

# **Me Talk Pretty One Day Study Guide**

**Me Talk Pretty One Day by David Sedaris**

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# Plot Summary

David Sedaris, a humorist and writer, presents a compilation of comical personal essays in *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. The essays are strung together with Sedaris's candid manner and a persistent language theme. The book is divided into two parts, and with a few exceptions, focuses on the early part of Sedaris's life in the first half, and the more recent years of his life while living in France in the second half.

In Part 1, Sedaris introduces himself with stories from his childhood where unwelcome sessions with a speech teacher and a music teacher reveal that he feels like he doesn't fit in. During his childhood, Sedaris is aware that he is his father's opposite, but like his sisters, shares his more creative and less cerebral personality with his mother. He happily trades technological talk for discussions about accomplishing the perfect tan.

Inspired by his sister's skill with a paintbrush, Sedaris begins an interesting journey developing as an artist. After running the gamut of artistic specialties, from sculpture to performance art, Sedaris finishes his degree at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. After graduating, he takes on the ambitious task of teaching a writing workshop, which turns out to be a flop.

Sedaris moves on to New York City where he first works as a personal assistant to an obnoxious woman named Valencia, which he quickly trades for back-breaking labor as a mover. Throughout this hilarious journey, Sedaris frequently recalls bizarre experiences with misidentified pigeons named Cheeky, meals that look like Band-Aids and chocolate, and the un-flushed remains of house guests.

In Part 2, Sedaris share stories of his bumbling adventures trying to adjust to a new culture. After cleverly plotting a romantic future for himself and a new acquaintance named Hugh, Sedaris is shortly thereafter living happily with Hugh in New York.

Hugh and Sedaris make summer visits to Normandy, France where Hugh has a summer home. During these visits, Hugh spends most of his time fixing up the house, while Sedaris fumbles about trying to get a grasp of the French language. He spends his first year spewing the words "bottleneck" and "ashtray" as canned responses to just about any question.

Sedaris spends his summers in France, developing more confidence with the language. After six years of summers in France, Sedaris and Hugh decide to move to Paris. Sedaris enrolls in a French class once they move to Paris, and his new teacher immediately reinstates Sedaris's self-doubt. He spends his time avoiding the French culture, hiding in movie theatres or underneath a set of headphones that plays books-on-tape in English.

During the second half of the book, Sedaris's life in Paris is just another backdrop for his hilarious everyday experiences. He struggles with the French language, and reminiscent of his childhood, develops tactics for avoiding certain phrases. As an

American in Paris, Sedaris also begins to view the world differently, changing his tone from that of self-absorption to one of social conscientiousness.

Although the novel may at first appear to be a miscalculated grouping of essays that bounce about chronologically, Sedaris actually pulls off a witty personal story held together by insightful themes.



# Go Carolina

## Go Carolina Summary and Analysis

David Sedaris begins this series of autobiographical essays with a story from his early childhood. While he is sitting in his fifth grade geography class, an unfamiliar teacher unexpectedly calls him out of the room. His mind flashes images of television shows where secret agents come knocking on doors in pursuit of a criminal. He then quickly runs through a list of crimes for which he might be punished. It is immediately evident that even as a child, Sedaris uses pop culture as a source of reference for many real life circumstances.

En route to her office, the teacher asks Sedaris if he is a State or Carolina fan. According to Sedaris, this is a typical question among North Carolina natives and is a sneaky tactic for weeding out people they might disagree with. Not being a sports fan, but wanting to be agreeable, the young Sedaris opts to turn the question around on his inquisitor in order to agree with whatever team she chooses.

Not getting the answer she is looking for the teacher digs deeper, asking Sedaris if he knows what State and Carolina are. He hesitantly responds with a lisp, saying "universities and colleges". The teacher's true reason for her question is revealed. She has tricked Sedaris into pronouncing his lisping "s". The young Sedaris soon realizes the purpose of her interruption, speech therapy.

Sedaris grows to dislike his new speech teacher, Miss Chrissy Samson, immensely. He particularly despises her name, which is viciously overloaded with the letter "s", an irony that is not lost on him. The embarrassing reminders to attend his therapy sessions, which are announced in front of the entire class, also fuel his distaste for each session.

Most annoying to Sedaris, however, is the noticeable pattern among Miss Samson's students. They are all unpopular boys with a penchant for baking, decoupage, and secret desires about firemen. Thus, Sedaris implies that this speech class was intended to eliminate the natural phonetics of young homosexuals.

As the school year marches on, Sedaris makes every possible attempt to avoid words that reveal his lisp. He develops an impressive vocabulary with the help of his trusty thesaurus, and cleverly steers around possessives and plurals. His growing vocabulary thrills most of his teachers, but Miss Samson is less than pleased. She is forced to develop new ways to trick Sedaris into pronouncing words with "s".

Winter break arrives quickly, and Sedaris has his last meeting with Miss Samson the day before the break. She announces that she has taken a job at another school and begins to reveal a softer side of herself. She tells him about her fiancé in Vietnam, visiting her family in Asheville, and her hopes of moving to Orlando, Florida. Sedaris



starts to see a more human side to his teacher and becomes fond of this new Miss Samson.

As their meeting comes to a close Miss Samson admits to Sedaris that she has been trying her best as a teacher, but now realizes how difficult it is. She tells him that none of the students like her and that they all resist her lessons. Feeling sorry for her Sedaris lisps an apology, "I'm thorry," he says. Miss Samson grins in final accomplishment. She has tricked him into saying an S-word.

In his first essay, Sedaris uses witty verbal irony and an informal style to introduce himself. This essay not only introduces readers to Sedaris's humor, but to another very important characteristic, his sexuality.



# Giant Dreams, Midget Abilities

## Giant Dreams, Midget Abilities Summary and Analysis

In this essay Sedaris introduces his father, Lou Sedaris, a conservative computer engineer who uses a concoction of vodka and jazz to melt away his daily stress. In fact, in this portrayal, Lou doesn't just sooth himself with jazz music, he is obsessed with it.

Sedaris recalls an evening during his childhood when his father takes him and his sisters, Gretchen and Lisa, to see the musician David Brubeck perform. It is notable that on this particular night, Mr. Brubeck is accompanied by his sons.

Shamelessly, Lou is the most active listener in a crowd of quietly observant fans. Unlike his quiet counterparts, he beats his head and chest wildly to the music, embarrassing his children.

During the ride home, Lou begins to daydream aloud about having a family of musicians who could perform together on stage one day. The next afternoon Lou brings home a baby piano, hoping his children will jump at the chance to learn. However, the piano remains un-played, and becomes the structure for the perfect fort.

Noticing his children's lack of interest, Lou soon signs Lisa up for piano lessons. He chooses Lisa not because she is the oldest of the three, but because she has the most expressive fingers of the bunch. Lessons are shortly arranged for Gretchen, and for Sedaris as well. Gretchen is assigned the flute, while Sedaris is burdened with the guitar.

Sedaris has no desire to play the guitar, but humors his father and attends his scheduled lessons at the newly opened North Hills Mall. When he arrives at his first lesson he is shocked to discover that his guitar teacher is unusually small. Sedaris is humorously uncomfortable, alone with a grown man who only comes up to his chest.

Mr. Mancini, the guitar teacher, begins his lesson with a story about how he named his guitar; it is named after a woman he met in Atlanta. Sedaris is then given his first assignment, to name his guitar. Sedaris selects the name Oliver, after his pet hamster, but Mr. Mancini insists that he name his guitar after a woman. He names his guitar Joan, after his cousin.

Sedaris stumbles through several weeks of guitar lessons, pretending to practice without showing improvement. Not only does he completely lack interest, but Mr. Mancini continues to make him very uncomfortable. Mr. Mancini's height paired with his macho mentality puts Sedaris on edge. Sedaris is always fumbling his words, worried he might say the wrong thing.

One day Sedaris sees Mr. Mancini eating alone at a fast-food restaurant. Mr. Mancini is pretending to ignore the rude munchkin comments coming from nearby teenagers.





Sedaris instantly identifies with this outcast status and decides to come clean to Mr. Mancini at his next guitar lesson.

At his next lesson Sedaris tells Mr. Mancini that he has not been practicing, and in fact, he has no desire to play the guitar at all. Sedaris professes that he would rather be a singer and boldly demonstrates his vocal skills by singing several commercial jingles. During the short silence that follows, Sedaris tells himself that Mr. Mancini is blown away by his amazing voice.

Unfortunately this is not the case. Rather, Mr. Mancini explodes, expressing his distaste for Sedaris's performance. It is clear, however, that it is not the performance that has Mr. Mancini so worked up, it is the fact that Sedaris appears to be a homosexual.

Like the previous essay, Sedaris continues the theme of self versus society, which naturally started during his childhood when he felt like an outcast.



# Genetic Engineering

## Genetic Engineering Summary and Analysis

In this essay, Sedaris revisits his childhood again with a humorous tale about his father, and how different a father and son can be. Sedaris explains that his father, Lou, is an engineer with an unflinching interest in explaining the inner workings of everyday objects. It is Lou's intelligence and genuine interest in how things work, and Sedaris's lack thereof, that amazes Sedaris.

Evidently all of the Sedaris children take after their mother. Unlike Lou, if Mrs. Sedaris or her children are asked how an air conditioner works, any one of them is likely give a funny and nonsensical explanation, like squirrels with ice cubes in their mouths.

To exemplify this family resemblance, Sedaris once again flashes back to a memorable day during his childhood. On this particular day, the Sedaris family is enjoying their annual summer vacation on Ocean Isle in North Carolina. Sedaris and his sisters spend the day tanning at the beach while listening carefully to their mother's advice on achieving the perfect tan.

Unlike her husband, Mrs. Sedaris's interests lie in less scientific thoughts, like who has the best tan. Inevitably, Mrs. Sedaris's unofficial award for best bronze goes to his sister Gretchen, who evidently uses a combination of baby oil and suggestive positions to achieve an even bronze glow. Clearly, she too takes after her mother.

Sedaris admits that he does not have the will power to sizzle under the sun for hours like Gretchen, and instead breaks up his sun time. It is during one of these breaks that Sedaris finds his father standing near a group of fishermen on the beach. True to form, Lou asks his son if he knows how many grains of sand there are in the world. Not only does Sedaris not know, but he cares so little that when attempting to ponder the question his thoughts soon derail. Lou is quick to explain and with a stick draws out a long equation in the sand.

The nearby fishermen overhear this conversation between father and son, and curiosity draws them in. One fisherman asks Lou if he knows how much an investment in  $\frac{1}{2}$  acre of beachfront would be worth per grain of sand today. Mr. Sedaris quickly goes to work writing out a detailed explanation in the sand. While his father happily jabbars away, Sedaris allows his mind to travel to the greater complexities of tanning the underside of one's nose.



# Twelve Moments in the Life of the Artist

## Twelve Moments in the Life of the Artist Summary and Analysis

In this essay, Sedaris discusses twelve key moments that shaped his life as an artist.

**Moment One:** Sedaris is inspired to become an artist when he sees how his sister Gretchen is showered with praise for her drawings and paintings. When Gretchen's skills are recognized by her teachers, both Mr. and Mrs. Sedaris take credit for her inborn abilities.

