When You Are Engulfed in Flames Study Guide

When You Are Engulfed in Flames by David Sedaris

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

David Sedaris, the author, grew up middle class in North Carolina in the 1960s in a house filled with four sisters and one older brother. The abundant ironies and contradictions of his childhood formed a staid background from which he later felt an ever-present wanderlust to roam about the world as an adult, exploring his past through a prism of the present in perpetual motion. By travelling and then writing about the experiences, his feelings and thoughts became more clearly delineated to himself and his readers, often with hilarious results.

David's life is complicated by his relationships and his ambiguity about them. His lover, Hugh, is a constant source of companionship for many, many years. In effect and outcome, they are happily married, though the book takes place before such unions were legal. Rather than become embroiled in the political and social implications of such a relationship, however, David -- while openly gay if pressed by anyone asking his preference -- instead chooses to enmesh himself in his writing workload and studious eye for the absurdities going on around him. It's an insular but eye-opening manner he uses to see the world through his own point of view, even when events and persons in it threaten to topple his carefully crafted loner approach to living life on his own terms.

Because When You Are Engulfed in Flames is a collection of first-person essays, there is no overall plot or singular theme to it as a book. However, each essay connects to the previous and following chapter stylistically in that it presents another angle to the complex lifestyle David creates for himself. There are constant themes through each chapter that -- while they seemed diverse beyond union upon first reading -- actually tie together with a consistent view of the world by the author. Indeed, although this is a collection, the essays originally appeared in such diverse magazines as GQ, The New Yorker, and other periodicals.

In "It's Catching," Sedaris examines how people use scary stories about parasites harming humans to communicate with one another in a visceral, if fearful, manner. In "Keeping Up," the author writes lovingly about his dependency on his lover Hugh, who is forever striding ahead of David when they travel and leaving David in the figurative dust. In "The Understudy," David recalls a week-long nanny hired by his mother who turned out to be a profligate white trash woman and put the children through a form of living hell. In "This Old House," David recalls when he moved into a boarding house because it contained a lingering sense of nostalgia of olden times. In "Buddy, Can You Spare a Tie?" he reminisces about the many bad fashion choices he'd made in life, including wearing a bow-tie and the Stadium Pal, a device which collected urine in a bag so sports attendees didn't have to miss any of their game. "Road Trips" covers David's experiences as a young man with people who come onto him while offering hitchhiking rides, and how he declined the offers owing to his own sense of confused sexuality. "What I Learned" is Sedaris' imaginary reflection on his attending Princeton and how it inadvertently set his course to become a writer through no initial inspiration of his own. "That's Amore" details Sedaris remembering his New York City neighbor Helen, an elderly woman who bossed everyone she encountered with ruthless

precision. "The Monster Mash" is a morbid recollection by the author of visiting a medical examiner's office for a week and his subsequent obsession with seeing only death everywhere he looked. "In the Waiting Room" recounts David's sitting in his underpants in a Parisian medical office while other patients filed in and awkwardly co-occupied the space with him. "Solution to Saturday's Puzzle" details the author having to decline a fellow jet traveler's request to change seats so she could be seated by her husband. "Adult Figures Charging Toward a Concrete Stool" concerns David's parents and their sudden interest in collecting art for their home. "Memento Mori" details David's purchase of a human skeleton for his artist lover Hugh, and how the morbid gift haunted the writer afterwards. "All the Beauty You Will Ever Need" portrays the author purchasing pot from a redneck North Carolina couple and their inherent fascination with gay sex as a straight couple. "Town and Country" is a juxtaposition between a wealthy couple David encountered on a jet who were just as profane and vulgar as the poor immigrant taxi cab driver David encountered after leaving the airport. "Aerial" examines the author in France having to thwart a group of birds who were insistently trying to smash into the cottage windows and work their way inside. "The Man in the Hut" details Jackie, a nearby French neighbor, who was convicted of child molestation. "Of Mice and Men" is a memoir about a mouse who set fire to a man's home, and how perspective about an event when retold could entirely change its meaning. "April in Paris" concerns David's obsession with April, a spider he found in his French country home, and his growing fascination with her habits and feeding techniques. "Crybaby" is a meditation about grief, both genuine and the kind of forced play-acting at pretending to be sad over a loss of life. "Old Faithful" is a memoir about Hugh lancing a boil on David's backside. "The Smoking Section" is a two-part essay detailing David's attempt to quit smoking by spending time in Japan, immersing himself in a foreign culture as a means of distracting himself from his habit of chain-smoking.

"It's Catching" and "Keeping Up"

Summary

In "It's Catching," David, the narrator, recalls a Christmas dinner in which participants shared horrific stories of communicable parasites, each new story more gruesome than the previous round. The narrator listened to the stories about germs on shopping cart handles, hotel bedspreads, and other lurking social horrors and remembered when he caught crabs in his youth after buying a used pair of pants and not cleaning them prior to wearing them.

Hugh, the narrator's lover, remembered when a guinea worm formed a welt on his leg and then released a parasite from the wound upon hatching. Maw Hamrick, Hugh's mother, also experienced a similar affliction and horrific outcome on her own leg. David's sister Lisa was disgusted and paranoid, secretly wondering if Maw Hamrick was still rampant with guinea worm parasites.

