

# **Barrel Fever: Stories and Essays Study Guide**

**Barrel Fever: Stories and Essays by David Sedaris**

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# Chapters 1-4

## Chapters 1-4 Summary

Chapter 1, "Parade," details David Sedaris' stint on Oprah where he confessed that he used to "love too much." For those readers who were unfortunate enough to miss the performance, Sedaris explains how he has never visited a therapist and prefers to work things out on his own.

People constantly ask Sedaris for advice on how to conquer this problem. The author does admit that he went from loving too much to being loved too much. As the author says, "Everybody loves me. I'm the most important person in the lives of almost everyone I know and a good number of people I've never even met."

Sedaris claims that he went on Oprah because her show needed a little sprucing up.

Sedaris talks about his lack of affection as a child and how overcompensation in romantic relationships scared everyone away. The author would become completely obsessed to the point of being a stalker.

Mr. and Mrs. Sedaris finally admitted to their son that they pretended not to love their son because they were afraid of rejection. Everyone knew that Sedaris would become a famous celebrity someday.

Sedaris talks about the other panelists on Oprah and how each had severe romantic issues.

Sedaris also talks about Bruce Springsteen and Mike Tyson and his relationships with each. The stories are funny and Sedaris refers to each as a desperate man who longs for his affection.

Chapter 2, "Music for Lovers," talks about Anita O'Day and how she came back from years of drug addiction to reclaim what was left of her career. The author is fond of Anita O'Day and is also fascinated by the fact that the singer is missing her uvula which was removed during a routine tonsillectomy in childhood.

The story segues into the author's fractured abilities in the area of medicine. It was common for the author to give stitches to his daughter, Dawn. When Dawn was fifteen, she fell off the roof of the house. The author had to set her ankles and apply two casts which turned out to be "a little too tight." The author finally took Dawn to the hospital where her feet had to be amputated.

Trials with Dawn were not over. The girl became obsessed with rock music, much to her father's chagrin. The battle continued despite headaches and arguments over rock versus Anita O'Day. The father believes that the daughter's headaches are being



caused by her wisdom teeth. Wisdom teeth are expensive to remove and the father thinks he can manage just fine.

Chapter 3, "The Last You'll Hear From Me," is a goodbye letter from Trish Moody, a woman who plans to commit suicide. The woman discusses the gift of the paperweight bestowed upon the mourners from her prize collection. Also included with the letter was a list of instructions, from the directions for her best friend who was to deliver the eulogy and how the friend should care for the designer dress left to her by Trish.

Trish says that she knows the mourners will want to know why she committed suicide. After all, Trish is far better off than some people, such as her ex-boyfriend Randy Sykes and how he cheated with Annette Kelpler. Because of Randy's disgusting habits and transgressions, Trish encourages the mourners to stone him to death along with Annette. After all, "The Bible says that it's all right to cast the first stone if someone dead is telling you to do it..." Trish was kind enough to include with the instructions a cassette called "Stoning."

In the end, the suicide was the fault of Randy and Annette.

Chapter 4, "My Manuscript," is a story about Chad, a gay man and a would-be writer. The author tells the tale of Chad's sexual exploits as well as the young man's relationship with his father.

Chad went through several phases as most people do, and one of the obsessions was learning to play the guitar. Mr. Chatam, the music teacher, who also happens to be "an actual midget," is just one of the characters that appear in Chad's manuscript although in the manuscript, Chatam is adopted by "a group of truck-driving studs."

Chad's father tells a tale about a gay priest who stayed with his family while studying in seminary and how it was the father's first meeting with someone who was gay. It repulsed the father. Slowly Chad begins to suspect that his father has been reading the manuscript.

## Chapters 1-4 Analysis

Sedaris is quick witted and facetious, often adding in the touch of the absurd. In "Parade," the list of celebrities who have had obsessive gay relationships is ludicrous and therefore, hilarious. Sedaris includes Patrick Buchanan, Chuck Connors, Bruce Springsteen and Mike Tyson. The last two were determined to have relationships with Sedaris and were devastated when Sedaris rebuffed them.

"Music For Lovers" is the tale of a cheapskate father who does not believe in paying any kind of medical bills if it can be avoided. Due to this philosophy, the father routinely gives stitches to his daughter, Dawn, but is careful to tell the reader not to use yarn. Dawn also ends up with broken ankles which later have to be amputated due to the father's botched work. Sedaris makes the father character walk the line between truth



and absurdity. The behavior resonates with anyone who has children and is absurd enough to create a raucous caricature of the cheapskate dad.

"The Last You'll Hear From Me" is a tale of ultimate revenge. Trish Moody is preparing to commit suicide and has left a detailed list of instructions. There are instructions to her best friend on how to care for the designer dress left to wear at Trish's funeral. The bit is funny in that Trish tells the friend not to skimp on dry cleaning and recommends that the dress may need to be let out so it will fit.

Trish's tale of the torment endured at the hands of her ex-boyfriend Randy Sykes is a classic scenario in which the writer (Trish) is able to exact cruel and exact revenge. Not only does Randy and his new girlfriend have to endure the embarrassment, but Trish insists that they be stoned to death.

"Manuscript" is an odd story about a young man named Chad who is intent on becoming a writer. The line between the actual occurrences in Chad's life and his fantasy life is blurred to the point that the reader cannot tell what is true to the character's real life. This results in a bizarre amalgamation of the character while allowing the reader to get a good idea of what Chad's finished manuscript might be like.



# Chapters 5-8

## Chapters 5-8 Summary

Chapter 5, "Firestone," details the professional life of the narrator who works at a gas station. The author cannot drive, which makes a service station a peculiar choice; however, the job was recommended by his pastor. The owner of the service station is Carlton Manning, a man that, according to the narrator, has inside information.

The narrator often takes the bus to work and has made many friends. The uniform impresses many people who act as if there is a doctor in the house. The narrator likes these friends and is willing to offer almost anything a friend needs from a comb to a dollar. The narrator does return the favor, however and gives his shoes to a woman whose son had his motorcycle vandalized. The woman is puzzled by the gift and has no idea what should be done with the sneakers. The narrator tells the woman that it will be revealed in time.