Mrs. Sedaris claims that she had a talent for drawing and sculpture as a child. She is also known for drawing a particular cartoon woodpecker to entertain her children.

Unlike his wife, Lou Sedaris decides his talents are latent and takes up painting to prove his artistic skill. He paints New York streetscapes and mimics the works of artists like Renoir with great aptitude. After proving his talent, Lou puts his artist's tools aside. Sedaris soon snatches up the leftovers, thinking he can certainly do it if his father can, and begins his artistic career.

**Moment Two:** Sedaris soon learns that painting is not his forte, unlike his talented sister. His still life paintings of grapes look like stones, so he moves onto tracing comics.

**Moment Three:** Sedaris enrolls as an art major at an agricultural college. It is here that Sedaris draws his first live nude. However, before this opportunity, he agonizes over whether his teacher or classmates will notice that he is drooling over the hulking, beautiful male specimen. Fortunately, he discovers that his worries are somewhat unfounded. Though the nude model is in fact hulking, it is also a woman.

Sedaris then switches from drawing to printmaking, which is also short-lived. He then turns to sculpture, and then pottery, never quite getting the knack for any of his chosen specialties.

**Moment Four:** Sedaris does not succeed as hoped in many of his art classes and transfers to another college where he starts the entire process over. Eventually he stops classes all together in exchange for bong hits and spaced out conversations with fellow classmates. Instead of attending class, they go to showings of abstract artistic films that reek of hopelessness. Sedaris begins to recognize a connection between art and despair, but is aware that while he can pull off despair, he's not talented enough to pull off the art.

**Moment Five:** Sedaris returns to Raleigh, North Carolina and discovers methamphetamines. His artistic talents immediately burst forth because the high he gets from the drug not only eliminates his self-doubt, but also eliminates the time he



previously spent eating and sleeping. Ranting late-night phone calls and the burden of understanding true art (so he thinks) distances Sedaris from his high school friends. Instead, he calls his parents, who find his blathering equally annoying and confusing.

At this point Sedaris is convinced that he is living art. For him, every day is suffering, and to his drug-laden brain, everything from his dirty socks to his lint ridden floors is art.

Moment Six: Sedaris is eventually introduced to a group of artists with minds like his own. They all happen to be junkies as well. Happy that he has finally found a group of people who understood him, Sedaris falls in love with idea of being a part of this group.

Due to his desire for companionship, Sedaris blinds himself to the negativities that surround their lives. In fact, Sedaris shows greater respect for someone as an artist based on the desperation of their living situation. For instance, one of his new friends boasts that he has no furniture, and instead his apartment houses only a large nest of human hair that he has been collecting for six months. Sedaris has utter respect for this man.

With this new crowd, Sedaris emerges as an artist. At one point he gathers pieces of garbage from his apartment and places them methodically in a wooden crate. Sedaris then submits this piece to a local museum and his work is accepted for presentation in an art show.

Moment Seven: After the museum reception, Sedaris pretends that he detests the attention, and burns his piece in protest. He then moves on to performance art. Sedaris and his group of friends find a dingy, old warehouse to house their first performance, which flops. Convinced that they are ahead of their time, they break up their performance group temporarily to pursue other endeavors.

Moment Eight: One of Sedaris's friends, the man with the human hair nest, attempts to direct another performance piece with the group. To his chagrin, his fellow artists resist his direction, resenting that he is always the ringleader. The group disbands again. Fortunately, Sedaris is invited by the museum to perform at a museum festival, and thus is able to continue his work as an artist.

Moment Nine: Sedaris is without ideas for his performance at the museum. His search leads him to a secondhand store where he buys sock monkeys. While checking out, the woman at the register tells Sedaris about her niece, who is also an artist. In fact, she is the one who makes all of the sock monkeys.

At this point, it is evident that Sedaris is about to hit a new low. His thoughts about this woman, her niece, and their sock monkeys are condescending to say the least. He actually considers using the woman as a living prop in his piece. However, he arrogantly assumes she is too ignorant to appreciate and understand a piece of performance art that actually doesn't yet exist. Sedaris explains it all away with his philosophy on performance art, "It [is] the artist's duty to find the appropriate objects, and the audience's job to decipher meaning".



Moment Ten: It is the day of Sedaris's museum performance. He notes that a number of people have come to the show, but he stands on stage wondering what all of the people are looking at. It takes him a moment to realize, he's on stage and they are looking at him. A drug induced alertness for three days straight has affected his mind.

Finally, Sedaris begins to rip the stuffing out of the sock monkeys, and crams the stuffing into a tall rubber boot. He hears his father heckling him from the crowd. While Sedaris writhes with anger at each comment, the crowd eats it up, laughing at each quip. After the show, an audience member compliments Sedaris on the incorporation of his father into the show. He really admires Sedaris's ability to laugh at himself.

After learning about the compliment, Lou Sedaris takes it upon himself to start making suggestions for future performances, such as heating up plastic soldiers in a frying pan to speak to "man's inhumanity to man". Sedaris makes it known that he is disgusted with this suggestion.

Moment Eleven: Sedaris's drug dealer decides to go to rehab, leaving Sedaris with no more methamphetamines. As a result, his performance career quickly comes to an end. He spends the last of his savings on drugs, which last less than ten days. In his last performance he has clearly given up. Taking his father's suggestion, Sedaris heats up plastic soldiers in a frying pan and pours a carton of milk over his own head.

Now that he has hit rock bottom, Sedaris considers checking into rehab and cleaning up his life, maybe even getting a real job. But then he considers reentering art school, realizing they will have drugs there.

Moment Twelve: Post-recovery, Sedaris finds himself cringing at a performance piece. As he watches a woman walk around on stilts built from cans of Slim Fast, he winces while she embarrasses herself. At the same time he is also thankful that he is beyond this stage in his life. Bored to tears, like the rest of the audience, Sedaris quickly inserts a non-offensive yet non-encouraging question about her piece, allowing him to walk onto the street and away from it all for good.

# You Can't Kill the Rooster

## You Can't Kill the Rooster Summary and Analysis

Sedaris introduces his brother Paul, clearly the oddball among the Sedaris children. Paul, like his father Lou, has very little in common with Sedaris.

The essay begins as the Sedaris family relocates to Raleigh, North Carolina from western New York State. Once there Mr. and Mrs. Sedaris are adamant about preventing their children from acquiring the habits of the locals. The children are not allowed to say ma'am or sir, use conjugates like ya'll, or drink Mountain Dew.

While living in North Carolina, the youngest Sedaris sibling, Paul, is born. In contrast to his brother and sisters, Paul develops a thick southern drawl and a taste for Mountain Dew. He also develops an interesting dialogue that is spoken at a rapid pace, and is relatively unintelligible with the exception of the profanity that peppers every sentence.

Paul's profanity, coupled with his self-assigned nickname, the Rooster, paints him as the hayseed the Sedaris parents worked so hard to avoid in their older children. For instance, at one holiday dinner, Paul shows up to dinner with a black eye. He, however, is not embarrassed by it. In fact, he chooses to paint a matching black eye with his sister's mascara. Paul also refers to strangers as ma'am or sir, but chooses to refer to friends and family by a profane word turned pronoun.

Despite his misgivings, Paul is the only one of the Sedaris children to remain in Raleigh. Years after Mrs. Sedaris has passed away, Paul is there to continue the grieving process with his father, comforting him while the other children can only comfort via telephone.

# The Youth in Asia

## The Youth in Asia Summary and Analysis

The history of pets in the Sedaris family is recounted in this chapter. It all begins with two border collies, Rastus and Duchess, acquired by the family in the early 1960s while still living in western New York. When Rastus and Duchess have puppies, Rastus sneaks away into the woods, leaving the others behind.

The birth of Duchess's puppies is a critical point in the lives of the Sedaris children as their mother becomes a magician who can bring anything back from the dead. One puppy gets so sick that the children think it is dead. Mrs. Sedaris quickly scoops the puppy up, puts it in the oven at a low 200 degrees, and soon the puppy pops awake. She continues to perform this trick on countless hamsters, but once she fails to bring a guinea pig back, her powers are instantly put into question.

Duchess, unfortunately, does not take to the hot, humid climate of Raleigh, North Carolina. Her thinning, matted coat, coupled with the limp of old age makes her quite the sight. Eventually Duchess dies, found in a ravine near their house. The Sedaris children turn to their mother, depending on her magical powers, but Mrs. Sedaris's powers of reanimation does not apply to all creatures.

Shortly after the death of Duchess, Lou Sedaris brings home a German Shepherd puppy named Madchen by a childhood friend. Sadly, Madchen is hit by a car at six months of age. With lightning speed, Mr. Sedaris quickly replaces Madchen with a nearly identical German Shepherd puppy, aptly named Madchen II. Unfortunately, the similarities to her namesake are lacking, and the dog soon goes unnoticed. It is not until Madchen II falls terribly ill that Mr. Sedaris shows his attachment to her, spending every night by her side at the veterinary hospital until she finally passes on.

During the reign of collies and shepherds, there is also a series of cats that come quietly into, and out of, the Sedaris home. Mrs. Sedaris and the children become attached to one cat in particular, Sadie. Sadie is cat number four, and sadly, is diagnosed with feline leukemia. After Sadie's death, Mrs. Sedaris is so upset that she finally announces that she will not have another cat in the house.

Years after the children are grown and out of the house, Mr. and Mrs. Sedaris acquire a Great Dane puppy. They named her Malina and she becomes their pride and joy. Mrs. Sedaris is particularly fond of curling up with Malina for a nice, long nap, while Mr. Sedaris proudly chauffeurs her around the neighborhood in his car, enjoying every cliché comment about a dog the size of a horse.

Malina's importance in the family soon takes precedence for the empty nesters. Sedaris and his sisters come home to find their bedrooms redone to suit the dog, and are chided for leaving items out for the dog to chew on.



The importance of pets in the Sedaris family soon reaches its sad culmination. Malina sadly outlives Mrs. Sedaris. Malina is now Mr. Sedaris's sole companion. Walking through life sad and alone, Mr. Sedaris can be found lying with Malina in bed, comforted a little by the warm body next to him. In the absence of his wife, Mr. Sedaris becomes even more attached to the dog, so attached that he refuses to leave her behind in a kennel to visit his children.

Fortunately, Malina lives well beyond the years predicted for a Great Dane. For obvious reasons Mr. Sedaris has a hard time letting her go, but when she is 12 years old she is finally put to sleep.





# The Learning Curve

## The Learning Curve Summary and Analysis

In this essay, Sedaris reveals that he did in fact return to art school. Upon finishing his degree at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, he is offered a job teaching English. Armed with no formal training, no previous teaching experience, and no official publications of his own, Sedaris is somewhat intimidated by the endeavor. Of course, Sedaris is offered the job just two weeks before the start of class because the person initially given the job backed out at the last minute.

Naturally, Sedaris utilizes his two week preparation time to its fullest. Mostly, he spends his hours in front of the mirror practicing various tones of voice and phrases for his introduction to the class.

