

# **Holidays on Ice Study Guide**

## **Holidays on Ice by David Sedaris**

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# The SantaLand Diaries

## The SantaLand Diaries Summary

David Sedaris sits in a coffee shop reading the employment page when he discovers an advertisement soliciting elves to work in the Macy's department store SantaLand. Even though he has reservations about becoming a pitiable figure in a public department store, he is desperate for work so that he can pay off his student loans. Since his dream of becoming a writer for the television soap opera "One Life to Live," has yet to be realized, the middle-aged Sedaris decides to interview for the position. After a probing and thorough intellectual, psychological, and physical evaluation, Sedaris is hired.

The next step is to train the newly-hired elves. Sedaris learns how to manage the cash register, a daunting feat that paralyzes Sedaris with fear that he will fail and be beaten to death by irate customers. He also dreads the eventual humiliation of wearing his costume in the department store outside of SantaLand. Macy's security department warns the new elves not to steal from the store, and then a sign language teacher gives the elves a lesson in basic sign. Finally, Sedaris and his colleagues take a tour of SantaLand in order to become familiar with the holiday labyrinth. They also learn about the various positions that they may have to man, from assisting a Santa Claus to showing patrons in, out, and around SantaLand. Sedaris leaves training certain that he will be a prepared but low-key elf.

On the opening day of SantaLand, Sedaris names himself "Crumpet," dresses in his festive green and yellow costume, and encourages children to look through a window at Santa Claus until a man approaches him and insults him. Sedaris happily thanks the man and wishes that he had embarrassed him in return. Instead, he begins to instruct children to look through the window to spot famous celebrities and athletes. Soon, his manager reassigns him to a new position. Sedaris grows more comfortable at SantaLand. One day, two boisterous New Jersey couples visit Santa and the husbands ask for "a broad with big tits," for Christmas.

As a photo elf, Sedaris takes photographs of families and offers to sell prints. However, many families bring their own camera equipment and instruct their children to act out elaborate choreography on Santa's lap. Some children cry when they see Santa, but Sedaris still takes their pictures because the parents have their hearts so set on the photograph.

Many adults visit Santa without children. One man who does not speak English stands in the line to see Santa for hours without knowing why. Another middle-aged man visits Santa multiple times every day and grows so excited that he pees. A middle-aged woman arrives to see Santa wearing a pink, lacy child's dress, and skips around SantaLand after her visit with St. Nick. Conversely, Sedaris also spots many famous celebrities, and one day when Phil Collins arrives with his daughter, Sedaris sends throngs of Macy's shoppers after the singer.



Sedaris, or Crumpet the elf, realizes one day that Santa is an anagram of Satan and spends the rest of the day mistakenly calling the jolly philanthropist after the devil. Sedaris develops a crush on a Queens-based elf named Snowball, who flirts with every elf and Santa in SantaLand. Another elf, Sleighbell, mentions that she once played a role on "One Life to Live." A few other staff members mention that they have connections to the soap opera, and Sedaris suddenly sees his dream grow closer. However, he must continue to witness the daily events of SantaLand, including a woman allowing her son to pee on the display, a marriage proposal, and a chicken pox-riddled child out in public while contagious.

Most annoying to Sedaris is the Santa Claus who remains in character all day long. He insists that he lives at the North Pole and spends his days making toys for good little children. Sedaris also dislikes another elf he calls "The Walrus," a pudgy, unattractive sleaze who hits on every woman who arrives at SantaLand. One little boy misbehaves in line and Sedaris informs him that if he does not act appropriately, then Santa will come to take away everything he loves, including his television, his lights, and all his worldly possessions. The boy's mother, at first happy that the elf is taking her side, grows wary.

To other children, Sedaris gives copious compliments. When the children arrive on Santa's lap, Sedaris sees that they rarely get to speak for themselves because the parents speak for them. All the adults who sit on Santa's lap say the same things and Sedaris comes to the conclusion that human beings are fundamentally identical, except for their fingerprints.

One day, Sedaris gets to assist a particularly wonderful Santa who sings to all of the children and reminds the families that Christmas is about family and love instead of presents. This day's work is the only one that stands out as a positive experience for both employees and patrons of SantaLand. The Santa's warmth and enthusiasm for his work spreads to the family, and the parents' priorities shift from getting the perfect photograph to loving their children. Unfortunately, the next day Sedaris is back ushering families into different Santas' homes. Some families prefer a black Santa while others prefer a white one, and Sedaris must accommodate those requests. Even worse than this run-in with prejudice, Sedaris next tackles his phobia of the cash register, where he must void multiple transactions and deal with the ensuing paperwork.

On Christmas Eve, Sedaris goes to work to find that SantaLand is as full and manic as it has been all season. Many elves simply do not come to work on this last day and Sedaris rises to the challenge. He and his Santa whisk the children in and out of the house as efficiently as possible, and Sedaris waits until the very last minute before approaching his manager, a woman currently spewing profanities at a customer, to whisper that he has to catch a flight home.



## The SantaLand Diaries Analysis

This episodic short story chronicles David Sedaris' seasonal employment at the Macy's department store SantaLand in New York City. Each episode focuses on a specific event that occurs during this time, and these events vary in length, from two sentences to several pages of text. Sedaris serves as the narrator and main character.

The entire SantaLand patron pool seems to consist of psychotics, psychologically unstable parents, empty-headed and selfish brats, and throngs of unremarkable and unoriginal families. SantaLand is a carnival of freaks, not a site committed to seasonal magic and brotherly love. However, as much as Sedaris reveals about the SantaLand patrons, he does not subvert the mission of SantaLand, but rather simply observes it while remaining true to his own personality. He is not upbeat, perky, or tirelessly patient with cranky holiday shoppers. Instead, he watches all these cracked families and enjoys their public displays of psychosis. Ironically, the place that embodies the sweetest illusion of American childhood is the site of Sedaris' disillusionment of the normal American family.

Throughout the story, Sedaris records the dementia that colors the American families he encounters. Parents at SantaLand live vicariously through their children, and seem to care more about a marketable Christmas card photo than they do about their children's experiences with Santa Claus. Though Sedaris never comments explicitly about the parents' lack of judgment, he does describe their actions clearly and without any flattery. For example, when a husband and father asks for a well-endowed woman for Christmas, he belittles his wife and embarrasses himself and his family while visiting the jolliest figure in American culture, a saint who embodies love and humanity. That irony continues to resurface throughout the rest of the narrative, represented not only by patrons of Santa, but also by the Santas and elves.

The Santa who never breaks character and The Walrus both display the fraud of commercial Christmas. These two employees of SantaLand are polar opposites in their representations of the holiday spirit. The Santa Claus has no sense of reality and no clear sense of identity beyond the St. Nick myth. No human being can connect with this man, because he has no opinions, no weaknesses, and no genuine sense of self. On the other hand, The Walrus is sleazy and obviously not a paradigm of family fun. He sexualizes SantaLand, annoys patrons, and serves as a constant reminder that SantaLand is a fraud. Both extremes, the too-real and the too-false, annoy Sedaris and disturb the reader.

Sedaris plays a critical role in SantaLand as a dedicated elf, and he plays a crucial role as a storyteller as a clear-sighted, objective narrator. Sedaris has nothing but good intentions when he takes on this job, but his preference for uniqueness rather than appropriateness often causes problems. When a mother calls on him to help control her child, he wants to defend the mother and ensure the child's good behavior. However, instead of relying on the clichéd coal-in-stocking threat, he exaggerates an imaginative post-apocalyptic scenario in which Santa repossesses the child's entire material world.