The narrator has poor eye-sight but is a quick learner. The job at the service station is challenging, but the narrator catches on and soon excels. In addition to offering regular services such as gas, the narrator also thinks it would be a good idea to offer spiritual counseling to the customers, particularly teens who might otherwise end up in Hell. The customers don't appreciate the advice.

The narrator becomes concerned when customers begin to ask questions about problems with their cars. Carlton says that the customers should be told that it sounds like a transmission problem and to make an appointment. After three weeks, the narrator can no longer deceive customers and as a result ends up on a later shift scrubbing toilets.

After an embarrassing incident, one of the other employees takes over the cleaning of the restrooms. The employee, Taylor, tells Carlton a sob story about supporting his sick son when in truth Taylor is out on work release from the Feeny State Penitentiary where he is serving five years for armed robbery.

In the end, the narrator's job consists of carrying tires and inner tubes into the station at night. It seemed easy for the narrator to completely encase himself in inner tubes and carry as many as he could at once. This resulted in the narrator's picture being in the paper. The job spawned a popular site for passers-by. Carlton enjoyed the extra business and perhaps even more so, being able to call the narrator "The original boob tube."

Chapter 6, "We Get Along," is the story of a mother and son. The mother, Evelyne, is controlling and a bit crazy. Evelyne's husband died of a heart attack, and in her grief and anger, Evelyne smashed out her own car windshield. After a while, Evelyne becomes convinced that her husband isn't really dead at all. The son reminds her that they saw



the body in the morgue and said, "Normal, healthy adults do not choose to spend their time in a refrigerated morgue."

The Evelyne's sister believes that this behavior is part of denial.

The family had rental units. The narrator discusses some of them and their bizarre habits as well as items left behind. Tom Dodges, for example, left behind a pillow case stuffed with dog hair and two ink-stained bras. The Sportsman was a printer who supplied the gay son with pictures of naked women and was completely obsessed with any game that involved a ball.

The son, Dale, has sexual exploits with every tenant and feels somewhat entitled. One day, Dale catches his father and aunt having sex in The Sportsman's apartment. It was discovered after the father died that he had kept a notebook listing every woman he had ever screwed along with her hair color. Evelyne was not mentioned in the book. Evelyne becomes obsessed with W.S., a name in the book, and begins harassing everyone she knows with those initials. Dale knows that W.S. really stands for "Wife's Sister" but has no intention of telling his mother.

Margery stops by after her third husband's AA meeting and demands that Dale get a beer for her. All that whining about drinking has developed a craving in Margery. Dale tortures Margery by making her ask repeatedly, saying that the request sounds more desperate each time. Dale spits in one beer and shakes another so that it will explode when Margery opens it.

Margery and Evelyn talk about various things and Dale finally manages to escape to his room. Dale hopes that Margery will stay for a while so that he will not have to make certain phone calls to women with the initials W.S.

Chapter 7, "Glen's Homophobia Newsletter," is a tale written by Glen, publisher of the Homophobia Newsletter, to his readers. Glen apologizes for the delay in publishing the latest version of the paper which is supposed to be quarterly but the publisher says that it is hard to work forty hours a week and publish the newsletter. Additionally, it costs money to print, staple and mail the newsletter, for which Glen asks for help from potential subscribers who might ordinarily borrow a friend's copy.

Glen may well be his own worst enemy when it comes to homophobia. It is, of course, a real thing that can be traumatic and hateful to those living the gay lifestyle, but Glen often blames incidents on homophobia that are completely unrelated. Examples include arguing with a butcher over the exact meaning of the word "cutlet" and an incident in which Glen took a handicapped parking space away from a man in a wheelchair. Both men were obviously homophobic when they reacted badly toward Glen's obnoxious behavior.

The main crux of the story is Glen's short-lived relationship with Drew Pierson, an employee at the Kwik Stop. Drew is a student of psychology at the local community college. Glen takes advantage of Drew's interest in studying dreams and takes every opportunity to call and speak with Drew or visit the Kwik Stop. It takes quite some time



and an incident with Drew putting the phone in his underwear before he realizes that Glen is gay. The war is on. Glen tries to organize a boycott after Drew threatens to kick Glen's ass for what he did.

Glen also discusses his ex-boyfriend and new lover and makes comical references to the newsletters in which the men previously appeared.

In the end, Glen continues his rage against homophobes, which apparently are everywhere and are out to get him.

Chapter 8, "Don's Story," details the life of Don, a man who has just received the Academy Award for Best Actor, Best Director, and Best Picture. In Don's acceptance speech, he tells the entire premise of the movie from being nobody in Cumberland County, North Carolina to becoming the star of the moment. Once Don was unappreciated and scorned; now he is at the top of the list. The tale is rather bizarre from the time Don quit his job and did nothing but loaf at home for fourteen years, scrounging money from his parents or from under the couch cushions. Don's parents tried everything to get Don to get a job or move out but Don didn't budge. The changed locks on the doors and the padlock on the refrigerator served as little deterrent.

At age thirty-six, Don decided to go to California with \$8 in his pocket. There are strange stories of the people Don met along the way. After Don finally arrived in Los Angeles, he called Brandon Tartikoff at NBC and pitched the idea for the movie of his life. Tartikoff was instantly interested and met with Don. Tartikoff took Don to a party where he met many celebrities, such as Barbra Streisand, Faye Dunaway, Carol Channing, Tom Cruise, Chastity Bono, and Buddy Ebsen. Don became the talk of the town.

Tartikoff gave a contract to Don, saying that the movie had "everything." In the film Charles Bronson played Don's father and Don Rickles appeared in drag as Don's mother. In the end, Don tells those who mistreated him that it's too late to make up for their wrongs. Don was told to end the speech as the time limit was up.