Sedaris initially uses a number of unorthodox methods for teaching college students. On the first day he asks each student to wear a name tag that he has spent hours carefully cutting into the shape of a maple leaf. He then completes his well-practiced introduction and stares blankly out at his class. Apparently, he had romantic visions that each would be jumping at the opportunity to ask random questions about English and he would be fighting a sea of raised hands. He is disappointed that this is not the case.

Sedaris decides to defer to an old standby: he asks his students to write an essay. Sedaris recalls how much he hated the on-the-spot writing assignment when he was a student, particularly because he lacked cigarettes, his special writing tool. So, in contrast to a typical college professor, Sedaris gets things started by digging out a few ashtrays and spreads his cigarettes on the desk for the taking. Naturally, a few students complain, mostly the asthmatic.

Determined to inspire his students with a clever assignment, during his next class Sedaris asks his students to use their imaginations and write a letter to their mothers in prison. Sedaris soon learns this was a poor choice. A young female student comes to him with her completed assignment and tells him it was a very depressing assignment for her. Both her father and uncle are in prison, and the thought of her mother going as well is miserable.

For his next classes Sedaris develops a few new discussion sessions. He starts with celebrity gossip, which he calls Celebrity Corner, followed by sharing slow cooker recipes, known as Feedbag Forum. He then attempts to follow up with some chat about each other's sex lives, the Pillow Talk section. Needless to say, most of students are hesitant to share during the later session.

Seeing that his discussion sessions are also a failure, Sedaris gets another bright idea and begins showing the class episodes of Days of Our Lives. Their assignments are to write up what they predict will happen in upcoming episodes.



In his many attempts to try to teach his students creatively, Sedaris does one thing right—he eventually asks his students to write an essay on whatever topic they chose. The essays are to be read and critiqued in upcoming classes. The students show very little interest during the open critique, but this is the best method for Sedaris to avoid additional complaints to the administration about his teaching methods, as so far there have been several.

When Sedaris returns the students' corrected essays one day in class, the older returning student complains about his comments. Sedaris, who has been feeling ill-equipped to teach his students with any amount of authority since day one, finally takes charge. He responds with self-convincing authority and childishly tells his student that he is the authority because he was the one getting paid to teach. His pride quickly fizzles when his students ask how much he is paid. He answers honestly, which provokes a roaring laughter so loud that he can hear it as he runs from the classroom down the hall.

# Big Boy

## Big Boy Summary and Analysis

This essay is a great demonstration of raw Sedaris humor. At an Easter Dinner party in Chicago, Sedaris and his sister are about to sit down to dinner at their friend John's house. Sedaris quickly excuses himself to use the bathroom. Upon entering the bathroom, he notices that the previous occupant left behind a present, large and unflushed, for him to deal with. Had he not implicated himself as being the next person to use the bathroom he would have left it, but this situation now implies that he is the dirty non-flusher. Agonizing over what to do, there is a knock on the door. It is his friend Janet. Suddenly the pressure is on. The first option he considers is detestable and obviously not a possibility, so he turns to the plunger. There is another knock at the door, Sedaris runs through as many excuses as he can for taking so long, but finally it flushes. He is now free to go investigate who is the most likely culprit.



# The Great Leap Forward

## The Great Leap Forward Summary and Analysis

After living in Chicago for a number of years, where one can rent an apartment of a descent size and still afford dinner and a movie once in a while, Sedaris moves to New York City. He soon discovers that even the smallest and dumpiest of apartments are unaffordable. Arriving in New York with no job and a small savings account to rely on doesn't help his situation.

With a budget of \$12 a day, Sedaris learns to make lifestyle choices, such as walking fifty blocks to the library in lieu of the subway fare he decides to spend on a hot dog. No work and no money leaves Sedaris feeling self-conscious in comparison to the average New Yorker who walks around proudly, flaunting expensive fashion and living in tin can apartments on trendy Avenue D paid for by posh jobs or enormous debt.

One day Sedaris finds that a beautiful townhouse he has long admired is up for sale. He dreams of the luxury one is afforded by having an entire building to oneself. Shortly after being put up for sale, the townhouse is sold and painted an obnoxious hot pink with tangerine trim. The once majestic townhome is an obnoxious, anxiety-inducing eye sore, owned by a Columbian woman named Valencia.

Valencia is an independently wealthy woman who wants to live life like a starving artist. She always acts as if she cannot afford a thing and chooses to furnish her apartment in used dumpster fare and the latest piece made by one of her deadbeat artist friends.

Ironically, Sedaris starts working as Valencia's assistant. He enjoys such menial tasks as running her errands and paying her bills. He is even asked to try to help her capture a pigeon that she thinks suits the description of a parrot, named Cheeky, with a \$750 reward on its head.

When Sedaris refuses to call Cheeky at what is obviously a pigeon, not a parrot, Valencia has a bit of a tantrum. In keeping with her persona, she speaks wildly about Sedaris on the phone to her friends and family in Spanish and raves about what he has cost her.

Following this fiasco, Valencia begins to call on Sedaris early in the morning to announce he won't be needed for the day. When he is eventually down to working for her only one day a week, he has the luck of running into another line of work. He begins working as a mover.

Sedaris is much happier with his new job. All the heavy lifting among this gang of convicts, immigrants, and communists begins to make him feel manly. He gets joy out of easily intimidating bookish men, and starts to enjoy the type of people who collect stuffed animals. The lighter the load, the more he likes the client.



Previous to this moving job, Sedaris always admired the intellectually wealthy book-collecting type. His distaste for them only begins with the weight of their books. Through Patrick, his boss, he soon discovers a new perspective. This perspective is highlighted in a story Sedaris retells of a woman who did not pack for her move because she could not find any boxes. Rather than leaving this irresponsible woman behind, Patrick still agrees to move her. Sedaris is extremely annoyed at Patrick's generosity toward this woman, who clearly gets away with everything due to her looks.

Although Patrick decides to move the woman with no boxes from one walk up apartment to another (on the fifth floor), he often arrives at an immaculate apartment with well-organized boxes lined up for them to whisk away and refuses the job. Once he gets a good look at the owner, who is likely a wealthy businessman, Patrick suddenly develops an excuse for not doing the job. He really gets a kick out of sticking it to guys like that. Upon reflection, Sedaris begins to see it Patrick's way.



# Today's Special

## Today's Special Summary and Analysis

In this essay, Sedaris is having dinner with his boyfriend Hugh at a restaurant in New York. Unlike Hugh, Sedaris has not arrived dressed for the occasion. He borrows a jacket from the restaurant, a jacket that looks like a marching band uniform.

Before ordering their entrée, Sedaris and Hugh are offered an amuse bouche, a fancy sort of appetizer. To Sedaris this appetizer appears to be a Band-Aid floating in chocolate. Of course, it is not really a Band-Aid, but a sliver of swordfish.

When their entrées arrive, Sedaris complains that he cannot discern whose entrée is whose. Apparently the lengthy descriptions on the menu aren't much help to Sedaris. Each plate displays a decorative tower of edible parts. These dishes are certainly not recognizable as traditional fair.

A concoction of fish afloat in a pool of chocolate or sweetened ham for dessert is more than Sedaris can handle. This SoHo style traditional restaurant is just another place for the next up-and-coming chef to show his latest twist on cuisine. Sedaris is unimpressed, and hungry. In his mind, traditional refers to food that you can be nostalgic about, food that your mother makes well, like a patty melt.

Feeling out of place in his marching-band jacket among dishes that have not quelled his appetite, Sedaris opts to skip a dessert of sweet ham or white chocolate couscous. As Sedaris and Hugh hurry to get to their after-dinner movie, Sedaris quickly stops at the nearby hot dog vendor as his expensive dinner left him ravenous. He happily accepts standard, easily recognizable traditional food.

# City of Angels

## City of Angels Summary and Analysis

In this essay, Sedaris is looking forward to an annual December visit from his friend Alisha. Alisha is the quiet laid back type of guest that feels comfortable lounging on the couch reading magazines and being ignored if her host is busy. She is always flexible with her plans and willing to do anything. As such, Sedaris always looks forward to her visits.

A few days before her annual visit, Alisha calls to tell Sedaris that she will be bringing a friend. Bonnie, a native of Greensborough, North Carolina, has never been anywhere outside a fifty mile radius of Greensborough. Alisha, consistently a poor judge of character, describes Bonnie as sweet. Immediately Sedaris is aware that the additional guest may be a problem.

When Alisha and Bonnie arrive at Sedaris's apartment, Alisha already has a "why me?" look on her face. Bonnie has been overly suspicious of everyone since arriving in New York. On their ride from the airport, Bonnie threatens the cab driver when she assumes he is trying to take advantage and over charge a couple of out-of-towners. Sedaris assures Bonnie that she paid the correct fare and wonders aloud if she left a tip. The answer is no. Evidently, the driver did not meet Bonnie's expectations. Sedaris is confused by what her expectations might have been since it was her first cab ride, but he leaves it alone. It is now obvious to Sedaris that Bonnie is the type of American that most New Yorkers move to New York to avoid.

Bonnie is the type of visitor that comes armed with a long list of things to see and do. Sedaris chooses to ignore her wishes and takes Alisha and Bonnie to a flea market. Bonnie spends most of the time pouting and haggling over angel collectibles. Unfortunately, she finds that these angels are not as spiritual as those back home, and they are overpriced as well. When her pouting becomes intolerable, they decide to leave.

Sedaris leaves Alisha and Bonnie to their own devices. Bonnie takes the opportunity to see the sights on her list, including a Broadway show. After the show, Bonnie becomes unstoppable. She drags Alisha to the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, and Radio City Music hall, among other tourist traps.

Also high on Bonnie's list is having tea at The Plaza Hotel. When Sedaris suggests that Bonnie might feel more comfortable wearing something other than overalls, Bonnie snidely remarks that she doesn't care what others think. Sedaris is secretly happy that Bonnie may have to face the stares, ridicule, and rejection of high society women dressed at the Plaza Hotel.

When Sedaris arrives at the Plaza to meet Alisha and Bonnie, he finds that the place is overrun with tourist in loungewear. Bonnie fits right in at the Plaza and finds similar friendly faces at all of the tourist sites she visits. As Sedaris puts it, she was "overjoyed to have discovered a New York without New Yorkers".



# A Shiner Like a Diamond

## A Shiner Like a Diamond Summary and Analysis

Sedaris begins his next essay with a phone call from his proud father. Lou is ecstatic because his most beautiful child is going to be so highly recognized. Amy is going to be featured in a magazine article about interesting women in New York.

Sedaris points out that Lou is an old fashioned man who remains convinced that a woman's best chance at a happy life is to get married. He is constantly poking at his other daughters about their size, pointing out if they have gained a few pounds. Amy is the most attractive of the Sedaris children and has also managed to keep her weight in check. Thus, Lou shows obvious favoritism toward Amy.

Amy, who has always had a knack for impersonation, comes home for Christmas wearing a special body suit. They call it the fatty suit, and it is meant to make her look obese. When Lou sees Amy, he is devastated that his beautiful daughter has gained so much weight.