His intentions are correct, but his execution is as warped as the families he intends to help. He is a good worker, a dedicated elf who does not judge the insane while harshly condemning parents who manipulate their children and boorish, crude behavior.

The only bright spot in Sedaris' experience at SantaLand comes in the form of a Santa who understands the true meaning of Christmas. He is warm, giving, and engaging. He involves the parents in the child's experience so much that the parents are happy to have been able to spend time with their child during such a special interlude. This Santa is the one island in the midst of the sea of materialism, crankiness, and insanity that floods the population during the holiday season.



# Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!!

## Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!! Summary

Jocelyn Dunbar writes this dark version of a holiday newsletter. She opens with warm wishes to her readers and acknowledges their certain shock that after the tumultuous year that the Dunbars have had that Jocelyn would still produce a holiday newsletter.

Next, she introduces Khe Sahn, the newest twenty-two-year-old member of their family. Clifford, the patriarch of the Dunbar clan, apparently impregnated a Vietnamese woman while on his tour of duty in the war. Twenty-two years later, on Halloween night, Khe Sahn arrives at the Dunbar's door wearing a lot of makeup and very little clothing. Jocelyn mistakes her for a prostitute, but after hearing from Khe Sahn's lawyer, grudgingly admits her into the Dunbar home.

Jocelyn mentions that her son, Kevin, is excelling in school. Khe Sahn, on the other hand, will not learn English and will not do anything to help inside the household. Jocelyn and Clifford's youngest son, Kyle, an artist who carves gnomes out of soap, ignores Khe Sahn. The Dunbar daughter, recently abandoned by her unemployed husband, leaves her newborn son Don in the care of her parents while she seeks treatment for her drug addiction. Even so, Jocelyn's chief complaint is still Khe Sahn, especially when the Vietnamese girl continues to dress herself scantily and throw herself at Clifford and then at Kevin. After she meets Kevin, she seduces him and then pines for him day and night. Jocelyn warns Khe Sahn to leave her one successful child alone, but the girl remains mute and disinterested in Jocelyn's hysterics.

One day near Christmas Jocelyn runs some errands and asks Khe Sahn to watch baby Don. She repeats the request loudly, and Khe Sahn seems to understand. However, when Jocelyn returns some hours later, she discovers baby Don in the dryer and Khe Sahn upstairs. Khe Sahn is arrested and baby Don zipped into a body bag, but the next day Jocelyn's neighbors come forward and testify that they saw Jocelyn creep into her own basement that afternoon. Khe Sahn herself incriminates Jocelyn for baby Don's murder. Jocelyn closes the letter by entreating her friends and family to attend her hearing and defend her character.

## Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!! Analysis

The sunny and relentlessly merry tradition of the family newsletter takes on a dark patina in this short story, told from the point of view of a woman who may very well have



put her own grandchild into a washing machine in order to free herself of a Vietnamese step-daughter. Nevertheless, Jocelyn gamely sticks to Christmas merriment, largely with the aid of copious exclamation points, often up to twelve at a time.

From the first mention of Khe Sahn, in which Jocelyn jokes that no, the family has not adopted a Siamese cat, the matriarch's distaste for the Vietnamese girl is apparent. By likening her to animals and taking every opportunity to call her lazy, stupid, slutty, and selfish, Jocelyn cuts down Khe Sahn constantly. Unfortunately, her effort unintentionally calls attention to Jocelyn's own pettiness and growing hatred. For example, when Jocelyn writes that she herself sewed two beautiful burlap dresses for Khe Sahn, she attempts to show that she has generously given of her own time and energy, but in fact she has only reinforced the fact that she wants to drape her step-daughter in itchy, unattractive robes. Jocelyn as a narrator cannot be trusted, as she tells only her side of the story. However, she unwillingly paints herself to be as vindictive as she describes Khe Sahn to be.

She blames the arrival of Khe Sahn for all her family's troubles, yet in fact two of her three children face serious social and personal obstacles before Khe Sahn's fateful arrival. Jocelyn and Clifford have a flawed family, one that cannot bear the strain of daily stress, much less the shocking presence of a foreign love child. Jocelyn and Clifford's family is in shambles, with the single bright spot of college-educated Kevin. Jocelyn's adoration for her son's accomplishments is clear, but soon Khe Sahn invades that sacred source of pride as well. Khe Sahn and Kevin's relationship is incestuous, but that does not bother Jocelyn so much as the thought that Khe Sahn could monopolize her son's attention while he is supposed to be a diligent student and a magnanimous son. This strike is the final one in Khe Sahn's war against Jocelyn, and Jocelyn Dunbar must retaliate.

The narrator never explicitly says that Jocelyn kills Don, but the narrator is the woman accused of the murder. Jocelyn scrambles in near-hysteria for support from her family and friends, and the entire story of Khe Sahn's arrival and horrible influence on the family is only an opening argument for Jocelyn's innocence. Sedaris has applied the traditional Christmas newsletter to a useful purpose, thereby exonerating the possible guilty and totally insane.





# Dinah, the Christmas Whore

## Dinah, the Christmas Whore Summary

At their father's suggestion, David Sedaris and his sister Lisa both gain after-school employment at different cafeterias in Raleigh shopping centers. David is a dish washer and his sister is a steamer. During his intellectually unengaging work hours, David contemplates his dream of producing and starring in a television show called, "Socrates and Company," about his travels with a monkey named Socrates. In his imagination, each episode ends with his final thought, a profound statement about life that suddenly occurs to him as a result of that day's adventures. He tries to draw epiphanies from many of the released felons who work in the kitchen on parole, but finds them to be unmotivated and unmotivating.

As the holiday season approaches, David gets much busier at the cafeteria and realizes that he is as insignificant to the cafeteria's customers as they are to him. His daily confrontation with the Christmas hordes lessens his holiday cheer to the point that he believes Christmas to be a charade and Christmas enthusiasts to be nothing more than sheep. He refuses to take part in the commercialized, massive and therefore meaningless traditions of Christmas. His boycott is aided by the fact that his sister Lisa will be responsible for buying his Christmas present this year and she is as normal and dull as he can imagine.

On Lisa's eighteenth birthday, the family sits around the dinner table until the telephone rings. A gravelly female voice demands to speak to Lisa, and after a brief conversation Lisa drags David out with her. Soon they arrive in a dark, poor slum. Lisa charges into a house with a fearful, timid David behind her. She levels a large, drunk man named Gene with a blow, and, as David watches in awe, drags a large, unattractive prostitute out of the house. Once in the car, Lisa introduces her brother to Dinah, a prostitute that Lisa works with at the K&W cafeteria.

Lisa drives home and introduces Dinah to her mother. Mrs. Sedaris, Lisa, David, and Dinah sit around the kitchen table as David's other sisters pelt the prostitute with questions and try on her clothes. The moment is a profoundly happy, unique one. It suddenly occurs to David that this is the greatest gift he could have hoped for. He enjoys a night's conversation with his freethinking mother, his heroic sister, his curious siblings, and a drunk and wizened prostitute.