## Chapters 5-8 Analysis

The main character in "Firestone" is reminiscent of a Forest Gump type of character in that he doesn't always realize when he is being taken advantage of or ridiculed. The character did not even want the job at the service station but did not want to seem ungrateful to his pastor. Carlton Manning is a loudmouthed womanizer whose ethics are non-existent. Despite all of the unethical things that go on around the main character, he continues to do the right thing and even tries to help customers who might otherwise go to Hell. The customers do not appreciate the advice. In the end, the character continues to humiliate himself as if he is doing something good.

In "We Get Along," the character of Dale is one who has secrets and keeps others, particularly the secret involving the affair between his newly deceased father and wife's sister, Margery. Evelyne had no idea that her husband had been cheating on her for their entire marriage and is incensed when she discovers a childlike journal with initials





of all the women he had slept with over the years. Evelyne figures out most of them and takes some perverse joy in confronting these women. The one that plagues Evelyne the most is the mysterious "W.S." Evelyne tries to track down this woman and meanwhile does not realize that Dale knows that "W.S." actually stands for "Wife's Sister." Margery continues to act as if nothing has happened and Evelyne plans to continue the assault on all women she knows with the initials "W.S."

In "Glen's Homophobia Newsletter," Glen attempts to create solidarity among all those who have suffered at the hands of homophobes. Glen is on a crusade and is determined to point out the error of everyone's ways while ignoring his own faults. The incidents with the butcher and the man in the wheelchair show that any conflict Glen might encounter has most likely been brought on by himself and have nothing to do with homophobia.

Not only does Glen confront people about their alleged homophobia but urges his readers to do so as well. The main victim in the story is Drew Pierson, an employee at the Kwik Stop, who had been an unwitting target of Glen's and upon discovery acted badly. Glen urges his readers to harass Pierson and boycott the store as a show of unity of rejection of repression.

"Don's Story" is a farce about a hapless man who decides to throw caution to the wind and go to Hollywood to take the film industry by storm. While Don's goals and intentions are completely unrealistic, Sedaris makes it so that the world falls at Don's feet.



# Chapters 9-13

## Chapters 9-13 Summary

Chapter 9, "Season's Greetings," is the story of the Dunbar family. The story consists of a holiday letter written by Jocelyn Dunbar to friends and family. Mrs. Dunbar starts off by saying that despite all of their legal moves, they still plan on celebrating Christmas.

Jocelyn goes on to write out the events that began with the arrival of her husband's illegitimate daughter through to the Christmas season, which finds Jocelyn in jail.

The Dunbars have three children. On Halloween, a twenty-two-year-old Vietnamese girl showed up on the Dunbar's doorstep. It turned out that the girl, Khe Sahn, was the product of Clifford Dunbar's stint in Vietnam before he married Jocelyn. The girl had come to live with her biological father.

Khe Sahn does not make a good impression on Jocelyn. The girl does dote on her father in an inappropriate way, often giggling and sitting on his lap. Khe Sahn speaks almost no English, and seems to lose what vocabulary she has when asked to do chores by Jocelyn. The only time Khe Sahn seems to understand Jocelyn is when there is mention of a trip to the mall.

In addition to the three Dunbar children, Jocelyn and Clifford also take care of their daughter Jacki's crack baby, Don.

Jocelyn's tolerance for Khe Sahn is wearing very thin by the time the Christmas season rolls around. Jocelyn decides that Khe Sahn can take care of the baby while she does some Christmas shopping. Before leaving to go to the shopping center, Jocelyn repeats, "Watch Baby" many times and assumes that the girl understands.

When Jocelyn returns home from her shopping trip, baby Don is nowhere to be found. Instead of watching the baby, Khe Sahn has washed him in the washing machine and the lifeless child is found in the dryer. Jocelyn and the rest of the family are horrified. One thing leads to another and Jocelyn is blamed for the crime. Khe Sahn has won.

Chapter 10, "Jamboree" is the story of Chug. Chug has an older sister, Vicki, who was at one time, an aspiring singer. Vicki had been bitten by the singing bug after she joined the high school chorus. Eventually, Vicki quit the chorus because she was annoyed with the choral director but was insistent that she would go on to become a star. Vicki ended up in an argument with her father and moved out. Vicky's plans went awry after she became pregnant by Marty Manning and agreed to marry him. Vicki is now married to Marty, a homophobe, who has little tolerance for his brother-in-law.

Marty Jr. was born on Thanksgiving Day. Chug says that more heat resembled a doll, one fashioned out of hamburger meat. The unattractive side of the child caused Marty to turn away and eventually Chug quit school to help Vicki take care of the baby.



Chug still lived at home with his father, who refused to have anything to do with Marty Jr. because he felt he was too young to be a grandfather. The father's girlfriend, Rochelle, had moved in and immediately expected Chug to be her full-time slave. Chug lived at home with his father and Rochelle until the couple threw him out. But with no place to go, Chug moved in with Vicki and Marty. Chug ended up sleeping in the garage. Vicki was quick to remind her brother that there were many people who had it worse and that he should not complain. The main reason for Chug to sleep in the garage was to be able to keep an eye on Marty's motorcycle, which had been recently damaged when someone sawed off the handle bars.

Marty bought a Doberman named Jamboree. Everyone in the neighborhood was afraid of the dog. No one but Chug seems to be worried about Jamboree being around baby. One day, Chug decided that it might be wise for him to take the baby and run away to Florida. Chug knew that Marty would not care and that Vicki would soon forget about the baby.

Chapter 7, "After Malison," is a story of a college kid who is eager to meet his hero, Malison, a famous writer. Malison has elected to make an appearance at the Pavilion of Thought to do a reading of his work. The student is so sure that the writer will be exhausted by his sightseeing duties of the day that he will be too tired to express himself properly, and so the student decides to skip the reading. Student finds out where Malison is staying and waits for the writer's return.

Malison gives a lecture for writers at the college. The student is especially excited because he knows the author's work intimately and is eager to hear what the man has to say. The student is disgusted by the fact there are so many people who should not have been present at the lecture and who insist on asking stupid questions and making fools out of themselves.