He lectures her about stopping the emotional eating and tells her she needs to find help. In fact, he offers to pay to get the help she needs, but she refuses. Amy carries on the ruse for the entire weekend. Just before she leaves she reveals the suit to her father. Lou is elated and tells her that he thought she was beautiful either way, inside and out. His non-superficiality is short-lived, however, as the magazine photo shoot approaches.

Unfortunately for Lou, Amy may be beautiful, but she is not the type of woman to be put on display for her beauty. Rather, after waiting for the other women to be painted and powdered at the photo shoot, Amy gets in the chair of the makeup artist and asks to be made to look like she has been beat up. The artist does a fine job, giving her black eyes, a split lip, and oozing wounds.

The makeup is not just convincing on film, but in real life as well. Amy chooses to wear it about while running errands for the afternoon. She replies in character to onlookers, "I'm in love. Can you believe it? I'm finally, really in love, and I feel great".

# Nutcracker.com

## Nutcracker.com Summary and Analysis

Lou Sedaris, an engineer for IBM, dreams aloud of a future where computers will be a tool no consumer can live without. In his imaginary computer utopia, each computer will be networked so they can all talk to each other. Despite his father's passion, Sedaris has no warm and fuzzy place in his heart for computers, nor does he ever imagine that his father's lunatic ideas will ever come true, until they do.

In this essay, Sedaris waxes nostalgic about the days when computers did not exist, when college students counted on fingers, when graphic designers used tools like Spray Mount and poster board to display their ideas. Like many writers, Sedaris is not attached to the computer, but a typewriter. With a typewriter, he can see the ideas he has laid to waste, physically represented by the amount of balled up paper on the floor. Despite being told constantly by friends that he really should get a computer because they are so much easier to use, and emailing is so fun, he resists. In fact, with each push toward using a computer, Sedaris pushes back even harder.

Exemplifying his resistance, Sedaris even tries to go through the x-ray at the airport with a typewriter. Rather than lugging an eight-pound laptop like everyone else, Sedaris decides to bring along his typewriter. With each trip to the airport the computer becomes more common and the security agents at the screening machines become more and more suspicious.

One evening, while at his parents' house, Amy arrives with a pretty little laptop in tow. Sedaris is greatly disappointed until she shows him how fun it can be. One short, somewhat pornographic film later, Sedaris is leaning intently over his sister's shoulder ready to view it again. He is hooked.



# You Again Yesterday

## You Again Yesterday Summary and Analysis

In Part 2 of his book, Sedaris tells more recent stories, many of which involve his boyfriend Hugh, who is briefly discussed in Part 1.

Sedaris met Hugh shortly after arriving in New York, during a time when he was wondering if he would always be alone. He had assured himself that his long list of no-no's, which are listed in true-to-form hilarity, was quickly eradicating any possibility of a future happily spent with a partner.

Then, Sedaris meets Hugh, a man who lives in a loft apartment on Canal Street, who bakes pies while the rest of Manhattan is out socializing, and who has a summer home in Normandy, France. Sedaris is immediately enamored and vows that Hugh will be his, even if he must use trickery. He wittily admits to his devious ways, stating "I know it sounds calculating, but if you're not cute, you might as well be clever".

Nine months after meeting, Sedaris and Hugh move in together. During their first summer together, Hugh goes to France to work on fixing up the house in Normandy. Sedaris confesses that living abroad is an enticing idea, mostly because he would be forced to overcome helplessness in a foreign place. However, Sedaris stays home as he is not yet prepared to deal with the language barrier or the thought of bringing his American traits and beliefs into question. Fortunately, Hugh brings Sedaris plenty of presents, which in Sedaris's mind is the primary reason to travel outside the US in the first place.

The following summer Sedaris joins Hugh at the house in France. The house is in a seriously secluded area. It is a two hour train ride from Paris, with no more than eight other houses nearby.

Sedaris spends the summer playing the bumbling village idiot, unable to understand French and responding with the only words he knows, like ashtray or bottleneck. Despite his fumbling use of French, Sedaris finds that he is often visited by the local teenagers who have the impression that he is friends with celebrities since he is from New York. Cultural differences such as this amaze Sedaris.

During his second summer in France, Sedaris elects to memorize a list of ten words a day in attempt to improve his French. However, words like exorcism, facial swelling, and sea monster prove not to be very useful in everyday conversation, and Sedaris continues to assume the role of village idiot.

Finally, after six years of collecting unusual items (think two-headed calf skull and an ashtray in the shape of a protracted molar) and phrases during his summers in France, Sedaris and Hugh decide to make an official move to Normandy. Fortunately, Sedaris's French has progressed from creepy baby speak to something akin to a hillbilly.



# Me Talk Pretty One Day

## Me Talk Pretty One Day Summary and Analysis

Sedaris enrolls in a French class shortly after moving to Paris. On his first day Sedaris watches his fellow students catch up with each other, discussing their summer vacations and the latest news about mutual friends. He has a number of first impressions: they appear much younger (he is now forty-one years old), they are definitely much more attractive, and they all appear to speak French flawlessly. Sedaris soon feels a little out of his element, until his French teacher arrives and makes him feel like a complete imbecile.

When the French teacher arrives to class she makes a strong statement that Sedaris only partially understands. She expects them to know certain things, which she names explicitly and in a way that is incomprehensible to Sedaris. If they do not know these things, they are not meant for this classroom. Not understanding what her expectations were, Sedaris did not speak up and thus class commences.

The French teacher first asks who knows the alphabet. Sedaris realizes he does not. The teacher begins with "A", calling on those in the room with names beginning with "A" to introduce themselves in French and state with a few of their likes and dislikes.

Two women, both named Anna, begin the round of introductions. The first Anna says that she hails from Warsaw, Poland and that she hates mosquitoes. The teacher quickly makes a sarcastic comment about Anna's individuality, probably being the only person in the room who hates mosquitoes. The pattern continues where students stumble over their limited French vocabulary and thereafter the teacher gives a stinging remark before moving on to her next victim.

Over the course of the semester, the French teacher singles out Sedaris as lazy, which leaves him determined to prove himself. He works diligently on essays and spends hours agonizing over complete-this-sentence assignments, trying to instill a tidbit of his own brand of humor. His teacher does not find his assignments the least bit entertaining.

Sedaris's French teacher quickly instills a fear of speaking that he had never known before. Even after years of speaking stuttered French during his summers in Normandy, Sedaris grows exceedingly self-conscious. He avoids speaking French at all costs, going as far as feigning deafness.

Sedaris finds that his greatest comfort is among his fellow students. They piece together childlike phrases in broken French in attempts of comforting and reassuring one another that one day they will "talk pretty".



# Jesus Shaves

## Jesus Shaves Summary and Analysis

During Sedaris's second month in French class, he is learning the use of the word "one" as a personal pronoun. Using a list of holidays from the book, the class takes turn stating what one is doing on said holiday. A woman from Morocco, evidently the class showoff who has spoken fluent French since childhood and who is taking the class merely to brush up her spelling, asks what an Easter is. Being from a Muslim country this may be understandable, but is still somewhat shocking to Sedaris. How could anyone not know what Easter is?

The classroom explodes with broken explanations of Easter, such as "He calls his self Jesus and then he die one day on two . . . morsels of . . . lumber." Sedaris makes his own attempt at explaining, inserting yet another complication, the presence of the Easter bunny. At first, the French teacher believes Sedaris has misspoken, asking if he really meant to say rabbit, as in furry with two ears? When Sedaris confirms that this is what he meant, the teacher is confused. In France, the goodies are not brought by the Easter bunny, but by a chocolate bell that flies in from Rome.

Sedaris can't believe it. Why a bell? It doesn't have eyes to see with or legs to hop around. Not to mention it comes all the way from Rome. In Sedaris's mind, there were plenty of bells in France and the French were not likely to hand over their jobs to an outsider, especially someone from Rome.

Sedaris considers what it takes to truly understand another religion and the rituals associated with them, to an outsider it is all based on faith. Thus, he begins to have faith that he will learn French, and that this teacher is not the mean-spirited woman he makes her out to be, but on the inside is a kind and loving person.



# The Tapeworm Is In

## The Tapeworm Is In Summary and Analysis

Sedaris jumps back a few months in time to the one-month French class he took while still living in New York. This French teacher is sweet and kindly walks them through an audio book on learning the basics of French. Sedaris finds that he is having a hard time memorizing all of the basic nouns and verbs. He buys a Walkman to listen to his French audio book while getting around during the day. Once past his distaste for Walkmans, Sedaris soon learns how wonderful it is. He can walk around in the world without having to interact with it. He can play his own tune to every scene and block out reality.

Sedaris learns many standard introductory phrases and rote vocabulary in his beginners' French class, most of which he never finds a use for. Rather, his new found love of the Walkman becomes the greatest asset taken from this class. Once in France, Sedaris uses his Walkman as protection from the outside world. In his French class in Paris he does not have to memorize lists of nouns and verb, but he still uses his Walkman. He walks about while listening to books on tape in English, which is a relief to him. Not only does he have to avoid speaking and hearing French, French, but he can hear his native tongue as well.

While living in Paris, Sedaris completes all of his books on tape and realizes that he will have to walk about in his French reality once again. Desperately, he searches for more books on tape, but the only English audio books he can find are learn-to-speak-English tapes. Fortunately, his sister Amy rescues him with a care package that contains a variety of American goods, including a walking tour of Paris and an audio book on learning medical terminology in French. Sedaris's strange love of diseases, in any language, soon has him listening daily. He learns a variety of phrases that may be uncouth in day-to-day conversation but that leave him feeling like he can dive into real conversations in French: no Walkman, and no nagging self-doubt.

# Make That a Double

## Make That a Double Summary and Analysis

According to Sedaris, Americans in Paris speak two kinds of French: hard French and easy French. When Americans attempt to speak hard French, a fumbling mix of pronouns and verbs are blurted out in nonsensical sentences. Easy French is much simpler. It involves speaking English at a much higher decibel level, much like Americans speaking to someone who is hard of hearing.

Sedaris brings up Americans that take the easy way out as a contrast to his relentless efforts to understand French. Unlike those that speak easy French, Sedaris has worked hard to develop a decent French vocabulary as well as an understanding of conjugation. However, Sedaris confesses that he continues to struggle with the masculine or feminine assignment given to objects.

Sedaris creatively discusses his struggles with the masculine and feminine forms. He points out that for some reason words that seem inherently feminine, such as vagina, are masculine, and vice versa. Words that by definition are asexual are still assigned a sex; for instance, indecisiveness is female. Stumbling through a variety of theories in an attempt to identify some pattern in sexing objects, Sedaris comes to the conclusion that this information is learned by the French at a young age. There is no rationale behind Utah being masculine while Georgia is feminine, it just is.

Determined to function in society while not appearing to be an imbecile, Sedaris cleverly begins using the plural form for every object. Unlike their singular cousins, nouns in plural form lack a masculine or feminine assignment and give Sedaris a way out.