## Dinah, the Christmas Whore Analysis

Possibly the only truly heartwarming story in this collection, "Dinah, the Christmas Whore" tells a story of an unconventional Christmas present to an unconventional family. David Sedaris is a young man with big, strange dreams. From the beginning, he comes across as an eccentric young man; while other young men his age might dream



of becoming astronauts, scientists, or professional athletes, Sedaris fantasizes about creating his own TV show starring himself and a well-trained monkey named Socrates. The only snag to his plan is that he struggles to come up with the philosophical, uplifting realizations that he wants to end each episode of his television show. He realizes that these kinds of deep thoughts rarely occur on a daily basis.

When the Christmas season arrives, Sedaris discovers yet another obstacle to his television dreams: he loses his faith in mankind. After watching the herds of consumers march through his cafeteria, Sedaris realizes that he is simply one person in an enormous sea of people. He loses his sense of identity and decides to boycott Christmas in order to stand out from the crowd.

Sedaris' sister, Lisa, embodies all that David is not. She is practical, level-headed, and in David's mind, dull. David dreams of being truly unique, as is evident in his long-term goals and his Christmas boycott. However, he discovers that his sister Lisa can teach him something about being surprising when she introduces him to Dinah, a prostitute and friend of Lisa's. At first, David is afraid of the woman, but he soon realizes how valuable this experience is. His family is the only one that can boast friendship with a prostitute named Dinah, and in that unique night Sedaris rediscovers his family's distinctiveness.

# Front Row Center with Thaddeus Bristol

## Front Row Center with Thaddeus Bristol Summary

Thaddeus Bristol, a theatre critic of discriminating tastes, reviews a series of elementary and middle-school holiday plays. First up is "The Story of the First Christmas," staged by the first, second, and third graders of Sacred Heart Elementary. Bristol's first complaint is of uncomfortable chairs and the lingering odor of that day's lunch, as the play takes place in the school cafeteria. He finds little to redeem the setting in the performances, undisciplined; the script, mind-numbing; and the staging, paralytic. The critic concludes that parental encouragement is nice, but in the world of theater, more often than not the encouragement only gives a child the idea that he is talented when he is not.

Next, Bristol discusses "A Reindeer's Gift" at Scottsfield Elementary. Chief complaints include the plot's shallowness and predictability, the overly emotional performances, and the poor choice in casting a disobedient dog as the reindeer Blitzen. Finally, Bristol sends up Jane Snow-Hernandez Middle School's version of "A Christmas Carol." The sixth-grade cast, he complains, should know better than to stage such a slow, sentimental story. Director Becky Michaels, a child herself, blocks the actors amateurishly and completely misses the satirical opportunity to spear Dickens' moral center. Furthermore, Michaels casts a black student as Tiny Tim, a move condemned as distracting. The costumes are cheap, the students' English accents abysmal, and the only compliment goes to Tiny Tim, who can limp realistically thanks to having recently lost his right foot to diabetes. Bristol despairs every time the parents applaud for what he considers to be sub-par theatre, and does not understand what they could appreciate in these shoddy productions.

## Front Row Center with Thaddeus Bristol Analysis

Bristol cannot understand why parents applaud these horribly produced pageants. Of course, the parents attend enthusiastically because they love their children and want to support them, but in Bristol's eyes such motives only serve to corrupt the theater. Bristol's perspective is bitingly funny not only because his criticisms are accurate of any grammar school pageant in the United States, but also because he judges them against professional theatre when they are clearly not meant as such. In this story, Sedaris satirizes Christmas pageants as trite and dull, theatre critics as self-important, and parents as delusional when it comes to a child's talent.

The pageants Sedaris critiques through Bristol's erudite voice all share a total lack of polish. From the slapdash costumes to the stilted speech, the plays are nothing but unprofessional and for families of the performers, adorable. Bristol does not love any of the children onstage and therefore has no predisposition to appreciate the children's efforts. He can, therefore, being an abrupt critic, take each lacking element of each

production to task. Unfortunately, his reviews will only serve to make him appear snobby and unforgiving. Doubtless, Bristol has valid complaints when it comes to talent, but parents do not care how talented their children are in the eyes of critics. Therefore, at the end of the story the reader can be certain of three things. First, the reader learns that Christmas pageants are poorly produced and secondly, that theatre critics are imperious and unforgiving. Finally, the reader also becomes aware that parents do not care how poor a pageant is so long as they can see their children onstage.



# Based Upon a True Story

## Based Upon a True Story Summary

Television producer Jim Timothy addresses a Pentecostal church congregation in Jasper's Breath, Kentucky. He apologizes for Preacher Phil Becky's lateness, and proceeds to introduce himself to the poor, rural parishioners, using such words as "ain't," and "reckon" in order to relate to the people of the church. Mentioning that he is clearly an outsider by his full set of teeth and expensive clothes, Timothy proceeds to describe the trajectory of his career up to this point. He begins with some of his famous situation comedies, dwelling specifically on 'Crackers'n'Company,' a show you are probably familiar with about a group of ignorant rednecks such as yourself." Timothy places great emphasis on the comedy that can be found in examination of common people, like his current audience.

After comedies, Timothy moves on to his stint in television dramas, programs that deal with the grit and hardship of life with a glittering, clean, beautiful cast. Finally, Timothy arrives at his current job, producing television mini-series. He lists some of his more famous achievements and Emmy-award-winning series, and describes the process by which his studio gains the rights to real-life stories. Many people write to television channels with tales of personal tragedy, hoping to make a small fortune. More often than not, the criminals who perpetrated the crimes in question are the ones to reap the financial benefits of a mini-series. In fact, Timothy states that the readers at his station no longer open any envelopes that are not from a prison.

He defines "art" as a combination of real-life stories and Christmas specials, and hints that there may be such a magical piece of "art" within this very body of people. Last year, one of the members of the church performed an emergency kidney transplant on her son by removing her own kidney and sewing it into his body. This procedure occurred in her own home, what Timothy considers a squalid shack, and despite the fact that infection risk was astronomical, the kidney was too large and the wrong blood type, and the woman had no medical training, the boy's body began to heal. The woman claims that she performed the surgery with God's guidance, and Timothy smells a hit series.

Unfortunately, the woman has filed restraining orders against members of the press, especially tabloid journalists who have hounded her ever since the miracle occurred. Her brother, a lawyer, has advised her to remain quiet on the issue of her experience, and Timothy insinuates that the brother is either stupid or corrupt. Finally, Timothy offers every member of the congregation a cash reward, a side-by-side refrigerator-freezer, and a brand new car if they can convince the woman to sell her story to television. Timothy knows that without the woman's cooperation, the mini-series can never occur because nobody knows exactly how she did what she did in her home with her son that night.



Timothy begins to manipulate the congregation and turn them against their sister. He argues that the woman wants her neighbors to suffer as she suffered when a cable television truck struck down her newly-well son less than a week after the surgery. He suggests that the people of the town have a great choice in front of them. They can continue to be poor and suffer or they can take his offer and begin to wallow in material wealth. Timothy speaks a language that all human beings understand. He will reward their loyalty with stuff, appliances, and automobiles, which are the trappings of success. Timothy leaves the congregation with that thought and departs.