Throughout the entire evening, the student waits at the Chesterton for Malison to return from the lecture. The student ends up spending a great deal of time in the bar and eventually vomits all over the place. There is no sign of Malison and instead the girl is visited by an older crippled man with two canes. The girl is incensed that the man hates Malison's work.

After many hours, the student goes to the Pavilion of Thought to find out that the lecture is over. The girl never does meet Malison.

Chapter 12, "Barrel Fever," is narrated by Adolph, the son of a woman who faithfully makes New Year's resolutions. After the woman dies, the children find the resolutions and revisit them. Adolph aka Dolph, recalls that while his sisters, Hope, Faith, Joy and Charity became estranged from their mother, Adolph remained close.

Along with the New Year's resolutions, the children find many letters written to them but not mailed. The letters were often hateful and cruel and that alone could explain why they were stored in a file marked "Poison."



Dolph discusses the visits with his mother as she lay in the hospital recovering from surgery to remove cancer from her lymph nodes. Even though Dolph traveled a long way to visit his mother, she was not interested in hearing about his life, but rather complaining about his sisters.

Dolph had a falling out with his best friend and was eager to speak to his mother about the rift. The problems with Gill started when he finally had the courage to admit to Dolph that he was an alcoholic. Dolph made a joke about it, not realizing that Gill was serious. Gill ended up parting ways with Dolph until he was able to understand about the alcoholism and stop trying to get him to drink.

Dolph and Gill had yet another argument on the phone and decided to sever their relationship. It wasn't long after that the Dolph ran into Gill and a group of friends from his AA meetings. Dolph was incredibly drunk at the time and joined the table uninvited. Dolph made a complete fool of himself. Dolph could not stand the fact that the people used the word "nice" twenty-three times and had to leave. As Dolph was leaving, one of the people called out, "Nice to meet you," which Dolph tacked on as number twenty-four in the "nice" category.

Dolph called Gill after his mother died, but instead of receiving a return phone call, received an ugly handmade sympathy card, complete with calligraphy. Dolph was not pleased.

Before the mother died, she had offered Dolph \$40,000 for his inheritance and also to turn off the TV in her hospital room. The TV was controlled by Mrs. Gails, a woman who was hard of hearing and insisted on having the volume on full blast. The mother offered to double the amount of money if Dolph would smother Mrs. Gails with a pillow.

When the sisters and Dolph gathered for the reading of their mothers will, the girls were incensed when the entire estate was to be liquidated and donated to the National Rifle Association. Dolph thought it was somewhat amusing, but then again he had received a check for \$40,000.

Because Dolph had lost his job, he ended up spending a great amount of time in his apartment watching television and drinking. Dolph soon found himself addicted to television and expressed disbelief at the fact that certain TV programs were only shown during the day. According to Dolph, "Daytime TV is a gold mine of pathological behavior."

Dolph is soon embroiled in the world of daytime TV. Dolph's favorites are the confessional talk shows. The character refers to one in which a man in his seventies had received thirty-seven shock treatments to cure him of "Barrel Fever" otherwise known as the DTs. The father was in a wheelchair and stared at his trousers throughout the show while the sixty-year-old daughter told how the man had drunk so much that he thought his wife and children were bees.

Tommy, Dolph's super, often stopped by to have a drink. The man often stayed throughout the afternoon, much to Dolph's dismay. One afternoon, Tommy confided in



Dolph that he had been experiencing blackouts. Dolph thought there was something wrong with the electricity in the building until Tommy explained that after having a few drinks, he blacked out and couldn't remember anything from Sunday evening until Wednesday afternoon when he was tied to the radiator in his apartment with a pair of pantyhose. To Dolph, this story was even better than daytime TV.

Dolph couldn't help but torture Tommy, telling the man that he had arrived at Dolph's door in a skirt and begged for money. Before long, Tommy had checked himself into a rehab center in New Jersey.

Dolph also believed that being an alcoholic was not Gill's idea but rather that of his supervisor at work. The supervisor had seen Gill having drinks at lunch and eventually confessed to being an alcoholic and therefore, he knew the signs. Dolph was disappointed when Gill became an alcoholic. Unlike Tommy, Gill had no interesting stories and lacked the requisite blackouts. Dolph knew all about blackouts but never had any horror stories to tell.

Dolph's behavior becomes increasingly strange up to the point that he takes to calling Scotland Yard after each episode of *Mystery on PBS* to congratulate them for a job well done. After continually wetting his pants and falling asleep atop the vacuum cleaner, Dolph refers to one of the cards written by his mother, one that reminded her to "be good." Dolph decides right then that if the telephone rang and someone instructed him to stop drinking, he would completely change his life.

Later that evening, an old classmate called to express condolences over the death of Dolph's mother. After listening to the woman go on and on about how "crazy" her life is, Dolph decides that it is better to keep on as he is rather than to "be good" and end up teaching underprivileged children how to make fudge.

## Chapters 9-13 Analysis

Khe Sahn is a manipulative girl, who wants nothing more than to have her father, a man for whom she has other than fatherly feelings, all to her herself. The story has definite oedipal undertones and no one seems to be able to recognize this except for Jocelyn.

The chain of events show the Jocelyn is quite naïve and was destined to fall into Khe Sahn's trap. It is clear to the reader that the girl has triumphed, and it is highly unlikely that Jocelyn will be spared from trial and conviction.

"Jamboree" is a strange tale about a young man who ends up serving as a nanny for his sister's deformed baby. The sister, Vicki, is not cut out to be a mother and allows Chug to take primary responsibility of her child. Marty, Vicki's husband and the baby's father, is basically useless and cares about nothing other than his motorcycle and the dog, a vicious animal that is allowed to roam around the house despite the fact that there is a baby present.



