

# **Let's Explore Diabetes With Owls Study Guide**

**Let's Explore Diabetes With Owls by David Sedaris**

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## Summary

This book is the latest in a series of publications that collect the writings of American satirist / memoirist David Sedaris in book form. A world-renowned columnist and broadcaster, Sedaris' pieces (both fiction and non-fiction, the sort of work which is the primary focus here) tend to be short, concise, and while occasionally somewhat rambling in style, ultimately anchored by a particular discovery, perspective, or insight.

The writings in this collection fall into a few broad categories. The largest category is the type of essay in which the author uses contemplations, or analysis, of relatively contemporary experiences as a springboard to explore similar experiences in the past; connections between past and present; and aspects of each that can be understood more clearly as a result of understanding the other. Examples of essays in this category include "Memory Laps" (which uses a re-awakening of the author's interest in swimming as a jumping-off point for contemplations about his childhood experiences as a competitive swimmer) and "A Friend from the Ghetto" (which uses an interaction with a telephone solicitor, seemingly based in a disadvantaged foreign country, as a trigger for examination of the author's experiences trying to enforce a friendship between his childhood self and a young black girl.

A secondary, but still significant, category of writing has to do with the author's exploration of various aspects of travel – from the challenges associated with learning foreign languages ("Easy Tiger"), to the shock and surprise often associated with learning of a country's hygiene and dietary practices ("#2 to Go"), to the trials and tribulations of trying to get a replacement passport ("A Cold Case").

Then are the essays in which the author examines the history of his difficult relationship with his father, essays which sometimes fit into one of the other categories (i.e. "Memory Laps") but which are sometimes more stand-alone essays. These include "Standing Still" (in which the search by the author's father for a man who attempted to assault the author's sister turns both comic and poignant) and, perhaps most notably, "The Happy Place". In this essay, a medical procedure undergone by the author leads him, perhaps surprisingly, to a conversation with his father in which the latter reveals a compassionate, affectionate side that the author, it seems, has been searching to connect with all his life.

A final category of writing found in this collection is the fiction pieces. Whereas most of the essays are defined by their apparent grounding in the author's real life experiences and considerations of those experiences, the fiction pieces ("A Quick Email", "I Break for Traditional Marriage", and "Mind the Gap" among others) have a more satirical, edgy bent. That is, their focus is less on telling a story, illustrating the author's experience, and/or triggering self-exploration in the reader than on making pointed, often negative comments about particular aspects of American social and political life. Most often, the targets of those satirical comments are connected to the American right wing – more specifically traditional, often Christian, conservatives.

The overall tone of the collection, no matter what category an individual piece of writing might fall into, is humorous and clever. There is the strong sense that the author's primary point is to entertain and engage - and if a little thought, a little insight, or a little outrage is provoked, that's part of the fun.



# Essays 1, 2, and 3

## Summary

“Dentists without Borders” - This essay begins with a reference to the American Health Care debate, and how “socialized” medicine such as that practiced in Canada and in Europe is held up to be an extremely negative experience. The author describes his confusion about why this belief is so prevalent, and cites some examples of why the treatment he received from a physician in Paris (who works within a socialized system) is just fine. He makes the same point about the treatment he receives from the three Parisian physicians who take care of his teeth, all of whom, he says, treat him with respect and humor, professionalism and warmth, recognizing his needs as a patient and his curiosity and experiences as a human being. He describes in relative detail his experiences in each of the physicians’ three offices – specifically how, in spite of the pain he inevitably experiences, he looks forward to his appointments, returning himself to “this curious, socialized care.”

“Attaboy”- This essay begins with a contemplation of contemporary parent/child relationships: how children seem to be in charge, how they seem to be undisciplined and out of control, and how the author, even though he’s not a parent himself, frequently resists the temptation to tell the parents of such children what they should be doing differently. This leads to recollections of his own childhood: how he was immediately believed to be in the wrong any time he was accused of anything; how he was severely punished for any misbehavior; and how other parents had the right to punish the children of other families if they (the children) misbehaved. This leads to a recollection of a specific incident from his childhood in which the author’s mother was called a “bitch” by a passing boy; how the author’s father reacted angrily; and how he attacked a boy who had come to call on the author because he (the author’s father) mistook the boy for the first boy. The author describes his father’s attempts to make peace with the second boy, including offering him some ice cream. He (the author) goes on to describe how the second boy was eventually served some very old, not very appetizing ice cream; how his father urged him to eat it, promising even more; and how, when they boy began eating, his father said “There you go ... Attaboy. Eat up.”

“Think Differenter” - This essay follows a stream-of consciousness structure as it moves from reflection on common expressions that the author thinks should be removed from American conversation ... to discussion of how easy it is to be forgetful (including a reference to how the author, in conversation with his mother, forgot that his father was still alive) ... to discussion of things that the author remembers (including the Sony Walkman) ... to his obsession with owning the newest cell phones (which he refuses to use to call his two ex-wives, and the “children they tricked [him] into having) ... to commentary on how technology in general is meant to make life better ... to how he’s moving to a different state where “the mentally ill can legally own firearms. Here he comments that “the truth is that crazy people ... have as much right to protect themselves as we do.” The essay concludes with contemplations on how freedom can



make anything possible anywhere it takes root, but that wherever he lives and however free he becomes, the author is still “a guy with a phone, waiting for the day when he can buy an even better one.”

## Analysis

“Dentists without Borders” - This first essay in the collection is notable for its use of wordplay, puns, and double meanings, all characteristics of the writer’s work that appear throughout the book. The title itself is a double meaning, being a play on the internationally renowned humanitarian organization “Doctors without Borders”, which sends physicians into countries troubled by war, disease, or other difficulties to offer free medical support to the poor or otherwise disadvantaged. Then there are the multiple meanings to the word “socialized”. Here it’s important to first understand what is meant by “the American health care debate”, which is an often acrimonious political / social / cultural conversation about how Americans receive coverage from the government and insurance companies for their medical expenses. In that conversation, and in American culture in general, “socialized” carries with it echoes of Socialism and/or Communism, economic systems in which all citizens are treated equally but which are generally held by American society and politicians to be an individualism-destroying evil. On another, and perhaps more significant, level, there is the sense that the author is using “socialized” in the sense of “sociable” – that is, as meaning companionable, open, friendly, and compassionate, the sort of treatment he receives at the hands of the French physicians who operate under a health care system that is “socialized” in the first sense of the word.

“Attaboy” – This essay is notable as the first of several pieces in the collection that focus on the author’s long-troubled relationship with his father. It’s also noteworthy for its sense of dark humor; for the descriptions of the author’s mother (pregnant, smoking, drinking) and his father (immediately coming home from work and taking off his pants, leaving them off both during dinner and any time someone came to the door and interrupted mealtime), both of which are evocative of a particular period in American history (i.e. the 1960’s) and of the author’s family environment, the detailing of which deepens over the course of the collection. That said, there is the sense that the descriptions of punishment seem sometimes exaggerated, perhaps for comic effect. Some critics see this characteristic of the author’s writing (i.e. the occasional sense of exaggeration) as a negative quality that his work as in general further into the realm of fiction than non-fiction. On the other hand, and in this particular case (i.e. within the larger context of consideration of the essay considering an earlier time when raising children had much fewer behavioral boundaries around it), the exaggeration may not, in fact, be so extreme.

“Think Differenter” – This essay is noteworthy for its style (which is more stream of consciousness, seemingly more random, than the other essays in this section and in the collection as a whole); for its subtly pointed commentary on the negative aspects of American consumerism and gun control; and for its deployment of another of the



author's narrative characteristics: his self-deprecating, slightly self-mocking perspective and sense of humor.

## Vocabulary

genocide, frivolous, indifferent, bilateral, abasement, venal, periodontist, abyss, incisor, elicit, orthodontist, fabricate, prosthodontist, traipse, molder, pewter, deface, volcanic, presidential, intervene, abusive, quizzical, captivity



# Essays 4 and 5

## Summary

“Memory Laps” - The author describes how, when he turned fifty, he rediscovered swimming, an activity he participated in when he was younger. He describes how he took swimming lessons and swam competitively at the Raleigh Country Club, where his parents were members; where the staff was all black; and where he was referred to as Mr. Sedaris while members of the adult black staff were referred to by their first names. He describes his intense dislike of competitive swimming; how he was glad to give other children the joy of winning (because all he felt at the end of a race, win or lose, was relief that it was over); and how his father became obsessed with the accomplishments of another young swimmer, Greg Sekas.

The author describes how, over the course of one particular summer, he felt increasingly angry at the way he was constantly being compared by his father to Sekas, constantly unfavorably, and how he did everything he could (including picking on his sisters) to distract his father from the comparisons. He also describes how his father repeatedly compared him, again always unfavorably, to pop star Donny Osmond; how any achievement he (the author) made, including winning a swimming competition, was belittled by his father; and how that belittlement continued even into the author’s adulthood. He comments that on the rare occasions when his father approved of something he had done, his father used the phrase “attaboy”, and concludes the essay with a reference to what little can be seen while someone is swimming: the bottom of the pool, a glimpse of the outside world while breathing ... “but you can’t pick things out,” he says. “A man’s face, for example, watching from the sidelines when, for the first time in your life, you pull ahead and win.”

“A Friend in the Ghetto” - This essay begins with a description of a conversation the author had with a cell phone salesman who, the author believes, lived in another, more disadvantaged country: his voice “had snakes in it. And dysentery, and mangoes.” The caller doesn’t make a sale, but he and the author have what the author portrays as a pleasant conversation, which concludes with the author’s invitation for the salesman to call again, and his (the author’s) comment on how he likes talking to people from what he believes to be disadvantaged lives. He then comments on how his mother suggested that he needed those kinds of people in his life so he can feel better about himself. This leads him into the recollection of how, when he was in grade school, he made an effort to befriend and date an overweight black girl his age whom he gives the pseudonym “Delicia”.