## Based Upon a True Story Analysis

Sedaris develops another brilliantly ironic character voice in Jim Timothy, a television producer who thinks that he can talk anyone into anything. Using such words as "ain't," and "reckon" in order to relate to the people of the church, Timothy patronizes and insults these poor farmers and homemakers at every possible turn. Because he is so clearly an outsider and he obviously disapproves of the community's poverty, Jim Timothy's attempts to become "one of the folks" are both funny and horribly rude. As much as Timothy is selling himself as a saint, a man of the people and a great communicator, he is revealing himself to be a fraud, a profit-driven suit. Luckily, man can be bought, and Timothy reveals what it is he wants to purchase from these poor church-goers.

Jim Timothy wants the life story of one of the church's members. This woman has declined to live in the public arena, but Timothy needs her story, a combination of Christmas and true-life, to boost his ratings. Jim Timothy is not a villain, because this woman has nothing to lose by selling her story to television, but he is a sleaze because he does not respect her wishes. He buys the congregation with consumer goods and material wealth, that which the Christmas season has come to value above all else. Ironically, Timothy subverts Christians within their own church. Although the man's triumph has yet to be seen, the reader knows that, when faced with free prizes for little effort, men and women will inevitably succumb.



# Christmas Means Giving

## Christmas Means Giving Summary

This tale of gross exaggeration of Christmas extravagance begins with the introduction of the narrator and his wife Beth. They have always enjoyed a great reputation as the most lavish and generous gift-givers, and the narrator details the enormous number of gifts he gives to his family every year. In fact, he shares his generosity with all of his friends and family in the annual Christmas card, which not only features a photograph of the previous year's loot, but also a summary of the cost of these items, along with the catch phrase "Christmas Means Giving."

When the Cottingham family moves in next door, however, the narrator's family faces a challenge. Doug, Nancy, and Eileen stage a passive-aggressive coup when they begin to expand their home so that it is more impressive than any other in the neighborhood. Of course, the narrator expands his home even more, and eventually the two structures reach the limits of their neighboring plots. The narrator and his wife invite Doug and Nancy to their home for a couple of dinner parties, but the superficial friendship quickly dissolves once the Cottinghams assert that their own Christmas card, a Xeroxed copy of their investments, is more meaningful than the narrator's "Christmas Means Giving" card.

On Thanksgiving, a beggar arrives at the narrator's door, and since the dogs are too stuffed with food to attack the man, the narrator himself bites the beggar before sending him over to the Cottingham mansion. The narrator hopes that Cottingham will continue to up the ante on physical brutality against the beggar, but instead Doug Cottingham and his family give the beggar a dollar. A photograph of their generosity appears in that year's Christmas card, along with the narrator's own phrase of "Christmas Means Giving." The entire neighborhood buzzes about Doug's bravery and the narrator rises to the challenge. He donates two dollars to another charity, and flashes the canceled check at every event he attends. Soon, the spotlight is back on him and his family.

The competition begins to shift from the amount of wealth that can be accumulated to the amount of wealth that can be given away. The next Thanksgiving, the beggar arrives at the narrator's door again, but instead of biting him, the narrator takes a photograph of the beggar taking an old tape player. The beggar moves next door where Doug Cottingham gives him another outdated appliance and then the narrator gives him a more expensive donation. The donations escalate until the narrator and his wife give the beggar their two young sons. Their Christmas card features a photograph of their sons weeping as the beggar carries them away. For this ghoulish version of a typical American family, winning the public's sympathy and admiration is more important even than the safety of children. When their sons' bodies are discovered a few months later, the narrator and his wife beg their neighbors to donate to charities instead of supporting them, and soon they are considered the most saintly people who have ever walked the earth.



The Cottinghams continue to accelerate the game of one-upmanship, and the next year's Christmas card shows Doug Cottingham on an operating table, donating his lung to a coal miner. The narrator, who has drained his own blood for that year's card, is furious that Cottingham has exceeded his own sacrifice. He and his wife rush to the hospital, where they donate myriad pieces of their bodies. The narrator has his eyes, a lung, a kidney, and coronary veins surgically removed; Beth gives up her scalp, teeth, breasts, and a leg. Unfortunately, Beth's contributions cannot be medically transferred, and her sacrifice is essentially worthless. Nevertheless, the narrator's family is once again the most adored in the neighborhood. These people have progressed from ineffectively donating their material possessions to ineffectively donating their own bodies, all for the sake of shaming an ambitious neighbor.

The narrator will continue to give of himself until he and his wife move into a cardboard box, followed by the Cottinghams, who will move into a smaller box. The Cottinghams will die of pneumonia, and Beth will die of tuberculosis, but the narrator still cherishes the memories of their Christmas victory.

## Christmas Means Giving Analysis

Sedaris paints a picture of a Christmas charity drive gone terribly wrong in this tale of one-upmanship and vengeful gift-giving. "Christmas means giving" signifies the idea that Christmas means giving as much as possible to people who do not need anything at all. When the narrator's family finally donates two dollars to an obscure charity, they believe that they have discovered a new and apparently revolutionary breed of giving where they give money to people who actually need it. These meager donations completely shock and awe the community in which these families live because the idea that Christmas means giving has been perverted to the point that Christmas actually means giving meaningless excess to people who do not need anything. The legitimately needy have been completely forgotten until the materially obsessed realize how easily they can gain social currency by giving of themselves.

The competition between the two families reveals a great deal about the nature of social status in American middle-class culture. To this ghoulish version of a typical American family, winning the public's sympathy and admiration is more important even than the safety of children. These people progress from ineffectively donating their material possessions to ineffectively donating their own bodies, all for the sake of shaming an ambitious neighbor. Both the narrator's family and the Cottinghams are both ridiculous and pitiable, having ultimately sacrificed everything in order to trump another person's sacrifice of everything. However, the narrator never dwells on the loss of his sons or his wealth. In fact, it seems that his sense of loss is only applied to the competition with Cottingham. Even though by the end of the story he is living alone in a cardboard box, he is still comforted by Beth's glee on the night that they wallow in their organs' success and their neighbor's organ's failure.





# Characters

## **David Sedaris appears in The SantaLand Diaries; Dinah, the Christmas Whore**

David Sedaris is the narrator and main character of the stories, "The SantaLand Diaries," and "Dinah, the Christmas Whore." A pithy, sarcastic, and borderline sado-masochistic man, he is a sharp observer of humanity and a big fan of soap operas. While he notices every person around him and notes their affectations, style, and phobias, he does not openly judge them. He may not like them or may find them annoying, but ultimately he is a benevolent narrator, willing to forgive nearly any trespass so long as the trespasser is entertaining.

In "The SantaLand Diaries," Sedaris is in his forties and attempting to pay his student loans as he works his way towards his dream job as a writer on "One Life to Live." He agrees to play an elf at the largest department store in New York, characteristically neurotic about the possibility that someone will see him in his costume outside of SantaLand. He is a good employee, punctual and enthusiastic, if he lacks the manic zeal and sense of appropriateness that the other elves possess. For example, he signs a Christmas carol, but he does so in the voice of Billie Holliday. A grown man however emulating a female jazz singer does not reinforce good and clean family fun, no matter what the song.

In "Dinah, the Christmas Whore," Sedaris is a high school student working after-school in a Piccadilly cafeteria and growing steadily more disillusioned with the Christmas season. He envisions himself as a great, poetic outcast whose future lies in traveling the world with a mischievous monkey named Socrates.