While Chug seems to be relatively immature until the baby came, he takes the role of uncle quite seriously and is by far the best thing to ever happen to the child. Marty chose to ignore his son and it seemed as if Vicki was more devoted to her husband than her child. In the end, Chug is contemplating taking the baby and running away, knowing that he would be able to take better care of Marty Jr. than his sister. It was a sad realization that Marty would not care if his son was gone, and that Vicki would easily get over the loss.

"After Malison" is the story of a female college student who idolizes the work of a famous writer who has come to campus. The girl feels as if she is the only one at the university who can understand or appreciate the complex work of the writer and is better than other people attempt to analyze or criticize the work. Because of the girl's devotion, she is convinced that she should have a private audience with Malison and spends the entire evening waiting for the writer at his hotel. The girl spends most of the time waiting in the bar, where she drinks too much and gets sick. Eventually the student wanders out into the rain only to find that Malison's lecture is over and the man has flown back to New York.

Chapter 12, "Barrel Fever," is a strange tale of Dolph, a man whose mother has just died. Dolph was close to his mother, even though she was a complainer and often unkind to those around her. The woman was combative and disagreeable enough that her four daughters, Hope, Charity, Faith and Joy avoided her for years on end. After the woman died, the children found a stack of documents marked "Poison." Among the documents was fifteen years worth of New Year's resolutions that were never kept. Each resolution represented the woman's desire to change, no matter how temporary. Dolph kept some of the cards, perhaps with the idea to change as well. Of course, he does not change.

Dolph's relationship with Gill goes from being perfect to non-existent after Gill admits to being an alcoholic. Dolph is resentful of the admission and the friendship suffers to the point of breaking. Dolph wants Gill to start drinking again so they can have fun like they used to back in the day.

After Dolph loses his job, things go downhill. Dolph spends all day in front of the TV watching soap operas and talk shows and eventually, the shows become his world.

Dolph's interaction with Tommy shows that he still has a mean streak. Dolph begins to realize that he also has a problem with alcohol and the blackouts and bizarre behavior increase dramatically. Dolph is so deep in denial that he cannot see what the alcohol is doing to his life. At the end, Dolph decides it is better to go on the way he has been rather than ending up like his old classmate.



# Chapters 13-16

## Chapters 13-16 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 13, "Diary of a Smoker," is the first piece in the Essays section. Sedaris was a long time smoker, as was his mother, Sharon. Sharon Sedaris was never without a cigarette in hand, and even after being diagnosed with cancer, Sharon never quit smoking. Sedaris jokes that on Christmas, the Sedaris children would often play, "Find Mom, Find Mom's Cigarettes." According to the author, every single picture ever taken of his mother showed a cigarette, no matter the activity. Even after Sharon was diagnosed with cancer, it never occurred to anyone in the family that she might actually quit. There was no judgment, as Sedaris believes that each person has the right to choose his or her quality of life. Sharon was always fond of saying, "Sooner or later, something's going to get you."

After the EPA report on second hand smoke came out, Sedaris was informed by his partner, Hugh, that there would no longer be smoking in their apartment. The compromise ended up being that Sedaris could smoke in the apartment as long as the windows were open. The author claims that he realized just how cold it was outside.

Chapter 14, "Giantess," is the story of Dave, a hapless writer, who is attempting to break into the business while holding down odd jobs. The writer has an imagination, shown when he accidentally breaks a collector's plate at a client's house and instead of confessing thinks that he should make up a story about a squirrel that jumped in through the window, smashed the plate and ran away. The writer's partner, a woman who is a friend of the client, refuses to play along.

Dave is not well suited to being a handyman. One day, he blows a fuse and on the way back from changing it stops into the apartment of a friend to watch Oprah. Sirens alert the man and soon he realizes that the heat gun that had been plugged in at the client's apartment had set fire to the curtains.

Dave had written a letter to Giantess, an erotic magazine. The magazine had placed an ad looking for writers. Dave received a call from the magazine's editor, Hank, who claimed that Dave had potential. Dave simply had to learn how to cut to the chase and get to the "turn on" as soon as possible.

Dave receives back issues of the magazine so that he might familiarize himself with the way the other writers created stories around gigantic women. Dave asks himself a number of questions, including how and why a woman might grow to be seventy-five feet tall with nipples the size of manhole covers. It is all very strange to Dave but he is willing to try.

Chapter 15, "The Curly Kind," tells the story of a man who works for a cleaning service. While taking out the garbage for one of the clients, the worker saw an Irish nanny with





two small children, one of which was pitching a fit because the nanny bought the wrong kind of Cheetos.

The author tells of some of the clients he serves, from the Rosenblatts to the sadomasochistic G.L. with filthy blinds. Finally, the last client is one of the writers for Sesame Street, the third one the writer had worked for during the month. When the worker thought he was alone, he picked up one of the author's eight Emmy Awards and began to deliver a speech, only to be caught by a fellow worker.

Chapter 16, "Santaland Diaries," was Sedaris' first commercial success, establishing his style as one of sarcastic wit and wry humor.

At age thirty-three, Sedaris was a newcomer in New York and was looking for work. Finding work during the holiday season is relatively easy. Sedaris was turned down by UPS after he told the interviewer that he just liked the brown uniforms. Despite the author's previous pity for people that had to dress up and humiliate themselves in public, Sedaris applies for a job at Macy's as a Christmas elf.

Inside Macy's is an entire new world known as "Santaland." Santaland was the place where children and their tired parents congregated to commune with Santa and have pictures taken. The store requires the elves to always be polite, friendly and courteous to the 22,000 people per day that traipse through Santaland.

Sedaris quickly discovered that Santaland a magical world unto itself. After receiving intense training on how to operate the cash register and follow the particular rules in Santaland, the author is also schooled regarding theft policies and how to treat a child that might be covered in third degree burns or missing a nose.

There are many different areas of Santaland, many of which have been given code names by the employees. The two most popular are the "Vomit Corner" where "nauseous children tend to surrender the contents of their stomachs"; and the "Oh, My God, Corner," where parents are taken when they go into shock after seeing how long the line is to get to see Santa.