The school had just been desegregated, and Delicia, according to the author, seemed lonely and in need of friends. The author describes his plan to bring her out of her shell, to make her feel better about herself, and in general to make her life better, a plan that he suggests relates to what he knew about the life of his grandmother, a Greek immigrant who struggled all her life but who, he comments, loved her grandchildren





deeply. As he describes his efforts to get to know and improve Delicia's life, he also reveals how his mother commented that his efforts wouldn't be fair to Delicia, which led him to contend, at the top of his lungs, that she (his mother) was a racist. This leads him to realize how patronizing he must have been to Delicia, to wonder how she felt about it all, and also to consider whether his need for such friends might be best served by safe, unthreatening relationships like those with pen pals. The essay concludes with a return to the author's imagining of the telephone salesman, whom he still imagines calling him back ... once his life has improved.

## Analysis

"Memory Laps" – Here again, the author engages in characteristic wordplay, with "laps" referring to the lengths of a swimming pool swum either competitively or recreationally, while a memory "lapse" is a moment in which memory doesn't work. The pun in the title is therefore ironic, given that the author's memory seems to be working fine. Also: the author explores his relationship with his father, in a continued development of one of the collection's central themes; and again deploys the thematically central technique of using a present day experience to re-evaluate or re-examine his past. Meanwhile, he also introduces another characteristic of his writing: the dropping of hints about deeper meaning into the almost poetic writing of the essay's conclusion. In this case, the somewhat poetic metaphor refers not just to swimming, but also to what he seems to want from his father. There is also the sense that this moment is a foreshadowing of an incident, described in a late essay in the collection, in which the author finally does receive some positive, loving, affirming words from his father.

"A Friend in the Ghetto" - Once again, the present becomes a springboard into the past in this essay which, in many ways, takes the author into darker aspects of his life / history (i.e. his experience of liberal guilt/generosity which has within it a strong sense of racism) than many of the other essays in the collection. This section also marks the first appearance of the author's grandmother (who appears in a couple of other essays as an important influence in his life), and introduces yet another characteristic of the author's writing: the posing of a question that the author doesn't really answer, either here or anywhere else in the collection.

Both essays are notable for their sketched-in portraits of race relations in America: the comments about the black waiters and what they and the author were both called particularly pointed, vivid, and telling.

## Vocabulary

fraught, retrospect, triumphant, equivalent, ghetto, dysentery, mongoose, defiant, inaudible, reticence, virtuous, decrepitude, forfeit, illiterate, conjecture, pragmatic, outlandish, dromedary, elitist



# Essays 6, 7, and 8

## Summary

“Loggerheads” - This essay begins with the author’s recollection of inspiring encounters with wildlife while on vacation, one of which involved coming face-to-face with a sea turtle while diving (with Hugh) near Hawaii. This leads him into a reminiscence about a childhood experience with his friend Shaun. One of the things he and Shaun regularly did together, he says, was collect wild animals and attempt to domesticate them, attempts which, the author says, usually failed because the animals were all fed the same diet (raw ground beef), no matter what they were. He then describes how, while on an outing with Shaun and his family, he and Shaun found a nest of newly hatched sea turtles and each took five home. He describes his efforts to feed them and play with them, all of which failed.

He also describes how, while attempting to research the care and feeding of turtles at the library, he discovered two black men in the washroom: he only describes them as doing “something indecent”, but there is the clear sense that the men were engaged in some kind of sexual activity. He describes how the men ran away very quickly, and how they looked at him as though he had some kind of power over them.

Shortly afterwards, the turtles start to die, the author drawing a present-day parallel between the experiences of the turtles and those of the black men (i.e. of them being caught, trapped, and forced to live a lie. He then describes how, in an effort to get his mind off what was happening, the author’s father took him to a football game, which he (the author) says he didn’t understand at all, the opposite (he says) of how boys were supposed to automatically understand everything about football.

Shortly after the last turtle dies, the author then says, Shaun’s father suddenly died, from what he (the author) found out, as an adult, was alcoholism. Subsequently, the author continues, he found out the name of the turtles: “loggerheads”. He also discovers that the female loggerhead turtle lays hundreds of eggs at a time, and that “only one in a thousand” will make it to adulthood. The essay concludes with one last reference by the author to Shaun: on a day shortly after Shaun’s father’s funeral, when they were shooting a BB gun into the woods, the author says he “tried to see what [he] imagined [Shaun] did: a life on the other side of this, something better, perhaps even majestic, waiting for us to grow into it.”

"If I Ruled the World" – In this brief piece of fiction, the author writes from the (assumed) point of view of a conservative Christian who wants to rule the world in collaboration with Jesus; who wants to go after blasphemous, raucous, immoral music, clothes, entertainment and sexuality (particularly transsexuals) ; and who wants to show no mercy to anyone who disagrees with Jesus’ teachings. “... they shall know our fury,” he says, “Jesus and mine, and burn forever.”



"Easy, Tiger" – In this essay, the author discusses a variety of techniques he's used to learn a variety of different languages. He refers to his frequent travels to various countries (particularly to Germany and Japan), and discusses how the various languages compare to English (German, he says, used to seem extremely commanding to him, but now that he knows it better, just seems melancholy). He also refers to the differing styles of teaching language that he's discovered, one technique that includes considerable amounts of words and conversation about having sex, and another that leads students carefully into complicated sentence structures. The essay concludes with a reference to the joy of foreign travel: "you don't have to be fluent in order to wonder. Rather you can sit there with your mouth open, not exactly dumb, just speechless."

## Analysis

"Loggerheads" – Here the author deploys several of his familiar techniques and themes: present events triggering considerations of the past; the father/son relationship; and the use of poetic imagery. In the case of the latter, there is the sense, in the final moments of this essay, that the author is juxtaposing the image of Shaun looking into the woods / the future with the image of only a few surviving baby turtles to make a point about the futility of hope. Meanwhile, there are also developments in another of the book's major themes: the author's need for connection with people other than his father, which manifested earlier in the narrative (in "Dentists" and in "Friend ...") and which manifests with particular poignancy here. There is also the first explicit reference to the author's homosexuality – not so much in the passing reference to Hugh, but the reference to the black men in the washroom. It's never explicitly stated, but there is the clear implication that the author caught them engaged in some kind of sex act. His reaction to this, and the implications of the author's experience at the football game, suggest an emerging awareness that he wasn't like other boys, and that there was something about what the black men were doing that relates somehow to that awareness. Meanwhile, the sense of power over the black men that the author refers to has both racial overtones (in that the author is white and as such, had control over what happened to ANY black person) and social ones (in that he had the power to reveal what was then perceived as not just an indecency but a criminal act). Finally, there is the author's characteristic wordplay in his use of the term "loggerheads".

"If I Ruled the World" – This piece is one of several pieces of fiction in the collection which, almost entirely, are used to develop one of the author's key themes: specifically, his use of satire. His target here is the Republican Christian political right wing, which he targets here for its hypocrisy.

"Easy Tiger" – This essay introduces and develops the fifth of the collection's main themes: its exploration of the author's personal development while traveling. While he doesn't literally travel in this essay, his subject (the study of language) is clearly related to travel and to the expansion of knowledge while engaged in both the act and the preparation for it, while in its closing lines (which again deploy the author's technique of adding just a hint of poetry to his writing at his essays' close), he draws a clear



connection between the use of foreign language and the experience of being in a foreign country.

## Vocabulary

immaculate, glacial, cleave, barnacle, eclectic, disposition, predatory, exponential, traumatize, elicit, empathy, nutrient, mandatory, institute (v.), non-sequitur, phonetic, fluent



# Essays 9 and 10

## Summary

“Laugh, Kookaburra” - The author describes an argument he had with his father over what, exactly, he (the author) has done on his trips to Australia, eventually choosing to give in rather than embarrass the family members also present. The author then describes a particular experience on his most recent Australian trip, where he was guided by a woman named Pat whom he had originally met in Paris. While showing him and Hugh around, Pat spoke about her belief that people needed to cut off parts of themselves (such as family, friends, health, or work) in order to find success in other areas (for her it was her alcoholic, abusive family that she needed to cut herself off from in order to experience professional success); and who then took them to a prestigious restaurant, where the author has a startling encounter with the uniquely Australian laughing, carnivorous kookaburra. He describes a childhood experience in which he learned a song in school about the kookaburra, how he taught it to his sister Amy, how they stayed up late singing it, and how their father continually and angrily told them to stop, eventually spanking the author with a paddle the way he often did. He describes how, while interacting with the kookaburra at the restaurant, he realized that after this incident, he had tried to do what Pat did: cut himself off from his family (his violent father, his passive mother, his siblings for not backing him up), but then realized that without them, he was nothing. The essay concludes with another reference to the kookaburra, its cry coming from “the distant trees, laughing. Laughing.”

“Standing Still” - This essay begins with the author describing his living situation in his early twenties: in a small apartment, working several part-time jobs (including posing as a model for a drawing class) to pay the rent while he was struggling to be a sculptor, and feeling rather frightened of life after a period of somewhat random traveling. Things change when his younger sister Gretchen moves in upstairs: she, he says, idolized him somewhat and helped him out with food from the restaurant where she worked, but for the most part was quite independent as she prepared to go away to school and study entomology (the science of insects).

The author describes how Gretchen was attacked by a would-be rapist while walking home from a late-night grocery store with a butterfly she had captured; how she escaped without injury; how she called her and the author’s parents (who basically blamed her for the attack, saying she shouldn’t have been out at all); and how their father decided to search out and arrest the would-be rapist himself. The author describes how he accompanied his father on his expeditions to find the would-be rapist, and how their time together didn’t really improve their relationship in the way he (the author) thought it might. He concludes the essay by saying that he realized that “while modeling for the drawing class [he] was both literally and figuratively standing still”, a position, he says, he held for another three years of his life, “a long time when you’re going nowhere, and an interminable time when you’re going nowhere fast.”



## Analysis

"Laugh, Kookaburra" – As the author develops his themes of present experiences triggering contemplations of the past, his troubled relationship with his father, and the benefits of travel, he introduces (through the character of Pat) an interesting and intriguing idea: that of cutting parts of one's life off so that another part can be realized more successfully.

The kookaburra is renowned for the laughing quality of its song, which the author seems to experience as somewhat ironic and mocking – at least, that's the impression offered by the essay's final moments, which suggest that the kookaburra is laughing at the author even thinking he could cut himself off from his family.

"Standing Still" – As the author takes yet another opportunity to explore his relationship with his father, he also sketches in a portrait of his younger sister Gretchen, who is referred to in passing in other essays in the collection, but who comes to more vivid life here as someone - in spite of the other's contention that she idolizes him (at least to some degree) - far more independent and self-assured than her older brother. The essay's final lines can be seen as referring not only to the author's living and employment situations, but also to his relationship with his father which, as the descriptions of the essay suggest, was itself "standing still."