## **Jocelyn Dunbar appears in Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!!**

Jocelyn is the narrator of "Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!!" Doggedly merry, even in the face of family tragedy, Jocelyn's letter is a thinly veiled cry for help to her loved ones. Jocelyn believes that her life has been blessed. She has a husband, a house, and three children: one in college, one in rehab, and one who stays in the bathroom to carve soap figurines. This slightly mutated idyll is shattered one day when Khe Sahn, an illegitimate child fathered by her husband during his tour of duty in Vietnam arrives. Jocelyn immediately hates the girl. She resents that the girl has gotten a free ride, and that she can simply barge into Jocelyn's family and make herself at home. She is also threatened by Khe Sahn's demonstrative physical overtures towards Clifford and Kevin. Jocelyn is desperate to get Khe Sahn out of her life, so desperate in fact that she may even have killed her own grandchild to ensure the Vietnamese girl's departure and punishment. Sanctimonious, bitter, and protective, Jocelyn is the inner



voice of a suburban wife and mother whose life spirals out of control. Unfortunately, for Jocelyn, she spirals downwards with this negative energy.

## **Khe Sahn Dunbar appears in Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!!**

Khe Sahn is the illegitimate Vietnamese love child of Clifford Dunbar and a Vietnamese woman. She arrives at the Dunbar home speaking almost no English and spends her time there shopping and doting on the men of the house. She is a suspect in the murder of Jocelyn's grandchild, Don. Hated by Jocelyn, Khe Sahn returns the vindictiveness and spite in her own quiet way. Obsequious to wealthy men and apathetic to her new mother-figure, Khe Sahn knows how to get what she wants.

## **Clifford Dunbar appears in Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!!**

Clifford Dunbar is Jocelyn's husband and the father of Khe Sahn. He appreciates Khe Sahn's presence in the house if only for her constant offers of five dollar massages and unending flattery. Otherwise, Clifford remains silent and absent from Jocelyn's narrative.

## **Kevin Dunbar appears in Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!!**

Kevin Dunbar is Jocelyn and Clifford's son and a successful college student with bright prospects for the future. He is the apple of his parents' eyes, and once Khe Sahn meets him, he immediately falls for her. After they spend some alone time in his bedroom, he must depart again for college, but he calls Khe Sahn daily. Jocelyn fears that Khe Sahn will destroy her son's future.

## **Lisa Sedaris appears in Dinah, the Christmas Whore**

Lisa is David Sedaris's sister. She works at a cafeteria in Raleigh, North Carolina, and befriends a prostitute named Dinah. David has always considered his sister to be normal to a fault: boring, predictable, and painfully practical. However, one night she takes David along on a trip to rescue Dinah from her boyfriend. Lisa fearlessly charges through the slums of Raleigh and punches out a full-grown man before grabbing the prostitute by the hand and taking her home to meet her mother. Surprising and bold, Lisa becomes a heroine to David.



## **Socrates appears in Dinah, the Christmas Whore**

Socrates is David's imaginary companion and a well-trained proboscis monkey with whom he will travel the world and gain enlightenment on the nature of humanity. Socrates is trained in the fighting arts.

## **Dinah appears in Dinah, the Christmas Whore**

Dinah is a prostitute who works at the K&W cafeteria with Lisa Sedaris. On the night of Lisa's birthday, Dinah calls Lisa for help because her boyfriend has gotten drunk and mean. She dreams of staying clean and graduating from the cafeteria's steam counter to the meat-carving station. Grateful for the Sedaris family's attention, Dinah spends the evening of Lisa's birthday in their kitchen, telling stories, and enjoying the company.

## **Thaddeus Bristol appears in Front Row Center with Thaddeus Bristol**

Thaddeus Bristol is a discriminating theatre critic who abhors the Christmas season and the scads of rote middle and elementary-school pageants that the season brings. He is perfectly willing to skewer the efforts of preadolescent actors and directors, because he believes that too many parents encourage their children to pursue interests for which they have no talent. Bristol will notify the children of their lack of talent, and seems to enjoy thoroughly dissecting the flaws and shortcomings of multiple amateur productions.

Bristol's own defect is in his inability to discriminate between amateur theatre and professional theatre. He judges a child's pageant on the same scale as he would a fully professional theatre production, and is therefore doomed to disappointment in every folding chair-packed school gymnasium and lunchroom.

## **Jim Timothy appears in Based Upon a True Story**

Jim Timothy is a television producer who travels to rural Kentucky in order to track down a true-life story about a miraculous organ transplant. Impeccably dressed and unrelentingly paronizing, Timothy calls his audience ignorant, dirty, and squalid at every turn. A serial divorcee, he believes that every person can be bought and that every person's foremost priority ought to be material success at any cost. Although he considers himself to be an adept communicator, his success is due only to his financial resources.



## **The Woman appears in Based Upon a True Story**

A Christian mother who sews her own kidney into her ailing son's body, the unnamed woman is the focus of Timothy's mission to Kentucky. She has refused to sell her story to tabloids and television studios alike and gives God credit for the successful surgery.

## **Phil Becky appears in Based Upon a True Story**

Brother Phil Becky is the preacher at the Jasper's Breath Pentecostal Church. He agrees to allow Jim Timothy to speak to the congregation in return for a brand-new church funded by Timothy's studio. Becky reinforces Timothy's theory that all people can be bought for the right price.

## **Narrator appears in Christmas Means Giving**

The narrator is a wealthy and material-obsessed husband and father living in an affluent suburb. He prides himself on his ability to consume massive amounts of consumer goods and food, and competes with his neighbor to ensure that he is the most extreme consumer in the neighborhood. That competition turns dangerous when the narrator shifts his focus from gaining to giving, and, in competition with Doug Cottingham, gives up his sons, his possessions, and several internal organs before he is certain that he has won. To this man, winning is more important than any of his other valuables or loved ones.

## **Beth appears in Christmas Means Giving**

Beth is the narrator's wife and another fervent consumer. She supports her husband's competition with the Cottinghams and herself gives away several pieces of her body in order to show up Doug Cottingham's meager lung donation. She dies in a cardboard box with her husband, blind and toothless.

## **Doug Cottingham appears in Christmas Means Giving**

The new man in the block, Doug Cottingham wants to become the neighborhood alpha consumer, and therefore must supplant the narrator and his family. First he expands his home, and then, once he realizes that charity is far more jealousy and awe-inducing in his neighbors' eyes, he gives away most of his material wealth and parts of his body. Unfortunately, he cannot compete with the narrator and ultimately dies with his wife, Nancy, of pneumonia in a cardboard box one winter.



## The Beggar appears in Christmas Means Giving

The beggar precipitates the shift from hoarding wealth to giving it away. When Doug Cottingham gives him a dollar, he sets the trajectory of the rest of the story. The beggar, unfortunately, does not value the material donations as much as he does the young sons of the narrator until he kills them and leaves them in the traveling sauna given to him by Cottingham.



## Objects/Places

### **SantaLand appears in The SantaLand Diaries**

SantaLand is the massive Christmas village that appears in New York City's Macy's department store every winter. SantaLand contains a long path through a village with dioramas of penguins, Christmas trees, and other festive scenes, and a magic tree where children get to depart to multiple houses where various Santas greet children. David Sedaris works as an elf in SantaLand one winter in order to pay off his student loans.

### **One Life to Live appears in The SantaLand Diaries**

A soap opera that Sedaris dreams of writing for when he moves to New York. He struggles to make the connections that he needs to land a job on the popular soap opera, however, and instead works as an elf in SantaLand in order to pay the bills.