There are a large number of positions in Santaland and the elves take turns at each job. According to the author, "On any given day you can be an Entrance Elf, a Water Cooler Elf, a Bridge Elf, a Train Elf, Maze Elf, Island Elf, Magic Window Elf, Emergency Exit Elf, Counter Elf, Magic Tree Elf, Pointer Elf, Santa Elf, Photo Elf, Usher Elf, Cash Register Elf, Runner Elf, or Exit Elf," The management makes it clear that even when one is performing the job of Santa Elf, Santa is not allowed to use that person as a personal slave.

Sedaris goes through the routine of how the children are led into meet Santa and all of the trials and tribulations of getting a child to pose and smile. Elves are often required to be in the photos.

One of the strict rules is that the elves must ignore the celebrities that come through the line. Sedaris spots Walter Cronkite and Phil Collins as well as some soap opera stars.





The author points out that last year a girl was fired after asking Goldie Hawn for an autograph.

The author and a fellow elf from Brooklyn suddenly realize that Santa is an anagram for Satan. The elves were off and running, referring to the real Satan and how everyone loves him.

There are many stories of the odd behavior of the children and how the author lies to them all, handing out compliments like candy. One child misbehaves and the mother says that unless he is good, Santa will not bring any toys. The child sassed the mother, saying that Santa already promised. The mother asked Sedaris (whose name is Crumpet) to confirm that Santa would replace gifts with coal. Instead, Crumpet tells the child that Santa does not do that any more. Rather, Santa goes into the house and steals all of the electrical appliances.

As the day wears on, Crumpet gets tired and changes his name to "Blisters."

As the season goes on, the parents become more confrontational. One woman insists on speaking to a manager because she wants a black Santa. When the woman is told that the Santa on duty is black, the woman replies, "Not black enough." Another woman wants a white Santa. People encourage their children to pee in artificial snow and leave diapers near the entrance to Santa's house.

At the end of the story, Blisters has to leave to catch a plane. Blisters has waited as long as he could but must tell the manager that it is time to go. The manager merely squeezes his shoulder all the while screaming at a customer, calling her a bitch.



# Characters

## David Sedaris appears in All/Author

David Sedaris (1956 - )

Time Magazine's 2001 Humorist of the Year, David Sedaris is a well known satirist and essay writer. Most know him from NPR's American Life, where the author's original radio pieces have aired for many years. The humorist's works include a number of collected personal essays, which have appeared in best selling books "Me Talk Pretty One Day" and "Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim". Sedaris has also been nominated for two Grammy awards for his spoken word material.

Born in New York and raised in North Carolina, David Sedaris is a cut to the quick kind of humorist. The author's works, particularly his essays, are self-effacing, revealing, and hilarious. Much of Sedaris' work relays stories of his family - parents and five siblings - and their unique relationships. Many may think that Sedaris writes without censorship and his memories and experiences are sometimes politically incorrect and slightly risqué. Others applaud the author for candor and realism.

Together with his sister, Amy Sedaris, the author has written a number of successful plays that have appeared in such prestigious locations as Lincoln Center. Sedaris' newest collection of essays and fables, "When You Are Engulfed in Flames", was released in June 2008.

## Amy Sedaris appears in The Last You'll Hear From Me

Amy Sedaris (1961 - )

Amy Sedaris was born in Endicott, New York and raised in the suburbs of Raleigh, North Carolina. She is the daughter of David and Sharon Sedaris and one of the six Sedaris children.

Amy is an accomplished actress, author, and comedian. Known for her work as part of the Talent Family with her brother, humorist David Sedaris, Amy has co-written a number of plays that have been performed in such noted locations as Lincoln Center.

Amy's training as a comedian began with a stint in the famed Second City Troupe in Chicago as well as In addition to her work as a humorist Amy Sedaris has appeared in a wide array of television shows and feature films. Her filmography includes the feature films Elf, Shrek the Third, Bewitched, and Maid in Manhattan. Television appearances include My Name is Earl, Monk, Strangers with Candy, and Sex in the City.



In 2006, Amy became a best selling author with her lighthearted tribute to cooking titled, *I Like You: Hospitality Under the Influence*. Amy also operates a home business in the form of *Dusty Food Cupcakes*, a cupcake and cheese ball enterprise.

In a 2006 appearance on *Late Night with David Letterman*, Amy announced that her imaginary boyfriend, Ricky, had recently been murdered and she now lives with his ghost.

## **Oprah Winfrey appears in Parade**

Oprah Winfrey - Dynamic and iconic talk show host that had Sedaris as a guest in "Parade."

## **Anita O'Day appears in Music for Lovers**

Anita O'Day was a jazz singer who is often affiliated with the "West Coast Cool School of Jazz."

## **Dawn appears in Music for Lovers**

Dawn - The author's tormented daughter in "Music for Lovers."

## **Trish Moody appears in The Last You'll Hear From Me**

Trish Moody - The woman who committed suicide in "The Last You'll Hear From Me."

## **Chad appears in My Manuscript**

Chad - The would-be writer who is obsessed with sexual exploits.

## **Carlton Manning appears in Firestone**

Carlton Manning - The slightly unethical service station owner in "Firestone."

## **Don appears in Don's Story**

Don - Author of "Don's Story," a movie about the life of a man who leaves his home in North Carolina to make it big in the movie industry.

## **Khe Sahn appears in Season's Greetings**

Khe Sahn - Illegitimate daughter in "Season's Greetings." Khe Sahn is a manipulative girl who is the daughter of Mr. Dunbar, conceived when he was in Korea. Khe Sahn likes to pretend that she doesn't understand English unless it involves a reward or treat.



# Objects/Places

## Hollywood appears in Don's Story

Hollywood, California is more than a location on the map to Don in "Don's Story." Hollywood represents the culmination of a fourteen year period in Don's life and the formulation of a movie that would go on to win Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Director.