## Vocabulary

wallaby, constitute, cockatoo, brutish, avian, expectant, synonymous, evasion, meager, cryptic, psychedelic, entomology, languish, paisley, compensate, gumption, interminable



# Essays 11, 12, and 13

## Summary

“Just a Quick Email” - This short piece of fiction is written in the voice of a woman named Ronda, the wife of a successful attorney, sending an email to Robin who, the email reveals, was left a paraplegic as the result of a car accident in which Ronda was also injured, but relatively lightly. In the email, Ronda complains that the wedding present recently sent by Robin (a gift certificate for two pizzas) was inappropriately cheap, but then reveals her excitement at all the very expensive activities that are keeping her busy. At the same time, Ronda suggests that it's time for Robin to get over what happened and start living her life. The email also reveals that Ronda's husband is trying to get the DUI (driving under the influence) off her record, that Ronda was responsible for the car accident, that Ronda's husband was, in fact, Robin's husband at the time of the accident ... and that Robin is Ronda's sister.

“A Guy Walks into a Bar Car” - The author recalls a train trip he took in 1991 – outbound towards a possible reunion with an on-again / off-again boyfriend, return in the aftermath of a final break-up that, narration eventually reveals, included a physical confrontation. On the return trip, he went into the bar car where he encountered a black man telling a string of bad, mostly off-color jokes, and a man he gives the name Johnny, a young alcoholic whom, the author says, became his traveling companion for a short time and the object of a temporary, passing crush. He describes how they got caught after locking themselves in a private room to drink and smoke some marijuana, and how the next day, he (the author) saw Johnny again in the bar car and all he seemed to be (even while the black man was still telling jokes) was another drunk. Recollection of this experience leads the author to go further back into memory and recall a train trip through Italy he took several years earlier during which he again met a fellow traveler – in this case, a Lebanese man named Bashir. The two men, the author says, shared a mutual attraction that resulted in Bashir inviting the author to stay with him for a while, but the author, tempted as he was, chickened out. He comments on how, in the aftermath of the encounter with Johnny and even now, he regrets his choice and remembers Bashir with fond longing.

“Author, Author” - The author describes some of his experiences while on tour promoting his writing: his habit of trying to choose little gifts to hand out to people who come to his book signings; his habit of trying to ask good and appropriate questions of people; and his habit of trying, in different cities, to prioritize different groups coming to get their books signed (i.e. smokers, short people). He describes how one tour began and ended at Costco – first to buy his little gifts, and at the end for an actual signing which no-one attended, during which time he “imagined people thinking ‘I mean, really, just who the hell do you think you are?’” ... a question, he concludes was a good one for such a large space, next to a “boundless parking lot which leads, eventually, to home.”



## Analysis

“Just A Quick Email” - This fiction piece is clearly satirical, the author presenting a fairly recognizable character (who might be summed up as a spoiled, selfish, insensitive so-called “trophy wife”) in a manner that in some ways might seem exaggerated, but in other ways (and unfortunately so) might not be. The writing of this piece is structurally very effective, as Ronda’s selfishness becomes more and more extreme at the same time as the facts of her and Robin’s situation are revealed, the whole thing building to the twist revelation at the end of the relationship between Ronda and Robin.

“A Guy Walks into a Bar Car” - Here the author develops several of his themes: the value of travel, present experience triggering contemplation of the past, and perhaps more significantly than in any essay to this point, a contemplation of the need for connection. In this essay, that need seems intense to the point of being extreme, given the author’s actions. What’s both ironic and poignant about this piece is that the author is reaching for something, in each of these other characters, that he longs for; that he is unable to take the action to acquire it; and, therefore, ultimately doesn’t get what he wants. Also worth noting is the wordplay: specifically, the title, which is a paraphrase of a popular, almost cliché joke opening of the sort that might be told by the black man in the story and which, perhaps obviously, is a reference to the author’s actions in the essay.

"Author, Author" – In reference to this story, it’s important to remember that the author has, over the last several years, become increasingly well known around the world for the stories he tells, the manner in which he tells them, and the truths slightly camouflaged by that humorous, ironic, slightly heightened manner ... those truths referred to in poetic, metaphoric passing by the final lines of this essay and several others. It’s also important to note the relationship between what the author contends is said to him (i.e. who do you think you are?), a question that he seems to gently be asking the reader in these essays and his other writings, and those final lines ... truths about identity, who people think they are, seem on some level to equal home.

## Vocabulary

paraplegic, proverbial, volition, coercion, interminable, derailment, prudish, benzene, confiscate, stymie, perennial, jittery, titanic, oblivious, ephemera, cavernous





# Essays 14, 15, and 16

## Summary

“Obama!!!!!!” - The author writes about his experiences during the 2004 presidential campaign in the United States – or, more specifically, the first campaign in which Barack Obama was running, and which he (Obama) eventually won. The author describes how he was traveling around the world throughout almost the entire year; how he encountered almost universal doubt about Obama’s chances; and how that doubt seemed to be anchored in the almost universal belief that America as a country is racist. He also describes how doubt about Obama’s chances continued right until Election Day; how reaction to Obama’s election was almost universally positive across Europe; and how that positivity had a faintly patronizing feel about it. The happiness, the author comments was “Not ‘how wonderful that you have a thoughtful new president’ but ‘How wonderful that you elected the president we thought you should elect.’” The essay concludes with commentary on how coverage of Obama’s inauguration in Europe focused almost entirely on his being the first black president; on how the author imagines how he (a gay man) might feel on the inauguration of the first gay president; and, after reflecting throughout the essay on how Europe has some powerful right wing conservatives in its various governments, how he kept thinking to himself that Europeans should get their “own black president.”

“Standing By” - In this essay, the author contemplates various aspects of airplane travel: unexpected (and brief) friendships made in long lines; the way people tend to dress sloppily for plane trips; and the cost of flying that pays for service that don’t seem to improve. He describes experiences in one particular line: ahead of him, a large family with two teenaged parents of an infant child, one of which is wearing a particularly obnoxious t-shirt; behind him, a grandmother, traveling with two exceedingly well-dressed children, who hates the t-shirt; and behind her, a pair of conservative men complaining about how much Barack Obama is ruining the country, who is only (as the author points out) six months into his presidency. This leads the author to wonder about whether, in blaming the airlines and their employees for the discomfort of plane travel, people in airports are being their real selves, “gloriously so?” The essay concludes with his description of flight attendant activities at the end of a flight: going down the aisle “and whispering, without discrimination, ‘Your trash. You’re trash. Your family’s trash.’”

“I Break for Traditional Marriage” - In this piece of short fiction, narrator Randolph Denny describes how, in the aftermath of a legal ruling saying that same sex marriage was legal, he decided to do all the things that, like homosexuality, used to be illegal – things that he’s always wanted to do, but couldn’t because of the law. He shoots his wife and daughter; murders his mother-in-law with an ice pick; and makes plans to use important documents like his insurance policy and birth certificate to cover a box. As he goes to the bank, listening to conservative talk radio, he reflects (along with callers into the radio program he’s tuned into) on just how extreme marriage might get now that gay people can marry each other: Randolph, in fact, muses on his chances of marrying a



lawnmower that he likes a lot. Listening to the radio, Randolph passes a school bus, killing a child crossing the street. He's arrested and charged with not just the killing of the child, but also the killing of his family. He comments that he's now in prison; that if he was gay he'd have been set free; that in order to prove that he was gay, he kissed another male inmate; and that "as long as you keep your eyes shut, it's really not that bad."

## Analysis

All three essays in this section develop, to varying degrees, the author's consideration of the tension in America between political left and political right, Democrat and Republican, Liberal and Conservative.

"Obama!!!" – One of the collection's secondary themes emerges in this section – specifically, its consideration of racism, referred to in both essays in Section 2 ("Memory Laps" and "A Friend ...") and developed here on a larger scale. The noteworthy point here is how the author portrays the scope and depth of how America's racist history are recognized around the world, and how that recognition manifests in an attitude that has clear echoes of the author's attitude towards Delicia in "A Friend ..." This essay also contains what might be best described as a slightly darker twist on the collection's thematic focus on the enlightenment available through travel: the enlightenment glanced at here is less positive and somewhat more pointed.

"Standing By" – This essay also takes a somewhat pointed look at the darker side of enlightenment through travel – more specifically, enlightenment in terms of what people reveal about their darker, less generous and compassionate, more judgmental sides when they're away from the safety and security of their homes. There is also a sharp, vivid glimpse of right wing conservative attitudes towards the left-leaning Barack Obama (attitudes that, as extreme as they seem here, are very real in America), and a very pointed last few lines which, as is the author's practice, make a pointed, metaphoric comment on elements of the essay that have gone before – in this case, that comment being that such judgmental attitudes as those referred to here by the author make the people who make them trash ... or at the very least, trash-Y.

"I Break for Traditional Marriage" - This piece is among the broadest, most vivid, and most pointed examples of satire in the collection. The central character and speaker (Randolph) is to some degree an exaggeration of the kind of right wing, conservative "Christians" that have become more and more vocal, more and more politically and socially active, and increasingly determined to gain power and influence in America over the last several years. To another degree, however, here is a sketch of how some very real, very present, and very public attitudes might manifest if they were taken just one step further. Also: there is a sense here, as in other parts of the collection (particularly Part 2) that the essays were put in a specific order for a specific reason: in this case, the grouping of the collection's more pointed attacks on the conservative right. Here, though, it's important to note that while the technique of putting some kind of twist into his essay's final lines is something the author repeats frequently, rarely is it deployed



with the same kind of satirical effect as it is here, with his suggestion that Randolph might not be as anti-gay as he would have the reader believe.