### **Sallie Mae appears in The SantaLand Diaries**

Sallie Mae is the company that holds Sedaris' student loan. Sedaris says that the company sounds like a sweet farm girl but in fact is a vicious and predatory bully that pressures him to work as an elf in order to pay them.

### **Feeny State appears in Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!!**

Kevin Dunbar, the one successful Dunbar child, attends Feeny State University. Until Khe Sahn distracts him with her wiles, he is a perfect son in his mother's eyes, destined for success and greatness as long as he can rise above the base intentions of the Vietnamese huntress.

### **Burlap Dresses appears in Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!!**

Jocelyn Dunbar sews two full-length burlap dresses for Khe Sahn to wear instead of her own scanty scraps of clothing. Although Jocelyn purports to be entirely giving and patient with Khe Sahn, the burlap dresses betray the matriarch's sadistic streak.



## **Crack Baby appears in Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!!**

Jocelyn and Clifford have nicknamed their grandchild a crack baby allegedly because he wakes them up at the crack of dawn. However, since the baby's mother is currently going through drug rehabilitation, that nickname suggests a far more sinister meaning.

## **Piccadilly Cafeteria appears in Dinah, the Christmas Whore**

David Sedaris gets his first after-school job as a dishwasher at this cafeteria in Raleigh. The decor is tacky but superficially elegant, with faux torches on the walls and red velvet trimmings. During the Christmas season, shoppers at the mall flood the cafeteria.

## **K&W Cafeteria appears in Dinah, the Christmas Whore**

David's sister Lisa gets her first after-school job as a steam-conter girl at this cafeteria in Raleigh. Lisa meets Dinah, a prostitute on probation, at work.

## **Dinah's apartment appears in Dinah, the Christmas Whore**

Dinah's apartment is squalid, foul-smelling, and located in the slums of Raleigh. Sedaris notes that it is the kind of place where bad things happen to bad people. Broken glass and trash litters the living room.

## **Sedaris kitchen appears in Dinah, the Christmas Whore**

When Lisa and David rescue Dinah from her apartment, they bring her to the Sedaris kitchen, where David's mother fixes the prostitute a drink and the family spends the rest of the night chatting with her.

## **Proboscis Monkey appears in Dinah, the Christmas Whore**

In order to keep his mind occupied while he works his menial job, Sedaris dreams of traveling the world with a well-trained monkey named Socrates.



## **Jasper's Breath, Kentucky appears in Based Upon a True Story**

Jim Timothy travels to this poor and rural hamlet in Kentucky in order to get the rights to an unbelievable true story about one of its citizens.

## **Savile Row suit appears in Based Upon a True Story**

This is merely one of many allusions that Timothy makes to his own success and wealth in the face of a poor congregation.

## **Silver wand appears in Christmas Means Giving**

The narrator's family uses a silver wand to purge their enormous meals so that they can continue to eat. The silver wand symbolizes the grotesque waste and obsession with consumerism that ultimately leads to the family's total destruction.

## **Christmas cards appears in Christmas Means Giving**

The narrator's family wars with the Cottinghams over the most meaningful Christmas card. These cards are the weapons of choice for the two families in seeking the approval and favor of their similarly vapid and competitive neighbors.

## **Traveling Sauna appears in Christmas Means Giving**

The Cottinghams donate their traveling sauna to the beggar who later murders the narrator's two sons inside the camper.

## **Ragsdale Cloverleaf appears in Christmas Means Giving**

In the final gesture of sacrifice, the two families move into side-by-side cardboard boxes in the Ragsdale Cloverleaf.





# Themes

## Warped American Family

Sedaris dissolves the myth of the standard Christmas familial warmth with several stories in this collection. The families that appear in "Holidays on Ice" are unique, sometimes demented groups. For example, in "Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!!" the Dunbars use Christmas as an excuse to purge their family of two unwanted members. They are the baby Don and Khe Sahn. Although Jocelyn purports to embrace the warmth of the season, in fact her newsletter is only an excuse to drum up support for her character at an upcoming legal hearing. Furthermore, even before Khe Sahn arrives, the Dunbar family is fractured. Jocelyn's daughter is a drug addict married to a tattooed loser and her younger son is antisocial and spends all his time locked alone in the bathroom. The Dunbar family, like so many American families, has to pepper its Christmas newsletter with exclamation points in order to liven up the otherwise dull or even tragic events of their year.

The Sedaris family is similarly quirky in an entirely more positive light. In "Dinah, the Christmas Whore," the Sedaris family welcomes a prostitute into its loving arms. A traditional American family might give away a coat or some canned goods on Christmas, but the Sedaris family has drinks with a hooker and plays dress-up in her high-heeled shoes. The events of this story are far from what Americans perceive to be normal or traditional, but because of their uniqueness and strangeness they are deeply meaningful to Sedaris himself.

## Materialism, Consumerism, and Success

Christmas is a time of massive consumption, of both food and goods. Sedaris explores the extent to which Christmas can be spoiled by such an obsession. In "The SantaLand Diaries," Sedaris depicts thousands of families who do not care about Santa, but rather about getting the photograph for their Christmas cards. These families' priorities are such that the consumer experience of buying a photo at a department store trumps the necessity of a child's interaction with a beloved figure. In "Based Upon a True Story," Jim Timothy manipulates the inherent consumerism of all people in order to further his career and make more money. He bribes the town to sell out one of its citizens for appliances and new cars.

Thaddeus Bristol consumes and spits out Christmas theatre. He believes that Christmas is not served by children's theatre. The children might enjoy the performances, and the parents may treasure the experience, but the productions are unsuccessful and therefore of no value to the theatre critic. As a consumer, he can only see the value of a production in terms of dollars and professional worth, not in terms of sentimental importance.



An even more extreme example of the dangers of materialism exists in "Christmas Means Giving," in which two competitive families consume with abandon. The narrator describes his ideal Christmas as loading up a moving van with loot for his family, and then eating an enormous, decadent feast until he must use a silver wand to purge himself so that he can eat more. Although this is an extreme depiction of waste, it is an accurate exaggeration of American Christmas fervor. In "Dinah, the Christmas Whore," Sedaris comes to such a realization after watching crowds of shoppers move anonymously through his cafeteria. He becomes disillusioned with the idea that Christmas can be special, and boycotts Christmas. Ultimately, the best gift he receives is an experience with his family and not an item for sale.

## **Humor as a Tool of Truth**

Sedaris uses humor as a disarming device for his readers. When readers laugh, Sedaris' unflattering or subversive messages become palatable. For example, in "Christmas Means Giving," Sedaris skewers that American tradition of lavish gift-giving and waste, but he exaggerates the families' consumption so much that the reader cannot find offense or take Sedaris' criticism personally. Even if a reader gorges himself at a Christmas feast, chances are that he does not then purge with a silver wand and so he can still laugh at the fictional characters. Similarly, in "The SantaLand Diaries," Sedaris embellishes upon the ugliness and chaos of Christmas in a department store. Families act horribly, threaten to have him fired, hold up lines, and instruct their children to pee on SantaLand. Such a description could easily err on the side of offensive or misanthropic, but Sedaris' blameless, humorous style is instead benevolent. Families reading this story will be reminded not to act poorly in public. Sedaris' message seems to be that people should laugh at themselves, as Sedaris does when he describes his elf uniform or when he details his inability to come up with an epiphany for his television show about a proboscis monkey.