As the center of the film industry, Hollywood is a mystical and contradictory place. Don is extremely naïve in his expectations of going to Hollywood, making a phone call and getting a movie contract. Of course, in the world of David Sedaris, that is exactly what happens. The reader is amused by Don's simplistic plan and resulting journey.

Brandon Tartikoff, former head of NBC, is the person who is most enthralled by Don and immediately offers the thirty-six-year-old from North Carolina a movie deal. Don is also introduced to Hollywood's elite, including highly recognizable celebrities including Faye Dunaway, Chastity Bono, Barbra Streisand, and Buddy Ebsen.

The depiction of Hollywood may not be too far off when it comes to the possibility of overnight success of a former nobody.

## Macy's appears in Santaland Diaries

Macy's Department Store is one of the oldest, largest and most well known department stores in the world. It was founded in 1858 as a "fancy goods store." Although Macy's has locations all over the United States, the company's flagship store is a landmark and iconic symbol. The flagship store is located on 151 West 34th Street in Manhattan, New York City, New York.

In "Santaland Diaries," the main character decides to apply for a job as a Christmas elf at Macy's for the holiday season. Sedaris describes the part of Macy's turned into Santaland, where he will be working as an elf. The author claims that Santaland is beautiful with false snow, twinkling lights, bridges, train sets, mechanical toys, full decorated trees and giant candy canes. The elves have created their own names for various parts of Santaland, including "Vomit Corner" and the "Oh, My God, Corner."

The job at Macy's Santaland entails selling photos of children posing with Santa Claus. The elves get to take up different positions in Santaland, acting as Magic Tree Elf, Usher Elf, Emergency Exit Elf, Water Cooler Elf, Maze Elf, Train Elf, Cashier Elf, Island Elf, and so forth and so on.



## **Cumberland County, North Carolina appears in Don's Story**

Cumberland County, North Carolina - Hometown of Don from "Don's Story."

## **Los Angeles appears in Don's Story**

Los Angeles - Home of the movie industry and scene of Don's big movie debut in "Don's Story."

## **Tiffany Circle appears in Season's Greetings**

Tiffany Circle - The street on which the Dunbar family lives.

## **Glen's Homophobia Newsletter appears in Glen's Homophobia Newsletter**

Glen's Homophobia Newsletter - Quarterly publication for people against homophobia and main topic of the story of the same name.

## **The Chesterton appears in After Malison**

The Chesterton - The hotel used by the famous writer Malison in "After Malison."

## **Pavilion of Thought appears in After Malison**

Pavilion of Thought - Location at which Malison is scheduled to hold a literary reading.

## **Oprah Winfrey Show appears in Parade**

Oprah Winfrey Show - A daytime talk show hosted by iconic celebrity Oprah Winfrey.

## **Giantess Magazine appears in Giantess**

Giantess Magazine - Erotic men's magazine that the main character approached for a job.



# Themes

## Sex

David Sedaris is known for being a writer who is not afraid to express his sexual side in his work. Sedaris, openly gay, often creates true to life scenarios in which the characters in the story celebrate their sexuality or are trying to deal with those who are homophobic or violent.

One good example is "My Manuscript," in which Sedaris fantasizes about various people and wonders what it would be like for the men in the fantasies to be put into some unusual sexual situation. The best example is the main character's fantasy about his music teacher, Mr. Chatam. "In my manuscript, Mr. Chatam is kept in an orphanage, completely nude, his head and body shaved bald, until he is adopted by a group of truck-driving studs for use as a sex baby."

In "Glen's Homophobia Newsletter," the main character, Glen, is obsessed with homophobia to the point of believing that anyone who is not gay is homophobic. Glen is beyond realizing that many of the people in the story are not homophobic, simply reacting to Glen as a person. Drew Pierson, an employee at the Kwik Stop, is homophobic. Once Pierson finally figures out that Glen's frequent visits and requirements for items from the bottom shelf are no more than a ploy to attempt to seduce him, Drew becomes irate and threatening. As a result, Glen fights back, urging other gays to harass Drew at home and to boycott the store.

"Parade" is all about sex. Sedaris creates a hilarious string of characters that he has supposedly dated and cast aside. The rebuffed lovers, who are always desperate and obsessed with Sedaris, include Charleton Heston, Mike Tyson, and Bruce Springsteen, among others.

## Family Relationships

David Sedaris is well known for his stories and essays involving family relationships. Amy Sedaris, the author's sister, often takes part in his work. The book is dedicated to Sharon Sedaris, the author's chain smoking, tee-totaling mother, who was said to be his muse up until the time of her death.

Sedaris' stories involving family relationships are always highly dysfunctional. In "Don's Story, the main character refuses to work for fourteen years and in desperate attempt after desperate attempt, Don's parents try to get him to move out. The plan escalates until the refrigerator and cabinets are padlocked.

In "We Get Along," Dale and Evelyne are a mother and son team that make due after the death of Evelyne's cheating husband. Dale doesn't always want to go along with his



mother's plans to harass potential paramours of his father's but must maintain the family front.

"Season's Greetings" is an excellent example of a dysfunctional family relationship. The main character is Mrs. Dunbar. The Dunbars have taken on responsibility for their daughter's crack baby and get another shock when Mr. Dunbar's illegitimate Vietnamese daughter moves in with the family. The girl manages to divide and conquer the husband and wife and when the wife is prepared to find a way to get rid of the girl, she is framed for murder.

## **Ambition**

Many of the characters in "Barrel Fever" by David Sedaris confront ambition, whether it is a strong characteristic or a non-existent one.

Don, the main character in "Don's Story," has no ambition for the fourteen years since losing his job at a local cafeteria. Don often stays in his room all day and flatly refuses to get a job. Don claims that he is preparing to take Hollywood by storm. Don's parents scoff.

Don ends up channeling ambition when he reaches Hollywood and a movie is made about his life.

The essays, "Giantess," "The Curly Kind" and "Santaland Diaries" all contain pieces of ambition, from the struggling writer who takes on odd jobs in order to support himself to the main character in Santaland Diaries who takes a holiday job as an elf.