## Vocabulary

privy, absentee, pigeonhole, congratulatory, inauguration, phonetic, belligerent, provocative, egocentric, referendum, custodian, inexcusable, iguana, retractable, alimony



# Essays 17 through 20

## Summary

“Understanding Understanding Owls” - After briefly describing his occasional, usually futile, attempts to rid his household of the owl gifts and memorabilia that he and Hugh have been given over the years, and after describing the origins of the collection (the following up of family and friends on a piece of research material acquired by Hugh), the author describes his search for a stuffed owl to give to Hugh as a Valentine’s Day present. Living in London at the time, the author travels to an out-of-the-way taxidermist’s shop, where the owner is chatty, does very good work, and, in addition to having a couple of recently stuffed owls in stock, shows him a couple of unique items: a man’s forearm, severed during a duel and afterwards preserved; and the 400-year-old mummified head of a young Peruvian girl. Intrigued by both, and marveling at the taxidermist’s instinctive knowledge that he might be interested in those sorts of things, the author buys one of the owls and leaves, reflecting on how different people intuitively see things in others and how sometimes, love (of the sort he suggests he has with Hugh) deserves more than one Valentine’s Day present, so he buys Hugh a box of chocolates.

“#2 to Go” - The author uses a trip to China, and contemplations of its hygiene and food preparation and consumption habits, to comment on North American tastes. He contrasts the stark cleanliness of Japan to what he says is the ever-present lack of cleanliness in China where, he says, people spit up gobs of phlegm where/whenever they feel like it; where babies and sometimes adults “shit” when/wherever they feel the need; and how all the parts (including blood and organs) of all sorts of animals (including dogs) are eaten. He contrasts this culture with the careful, sanitized, selective food culture of North American, paying particular ironic attention to what he sets up as the various categories of eater (i.e. vegetarian, vegan, microbotic, etc.). He concludes with a description of an expensive, finely prepared meal he and Hugh had in Beijing shortly before their departure, and where, in the toilet, he found “an unflushed turd, a little reminder saying ‘See, you’re still in China.’”

“Health-Care Freedoms and Why I Want My Country Back” - This short piece of fiction is written in the form of a letter to its “author’s” fellow patriots. It describes the speaker’s plans and preparations to participate in a March on Washington, and how she receives help from her son Todd who, along with his black roommate (the mother describing them as “thick as thieves”), convinces her that the “dyke” on the t-shirt he’s making for her refers to her determination to hold back President Obama’s reforms as being like a “dyke” that holds back floods of water. She also describes, with apparent innocence and naivety, how her son also convinces her that the tall, white, pointed hat he gets her to wear is like a nun’s wimple; and how the anagram A.S.S.H.O.L.E. that he’s painted on it stands for “Another Savvy Senior Hopes Obama Loses Everything.” And then she describes his help in putting her on a bus to Seattle.



“Now Hiring Friendly People” - At a small coffee bar in a hotel, the author finds himself in line behind two married tourists. As the friendly clerk makes their orders, and as the author gets increasingly impatient, the wife in the tourist couple asks several questions that the author wants to shout don't really matter. But he holds his tongue and the tourists leave, after complaining that four dollars each is a lot of money for two coffees. When he finally gets to the counter, the author hopes that he'll get some sympathy from the clerk, but she treats him with the same friendly respect as she treated the tourists. Unable to get the kind of coffee he wants, he storms out to the coffee shop around the corner, where “the pierced and tattooed staff members scowled” as he came up, “confident” that they would hate the tourists “as much as, or possibly even more than, they already hated him.”

## Analysis

“Understanding Understanding Owls” - There are a few things to note about this particular essay. First, there is its manifestation of the collection's theme of reaching for connection (i.e. the author's connection with Hugh; the author's connection with the taxidermist; and, perhaps most intriguingly, his across-the-centuries connection, made entirely through imagination, with both the owner of the severed arm and the long-dead Peruvian girl). Second, there is the introduction of the owl motif. Here it's important to note that nowhere in the collection is there a specific, explicit reference to the title and why the author chose to phrase it the way he did. There is one other reference to owls in the collection (in “Laugh Kookaburra”, the author describes owls as professorial while describing kookaburras as “phys ed teachers”), but other than that, there are no real hints as to why the title is what it is: neither, for that matter, is there a direct reference to diabetes. It may be that on a metaphoric or symbolic level, the author is referring to the discussion of potentially difficult things like diabetes with owls as a discussion or connection to wisdom, owls being a centuries-old symbol of wisdom and insight. That idea, however, is pure conjecture: almost any interpretation of the book's title is possible.

“#2 to Go” – This essay is another manifestation of the novel's thematic contemplation of the value of travel, albeit a contemplation of some of travel's less appetizing elements. It may or may not be satirical or exaggerated in its depiction of Chinese eating and hygiene habits and practices: the core point being made here is not just that other cultures have other ways of doing things, but that it's not always appropriate to judge ... a point that, ironically enough, is counterpointed in “Now Hiring ...”. which, on some level, is all about judging others. There is, of course, significant irony in the piece's last lines.

“Health-Care Freedoms and Why I Want My Country Back” - This is one of the most clever pieces of satire in the collection. It's a well-crafted portrait of someone who is being made a complete fool of without their knowing it. Examples: the word “dyke” on the T-shirt is clearly intended to be seen as not related to dams, but to lesbians (“dyke” being a slang term for a female attracted to the same gender); the pointed hat is not only a dunce cap, but evocative of the tall white hats worn by the racist Ku Klux Klan;



and the word A.S.S.H.O.L.E., which is just as clearly meant to be exactly what it says, and not the anagram the woman's son says it is. It's also quite clear that the woman's son is, ironically, happily gay and partnered. The final irony in the piece is that the woman is not headed to the real-life, historical March on Washington: she is, in fact, headed to Washington STATE, not Washington DC. The fact that she doesn't realize what's going on is a clear suggestion by the author that those who believe as this woman seems to are clearly neither informed enough nor intelligent enough to know what's really going on around them, nor what they're seemingly arguing against is really all about. In other words, by making a clear statement about a clearly defined individual, he is also making a statement about the type, or group, to which that individual belongs.

## Vocabulary

trivet, nocturnal, defunct, taxidermy, pedestrian (adj.), albino, miserly, enviably, amputee, desiccated, grisly, turnstile, cumbersome, indignity, authentic, incessant, guttural, phlegm, sanitation, arbitrary, devious, lavish, blight, mimeograph, dunce, genial, interrogation, dismembered, concourse



# Essays 21, 22, and 23

## Summary

“Rubbish” - After the author and Hugh purchase and begin to renovate a home in a beautiful part of West Sussex, England, the author becomes obsessed with keeping the area as clean and tidy (and as naturally beautiful) as possible. To that end, he spends increasing amounts of time walking the paths and roads, picking up all the litter he can find. He imagines the people who threw away things like a half-empty bag of doughnuts (i.e. a struggling dieter) or a carefully folded chocolate bar wrapper placed into a soda can (i.e. someone who is trying to reduce the amount of waste s/he is throwing away). The author recalls how his grandmother was herself a significant litterbug, preferring to keep the inside of the car clean, and concludes by describing another of the plans he and Hugh devise to keep people from throwing away their litter. “Here we are,” he says, “recent immigrants thinking that everything will be perfect once we fundamentally change the people who were actually born and raised here ... deep down I suspect it’s just rubbish.”

“Day In, Day Out” - A short visit from a friend and her young son, who keeps a journal in imitation of the author, leads the author to consider and analyze his lifelong habit of keeping what he calls “an old-fashioned, girlish, Keep-Out-This-Means-You diary.” He refers to his habit of keeping track of images, ideas, encounters, and moments that interest him; how he will spend time on vacation writing about things he’s experienced as opposed to going out and experiencing more (as Hugh will do); and how difficult it is to read his past diaries (particularly from when he was addicted to crystal meth) because it “calls forth the person you used to be [and] rubs your nose in him, reminding you that not all change is evolutionary.” He describes the different ways that members of his family (including Hugh) react to his keeping a diary, and concludes with a reference to the simultaneous joy and need associated with seeing a moment that he wants to remember forever, and the value of using his daily diary to do exactly that.

“Mind the Gap” - In this short story, the unnamed narrator is a young American woman, recently returned from a week-long stay in England with a suddenly acquired accent, a lot of British words in her vocabulary, a taste for British cigarettes, and a lot of patronizing impatience for Americans in general and for her family in particular. Narration reveals that her mother died of ovarian cancer while she was away; that she and her father had a difficult relationship even before the trip; and that she (the narrator) spent a lot of time with someone named Fiona who, narration also reveals, was much older and to whom she loaned a lot of money, going to three different bank machines. The story concludes with the narrator’s determination to get back to England as soon as she can, even if her father forbids it.





## Analysis

All three of these essays are grounded in / defined by the author's experience of living in England.

"Rubbish" – Aside from the wordplay ("rubbish" being the term more commonly used in the UK for garbage, and also in this essay the term the author uses for his attitudes and hopes), this essay is most notable for what might be seen as a playful manifestation of the collection's theme about connection – specifically, the author's use of his imagination to "connect" with the thoughts and reasonings behind the discarding of the rubbish that he finds. There is also a second vivid appearance of the author's grandmother (who appears tantalizingly only a few times, making the reader want to know more about her) and what is arguably a strong manifestation of the book's thematic interest in the value of travel – or, in this case, of living in a country not one's country of origin and of finding, preserving, and connecting with the beauty there.

"Day In, Day Out" – The reference to the author's life in England is a passing one in this essay – specifically, in its opening, more present day images which, as such similarly placed images do throughout the collection, trigger in the author a contemplation and analysis of his past. Here, perhaps more so than in any other essay in the collection, the author hints at a darker side to his history: specifically, his history of drug addiction, and to how it changes a life. What's particularly interesting about this reference is that its implied, glimpsed darkness places the more positive experiences to which the author refers (that is, the joyful moments he wants to record in his diary and remember) into vivid relief. The glimpse of darkness makes the glimpses of brightness more vivid: white is never more white than when it's placed next to black.

"Mind the Gap" – There's something simultaneously poignant and angry about this piece of fiction, a piece that has satirical elements but which is more notable for what it implies rather than what it says, what it suggests or evokes or means as opposed to what it explicitly comes out and states. There is such desperate loneliness and self-loathing in this piece, such a desire to escape from a deeply troubling life, that the extremes of altered language usage and self-deception can be seen as at best understandable, at worst forgivable. The writing is very well done here, in that clarity about the character and her situation becomes very apparent without outright statement. There may, in fact, be metaphorical echoes here of the author's own situation: he doesn't get along with his father in the same way as the protagonist of this story doesn't, and while the protagonist has at this point made an English life for herself only in terms of habits and mannerisms, the author has made a life for himself in England on almost all levels ... perhaps, in the same way as the protagonist has, in an extreme effort to get away from the influence of Dad. A word about the title: "Mind the Gap" is the phrase used on the London Underground / Subway to tell potential travelers to watch out for the space between the subway train and the platform. There is the sense here that there is significant metaphorical value in this title.