# Style

## Point of View

Each story is told from the first person point of view, but the identities of the narrators differ from story to story. Sedaris himself narrates "The SantaLand Diaries," and "Dinah the Christmas Whore." Jocelyn Dunbar is the narrator of "Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!!" Thaddeus Bristol narrates as the author of his own theatre review in "Front Row Center with Thaddeus Bristol," and Jim Timothy speaks to a congregation in "Based Upon a True Story." Finally, the yuppie husband-and-father narrator of "Christmas Means Giving," remains unnamed. As the identity of the narrator shifts, so does the narrator's trustworthiness. David Sedaris can be trusted as a narrator if only because he portrays himself as unflatteringly as he does other people. Thaddeus Bristol is similarly honest, although on a subject in which honesty is rarely displayed so mercilessly. He accurately judges the children's pageants with unrealistic expectations however.

Jocelyn Dunbar paints such a picture that she is a martyr while everyone else in her life is sadly lacking. From her perspective, she has done nothing but love and dote upon every member of her family and in return her children fail, her husband produces a Vietnamese love child, and that illegitimate girl destroys Jocelyn's life. Jocelyn's letter is a plea for help and so she must communicate the recent events of her life with a certain slant in her favor.

## Setting

The physical setting of each story shifts but the time of year remains constantly around the winter holidays. "The SantaLand Diaries" takes place in the Macy's department store in New York City, where Sedaris works as an elf. The environment is chaotic and stressful, with families, celebrities, pets, and the unusually handicapped passing through every day. "Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!!" takes place in an unspecified suburb where Jocelyn and Clifford Dunbar have raised their family. "Dinah, the Christmas Whore" moves around Raleigh, North Carolina. Sedaris works in a cafeteria in a new and popular mall. His family lives in a middle-class suburb and Dinah, the prostitute, lives in the slums of the city. Sedaris' favorite setting is Dinah's dilapidated home, where his imagination can fly free to depict his own murder at the hands of a drug dealer. "Front Row Center with Thaddeus Bristol" moves from school to school, taking place in cafeterias and gymnasiums filled with uncomfortable chairs. "Based Upon a True Story," hails from Jasper's Breath, Kentucky, where Jim Timothy has arrived from the world of television to bring wealth to the poor and rural masses. Finally, in "Christmas Means Giving," two families live in a wealthy town until they give away all their possessions and end up living in cardboard boxes in Ragsdale.



## Language and Meaning

Since Sedaris is a humor writer, he uses language that might be slightly off-kilter in mainstream conversation. Such words as "proboscis monkey," are openly humorous, but other turns of phrase enhance the narrator's identity or mood. Sedaris' language is notoriously well-crafted. He picks words precisely and constructs character voices with over-the-top yet believable personalities.

Jim Timothy of "Based Upon a True Story" acknowledges how language shifts from audience to audience, explaining that he would never use such words as "folks," and "ain't" with a more erudite group. The narrator of "Christmas Means Giving" showcases this trait perfectly, as he clearly comes from an upper-class, snooty background. He feels no need to justify or explain his family's bizarre holiday traditions, and states them as plainly as can be as such.

Jocelyn Dunbar, for example, calls Christmas "the most special and glittering time of the year" because she is a suburban housewife whose job it is to engineer that special, glittering month of December. She is a ham, and therefore can exaggerate with her exclamation points and hyperbole, as is common in many Christmas newsletters. Thaddeus Bristol has a language all his own as well. As a stodgy theatre critic, he uses language as his sword. A good example is his vivid descriptions of people and events such as "the apathetic staging suggested the limp, partially paralyzed hand of Sister Mary Elizabeth Bronson, who should have been excommunicated after last year's disastrous Thanksgiving program." His language is elevated, snarky, and droll. He enjoys skewering the children and their well-meaning teachers and he uses a florid vocabulary to do so.

## Structure

"Holidays on Ice" is a short story collection that bridges fiction and nonfiction. Sedaris includes to memoirs in "The SantaLand Diaries" and "Dinah, the Christmas Whore." The other stories, namely "Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!!," "Front Row Center with Thaddeus Bristol," "Based Upon a True Story," and "Christmas Means Giving," are all fictional. However, only "Christmas Means Giving" is actually constructed as a narrative.

"Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!!" tells a story in the form of a Christmas newsletter. This structure allows Sedaris to create a narrative voice that is relentlessly merry even as it relates dark events. "Front Row Center with Thaddeus Bristol" is a theatre review, one that reveals more about the critic than it does about the criticized. Finally, "Based Upon a True Story" is the transcript of a public address made in a church. Each of these stories is structured as a piece of communication: not a story simply to be told, but a story intended to rouse support, discourage talentless productions, or recruit a congregation.

The majority of the text is in the form of narrative, with rare snippets of dialogue in place to accent specific interactions. For example, in "Christmas Means Giving," the narrator focuses on relaying the events of his competition with the Cottinghams, but gives a conversation as an example of Doug Cottingham's pettiness.



## Quotes

"I don't know that I could look someone in the eye and exclaim, 'Oh, my goodness, I think I see Santa!' or 'Can you close your eyes and make a very special Christmas wish!' Everything these elves said had an exclamation point at the end of it!!! It makes one's mouth hurt to speak with such forced merriment. I feel cornered when someone talks to me this way. Doesn't everyone? I prefer being frank with children. I'm more likely to say, 'You must be exhausted,' or 'I know a lot of people who would kill for that little waistline of yours.' I am afraid I won't be able to provide the grinding enthusiasm Santa is asking for. I think I'll be a low-key sort of an elf" (The SantaLand Diaries, pg. 12.)

"At noon a huge crowd of retarded people came to visit Santa and passed me on my little island. These people were profoundly retarded. They were rolling their eyes and wagging their tongues and staggering toward Santa. It was a large group of retarded people and after watching them for a few minutes I could not begin to guess where the retarded people ended and the regular New Yorkers began. Everyone looks retarded once you set your mind to it" (The SantaLand Diaries, pg. 15.)

"All of us take pride and pleasure in the fact that we are unique, but I'm afraid that when all is said and done the police are right: it all comes down to fingerprints" (The SantaLand Diaries, pg. 33.)

"The great thing about this Santa is that he never even asks what the children want. Most times he involves the parents to the point where they surrender their urge for documentation. They lay down their video recorders and gather round for the festival of love" (The SantaLand Diaries, pg. 40.)

"I recall mistaking her for a Trick-or-Treater! She wore, I remember, a skirt the size of a beer cozy, a short, furry jacket, and, on her face, enough rouge, eye shadow, and lipstick to paint our entire house, inside and out. She's a very small person and I mistook her for a child. A child masquerading as a prostitute. I handed her a fistful of chocolate nougats, hoping that, like the other children, she would quickly move on to the next house. But Khe Sahn was no Trick-or-Treater" (Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!! pg. 50.)

"She hasn't got the ambition God gave a sparrow! She arrived in this house six weeks ago speaking only the words 'Daddy,' 'Shiny,' and 'Five dollar now.' Quite a vocabulary!!!!!!!!!!!!!! While an industrious person might buckle down and seriously study the language of her newly adopted country, Khe Sahn appeared to be in no hurry whatsoever. When asked a simple question such as, 'Why don't you go back to where you came from?' she would touch my hand and launch into a spasm of Vietnamese drivel-as if I were the outsider, expected to learn her language!" (Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!! pg. 52.)