"My Manuscript" deals with ambition in the main character's desire to write a book. One might say that Trish Moody in "The Last You'll Hear From Me" could be considered to be ambitious as she leaves detailed instructions for the mourners at her funeral to seek revenge on her ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend for causing her suicide.



# Style

## Point of View

The stories and essays in "Barrel Fever" by David Sedaris are presented in the first person point of view. Sedaris is well known for his characterization skills and in this case, the work is best shown through the first person. Using the first person allows Sedaris to give the reader great insight into the personality and vision regarding each character.

Many of Sedaris' characters are unusual and often twisted. No matter how bizarre the characters become, Sedaris always adds in enough reality and relatable material to make the story appealing to a general audience. A good example of this is "Music for Lovers," in which the father in the story frequently takes it upon himself to cure his daughter's ills and injuries with his own frightfully lacking medical experience. It is unlikely that most people would put casts on someone's broken ankles in order to save on medical bills yet the ongoing argument between parent and child over music is universal.

The same can be said of "The Last You'll Hear from Me," the suicide letter from Trish Moody detailing every aspect of her own funeral, including the dress that should be worn by her best friend down to supplying the music that should be played while mourners stone her ex-boyfriend to death with paper weights. While that seems to be a delicious fantasy for some, the story also involves anger and friendship.

In each of Sedaris' stories and essays, he is able to transform himself into the new character leaving just enough similarity to create unmistakable style.

## Setting

The settings used in "Barrel Fever" by David Sedaris vary wildly, although there are some similarities. Sedaris uses North Carolina several times in the stories and essays. Sedaris was born in New York and raised in North Carolina. Stories may take place there or the character may be from that area of the country.

Several stories take place in the home. These include "Season's Greetings" and the home of the Dunbar family on Tiffany Circle. New York is featured in several stories and in particular, Macy's in "Santaland Diaries."

Buses and trains offer fodder for humorous exploits. There are two good examples of this. The first is in "Don's Story," the tale of a man traveling from North Carolina to Los Angeles with only \$8 in his pocket. Don meets and relates to many different people on the bus but eventually gets thrown off in the middle of nowhere after stabbing a woman in the side with a key. The second example is in "Firestone." The main character rides a bus to work every day. Because the man wears a uniform, the passengers on



the bus treat him with the utmost respect, even though the uniform is from a service station. The man makes many friends on the bus and strongly resembles a Forest Gump kind of character.

## Language and Meaning

The language used in "Barrel Fever" by David Sedaris varies by story. Sedaris is a master at creating characters through their language, usually slang or some regionalism that is relatively easy to place. Sedaris is fond of hillbilly and backwoods type slang of the not too bright or poorly educated. The language is used not to demean but to add flavor to the story.

A good example can be seen in "Season's Greetings" where Mrs. Dunbar is casting doubts on a neighbor who agreed to testify against her. "Clarise Claremont-Shea has no more sense than a hand puppet. She has three names!"

Another good example is the language used for Drew Pierson in "Glen's Homophobia Newsletter." Drew becomes angry when he realizes that Glen is gay and has made a fool of him. "Fag! I'll kick your ass good and hard the next time I see you! Goddamn you, Fag!"

Some of the characters also practice a dominant attitude that is easily related to a figure in the reader's life. One example is Rochelle in "Jamboree," who scolds her boyfriend's son in a very motherly tone.

The essays are more consistent with Sedaris' own manner of speaking. The language is colorful and descriptive as the author paints vivid pictures for the reader.

## Structure

"Barrel Fever" by David Sedaris is a collection of short stories and essays. The book is 195 pages long, broken into two sections.

The first section, Stories, contains twelve stories. The shortest story is four pages in length; the longest story is eighteen pages in length. The average length of the chapters in the Stories section is eleven pages.

The second section, Essays, contains four essays. The shortest essay is four pages in length; the longest essay is six pages in length. The average length of the essays is four pages.

There is no obvious order to the stories or essays, except that perhaps Sedaris saved "Santaland Diaries" for the final piece. "Santaland Diaries" was Sedaris' first major success.

The short stories have varying topics although many of them deal with recurring themes of parent and child relationships and homosexuality.

The essays begin with "Diary of a Smoker," a short story focused on the smoking habits of Sedaris' mother, Sharon, to whom the book is dedicated. Sharon Sedaris died from cancer. The second, third and fourth essays deal with the life of a struggling writer who takes on an interesting array of jobs.



## Quotes

"Everybody loves me. I'm the most important person in the lives of almost everyone I know and a good number of people I've never even met." p. 3

"The Bible says that it's all right to cast the first stone if someone dead is telling you to do it..." p. 21

"Together we are a humanity who might take a moment or two to clean up after ourselves." p. 35

"Folks, you are looking at the original boob tube." p. 37

"Normal, healthy adults do not choose to spend their time in a refrigerated morgue." p. 40

"You're only as sick as your secrets." p. 41

"I would sooner eat a Vaseline sandwich than witness two minutes of football on TV, let alone an actual, live game." p. 43

"I give Margery my 'I have seen you naked' look but, as always, it has no effect." p. 51

"Khe Sahn, of course, said nothing. It is part of her act to tug at her hemline and feign shyness when first confronted by strangers." p. 91

"My mother was never much of a housekeeper and it drove me to distraction, the chaos of our home." p. 162

"I am a thirty-three year old man applying for a job as an elf." p. 168

## Topics for Discussion

Do you think Trish Moody would be able to witness the stoning at her funeral?

Do you think there were any underlying reasons Drew tormented Glen?

How long might it take before Evelyne figures out that "W.S." means "Wife's Sister?"

Would you ever consider applying for a position as an elf in a major department store? Explain.

Why do you think the character in "Firestone" put up with Carlton's abuse?

What kind of resolution do you expect from Mrs. Dunbar's trial? Will Khe Sahn ever be found out?

Describe what might happen if Dawn's father continues to give her medical treatment.