## Vocabulary

canopy, crockery, corrode, bucolic, verdant, prefabricated, rhapsodize, meticulous, picturesque, inexorable, conviction, repository, waver, compulsive, gibberish, collage, berate, lurid, incredulous, hydrangea, stoic



# Essays 24, 25 and 26

## Summary

“A Cold Case” - While on a visit to Hawaii, the author writes, he had his computer bag stolen. He was less concerned about his computer, he comments, than he was about his passport: he and Hugh, he explains, had gone through a lengthy, complicated, and expensive process to get an “Indefinite Leave to Stay” sticker in their passports, which meant that they could stay in their adopted home (the United Kingdom) for as long as they wanted. Wanting the passport back, he writes, led him to scour the area around the hotel for what was taken, imagining the whole time that the thief was a drug addict getting high after buying drugs with the proceeds of the sale of everything in the bag. Neither the bag nor its contents was ever recovered, meaning that the author and Hugh had to return to England (after this and other trips) with no proof that they had the right to stay there. On a couple of trips out and back, there was no problem: the author was just looked up in the computer at the immigration office. On one trip, however, one border agent was so disagreeable and so threatening that the author decided to get a new sticker and passport, the process for which took so long that he had to cancel several jobs outside of the country. Finally, just before leaving for a lengthy lecture tour of the United States, his bag, the passport, and other contents (but not the computer) were returned to him from Hawaii after being found by someone as anonymous, he reports, as the person who took the bag in the first place. After contemplating in his writing the possibilities for what the “good Samaritan” might be doing, the author writes that the next time he returned to the UK, he was waved through with a simple “next”.

“The Happy Place” - The author describes a pleasant conversation with a colleague in Holland, in which the colleague’s son (a biologist) also participated. The son describes a future time when people might be able to live to two hundred years of age, and suggests that that time is closer than many people believe. Recounting this story to his father triggers the author’s father to reintroduce the topic of the author getting a colonoscopy, which the author says has been a topic of conversation ever since he was in his twenties.

The author finally agrees, in spite of his nerves about any kind of medical procedure, and in the company of his sister Lisa (who says she loved her colonoscopy) the author goes in and has it done. He describes how, just prior to being given his anesthetic, the physician tells him to go to his “happy place”, a place of peace and contentment and safety. When he wakes up after the procedure, the author feels a kind of euphoria, which he thinks of as a kind of “happy place”, and is becomes even happier when his doctor tells him that his colon is perfectly healthy. As soon as he gets back to Lisa’s, where he is recovering, the author receives a phone call from his father, asking about the results. The author describes how he couldn’t resist telling his father that the test found cancer; that his father immediately offered him love, support, and encouragement; and how the author resolved to tell him the truth eventually, but not for



a while ... he wanted to enjoy being in the “happy place” of being cared for by his father as long as possible.

“Dog Days” - The collection concludes with a playful poem in which the author offers comic, rhyming sketches of a variety of dogs. The poem’s second to last verse refers to a test animal: “An average day and poor Raquel’s / being shot with cancer cells. / Among her friends, she likes to crab / that she’s a pointer, not a Lab.”

## Analysis

"A Cold Case" – This essay develops the theme about the value of travel in a slightly unexpected way, as the author becomes enlightened about the potential for unexpected obstacles to successful travel. It also develops the theme of connection in a similarly unexpected way, as the author experiences somewhat surprising, if entirely imagined, connections with both the people connected with his disappearing bag: the theoretical drug addict who stole it (a person whose existence is particularly pointed, given that the author had at one point, as he himself has admitted elsewhere in the collection, been a drug addict), and the imagined good Samaritan who found it. There is also the dark, angry, connection (what might be called a “shadow” or “reverse” connection) with the confrontational border guard, and the significantly ironic image of the essay’s final moments, which is in fact an evocation of how there is often in life, even in situations when we place importance on a particular moment where there was actually no connection at all.

"The Happy Place" – As noted elsewhere in this analysis, there is no plot associated with this collection of essays, no chain of events, choices, or circumstances that leads a protagonist or the reader towards a climax. That said, however, the events described here (i.e. the author’s comments to his father, and his father’s response) do form a kind of thematic climax – specifically to the through-line, discernible throughout the collection, of the author’s search for affection and respect from his father. This is the most significant point of note about this particular essay: a less significant, but still important element is the first substantive appearance of his sister Lisa, who is referred to (mostly in passing) several times throughout the book but makes her first significant contribution to narrative here.

"Dog Days" – The final piece of writing in the collection is not an essay but is, in fact, a poem that combines a formality of rhythm and structure with a playfulness of wordplay that appears throughout the collection but which explodes into giddy, clever celebration here. This is not to say that there are no poignancies in this poem – the verse quoted in the summary, for example, gently but vividly points out the futility and suffering associated with being a dog kept in a laboratory as a subject for experimentation (note the pun on “Lab”, a shorthand term for both a kind of dog – a Labrador – and for laboratory).



## Vocabulary

nondenominational, colossal, melodious, defecate, depravity, vibrant, convoluted, galling, hideous, monotony, precaution vicinity, prophecy, colonoscopy, malign, endoscopy, incontinence, affix, emphatic, omnipotent, hyperactive, infertile, errant, sphincter



# Important People

## The Author (David Sedaris)

David Sedaris is an internationally renowned writer, broadcaster, and commentator. An American by birth but currently making his home in England, he has also traveled the world giving readings and presentations based on his writing: several of the essays in this collection highlight all three aspects of his citizenry: his childhood in, and inescapable focus on / awareness of, America; how his life in England came into being; and his adventures traveling to different countries, in particular experiences related to food and language.

Several aspects of the author's life form background and context to this most recent collection of essays and other writings: his relationship with his father (which, the essays suggest, seems to have been difficult for his – the author's – entire life); his middle age (having, the essays also suggest, moved through his fifties); his homosexuality (he frequently mentions, usually in passing, his long-term same-sex partner); his neuroses (there is the sense that he is more than a little insecure, somewhat obsessive, and prone to self-dramatization); and his liberalism. This last is particularly significant, in that several of the writings in this collection satirize, sometimes very darkly, extreme conservatism in America. At the same time it's important to note that none of these aspects of his life – his family history, his age, his sexual orientation, his politics – ever shape the essays into anything approaching a straightforward chronology of events, self-indulgent self-pity, or, in the case of his political opinions, a lecture. Instead, these aspects of his life essentially serve primarily as springboards for contemplations of his own experience and, at times, of the broader human experience.

Other important aspects of the author's personality / identity that emerge and/or manifest at one time or another throughout the collection include a strong connection with his family (in spite of the often negative presence of his father); a cautious sense of adventurousness (his above-referenced neurosis often seems to prevent him from whole-heartedly embracing new things and/or experiences); and an engaging sense that while he has a certain clear sense of self-awareness, he doesn't take himself too seriously. This may be the result of a certain authorial perspective: the desire to inform and/or enlighten the reader is present, but seems to be of less concern than entertaining them with humorous, well-told stories.

## The Author's Father

The author's father appears in several essays in the collection, and is often portrayed as distant, autocratic, and judgmental. The author's search for affection, respect, and understanding from his father forms an underpinning to many of his stories, and as such forms the closest thing to a through-line, or linking element, in the collection.



## The Author's Mother

While the author's mother also appears several times in the collection, the sense that emerges from these various appearances is that while she is important to the author, her presence and influence are less significant in terms of how the author and his perspectives were shaped. She is portrayed, at different times, as being wise and naive; exasperated and patient; compassionate and brisk. Perhaps most importantly, there is a sense of long-term tolerance with the author's father, a perspective that at times verges into a sense of her being long-suffering. Ultimately, there is also the sense that her affection for the author, as a child, youth, and adult, was and is more accessible to him than the same reactions from his father.

## The Author's Grandmother

For the author, his father's mother is an eccentric, amusing, but consistently loving presence. She appears in only a few essays, and is a presence only in his life as a child, but is a figure that awakens in his adult self a sense of compassion and perspective specifically related to his increasing awareness of what she endured as a Greek immigrant to America early in the 20th Century.

## Gretchen

Of the author's three sisters, each of whom appears throughout the narrative, Gretchen is the one whose character comes through most vividly. She plays a significant role in "Standing Still", where she comes across as strong, courageous, and independent, a clear and vivid contrast to the somewhat fluttery neediness of the author that comes across vividly in that story and throughout the collection.

## Lisa

The second of the author's three sisters referred to in the collection, there are a couple of important points to note about her. On a couple of occasions, she is described as the "perfect" child in the family without a real sense of what that means - a reader might suspect something like good looking, athletic, intelligent, and well-behaved, traits that are often associated with the "good" or "perfect" child in the stereotypical family. Another point to note about Lisa is that like Gretchen, she plays a particularly significant role in one essay - in Lisa's case, it's "The Happy Place", in which she, again like Gretchen, comes across as a calming, mature influence on the neurotic author.

## Amy

Amy is the third of the author's sisters to appear in the collection. She, like Gretchen and Amy, is glimpsed several times, but unlike her sisters, does not have a particularly



significant role to play in any. Her most substantive appearance is in "Laugh Kookaburra (Part 2), in which she shows up as a sort of "partner in crime" for the author.

## Hugh

Hugh is the author's long-term, same-sex partner. While he is referenced in several essays, his character and/or identity are never developed in any significant detail. There are glimpses of his capacity for organization ("A Cold Case") and the determination he shares with the author to keep their English home clean and beautiful ("Rubbish"), but for the most part he comes across as a supportive, patient, constant, reliable presence in the neurotic author's life.

## Barack Obama

Barack Obama, the 44th president of the United States and the first African-American to hold that position, is referred to several times throughout the collection. Never a central figure but nevertheless an influential one, his race, his apparent liberalism, and the way in which conservative right wing elements of American society hold such anger at him form the backdrop for several essays and many of the short fiction pieces.