Hugh begins to find Sedaris's use of plurals a bit irritating. When Hugh asks what to do with four pounds of tomatoes and two chickens, Sedaris suggests that he place them next to the radios. The fact that they have two radios and not one gets to Hugh's point, their home is quickly running out of storage space for all of Sedaris's dual purchases.



# Remembering My Childhood on the Continent of Africa

## Remembering My Childhood on the Continent of Africa Summary and Analysis

In this essay, Sedaris retells stories from his childhood as well as Hugh's, which illustrate once again the great differences between Sedaris and an important person in his life. Sedaris's partner Hugh did not have an average American childhood. Rather, he was an American living in Africa with servants, chefs, and drivers. Growing up on another continent, especially Africa, Hugh's childhood stories are peppered with incidents Sedaris could hardly imagine as a child.

Sedaris recounts how unlike their childhoods were. For instance, while living in Ethiopia, Hugh is taken on a field trip to a slaughterhouse, a trip which would be considered traumatic, not educational, in the US. While Hugh is visiting slaughterhouses, Sedaris is playing sack races. Hugh has stories of pythons slithering across school basketball courts and dead men hanging from trees. Sedaris's childhood is filled with beach vacations and ice cream.

While envious of Hugh's interesting childhood, there is always an element of danger or revulsion in each of his stories that makes Sedaris less than enviable. Overall, Sedaris recognizes aloud that Hugh may be a bit more cosmopolitan, but it came with a price. With this recognition Sedaris tells Hugh's story of living with strangers in Africa. While still in secondary school, Hugh's father relocated to Mogadishu. Mogadishu had no school, so in order for Hugh to continue his education, he was sent to live with a man that his father had only met once. Hugh spent one year living with this man and his family. Sadly, the family had to move to Germany, leaving Hugh worried about where live. Fortunately, Hugh's school counselor found him another home, where he was allowed to live with complete strangers for yet another year. The thought of having such worries as a child is more than Sedaris can imagine. Thus, despite his envy of Hugh's interesting tales, Sedaris recognizes that they come with a cost.





# 21 Down

## 21 Down Summary and Analysis

Yet again, Sedaris introduces a character with traits that are dramatically different from his own traits. By comparison, these differences often illustrate the flaws that Sedaris finds in himself.

At the beginning of this essay, Sedaris recalls the day when he stopped in to visit his devastatingly handsome ex-boyfriend. To his disappointment, he does not find a man who has suddenly lost a few teeth. Instead he finds the same beautiful man who is on the phone, and is finishing up a New York Times crossword puzzle. His former partner claims that the crossword puzzles keep his hands busy while on the phone. Sedaris loathes that his former boyfriend is not only gorgeous, but so brilliant that he can multi-task puzzle solving and conversation.

Shortly after this visit Sedaris finds himself obsessed with the New York Times crossword puzzle. He notes that the puzzles get progressively more difficult throughout the week. Monday starts out reasonable and Saturday is devastatingly difficult, meant for the minds of geniuses only. Sedaris begins with a Monday puzzle and once finished, proudly carries it around in his wallet as if he might actually get an opportunity to show off such an impressive feat.

Sedaris then flashes forward two years, just before his move to France; he has progressed to Thursday puzzles. Unfortunately, once he moves to France, the international phone calls to friends and relatives at three AM to investigate crossword solutions is costing him a bundle and becoming exceedingly annoying to those on the receiving end. Thus, Sedaris invests in a number of reference books, which prove very useful.

One text in particular, *The Order of Things*, captures Sedaris's interest like no other. This book is filled with a list of phobias. He begins to discover fears he had never heard of before, such as the fear of knees, the fear of teeth, and the fear of being crushed by a man-made satellite falling from the sky! Sedaris is particularly taken by fears that he feels are more realistic, like the fear of being beaten and locked in a small space. At first he wonders how anyone might consider a fear of being beaten and locked in a small space unreasonable. However, he just as quickly thinks of several people who, enjoying such situations, might find it irrational.



# The City of Light in the Dark

## The City of Light in the Dark Summary and Analysis

Sedaris admits that living in Paris should mean he has seen all of the wonders it has to offer: the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower. However, Sedaris admits that he spends the majority of his spare time at the theater watching American movies. Sedaris finds his own way to rationalize the cultural benefits of seeing classic American films, subtitled in French.

When he has visitors from America, he jokes that he has planned a great itinerary for them, a day at the movies. While Sedaris would like to think that he is super flexible, he admits that he, in fact, is not. If a guest protests a day at the movies with an expected argument, such as "Why would I come all the way to Paris to do something I can do at home?", Sedaris will invariably pack off his guests with a guide book and a set of spare keys while he goes to the movies.

While living in the States, Sedaris often went to the movies, three or four times a week. Since moving to Paris he has upped his movie watching to five or six times a week. His rationale is that watching movies in France is much more enjoyable than watching movies in America because no one talks during movies in France.

Sedaris recounts numerous confrontations with annoying American movie-goers. In one circumstance, a man tried to watch an entire movie while also listening to a Chicago Cub's game on a transistor radio. When asked to turn the radio off, the man argued that America was a free country and unless there was a law against it he would continue to do both.

In this essay, Sedaris begins to point out cultural differences between France and America with a basic activity of daily life, going to the movies. In subsequent chapters, Sedaris begins to focus on these cultural differences to a greater extent.



# I Pledge Allegiance to the Bag

## I Pledge Allegiance to the Bag Summary and Analysis

In this essay, Sedaris addresses the drawbacks of being an American living in Paris. According to Sedaris, the French assume that an American living in their country has chosen to do so because he hates his native country. Although, in Sedaris's experience, this is simply untrue. Most Americans move live in France because they like it, or they have relocated for a job.

Sedaris also states that Americans living in Paris are often forced to defend their country, and at times themselves. He has come across many people in France who no longer view him as an American, but as America itself. For instance, during the Bill Clinton impeachment trials, Sedaris was constantly being heckled by his French teacher who was always quipping that American thought was so chaste.

Sedaris identifies a number of stereotypes, such as a thin American must have just lost the extra fifty pounds, a pushy American is typical, and an American that is not pushy must be medicated. As an American living in Paris, Sedaris is admittedly biased and has a hard time believing that these stereotypes apply to everyone living in the US.

Sedaris decides to be particularly observant of Americans during a five-week trip around the US. Now that he is somewhat an outsider, he is interested to see if the stereotypes are true. Of course, his first stop in every city begins at the airport. In the airports across America he observes people complaining about long lines or the person behind the counter. Yet, his overall observation while in the airport is that most Americans are relatively kind. In fact, Sedaris complains that Americans are overly optimistic.

During one flight, he watches a video clip of local artists in San Francisco who are trying to help the homeless get back on their feet through art education. Images of volunteers lecturing homeless men on art history flash across the screen. Sedaris is immediately annoyed by the artists' optimistic theory that art is therapy, and it will help homeless men and women become motivated to get their life in order.

During his travels Sedaris also sees a number of signs with suggestions or warnings, such as "don't touch". He observes that signs like these are posted abundantly across America, and are often quite ironic. Sedaris encounters a great example of such irony in coffee shops across the country. One chain of coffee shops posts signs saying "Save the planet", reminding customers to use fewer napkins because they are made from trees. Sedaris does not find similar reminders on the paper cups, which are also made from trees. He also notes that the signs tend to appear in groups, sending mixed messages about wastefulness.



Similarly, the many hotels Sedaris stays in also boast "Save the planet", suggesting that guests reuse their towels to save water. Again, Sedaris notes that similar suggestions are not placed on room service menus next to the price for a large pot of tea.

Sedaris finds it incredible that corporations ask their customers to save the planet when it comes to items given away freely, such as napkins and laundering towels. However, these promotions are nowhere to be found on items not given freely, such as a pot of tea.

The sign theme continues as Sedaris notes the plethora of signs that remind people of their common sense. Sedaris sarcastically mimics these signs with sayings like, warning bronze statues that sit under the blazing hot sun might be hot. He comments that someone not familiar with the prevalence of lawsuits in America might read the warning signs and assume that Americans are extremely ignorant. Sedaris states that the America is an I warned you so don't sue me society.

For Sedaris these signs are all symbolic of American culture and values, each representing a hidden agenda. He believes that these messages are not sincere, and are not meant to benefit others. They are meant to benefit and protect the entity that posted the sign, be it an individual or a corporation.

In the midst of this essay, the reader gets the sense that Sedaris is agreeing that Americans deserve their stereotypes. However, a quick trip to his favorite salon puts his doubts to rest. At the salon Sedaris is greeted by the salon owner, a man who openly professes his obsession with Jodie Foster. The man shows Sedaris a photograph of Jodie Foster walking a dog on the beach with a friend and asks Sedaris if he can tell what she is hold in her hand because he can't seem to make it out. When Sedaris explains that he thinks it is dog leavings, the man is appalled, thinking it is absolutely impossible that a celebrity, who is like royalty to him, would do such a common thing.

Sedaris is never quite clear about why this conversation makes him recall why it is so great to be an American. Maybe it's the familiarity or the obsession with celebrities, or maybe it's simply the freedom and fortune that allows Americans to be so superficial.



# Picka Pocketoni

## Picka Pocketoni Summary and Analysis

This essay appropriately follows I Pledge Allegiance to the Bag as it too discusses the selfish and rude American stereotype.

Sedaris recalls a July day on a Paris Metro. It is a time of year when many Americans are traveling via the Metro on vacation. On this particular day Sedaris is in a car with four Texans who live up to the loud-mouth American stereotype, "the trumpeting elephants of the human race."

The Texans loudly compare Paris with Houston without giving the least bit of consideration to their fellow passengers. Based on the presence of a Sonic Burger, access to air conditioning, ice cubes, and free parking in Houston, it is evident to Sedaris that Paris might lose this round. In addition to their notable loudness, the Texans also clearly ignore signs indicating that they should fold their seats and stand to make room if the car gets crowded.

Hugh and Sedaris de-board the first train, only to board another train where they are standing near an American couple. This couple evidently does not understand that the poles in the aisle are meant to be shared as a source of support for multiple passengers, not just those who get there first. This oblivious rudeness is the couple's first mistake.

Put off by their rudeness, Sedaris squeezes in to get a good grip on the support pole. The husband, Martin, immediately makes an insulting remark about Sedaris to his wife, not knowing Sedaris is an American and assuming he does not speak English. Martin goes on and on about Sedaris's need for a shower. Sedaris is appalled, but continues to remain silent, consuming their inane comments and plotting the moment at which he will reveal his understanding of English in order to embarrass the man.

Eventually Martin convinces himself that Sedaris is a pick pocket. Martin starts ranting to his wife, recounting his previous visit to Paris when his wallet was stolen on the Metro. Sedaris is nearly livid by this man's ignorance. However, Sedaris admits that while he is angry with the man for his comments, he is also somewhat flattered by the suggestion that he may be a skilled professional with sharp reflexes and cunning, traits he is not normally associated with.

Nearing their stop, Sedaris quickly tries to develop a plan to embarrass Martin. Sedaris plans to pull Hugh's wallet out of his pocket when exiting the train in hopes that Martin will lunge forward with accusations. Sedaris fantasizes images of Martin embarrassing himself as the policemen arrive. Unfortunately, Sedaris finds he is unable to pull off his planned stunt and is not quick witted enough to throw a piercing comment at the man that might result in further embarrassment for him once Sedaris had departed the train.