"The shock and horror that followed Don's death are something I would rather not recount. Calling our children to report the news, watching the baby's body, small as a



loaf of bread, as it was zipped into a heavy plastic bag-these images have nothing to do with the merriment of Christmas, and I hope my mention of them will not dampen your spirits at this, the most special and glittering time of the year. The evening of December sixteenth was a very dark hour for the Dunbar family. At least with Khe Sahn in police custody we could grieve privately, consoling ourselves with the belief that justice had been carried out. How foolish we were!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" (Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!! pg. 67.)

"It made me sad an desperate to see so many people, strangers whose sheer numbers eroded the sense of importance I was working so hard to invent... They meant nothing ti me, and watching them move down the line toward the cashier, it became apparent that the feeling was mutual. They wouldn't even remeebr the meal, much less the person who had provided them with their piping hot tray" (Dinah, the Christmas Whore, pg. 77.)

"Let them have their rolls of gift wrap and gaudy, personalized stockings: if it meant something to them, I wanted nothing to do with it. This year I would be the one without the shopping bags, the one wearing black in protest of their thoughtless commercialism. My very avoidance would set me apart and cause these people to question themselves in ways that would surely cause them pain. 'Who are we?' they'd ask, plucking the ornaments off their trees. 'What have we become and why can't we be more like that somber fellow who washes dishes down at the Piccadilly cafeteria?'" (Dinah, the Christmas Whore, pg. 77-78.)

"'Things might get a little rough up there, so just do what I tell you and hopefully no one will get hurt.' She flipped her hair over her shoulder and stepped out of the car, kicking aside the cans and bottles that lined the curb. My sister meant business, whatever it was, and in that instant she appeared beautiful and exotic and dangerously stupid. LOCAL TEENS SLAIN FOR SPORT the headlines would read. HOLIDAY HIJINKS END IN HOMICIDE" (Dinah, the Christmas Whore, pg. 80-81.)

"Were I to receive a riding vacuum cleaner or even a wizened proboscis monkey, it wouldn't please me half as much as knowing we were the only family in the neighborhood with a prostitute in our kitchen. From this moment on, the phrase, 'Ho, ho, ho' would take on a whole different meaning; and I, along with the rest of my family, could appreciate it in our own clannish way. It suddenly occurred to me. Just like that" (Dinah, the Christmas Whore, pg. 89-90.)

"The approach of Christmas signifies three things: bad movies, unforgivable television, and even worse theater. I'm talking bone-crushing theater, the type our ancient ancestors used to oppress their enemies before the invention of the stretching rack...To those of you who enjoy the comfort of a nice set of thumbscrews, allow me to recommend any of the crucifying holiday plays and pageants currently eliciting screams of mercy from within the confies of our local elementary and middle schools" (Front Row Center with Thaddeus Bristol, pg. 93.)

"Once again, the sadists at Jane Snow-Hernandez Middle School have taken up their burning pokers in an attempt to prod "A Christmas Carol" into some form of submission. I





might have overlooked the shoddy production values and dry, leaden pacing, but these are sixth-graders we're talking about and they should have known better" (Front Row Center with Thaddeus Bristol, pg. 97.)

"'Who is this guy with his hand-tailored Savile Row suit?' you're asking yourselves. Those of you with little or no education are no doubt scratching your heads thinking, 'We ain't never seed him bfore. How you reckon he keeps his shoes so clean?' Now, Friends, don't get me wrong. I'm not criticizing the way you talk. In fact, I kind of like it. As a people, you so-called hillbillies have made a remarkable contribution to the entertainment industry and I, for one, thank you for that" (Based Upon a True Story, pg. 103.)

"These are the programs in which good-looking people attempt to cope with a life which, as many of you obviously know, isn't always as pretty as you'd like it to be. Sometimes these people are forced to visit poorly-decorated homes or even trailers. Every now and then they come into contact with people who aren't so good-looking, but still they're forced to cope. Just as we all do" (Based Upon a True Story, pg. 106.)

"By refusing to sign my contract and spend an afternoon recounting the facts to me and my tonotch writers, this young woman is ensuring that none of you will ever experience the pleasures that most civilized people take for granted. She'll be saying, 'Fine, let their newborn babies die of malnutrition and staph infections.' She lost her son the hard way and maybe, in her mind, you should, too! Me, I'm more than happy to provide you with a clean and modern building in which to hold their sad little funerals" (Based Upon a True Story, pg. 117.)

"I'd buy them shoes and clothes and bucketfuls of jewelry from the finest boutiques and department stores. Far be it for me to snoop around for a bargain or discount. I always paid top dollar, thinking that those foot-long price tags really meant something about Christmas. After opening our gifts we'd sit down to a sumptuous banquet, feasting on every imaginable variety of meat and pudding. When one of us got full and felt uncomfortable, we'd stick a silver wand down our throats, throw up, and start eating all over again. In effect, we weren't much different from anyone else" (Christmas Means Giving, pg. 124.)

"Despite their competitive nature, Beth and I tried our best to be nneighborlyand occasionally invite them over for rooftop barbecues and so forth. I'd attempt to make adult conversation, saying something like, 'I just paid eight thousand dollars for a pair of sandals that don't even fit me.' Doug would counter, saying that he himself had just paid ten thousand for a single flip-flop he wouldn't wear even if it did fit him. He was always very combative that way" (Christmas Means Giving, pg. 125.)

"It had never been our way to give to others but I started having second thoughts when I noticed the phenomenal response the Cottinghams received on the basis of their Christmas card. Suddenly they were all anyone was talking about. Walk into any holiday party and you'd hear, 'Did you see it? I think it's positively enchanting. Here these people donated money to an absolute stranger! Can you beat that? A whole dollar they





gave to this vagrant person with absolutely nothing to his name. If you ask me, those Cottinghams are a couple of very brave and generous people...' When I first told people that I had given two dollars to the Inner City Headache Fund they turned away as if they didn't believe me. Then I actually did give two dollars to the Headache Fund and boy, did things ever change once I started flashing around that canceled check! Generosity can actually make people quite uncomfortable if you talk about it enough" (Christmas Means Giving, pg. 127-128.)

"How dare he! Beth and I had practically invented the theme of medical generosity and it drove us mad, that smug, superior expression seeping from beneath our neighbor's surgical mask" (Christmas Means Giving, pg. 131.)

"I'd try not to let it bother me that they had died first but in truth I would have a very difficult time dealing with it. Whenever my jealousy would get the best of me I would reflect back on that perfect Christmas Eve at the Hepplewhites'. Shuddering beneath my blanket of damp newspapers, I'd try to recall the comforting sound of Beth's carefree laughter and picture her raw head thrown back in nerriment, those bright, gleaming gums reflecting the light of the crystal chandelier. With luck, the memory of our love and generosity would lull me toward a profound and heavy sleep that would last until morning" (Christmas Means Giving, pg. 133-134.)

## Topics for Discussion

What does it mean to be normal? Is normal a good thing or a bad thing?

How does humor help Sedaris communicate his message?

Is a modern American Christmas about giving? If so, to whom?

Thaddeus Bristol describes his harsh condemnation of children as early treatment of a cancer. Is Bristol right to criticize children?

Is Jim Timothy a hero or a villain?

How much are Sedaris' depictions of holiday excess exaggerated?

Is Jocelyn Dunbar guilty of murder? Are her actions defensible?