## Greg Sekas

This is the first of several individuals from the author's life who plays an important role in only one of the essays. In Sekas' case, he is a key figure in "Memory Laps" as a successful swimmer who is frequently held up as an example for the author to live up to. Sekas then becomes a powerful, significant target for the author's resentment and retaliation.

## "Delicia"

"Delicia" is the pseudonym (false name) given to a character in "A Friend in the Ghetto", an overweight young African-American girl whom the author decides he is not only going to befriend and go steady with: he is also going to make her life better. She is a catalyst for his later-in-life realizations of just how patronizing and/or self-centered his attitudes towards those less advantaged than himself actually are.

## Shaun

Shaun appears in the essay "Loggerheads" as a childhood friend of the author's. Shaun's character is never quite developed, but he, like other such characters (i.e. Greg Sekas, Delicia) serves, primarily by his remembered presence, as a catalyst for development of the author's self-awareness as an adult.



## Pat

Unlike other such important people (i.e. characters who have influence on the author as portrayed in a single essay), Pat is someone he encounters as an adult. She is a direct, outspoken, generous Australian, who introduces the author (and Hugh) to the ways of her country, and who triggers, in him, an intriguing and challenging way to consider his life, his relationships, and his choices.

## "Johnny Ryan"

"Johnny Ryan" is the pseudonym of a character who, like Pat, appears in the author's recollections of a more mature time in his life. Appearing in "A Guy walks into a Bar Car", Ryan is a fellow traveler and partier with whom the writer passes time that, for the author, is noteworthy for his unfulfilled longing for his companion, and that companion's capacity for both alcohol consumption and self-delusion.

## Bashir

Also in "A Guy walks into a Bar Car", the author has an encounter with a second traveler. Bashir, a young Arab man, is that encounter, and in this case the author's longing to connect with his companion in a sexual and emotional way is reciprocated. But even though Bashir invites the author to share a weekend with him, the author declines, unable to make the adventurous commitment to an unexpected freedom and/or romance.

## Ronda

Ronda is the central character of one of the collection's fiction pieces ("A Quick Email"). Through her first person narration, Ronda reveals herself to be selfish, insensitive, and manipulative - in short, a satirical portrait of some of the most distastefully self-interested elements of American society.

## Randolph Denny

Like Ronda, Denny is the protagonist of a piece of non-fiction - in this case, "I Break for Traditional Marriage". Also like Ronda, Denny is a satirical creation - in his case, a satirized portrait of an angry, violent, right wing Christian / Republican angry about, and determined to take action about, what he sees as the dangerous liberalizing of America.

## The Conservative Mother

This is the unnamed central character and narrator of "Health Care Freedoms ...", a short fiction piece that again satirizes the American Christian Right but in this case





creates a first-person portrait of a character who is entirely unaware of just how much of a fool she's being made of by her apparently liberal, gay son.

## **The American Girl**

This is the unnamed protagonist and narrator of "Mind the Gap", a short story in the collection which portrays a character so desperate to distance herself from both her family and from America that she makes what is portrayed as an extreme effort to adopt British attitudes, mannerisms, and vocabulary.

## **The Taxidermist**

This vividly portrayed character appears in "Understanding Understanding Owls". In his brief, singular appearance, he makes a vividly eccentric impression, eager to please the author when he comes into his shop and, in the author's experience, has an almost uncanny ability to know and understand him.



# Objects/Places

## Paris

The capital city of France is the setting for the events contemplated by the author in the collection's first essay, "Dentists Without Borders". It is portrayed as being, in the author's experience, friendly, welcoming, and "socialized" in the non-political, well-mannered sense of the word.

## Normandy

This region of France is referred to in passing in several essays. It is where the author and his long-term partner Hugh had one of their first homes outside of America.

## West Sussex, England

This is the part of Britain where the author and Hugh eventually settle into what appears to be their permanent home. Portrayed in the essay "Rubbish" as particularly beautiful, there is the sense that in contrast to having lived at what the lives of his parents determined was "home", the life he (the author) shares with Hugh in West Sussex really IS home.

## Raleigh, North Carolina

This is the city in the American South where the author spend his childhood and grew up. It is the setting for several of the book's essays, including "A Friend in the Ghetto", and is defined by, among other things, a sense of class and social difference defined by race and economic status.

## The Raleigh Country Club

This exclusive club is referred to in "Memory Laps" as the place where the author had many of his experiences as a competitive swimmer. The essay also contains subtle but very clear references to the racism that was prevalent at the club at the time the author and his family were members there (i.e. the early-mid 1960's).

## China

This is the setting for the essay "#2 to Go", which comments on the author's visit to China and his observation of the dietary and hygiene habits there. Those habits are



used as a point of comparison with the same habits in America, with China coming out on the somewhat negative side.

## **Animals**

In several essays in this collection, the author's experiences with animals, both in the present and in the past, trigger important contemplations / understandings of human behavior. "Loggerheads", "Laugh Kookaburra", and "Dog Days" (among others) offer particularly vivid and/or significant examples of human and animal relationships in general, and the author's experiences with animals in particular.

## **Owls**

Of all the animals who appear in the collection, owls are perhaps the most significant - or, at least, intended to be perceived as the most significant. On a couple of occasions, the essays make reference to owls and the reputation they have in folklore and popular culture as sources of wisdom. The primary appearance of owls is in the essay "Understanding Understanding Owls", which refers to the various ways owls have presence in the lives of the author and his partner.

## **The Author's Journal**

Several times throughout the collection, but primarily in "Day In, Day Out", the author refers to his journal (which, he says, is more like a diary) and how he uses it as a repository and collecting place for thoughts, impressions, and ideas. There is the sense that the diary is where most of his essays and writings have their beginnings.

## **Conservatism**

On several occasions throughout the collection, in both its non-fiction and fiction pieces, the author makes pointed satirical comments about the power, influence, and failings of right wing conservatism in America. There is the very clear sense that in the author's perspective, such attitudes are dangerous, often inhumane, and just as often ill-informed.

## **The Author's Passport**

The passport, or rather the loss thereof, is the focus of the essay "A Cold Case", the narrative of which is anchored by events resulting from that passport disappearing. There is a sense in this essay that the author's identity, perhaps definable as "a citizen of the world" is compromised significantly by the loss of this document.

## **The 1960's**

This is the setting in time for many of the author's examinations of his past - particularly his childhood, and most particularly his relationship with his father. It was a time, narration suggests (particularly in "Attaboy") when disciplining of children was both more widespread and more severe than it is in contemporary society, and it was therefore more permissible for parents to have, and act upon, resentful, strict, or controlling attitudes towards their children.



# Themes

## Present Experience Triggering Insight into the Past

As is the case with a great deal of non-fiction writing, many of the essays in this collection use consideration of present-day experiences as springboards and/or triggers for both contemplation and analysis of the past. Each of these essays is, in essence, a mini-memoir of sorts, with the author using insights and perspectives gleaned over time to come to fuller and deeper understanding of himself, of the people around him, and of the world in which they all live. Present day experiences initiate excavations of the past, as the author digs through layers of his personal history to find a core truth that time has given him the metaphorical eyes to actually see and comprehend. In some ways, he is an archaeologist of memory, sifting through decades of personal history to find those artifacts of encounter and relationship, confrontation and outcome, that give his life both context and depth.

In “Memory Laps”, for example, the author’s relatively recent experience of rediscovering the pleasures and value of swimming leads him to both recollection and examination of his childhood experiences in the particular swimming pool where he grew up. These recollections, in turn, become triggers for what emerges throughout the collection as an important theme – the author’s difficult relationship with his father (see below). This process is repeated echoed in several essays throughout the work, particularly those in which the author’s relationship with his family in general, and with his father in particular, play the defining role.

That said, there are also essays in which a similar pattern plays out – i.e. present day encounters spinning the author around to look into the past – in terms of the author’s exploration not just of his relationship with others, but his knowledge of himself. The most notable example of this is “A Friend in the Ghetto”, in which the author comes to an understanding of a somewhat painful truth about his desire for friendships with those who seem to be more disadvantaged than he is. In other words, the focus on these essays is inward (i.e. directed towards the author’s self) than outward (i.e. the author’s relationships with others).

## Enlightenment through Travel

Several of the essays in this collection are built around the author’s experiences while traveling.

Born and raised in America, making his home in England, the author’s reputation and status as someone whose work is read, known, and enjoyed all over the world (even in non-English speaking countries like China) takes him on trains, planes, and other forms of transportation several times throughout his average year. “Dentists without Borders”, “Laugh, Kookaburra”, and #2 to Go” are all examples of how the author uses these



travel experiences in specific countries (France, Australia, and China respectively) as material for both his cultural and his personal contemplations. Meanwhile, “Easy, Tiger” is an example of an essay that examines a travel-related experiences without being anchored by / grounded in a visit to a particular country (i.e. the experience of learning other languages), while “A Guy Walks into a Bar Car” is an example of an essay in which the travel experience is one within the author’s home country of America.

The sense that emerges over the course of the collection is that all these journeys take the author not only into another place (i.e. another external situation): they also take him into himself (i.e. an internal exploration). This is one of the primary manifestations of the book’s central thematic perspective (i.e. as noted above, present-day experiences triggering explorations / contemplations of the past). The sense here is that no matter where he goes, and no matter what the context of his travel, the author uses his outward circumstances (what he does, sees, and encounters) as a way into contemplation not only of himself, his values and his feelings, but also his interpretations of what those external experiences MEAN, in terms of who he was, who he is, and how who he was affects who he is. Here it’s important to note that these interpretations manifest not just on a personal level (although this is the predominant perspective) but at times in the larger perspective of simply being a human being on the planet earth.

## Searching for Connection

Almost all of the pieces in this collection, in one way or another but never explicitly, suggest that the author is looking for a sense of connection and/or relationship with both people and places, situations or circumstances where he feels at home ... comfortable, safe, where he belongs, where he feels most able to be most himself. To look at this in another way: in most (if not all) his recollections, and his contemplations of what he recalls, there is a sense of his feeling like an outsider, of feeling different, and of feeling perhaps not unwelcome, but unconnected. This is true both of the essays in which he considers his younger self (“Memory Laps” is perhaps the most vivid example of this) and his travel (“#2 to Go” is a vivid example not only of the author’s feeling like an outsider, but how that feeling has a sense of moral judgment attached to it). There are also his essays about his efforts to make the place where he lives into a home (“Rubbish”), and his attitudes towards contemporary society (“Attaboy” and “Now Hiring ...” are clear examples of this), all of which suggest a man both trying to make a place for himself and trying to understand the place he’s trying to fit INTO.