Sedaris and Hugh exit the train as Martin and his wife ride on, their ignorance unchallenged.



# I Almost Saw This Girl Get Killed

## I Almost Saw This Girl Get Killed Summary and Analysis

Sedaris and Hugh attend the Festival of Saint Anne, which is held in a nearby village in Normandy. The festival is a heyday of do-it-yourself crafts, a few games, and low-end carnival rides. The main event, however, is the vachette, a young and angry long-horned cow.

Sedaris and Hugh find a seat in the bleachers where they can look down onto the makeshift plywood arena that sits in the middle of a pasture. Young men are playing soccer in the arena. After awhile Sedaris becomes concerned that he has missed the main event. His worries were soon replaced with excitement as the vachette races into the arena. The angry vachette immediately charges the soccer players, scattering them as they run for protection behind the barricades.

It is obvious to Sedaris that the source of excitement underlying the vachette event is the anticipation of seeing some gruesome injury. Thus, Sedaris begins to wonder about how he would feel if someone got hurt, or more realistically, how he would feel if someone did not get hurt.

Sedaris states that this self-curiosity began about a month earlier when at a fair in Paris where Hugh and Sedaris witness an old carnival ride break down. At first Sedaris thinks that the dangling passengers are part of the spectacle, an intentionally placed dramatic pause to increase the thrill. However, as a crowd begins to form he soon discovers that the people dangling from the ride are in danger.

The passengers are stuck in a variety of precarious positions, although one young blond woman is in a particularly dangerous situation. She is fifty feet in the air, facing the ground with nothing but a harness straining against her weight to prevent her fall.

Similar to others in the crowd, Sedaris can do nothing but stare and start to imagine the conversations he will have later about this tragic event. Sedaris is disappointed when rescue workers arrive to disperse the crowd. His imaginary conversations have now been altered with sayings like, "I almost saw a girl get killed today". Unfortunately, Sedaris feels that the "almost" didn't give it quite the same ring.

Sedaris flashes forward to the arena with the vachette. He watches as the events progress. A tower of inner tubes and a makeshift pool of hay bales lined with plastic are introduced. Soon one of the volunteers is injured by the vachette as he tries to run from the makeshift pool. A second volunteer is run down as he tries to distract the cow from the injured man. The vachette returns to kick the first man down, breaking his ribs.



During this brutal attack, Sedaris finds that he screeches like a girl and is gripping the knees of his neighbors, Hugh on one side and a man he had only recently been introduced to on his right. When the stranger on his right has to peel Sedaris's grip from his knee, Sedaris start to become self-assured that maybe he is not as inhumane as he had initially thought.





# Smart Guy

## Smart Guy Summary and Analysis

At the age of twenty-five, Sedaris has a job cleaning up construction sites. To make this mindless job worse, Sedaris is often paired with an irritating man named Reggie. Reggie happens to think that he is a genius and brags that he has an IQ of 130. Day in and day out Reggie complains that he should be working at a job that will challenge his intellect. True to form, Sedaris devilishly suggests that Reggie try sweeping the sawdust into a fan if he is looking for a challenge. Reggie takes offense to the comment and insults Sedaris with the implication that he has a low IQ.

Sedaris reflects on this story as he is about to get his IQ tested while living in France. It is something he has always been curious of, and as he flashes back to his childhood he recalls feeling like a genius. Of course, Sedaris realizes that he has nothing to confirm that he is a genius other than his own belief.

Sedaris makes arrangements to take the IQ test administered for Mensa qualification. He is well into his forties and worries that he may have passed his intellectual peak. Thus, Sedaris asks Hugh to take the test with him so he won't have to go it alone, and because he secretly wants a source of comparison.

The test is just as Sedaris had expected: it is a long series of questions testing spatial reasoning and logic, among other things. Sedaris admits that although the test is in French, he understands every word. Unfortunately, this leaves no excuse for Sedaris should the outcome be undesirable.

When the results arrive, Hugh opens his letter to discover a positive response with the suggestion that he retake the test as he is right on the verge of genius. Sedaris opened his letter only to see read an outright rejection. For Sedaris this is a pretty hard blow—not only is he not a genius, but evidently his numbers are awfully low.

Fortunately, Hugh is there to try to brighten his mood, telling him that it doesn't matter because he is so good at so many other things. When Sedaris requests that Hugh list some of his talents, Hugh suggests vacuuming and naming stuffed animals, but he would have to think about the rest.



# The Late Show

## The Late Show Summary and Analysis

Sedaris finds himself suffering from insomnia, thinking that he would like to make a sweater for his alarm clock to cover up the numbers on the clock as the minutes tick by. Sedaris tells of his methods of getting to sleep in the past. He rocked himself to sleep until he was twenty. In the subsequent twenty-two years sleep came very easy, especially after several drinks and a bit of marijuana. In fact, sleep came so easy that he would find himself petting the cat one minute and would awake eight hours later on the floor.

After giving up drugs and alcohol, Sedaris finds that his right hand, being so used always having a drink in it, has a mind of its own. Thus, Sedaris searches out a new non-alcoholic beverage. Coffee won't do when dealing with insomnia, for obvious reasons, and he refuses to drink decaf. He finds that tomato juice and milk are not drinkable. Juice gives him a headache, and soda a stomach ache. He then turns to tea. Unfortunately, he never realized that tea had so much caffeine, and after twelve cups, he finds himself up all night on a caffeine buzz. Lying in bed, Sedaris decides to pass the time with one of his many epic daydreams.

### Mr. Science

As Mr. Science, Sedaris imagines himself as a man who can cure any disease, invent amazing products, and discover uncharted lands. His daydream starts with the invention of a serum that causes trees to grow to their full height within one year. This pleases everyone from environmentalist and developers, until one man claims the leaves of his trees cause cancer. Thus, he develops the cure for cancer and thereafter cures for a variety of diseases and syndromes, from AIDS to mental retardation. He even develops an antidote for individuals who drink too much tea and can't sleep.

His imagination leads him to the next great invention, a soap that will reverse aging. This soap turns eighty-year-old women in to beauty queens once again. There is a catch, however. The soap does not work on everyone, including those who have had too much plastic surgery, as well as fashion magazine editors. Eventually Sedaris is so rich from all of his inventions that he builds a spaceship and discovers a nearby planet where he imagines large corporations and developers scramble for his approval.

This daydream represents Sedaris's admiration for intellectuals and his never-ending pursuit of self-improvement.

### The Knockout

In this daydream, Sedaris is a heavyweight boxer one fight away from the title, although he is still unknown by the public because he rose to his ranks so quickly. He has become a heavyweight boxer by accident. As a Yale medical student he was unable to



get into a seminar on endotracheal intubation and instead he enrolls in a boxing class. His teacher is so impressed with his skills that he signs him up for a few fights where he dominates and rises to profession level boxing. He is loved by the press, but not by boxing fans. The press loves that he is a white man and plays the race card at every opportunity.

A few days before the tournament fight, it is discovered that Sedaris is a homosexual and the press has a heyday with it. The press struggles with what is more important—his race or his sexuality. He is forced to interview with Barbara Walters just before the title fight. She asks if it was difficult to come out as a homosexual. Sedaris chokes on the peanuts he is eating and offers no response as he is now on the defensive as he hates the term "out". His reaction to the gay press is similar. He refuses to wear a rainbow cape and criticizes a number of other gay stereotypes before entering the boxing ring to become the heavyweight champion.

This daydream is a clear reflection of Sedaris's self-perception that he is a weakling.

I've Got a Secret

This daydream is a clear Lewinski scandal depiction. Sedaris imagines that he is a slightly chunky Whitehouse intern, and yes, a woman. It is discovered that (s)he has had an affair with the president of the United States and the press is going crazy.

Sedaris's family is amazed that she has kept this affair a secret, but she knows that no one can keep a secret like her. To exemplify this, Sedaris imagines that in high schools she had a baby in the woods that she secretly gave up for adoption without anyone being the wiser.

Sedaris resigns to a quiet life away from the press until one day she is subpoenaed to testify. She tells her attorney that she will not testify against the President and spends the majority of her time concentrating on having a high-end designer put together an amazing suit that flatters her new waiflike figure during her court appearance.

When she enters the courtroom it is evident that she is the most beautiful woman in the world. Once on the stand she gives her first and last name only, and is put in contempt of court for refusing to answer any further questions.

She spends a quick year or two in jail where others are constantly trying to unleash her inner anger. However, when she leaves prison, she discovers that she has become a bit of an icon. Her name becomes slang for one who is dignified, beautiful, mysterious, and slightly dangerous.

She retires to a quiet life and ends up writing the book *Lolita*—in Sedaris's imagination Vladimir Nabokov never existed. The book is a hit and she is deemed an enigma and a genius. Thereafter, she hides away living off the money she made from her book.

After recounting each of these daydreams in detail, Sedaris evaluates himself by stating, "In reviewing these titles, I can't help but notice a few common themes. Looks



seem rather important, as does the ability to enlighten, disappoint, and control great numbers of people who always seem to be American". He notes that he now lives in France and dreams about America because the American values system is something he can relate to.

It is also notable that Sedaris's attempts at doing good deeds in his dreams are selective. He does good deeds for some and punishes others, which is not unusual for a daydream.

Consistent with the other essays in this book, Sedaris also imagines that he has qualities that he does not find in himself in real life.



# I'll Eat What He's Wearing

## I'll Eat What He's Wearing Summary and Analysis

In his final essay, Sedaris returns to another comic tale about his father. The Sedaris family is visiting Sedaris and Hugh in France for Christmas. While at dinner with friends and family, Lou Sedaris announces that he found something brown in his suitcase and started to eat it thinking it was a cookie. The people at the table are shocked, with the exception of the Sedaris children who know this is one of their father's quirky habits.

Lou Sedaris is known in his family for being beyond frugal when it comes to food. He saves every scrap of food, hiding it in the most unusual places (e.g., under the bathroom sink, in the shed) and from whom no one really knows. While at one time the children thought their father's frugality stemmed from living through the Great Depression, their mother quickly quelled such rumors. She too had grown up in the Depression and was much worse off than he during that time, but she wasn't eating rotten food.

Mr. Sedaris eats fruit gone fuzzy, carrots gone completely limp, and milk that looks like lumpy cheese. And, since Mrs. Sedaris is viewed by her husband as a spendthrift, Mr. Sedaris does all of the grocery shopping.

When shopping for groceries, Mr. Sedaris tells his children to eat anything they want from the produce section, rationalizing that if it isn't wrapped it is free. During each trip, a store worker would eventually come out and stop them from devouring the entire produce section. At this point, Mr. Sedaris requests to see the fruits and vegetables in the back that are well past their shelf life and the family would leave the store with their rotten produce and graying pork chops.

