sister Amy. "It doesn't matter what your life was like, you can write about anything. It's just the writing of it that is the challenge," he says.

David Sedaris is certainly up to that challenge.

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