This idea, this thematic element in so many of the essays (implied but common), becomes even more apparent when juxtaposed with essays like “Dentists Without Borders”, which takes as its primary focus the opposite perspective – how welcomed the author feels in an unexpected situation or circumstance. Then there is “A Friend in the Ghetto”, in which the author clings to a somewhat delusional belief about a particular friendship not just out of a self-serving desire to improve the life of someone else but out of the implied desire (i.e. of a sexually awakening, parentally bullied, seemingly lonely young man) to find someone to be a friend with. Finally, there is “A



Guy walks into a Bar Car”, which is all about the author’s search for some kind of relationship with two different men on two different train journeys.

The primary example of this throughout the collection is how several of the essays explore different circumstances in which the author repeatedly seems to be searching for at least some kind of positive acknowledgement (at best affection and love) from his emotionally remote, eccentric father.

## The Father / Son Relationship

If there is a plot or story that threads its way through the collection, it has to do with the author’s ongoing, and almost entirely difficult, relationship with the man whom he (the author) describes as seeming to be constantly belittling him, undermining him, and/or behaving in ridiculous or embarrassing ways – his father.

Throughout the collection (with one exception), the author’s father is portrayed as being selfish, eccentric, willful (willfully eccentric?), often angry, and while loving and protective of his children, expressive of those more tender feelings in ways that don’t always make a great deal of sense - at least in the author’s perspective (“Standing Still” is a vivid example of this particular perspective). Only in the final pages of the collection, when he believes that the author has been diagnosed with cancer, is there a sense that the author’s father’s compassion and affection have made a genuine connection with his son - which arguably, if the essays are to be fully believed, has been the author’s desire throughout much, if not all, of his life.

The point must be made that the essays in general, and the author’s thematic contemplations of his relationship with his father in particular, are not chronological – that is, there is no sense of “this happened, then that happened”. This is not a book-long story in any sense of the word, and neither is the author’s exploration of, and commentary on, his relationship with his father any kind of plot. Neither is there a sense that the collection is, as a whole, anchored in the author’s search for a better connection with the man who didn’t so much raise him as morally and emotionally tried to SHOVE him into adulthood. Aspects of that relationship, however, become a repeated motif (i.e. image or incident) that evolves, through repetition, into an important undertone to the collection as a whole, one that comes to a kind of resolution in one of the book’s later essays (“The Happy Place”) as a more traditional plot would but which ultimately comes across as a slight tightening of one thread in the complex tapestry of the author’s overall experience.

## Satire

“Satire” is a form of humor in which aspects of a society, a system, a culture, a community, or an individual are exaggerated in order to reveal how extreme they actually are. As an art form, but more importantly as an engaging means of social commentary (i.e. making important points through humor), satire has been around for thousands of years. For example, in the classical Greek theatre of 300/400 BC,



attitudes towards war were satirized in the comedy “Lysistrata”, in which women tired of the constant state of military conflict in Greece refused to have sex with their men until the war ceased. In more contemporary terms, popular television programs such as “The Daily Show” have strong satirical perspectives, pointing out the ridiculousness of the behavior and the perspectives on both sides (i.e. Conservative/Republican, Liberal/Democrat), of the American political system. Meanwhile, animation programs like “The Simpsons” and “Family Guy” often focus their satirical attention on more social, moral, and/or familial issues.

Several pieces in this collection take a satirical perspective on socio, cultural, and political situations – most specifically, on the conservative right wing in America. “If I Ruled the World”, “I Break for Traditional Marriage”, and “Health Care Freedoms ...” are primary examples of how the author makes an edgy, pointed attempt to show both the extremity and the seeming ridiculousness of attitudes held and acted upon by the religious right (it’s important to note here that these pieces, while grounded in genuine, real-world attitudes and perspectives, are more fiction than non.) Other targets of the author’s sense of satire are the entitled and privileged (“A Quick Email”) and those who blindly assume characteristics of another culture (“Mind the Gap”), although this latter is like the non-fiction pieces in the collection in that while it contains satirical elements, it is more of a contemplation than a thinly veiled attack, as the other satirical pieces are.

Further to that point: even while he is exploring relatively important issues in his life and in the world around him, the author’s writing in general tends towards the satirical – that is, the exaggeration of certain elements for both comic effect and to emphasize their extreme nature even further. This has, on occasion, led to comments that the author’s writing is too fictionalized, too shaped, too exaggerated, to be true non-fiction.



# Styles

## Structure

Because this book is a collection of shorter works, there is relatively little, if any, apparent overall structure: there is no sense of narrative build, no sense of encounter A leading to encounter B, and no immediately apparent sense of climax. Each piece in the collection is almost entirely self-contained: important people (such as the author's boyfriend Hugh, his mother, or his sister Gretchen) appear in a number of the stories, and in some play more significant parts than in others. There are also echoes from one piece to another of themes, narrative elements (i.e. satire), and humor; there are interruptions of the flow of non-fiction writing by pieces that are more fictionally oriented – “If I Ruled the World”, “Just a Quick Email”, and “I Break for Traditional Marriage” are three examples of more fictionalized (but still satirical) writing that the author refers to as “Forensics”, shorter pieces that, as the author notes in a brief introduction, are used by students as competitive recitations.

All that said, and as noted in “Themes – The Father / Son Relationship”, there is a through-line of sorts in the connection, a theme or motif that appears in a number of the stories and reaches a kind of climax close to the book's conclusion – specifically, in the essay titled “The Happy Place”. This is the author's consideration of his relationship with his father, portrayed as difficult and challenging throughout the narrative, and with the sense that the author, consciously or not, is constantly seeking his father's approval, respect, or affection. In “The Happy Place”, that seeking comes to what seems to be at least a temporary end when, admittedly as the result of some manipulation on the part of the author, his father expresses the kind of unconditional support that the author says he has been looking for all his life. It may seem to some readers that both the essays and the order in which they were placed were deliberately shaped in order to give this moment in this particular story maximum impact – to give the book some kind of climax. It's arguable, in fact, that the implications of the moment in question would be very different if this essay had been placed at the collection's beginning, rather than at its end. Ultimately, the moment is not a climax in the traditional sense of the word, but does perform that function, and gives the collection a strong feel of coming to a satisfactory close.

## Perspective

There are several points to note about the collection's sense of perspective. The first, and most fundamental, is that the essays it contains are all written from the specific perspective of its author: a middle-aged, educated, middle-class, white gay man born and raised in America but now living in England. To one degree or another, one or more of those aspects of the author's identity filter into, and at times even define, both the fiction and non-fiction stories in the collection.



The second point to note about perspective in this book is that it tends to be humorous – often pointing out comic, and/or unlikely, juxtapositions between people, beliefs, situations, and circumstances and are frequently amusing. At times, and as noted in “Themes”, that humor takes on a darker, somewhat edgier tone as the author slips into satire – the exploration of absurdity through the exaggeration of reality. At other times, the humor comes at the author’s expense, as he notes and comments on the absurdity of his actions, attitudes, and beliefs (particularly those of his younger self). In almost all of the book’s writings, again to one degree or another, there is the clear intent to make the reader both laugh and think.

Finally, an important part of the piece’s perspective has to do with an aspect of the work that is less about what’s on the page and more about how what’s on the page came to be. In recent years, there has been a degree of criticism and/or concern that the author’s work is not entirely non-fiction – that he has exaggerated, and/or continues to exaggerate, his experiences for comic effect. While there is certainly a feel throughout the book that some of the incidents he describes, and the way he describes them, are a little too extreme to be entirely believable, and while there is a degree of validity to concerns about sacrificing pure truth for a humorous perspective, there is also the sense that at the core of each essay is a true experience: that the author, like countless writers and satirists before him, is using humor as a means of softening pills that are sometimes bitter, painful, and/or hard to swallow. In other words, the author’s perspective in writing is, or often seems to be, connected to using humor to make his readers think a little more about themselves and about the world ... the specific leading to contemplations of the general: contemplations of the personal leading to contemplations of the universal.

## Tone

As noted above, and indeed throughout this analysis, the collection’s overall tone is one of humor. Stories are told, incidents are described, details are perhaps exaggerated somewhat in order to trigger humorous reactions in the reader. The author uses humor, again as noted above, to safely and comfortably trigger at least a degree of contemplation in the reader – it’s not just him (the author) who questions how and why things happen as they do, in his own life and in the world: he wants the reader, at least to some degree, to look at the world and him/herself just that little bit differently. Humor has always been one of the story’s primary, most engaging, and most effective tools in inviting readers to shift their perspectives: the author here is following in the tradition of American humor / satire writers like Will Rogers and Mark Twain, along with comedic television personalities like Ellen DeGeneres, who use different degrees and forms of comedy to look at just how silly human beings can be.



## Quotes

None of them ever call me David, no matter how often I invite them to. Rather, I'm Monsieur Sedaris, not my father but the smaller, Continental model. Monsieur Sedaris with the four lower implants. Monsieur Sedaris ... sweating so fiercely he leaves the office two kilos lighter. That's me, pointing to the bathroom and asking the receptionist if I may use the sandbox, me traipsing down the stairs in a fresh set of clothes, my smile bittersweet and drearied with blood, counting the days until I can come back and return myself to this curious, socialized care."

-- The Author (Essay 1 - Dentists without Borders)

**Importance:** In this quote from the close of the collection's introductory essay, the author sums up the reasons why the French health (dental) care system is something he reacts positively to and/or compares positively to the American system.

Never would they have blindly defended me or even asked for my side of the story, as that would have put me on the same level as the adult. If a strange man accused you of doing something illegal, you did it. Or you might as well have done it. Or you were at least thinking about doing it. There was no negotiating, no "parenting" the way there is now.

-- The Author (Essay 2 - Attaboy)

**Importance:** Here the author sums up the primary difference between the kind of parenting he received as a child and what he sees as the liberal, too forgiving contemporary parenting he sees around him.