Because Mr. Sedaris is so well known for his cheap ways when it comes to food, the Sedaris children call ahead before coming home for Christmas, offering to bring food. Mr. Sedaris always lies, telling them that he has just purchased everything they need for Christmas dinner. When the children arrive for dinner, they always discover the same, literally old food. Tired of this scenario, the Sedaris children decide to share the hosting of Christmas dinner.

This happens to be Sedaris's year to host, and thus his father, as well as other friends and family, are all in France for Christmas. Sedaris flashes back to the scene at the dinner table where Mr. Sedaris finishes his story about the brown, seemingly edible material in his suitcase. Mr. Sedaris reveals that the brown thing he had started eating was in fact a part of his hat. The guests are shocked that this man literally ate his hat. However, while those not related to Mr. Sedaris probably chalked the whole thing up to an innocent mistake and humorous story, the Sedaris children knew that the hat was likely placed carefully back in this suitcase to be stored as a future famine food.



# Characters

## Miss Chrissy Samson

Miss Samson is Sedaris's fifth-grade speech therapist. She is clever, often trying to trick Sedaris into pronouncing words that will demonstrate his lisp. Her therapy sessions are a nuisance and embarrassment to Sedaris so he works diligently at developing a new vocabulary to avoid using S-words. In hindsight, these efforts may have contributed to Sedaris's future as a writer.

Miss Samson waits until her last session with Sedaris to share some friendly banter. She reveals that she has a fiancé who is in Vietnam, but is from Roanoke, Virginia. She has a grandmother in Asheville who she will spend Christmas with while her fiancé is overseas. She is also a college football fan, willing to make the drive from Asheville to Jacksonville after the holidays to watch Florida play Tennessee in the Gator Bowl.

The cunning Miss Samson shares these personal tidbits because she takes her role as a teacher seriously. It is all a ploy to trick Sedaris into saying that he is sorry, an S-word. Once he says it, she delights in her accomplishment.

In hindsight, Sedaris presents Miss Samson as an important character in his development as a writer.

## Mr. Mancini

Mr. Mancini is the guitar teacher at the North Hills Mall in Raleigh where Sedaris unwillingly takes guitar lessons as a child. Mr. Mancini is a very short man who is obviously uncomfortable with himself. Thus, he presents himself in an overbearing manner and often alludes to being a ladies' man.

Mr. Mancini's personality consistently makes Sedaris uncomfortable, especially since he demands that Sedaris name his guitar after a woman. Mr. Mancini's macho image crumbles one day when Sedaris witnesses him being made fun of for his size by a group of teenagers.

Though Sedaris identifies with being an outcast and attempts to bridge the gap between them, Mr. Mancini is clearly so self-conscious that he adamantly opposes this attempt. Mr. Mancini is so insecure that he makes it explicit that he is a very masculine, straight man, unlike Sedaris.

## Mr. Sedaris

Mr. Sedaris (aka, Lou), is David Sedaris's father. In this entire compilation of essays, Mr. Sedaris is clearly one of most significant people in Sedaris's life.



Mr. Sedaris is a computer engineer for IBM who has an enthusiasm for understanding and explaining the inner workings of all things. He also has an infatuation with jazz music and is often overly boisterous about it. Mr. Sedaris is not shy about showing the passion he has for his interests, and this characteristic often embarrasses Sedaris during his childhood.

Mr. Sedaris is obviously a man who cares a great deal about his children and is always an enthusiastic supporter, and sometimes has unrealistic expectations. For instance, when his children are young, he purchases instruments and accompanying lessons for each in hopes of one day seeing them play together on stage.

Even when his children are grown he remains a supportive parent. Although at times he is known to mock Sedaris, it is often in the best interest of his son who may need a quick lesson in humility.

Mr. Sedaris is a bit of an eccentric and is extremely thrifty. He is known for hiding food in unusual places for safe-keeping and will eat these hidden treasures well past their shelf life. He is also the person in charge of tasks like grocery shopping, where he makes a habit of retrieving out-of-date produce and meat to save the family money. Mr. Sedaris is in fact so cheap that when he talks of eating an unidentifiable brown object found in his suitcase, his children are not at all surprised when he admits that it was part of an old hat.

## Reggie

Reggie is a man with a seriously inflated self-image. He works alongside Sedaris on a construction clean up crew when Sedaris is twenty-five years old, and is always complaining about his job. Reggie's primary complaint is that he is a genius and is too smart and talented to be cleaning up construction sites. Reggie and his enormous ego are very much disliked by Sedaris.

## Amy Sedaris

Amy is the sister of the author, David Sedaris. Like her brother, Amy is also a comedian. Unlike her sisters, Amy never developed a self-conscious attitude, which Sedaris attributes to her love of costumes. Even as a child she never spent enough time being herself to become self-conscious.

Amy is obviously one of Sedaris's closer siblings, and shares a similar sense of humor. As children, Amy often worked on impersonations of her teachers or parents' friends, and at one time even had her own father convinced over the telephone she was a friend of her mother's.

As adults, both Sedaris and his sister Amy live in New York City. While living in New York, Amy is part of a special piece in a magazine about interesting women in New York. Prior to the photo shoot, Amy does not become obsessed with her self-image or her



looks, like other women might. Rather, she enjoys her time in a "fatty suit", a costume item meant to make her appear obese. She even convinces her father that she gained a significant amount of weight. As the thinnest and most beautiful of the Sedaris children, this comes as a great disappointment to Mr. Sedaris, but she seems entertained by his response.

The day of the photo shoot, Amy remains a true impersonator. She does not ask the make-up artist to emphasize her beauty, and instead asks to be made up to appear as if she has just been beaten up.

## **Gretchen Sedaris**

Gretchen is another one of David Sedaris's sisters. During their teenage years, Gretchen is known for being the sibling with the ability to achieve the perfect tan through her own method of body oils and suggestive positions.

Gretchen is also the inspiration, albeit unintentional, for Sedaris's choice to become an artist. When they were children, Gretchen was praised for being a talented painter. Envious of the attention his sister received, Sedaris launched into his path as an artist.

## **Paul Sedaris**

Paul is the youngest of the Sedaris children and David Sedaris's only brother. Unlike his older siblings, Paul acquired a thick North Carolina accent, uses terms like ma'am, and prefers drinks like Mountain Dew. He uses an overwhelming amount of profanity, which are generally the only distinguishable words in his drawling, rapidly spoken sentences.

Paul is best described as a bit of a hayseed. He gets into bar fights and has a relatively juvenile attitude. Sedaris describes him as the black sheep of the family. However, Paul is also the only Sedaris sibling that remains in Raleigh, North Carolina near their parents. Though he is brash, has a special connection with Mr. Sedaris and is there to comfort him when Mrs. Sedaris passes on.

## **Mrs. Sedaris**

Mrs. Sedaris is often considered a miracle worker by her children. Her love of animals is shared by her children as are a number of other characteristics. She is a bit more frivolous than her husband and concerns herself with more superficial things, like a good tan.

## **Hugh**

Hugh is Sedaris's boyfriend. Hugh and Sedaris met in New York City through a friend. Hugh is evidently financially well off, and enjoys peaceful nights cooking at home





opposed to jumping into the wild New York social scene. He has a home in Normandy, France that he and Sedaris visit in the summer, during the first seven years of their relationship. Thereafter, he moves to Paris with Sedaris.

Hugh is a bit more sophisticated than Sedaris and has a taste for finer things, like fancy SoHo restaurants. He grew up in Africa because his father had a job with the US government and was stationed there. Having grown up in Africa, Hugh witnessed a number of disturbing things as a child that Sedaris was protected from. It is implied in the text that Hugh's childhood experiences contribute to his mannerisms, taste, and more sophisticated demeanor.

## Valencia

Valencia is a Columbian woman who purchases a townhouse that Sedaris admires, and paints it an obnoxious hot pink with tangerine trim. She is an independently wealthy woman who wants to live life like a starving artist. Valencia always acts as if she cannot afford a thing and chooses to furnish her apartment in used dumpster fare and the latest piece made by one of her deadbeat artist friends.

Sedaris works as Valencia's assistant where she has him doing menial tasks, such as paying her bills. Her working relationship with Sedaris eventually fizzles when one day she requests that Sedaris degrade himself by calling out "Cheeky" to a pigeon.

## Patrick

Patrick owns a moving company in New York City where Sedaris takes a job as a mover after working for Valencia. Patrick is very much a blue collar guy with distaste for the wealthy and a soft spot for those in need of a little help.

## Alisha

Alisha is a good friend of Sedaris's. She visits him once a year and always makes herself comfortable in a way that alleviates him from having to constantly entertain her. To Sedaris she is the perfect house guest, but she is also prone to being a bad judge of character and one year brings a new friend, Bonnie, with her to visit Sedaris in New York.

## Bonnie

Bonnie is the new friend of Alisha who is invited on Alisha's annual trip to New York City to visit Sedaris. Before her trip to New York, Bonnie had not been outside a fifty mile radius of her home town in Greensborough, North Carolina. She is unsure of herself in a big city like New York and is at first overly suspicious of every person she meets. Unlike



Alisha, Bonnie arrives with a detailed itinerary of her plans, expecting Sedaris to play tour guide.

When Bonnie does not get her way she pouts until Sedaris and Alisha can't take it. Once Bonnie gets her way she is in heaven. She makes a point to see every tourist attraction in the city and soon discover that she fits right in among the tourists, not the New Yorkers.



## Objects/Places

### **Western New York State appears in non-fiction**

Sedaris was born in rural New York and lived there during his early childhood. His family later relocated to Raleigh, North Carolina.

### **Raleigh, North Carolina appears in non-fiction**

Sedaris spends the majority of his childhood and adolescence in Raleigh, and this is where most of his childhood stories are set. Mr. and Mrs. Sedaris remain in Raleigh after their children leave the house, making Raleigh the setting for several home-for-the-holidays stories.

### **Chicago, Illinois appears in non-fiction**

Sedaris moves to Chicago to finish his art degree at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Following graduation, Sedaris takes a job as a writing workshop teacher in Chicago.

### **New York City appears in non-fiction**

After a few years in Chicago, Sedaris moves to New York City. He is initially without work and is scraping to get by when he meets Valencia, an independently wealthy art snob. During his time in New York, Sedaris also works as a mover, acts as a tour guide for Bonnie, the crazed North Carolina native, and meets his long-term boyfriend Hugh.

### **Normandy, France appears in non-fiction**

Sedaris's boyfriend Hugh owns a second home in Normandy, France. They visit every summer for six years, gradually fixing it up while Sedaris fumbles with a new language.

### **Paris, France appears in non-fiction**

Sedaris and Hugh make Paris their home after leaving New York City. The essays based on his experiences in Paris give a more cosmopolitan view of the world.

### **Festival of Saint Anne appears in non-fiction**

This festival is held in a small out village in Normandy. It is Sedaris's first experience watching the angry vachette run down a number of risk-taking volunteers. During this



event, Sedaris ponders some tough questions about human interest in witnessing tragedy.

## **Guitar appears in non-fiction**

During his childhood, Sedaris receives a guitar from his father. It is an unwanted gift, but Sedaris takes guitar lessons anyway. Sedaris is asked by his guitar teacher to pretend that the guitar is a woman. Eventually, Sedaris takes pity on his guitar teacher and in an attempt to open up to him, is chastised for being gay.

## **Walkman appears in non-fiction**

Sedaris despises the Walkman as an accessory until he purchases a Walkman for his own purposes. He soon grows to love it. While living in France it allows him to block out the world and listen to his native tongue via books on tape. He also overcomes his fear of speaking French by regularly using the Walkman to learn French medical terms.

## **Movies appears in non-fiction**

The movies are yet another means for Sedaris to escape the world. While living in New York, Sedaris attends the movies three or four times a week. While living in Paris, he attends the movies almost every day.

## **Typewriter appears in non-fiction**

Sedaris unabashedly opposes technological change, which is consistent with his self-portrayal as his father's exact opposite. When the personal computer becomes popular, Sedaris adamantly defies this change. As a writer, he lugs his typewriter with him everywhere, even to the airport.

## **NY Times Crossword Puzzle appears in non-fiction**

In a book with consistent language themes, the NY Times crossword puzzle is an interesting object of significance. Sedaris first develops his obsession with the NY Times puzzles almost out of jealousy of a former lover who completes the puzzles with annoying ease. Over the years he tackles each puzzle with a perfectionist approach that implies that failure is equivalent to ignorance.



## Signs appears in non-fiction

Signs are other objects that are very symbolic of the language theme in this book. Sedaris discusses the over use of signs in American society, which often imply that Americans as a society are extremely ignorant.



# Themes

## Use of Language

From the first essay in *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, use of language is an evident theme. In his first essay, Sedaris discusses his clever tactic to develop his vocabulary to circumvent having his lisping "s" corrected.

In another essay he discusses his brother's colorful language, which is so laden with profanity that it is incoherent most of the time. Sedaris's brother, Paul, also speaks with a North Carolina accent, uses terms like ma'am, and other conjugates like ya'll, all of which are manners of speech that Sedaris and his other siblings made an effort to avoid. Paul's use of language implies that he is ignorant, brash, and offish, a completely the opposite of Sedaris and the characteristics that he admires.

As a novice writing professor who makes a mockery of his classroom and a man obsessed with the *New York Times*, Sedaris illustrates other instances in which the use of language theme repeatedly emerges. Sedaris's struggle to master each of these situations makes him think less of himself.

In the later half of the book, Sedaris returns to the elementary use of language when he begins to learn French. He is constantly stumbling over his words, making a fool of himself in front of the locals when he is only able to utter the same nonsensical words in response to every question, "ashtray" and "bottleneck".

Slowly Sedaris overcomes any fear of sounding like a babbling fool when speaking French. However, when Sedaris and Hugh make the decision to move to Paris, Sedaris is struck again with the reality that he is a novice and develops a fear of speaking the language. His Parisian French teacher's belittling attitude is the impetus for this regression.

In his struggle to overcome the challenge rules in the French language, Sedaris develops tactics that mimic those he used as a young child. In both situations he develops clever ways to avoid difficult words. As a child he used a thesaurus to help him avoid using s-words, as an adult he avoids masculine and feminine articles in French by always using the plural form.

## Individual Versus Society

In most of the essays in *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, Sedaris tells a tale about an individual versus society. Often the individual is himself, but at times Sedaris describes others whose struggle he can associate with, Mr. Mancini for instance.

In the early part of the book, the theme of individual versus society is set in Sedaris's childhood years. Sedaris is singled-out in class to attend speech therapy, which is



embarrassing to him. To Sedaris, going to therapy implies that there is something wrong with him.

In the essay, *Twelve Moments in the Life of the Artist*, Sedaris identifies with individuals on the fringes of society during college. He rejects just about anything that is normal or that has the approval of society, including his art. When his first installment is shown at the museum and given praise, he burns it in defiance.

This individual versus society theme in Part 1 is predominantly related to Sedaris's personal growth as a child and in his early adult years. As a new teacher making vague attempts against failure in his writing workshop, as a mover struggling with his perceptions about social class and which to admire, and as a writer pushing against technological change, Sedaris struggles against society.

In Part 2, Sedaris has similar struggles against society, but in his more recent years society is classified by culture. While living in France he again feels like an outsider because he cannot speak the language fluently. Once he has finally conquered enough of the French language to feel comfortable conversing in this new culture, he must struggle with the cultural differences.

## Cultural Identity

The theme of cultural identity plays out predominantly in the second part of the book. After visiting and living in France for years, Sedaris begins to view his American culture with a different perspective. He automatically defends his native culture when it is attacked. However, when he visits America, or witnesses Americans visiting France, he obviously has a hard time associating himself with American culture.

When Sedaris and Hugh first start dating, Hugh goes to Normandy and Sedaris stays home as he is not yet prepared to deal with the language barrier or the thought of bringing his American traits and beliefs into question. At the time Sedaris seems to embrace the self-indulgent American stereotype when he quips that gifts are the primary reason to travel outside the US anyway.

Over the years, Sedaris is consistently put in positions where he feels like he either has to defend the American culture, or frown upon it. He finds himself opposing the assumption that Americans live in France because they hate their native country. Sedaris also often feels that he is viewed not as an American, but as America itself, and is sometimes forced to defend himself against those who are angry with American society.

During a visit to the US, he observes that Americans are an I warned you so don't sue me society. He is disappointed by the signs everywhere that warn of future dangers but that are not meant to protect others—they are meant to protect the person who posted the sign. Sedaris is also offended by the rudeness of the Americans he sees visiting Paris.

In the end, Sedaris is a bit of an eccentric man who puts himself outside the normal curve. Culturally, he straddles two worlds and at times pushes against them both.





# Style

## Perspective

Sedaris is clearly a comic with a quick, biting humor. In a house full of children always bidding for attention, it is no wonder. Sedaris makes it clear in the book that he felt like an outsider at a young age. In his very first essay, *Go Carolina*, Sedaris is branded as a kid with a speech impediment. He is so sensitive about this label that he goes to extremes to develop a vocabulary that allows him to cleverly dance around certain words and avoid being corrected.

In another childhood scenario, Sedaris witnesses his music teacher being taunted by teenagers at a local restaurant. This event quickly replaces Sedaris's aversion for the teacher with sympathy. However, when Sedaris attempts to make amends with his teacher by being honest, he is faced with the teacher's fear and disapproval.

These childhood scenarios make it clear how Sedaris developed his sense of humor. His irony, though definitely mature, shows signs of childhood sarcasm that is often used as a defense mechanism.

*Me Talk Pretty One Day* is not just a form of comic entertainment, it is one man's honest, yet self-deprecating reflection on life.

## Tone

*Me Talk Pretty One Day* is written in an informal, playful tone. Sharp wit and irony appear on every page, and are a clear reflection of Sedaris's cleverness as well as his intelligence. This is an irony in itself since Sedaris is often so self-critical when it comes to his intelligence.

Despite touching upon some sensitive issues, Sedaris's stories stay within the realm of humor. He lifts topics that could easily take a more serious tone by quickly drawing attention toward the next joke. However, his humor is often brash, critical, and bad-mannered, which may make some readers uncomfortable.

Sedaris is outspoken and evidently unapologetic about his views and crude humor. Without these characteristics, however, this collection would lack its current effect. It is the way in which Sedaris draws his reader in to the intimate details and awkward situation of everyday life. Regardless of content that is at times shocking, it is faithful to the strange situations that everyone encounters in real life, which is impossible to ignore. This honesty is disarming in a way that forces the reader to be forgiving of ill-mannered content.

## Structure

Me Talk Pretty One Day is a series of essays, which Sedaris manages to piece together in a manner that makes sense. He does this by using several themes that have run through his life to string the stories together, albeit loosely.

The book is structured into two parts. The first part of the book primarily focuses on Sedaris's early development, and acts as a sort of preface to the second part of the book. This is not to say that Sedaris presents his life chronologically. Rather, he presents what at times seems to be a mixture of stories from his childhood and early adulthood that explain who he is, who his family is, and how he got to his place in life.

Sedaris uses flashback often to tell these stories, often starting an essay from one time in his life, only to jump ahead or back in time to tell the rest of the tale.



## Quotes

"The woman spoke with a heavy western North Carolina accent, which I used it discredit her authority." Chap. 1, Go Carolina, p. 7

"I'd always thought of Mister Mancini as a blowhard, a pocket playboy, but watching him dip his hamburger into a sad puddle of mayonnaise, I broadened my view and came to see him as a wee outsider, a misfit whose take-it-or-leave-it attitude had left him all alone." Chap. 2, Giant Dreams, Midget Abilities, p. 27

"It was the artist's duty to find the appropriate objects, and the audience's job to decipher meaning. If the piece failed to work, it was their fault, not yours." Chap. 4, Twelve Moments in the Life of the Artist, p. 52

"I was given two weeks to prepare, a period I spent searching for a briefcase and standing before my full-length mirror, repeating the words, "Hello, class, my name is Mr. Sedaris." Chap. 7, The Learning Curve, p. 84

"I'm in love. Can you believe it? I'm finally, really in love, and I feel great." Chap. 12, A Shiner Like a Diamond, p. 141

"I know it sounds calculating, but if you're not cute, you might as well be clever." Chap. 14, See You Again Yesterday, p. 156

"He calls his self Jesus and then he die one day on two...morsels of...lumber." Chap. 16, Jesus Shaves, p. 177

"Everywhere you turn the obvious is being stated. CANNON MAY BE LOUD. MOVING SIDEWALK IS ABOUT TO END." Chap. 22, I Pledge Allegiance to the Bag, p. 216

"It's hard trying to explain a country whose motto has become You can't claim I didn't warn you." Chap. 22, I Pledge Allegiance to the Bag, p. 216

"The trumpeting elephants of the human race." Chap. 23, Picka Pocketonia, p. 219

"Still, there were moments when, against all reason, I thought I might be a genius." Chap. 25, Smart Guy, p. 243

"In reviewing these titles, I can't help but notice a few common themes. Looks seem rather important, as does the ability to enlighten, disappoint, and control great numbers of people who always seem to be American." Chap. 26, The Late Show, p. 263



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the use of language. Why do you think Sedaris chooses to focus on language as a theme in this book? Why do you think that Sedaris implies that less than perfect linguist skills are a sign of ignorance?

Discuss the role of Lou Sedaris. What similarities do Sedaris and his father share? How are they different? Why are these similarities and differences important?

Sedaris has a number of obvious biases. Identify at least two of them and explain why this bias may exist for him.

Sedaris uses humor to touch on several sensitive topics, homosexuality for instance. Does this comic tone take away from these issues? Does the fact that he makes light of these issues make them easier to discuss?

Several essays begin with a flashback to an earlier time in Sedaris's life, which generally sets up the topic for the essay. Discuss how Sedaris uses this mechanism to continue the themes of growth/self-improvement and self versus society through the book.

A number of significant places are discussed in this book, but France is particularly important. Discuss how Sedaris's perception of American life has changed after moving to France.

Sedaris writes of his encounters with several different people, and how these people altered his perception of the world and/or himself. Identify at least two of these important people. Discuss how and why Sedaris's perception changed because of this person.