The iPhone 2 led to the 3, but I didn't get the 4 or the 5 because I'm holding out for the 7, which, I've heard on good authority, can also be used as a Taser. And isn't that technology's job? To lighten our burden? To broaden our horizons? To make it possible to talk to your attorney and listen to a Styx album and check out the obituaries in the town where your parents continue to live and videotape a race riot and send a text message and stun someone into submission all at the same time?"

-- The Author (Essay 4 - Think Differenter)

**Importance:** In this quote, the author kills two satirical birds with one clever stone: he looks, with humor and irony, at both his own acquisitiveness and greed and also at the seemingly unlimited string of things that can be accomplished with technology.

My dad was like the Marine Corps, only instead of tearing you to pieces and then putting you back together, he just did the first part and called it a day. Now it seems cruel, abusive even, but this all happened before the invention of self-esteem, which, frankly, I think is a little overrated.

-- The Author (Essay 4 - Memory Laps)

**Importance:** In this quote, the author sums up the essential qualities, values, and



outcomes of his relationship with his father, aspects of which thread their way throughout the book.

...what goes through a person's mind the first time they're patronized? Was she embarrassed? Enraged? Or perhaps this wasn't her first time. Maybe it happened so often she'd simply resigned herself to it.

-- The Author (Essay 5 - A Friend in the Ghetto)

**Importance:** Here the author begins to imagine what his efforts, well-meaning when he was young but seemingly embarrassing now he is an adult, might have actually meant to the young black girl he convinced himself both needed his help and would be grateful for it.

The smell that developed in the days after Halloween, this deep swampy funk, was enough to make your throat close up. It was as if the turtles' very souls were rotting, yet still they gathered in the corner of their tank, determined to find the sea. At night I would hear their flippers against the glass, and think about the Negroes ... wondering what would become of them - what, by extension, would become of me?

-- The Author (Essay 6 - Loggerheads)

**Importance:** Here the author draws parallels between the struggle of the captive sea turtles to survive and what he perceives as the struggle of the two black men in the washroom to perhaps not survive, but be themselves. He also draws the same parallel with his own experience as a young, questioning, possibly gay man.

[Jesus] and I are going to work really well together ... I'll point him to the Muslims and vegans who believe their God is the real one. The same goes for the Buddhists and whoever it is that thinks cows and monkeys have special powers. Then we'll move onto the comedians ... the Democrats, the Communists, and a good 97 percent of the college students.

-- The Author (Essay 7 - If I Ruled the World )

**Importance:** This is an excerpt from the long list of groups and individuals that the speaker of this essay (a character different from the author) says will be the targets of his and Jesus' revenge.

...I needed another minute to take it all in and acknowledge, if only to myself, that I really did have it made. A storybook town on the far side of the world, enough in my pocket to shout a fancy lunch, and the sound of that bird in the distant trees, laughing. Laughing.

-- The Author (Essay 9 - Laugh, Kookaburra)

**Importance:** The author concludes this essay with a summary of the good things that have happened in his life in spite of the emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical assaults of his father.



Seeing as we're on this subject, Robin, is it right to insist on all this special treatment? More than that, is it healthy? It's been almost a year since the car accident. Don't you think it's time you moved on with your life? Do I need to remind you of all my injuries ... it's no severed spinal cord, of course, but ... either you can live in the past as a lonely, bitter paraplegic, or you can live in the present as one. I dusted myself off and got back on the proverbial horse, so why can't you?

-- The Author (Essay 11)

**Importance:** In this quote, written in the voice of a self-centered character (Ronda) other than the author, the speaker reveals just how selfish she is and how concerned with her own status, particularly in relationship to her much more troubled friend.

For all I knew, in the time it took to kill my mother-in-law with an ice pick and throw her onto a bonfire, some activist judge or group of state assemblymen had decided that cars don't BELONG in garages anymore, that they should live in houses and eat chicken dinners, just like people do. Up was down and down was up, as far as the world was concerned, so why not make like the homosexuals and follow my dreams?

-- Randolph Denny (Essay 17 - I Break for Traditional Marriage)

**Importance:** In this quote, the narrator of this particular story reveals the extremity of his conservatism, his anger, and his violent tendencies. There is the sense that while the character and the story are satirical, the emotions at the core of both are, to a significant degree, quite real.

Hugh and I don't notice the same things either. That's how he can be with me. Everything the taxidermist saw is invisible to him: my superficiality, my juvenile fascination with the abnormal, my willingness to accept and sometimes even celebrate evil - point this out, and he'll say 'David? MY David? Oh no. He's not like that at all.

-- The Author (Essay 18 - Understanding Understanding Owls)

**Importance:** The author takes his contemplations of how well the briefly encountered taxidermist knew him into a contemplation of what he seems to suggest is love - the closing of one's eyes to the true, sometimes unappealing nature of the beloved.

My trip reminded me that we are all just animals, that stuff comes out of every hole we have, no matter where we live or how much money we've got. On some level we all know this and manage, quite pleasantly, to shove it toward the back of our minds. In China it's brought to the front and nailed there.

-- The Author (Essay 19 - #2 to Go)

**Importance:** Here the author sums up both his reaction to his experiences in China and the insight gained from thinking about those experiences.

... that's the terrible power of a diary: it not only calls forth the person you used to be but rubs your nose in him, reminding you that not all change is evolutionary. More often that not, you didn't learn from your mistakes. You didn't get wiser but simply older ...

-- The Author (Essay 23 - Day In, Day Out)



**Importance:** Here the author describes the insight he gleaned from rereading the diary he kept when he was addicted to methamphetamine, the basic idea being that no matter how much you want to, you can't run away from your history.

Hugh and I will go on a trip, and while he's out ... I'm back at the hotel, writing about an argument we'd overheard in the breakfast room. It's not lost on me that I'm so busy recording life, I don't have time to really live it. I've become like one of those people I hate, the sort who go to the museum and, instead of looking at the magnificent Brueghel, take a picture of it, reducing it from art to proof.

-- The Author (Essay 23 - "Day In, Day Out")

**Importance:** In this quote, the author reveals just how much of his life is taken up with observing and writing down things that go on around him, portraying himself as someone who doesn't really engage with the world around him, but only watches it.

Eventually I would set him straight, but until then, at least for another few seconds, I wanted to stay in this happy place. So loved and protected. So fulfilled.

-- The Author (Essay 26 - The Happy Place)

**Importance:** Here, for the first time in the collection, the author comments on a feeling of positive regard he gets from his hitherto judgmental father.



## Topics for Discussion

**Consider and discuss the titles of each essay. How do the titles relate to the content of the essay - are they ironic? Are they puns? Are they illuminations? Are they hints?**

The significance of the titles varies throughout the book. Some, like "A Cold Case", are relatively straight-forward, and essentially sum up one or more important elements in the essays which they front. Others, like "#2 to Go" are complex puns: in this case, at the head of an essay on Chinese eating habits, the title is a play on the idea that many Chinese restaurants group their meals under numbered headings; similarly, Chinese restaurants offer takeout service (i.e. "to go"); while #2 is common slang for poop, crap, or shit (as the author refers to it). Given that human defecation is also a focus of the essay, #2 is an interesting element of dark humor to add to the story. Students / readers are encouraged to look at all possible layers / levels of meaning in the piece's various titles.

**Part 1 - In what ways do the three essays in this section develop the collection's thematic consideration of the relationship between past and present?**

All three of these essays are grounded in this principle, albeit to varying degrees. "Attaboy" is perhaps the clearest example of the author using a present experience to go into his childhood; while both "Dentists ..." and "Think Differenter" take the author into the more recent past.

**Part 2 - Discuss the race-defined elements / ideas in the two essays in this section. What do they have in common? What do they suggest about the author and the environment in which he grew up? How do they relate to the socio - cultural history of America as a whole?**

America as a country has a centuries-old history of difficult race relations, particularly between whites and non-whites. Both these essays offer personal glimpses of that history: in particular, a period in time (the 1960's) and place (North Carolina) in which





the equal rights movement had yet to take root. The attitudes portrayed here, by both the country club and by the author, are in many ways typical of the time.

**Part 3 - The term "loggerheads", in addition to being the name of a type of turtle, is also used to describe a sense of conflict: people are described as being at "loggerheads" with someone or something. What do you think the author is at "loggerheads" with in this story?**

The author seems to be using the term "loggerheads" to refer to the conflict he's discovering / experiencing with his emerging sexuality.

**Part 4 - What is your response to Pat's comment about the need to cut off parts of yourself / your life in order to be successful in other parts? What parts have you cut off / do you think you might need to cut off?**

This is a philosophical question geared to engage the reader / student in critical thought / consideration about themselves and their lives. There is no right answer.

**Part 5 - What recollections do you have of important or powerful encounters while traveling? What are your thoughts and feelings about why such encounters feel particularly free, important, or joyful?**

Here again, this is a question with no right answers. It in effect asks the reader / student to do what the author does: look at an experience, and/or a pattern of experiences, for deeper meaning about identity, perspective, and/or values.

**Part 6 - How do you think the public would react to an openly gay American president? Is such a thing possible? Why or why not?**

Here again, the question asks the reader / student to think beyond what the essay outlines ... or rather, to use the essay's contentions as a trigger / springboard for deeper personal understanding of a particular situation.





## **Part 7 - Why are the final lines of "Now Hiring ..." ironic?**

In the final lines of this essay, the author refers to himself being judged in the same way as he was judging the coffee-ordering tourists earlier in the essay.

## **Part 8 - Do you keep a diary / journal? What kinds of things do you write in it? How do you view its purpose? How do you react when you look at some of its older entries?**

Again, a "no right answer question" designed to engage the reader / student in a comparison of his / her own experience with that of the author ... designed to take the reader into a deeper, broader understanding of him / her self.

## **Part 9 - Discuss and compare the various interpretations of the term "the happy place".**

There are comparisons to the imagined happy place that will make taking the anesthetic easier; the post operation "happy place" into which the author wakes up after his procedure; the happy place of NOT being diagnosed with cancer; and, most significantly, the happy place of the author receiving affection and support from his father.

## **Overall - consider and discuss one of your present day experiences that leads / led you to considerations, examinations, and realizations about your past. In what ways has thinking about the present given you insight into the past, and vice versa?**

This asks the reader student to put him / herself in the author's shoes and do what the author does / has done in these essays. There is no right answer, although the student / reader might need to be pushed to go further / deeper into memory and reflection to come up with the most effective, most significant connections.