Having had his fill of gruesome horror stories, the narrator steered the conversation to accidents. He was glad when Lisa explained, or rather insisted, that 5,000 children per year were accidentally frightened to death by their own loved ones. David felt a pang of guilt as he realized just how much physical work Maw Hamrick performed for him whenever he was present, work which he never reciprocated. But that didn't stop him from taking advantage of her freely supplied labor, anyway.

In "Keeping Up," David details his French apartment which offered non-stop views of arguing couples, all tourists, most of whom fought over their lack of French speaking skills, or their failed pretense at blending in as Parisians. This inevitably lead to shouting matches outside his apartment. He was certain at least one of the couples wound up divorced by the bitterness of their argument.

Sedaris recalls how Hugh inevitably strode ahead of David whenever they are traveling abroad, leaving David behind in the crowd of strangers. He recounted how a trip to Australia went awry when David's quest to see a dingo in a zoo for the first time was dampened by Hugh's sudden disappearance at the moment David saw the wild dog. David lamented Hugh's tendency, but attributed it to Hugh's natural boldness in life. David contrasted Hugh's brazen certainty with his own lack of it, detailing how he was afraid of dinner invitations, appliances that broke and needed to be repaired, and even his own neighbors. When David caught up to Hugh after one such incident and Hugh asked him where he was, David honestly and gratefully answered he was lost.

Analysis

"It's Catching" is a dry comedic study of how people use the horrors of the outside world to feel more safe and secure about their inside environment, even if this is largely an imaginative shield used to create psychological comfort. In this case, the setting is a

warm domestic one with a Christmas Eve goose cooking in the kitchen, and the tranquility of such a setting gives license for the narrator to indulge his sister Lisa as she recollects grim stories involving parasites meeting humans with ugly outcomes.

The narrator indulges himself at the expense of Maw Hamrick. He lazily attributes his allowing Maw Hamrick to wait on him throughout the evening as something he cannot discourage, as this need she has to wait on others is simply, he intones to the reader, in her Kentucky bloodline.

The irony is made overt by the closing paragraphs, in which the horrors of a parasite living off your flesh (as personified by the guinea worm living on a body part) is juxtaposed with the narrator boasting about how he hoists his glass for Maw Hamrick to refill with wine. In essence, David has metaphorically become the human form of the guinea worm, living off Maw's energies akin to a human parasite, albeit unrecognized by her as such (and perhaps David himself).

The amusing digression about whether or not 5,000 children are accidentally scared to death each year in either the United States or worldwide is not obvious comedic material. But the manner in which the author expresses himself by having this debate occur as if what matters is not the veracity of the tale but the sheer numbers captures the way much "urban legend" type stories are transmitted in our still word-of-mouth culture. Little energy is spent fact-checking such claims, but this is part of their horrific charm and allure to the listeners.

"Keeping Up" uses a rich metaphorical irony. For example, the couples who inevitably argue in front of David's apartment about their appropriate use of the French language do so without the slightest awareness that they both speak the same language -- typically English -- but fail to do so with any clarity or agreement in their native tongue. One wonders if they are unable to communicate in their preferred language how they will ever master maintaining their relationship in a foreign one, as well?

After opening the essay by focusing on arguments between external couples, David alters the concept from stranger couples to his personal viewpoint by detailing his own relationship with Hugh in this regard. Hugh is characterized as bold, fearless and innately self-centered, and not necessarily in a negative fashion. Sedaris contrasts himself by selecting moments wherein he is indecisive, fearful and withdrawn from society.

The dingo dog incident is a clear example of this study in contrast by the author. Hugh offers to draw the dingo so that David can at least have a clear mental image of what to expect, but David, who has never seen even a sketch or picture of a dingo, refuses, not wanting the outside world to color his own internal reaction to the beast. When Hugh vanishes at the dingo dog exhibit as he is want to do in such situations, David grows livid, convinced he will break up with Hugh in the latest of an endless series of such unfulfilled promises in their relationship.

When David finally catches up to Hugh and Hugh asks where David has been, David answers that he's been lost. But the author does not mean this in only the most literal manner, but metaphorically speaking, in a larger sense that, without Hugh and his commanding presence upon which David leans upon for support and guidance, David feels lost in the world at large. Notice how the author cleverly builds the entire essay to end on this "double meaning" turn of phrase re: being lost, and how it emotionally impacts the reader.

Discussion Question 1

In "It's Catching," why do you think the narrator so freely encouraged others to participate in their telling of horror stories involving germs, parasites and similar horrific events when he had so few such tales to offer of his own? Was there a certain vicarious living experience happening while in his company?

Discussion Question 2

In "It's Catching," after the narrator intoned his guilt over allowing Maw Hamrick to wait on him hand and foot, do you think he was likely to change his attitude and help her in the future? What attitudes did he possess that lead you to your conclusion?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think David Sedaris was so reluctant to have any preconception of what a dingo looks like prior to his visiting a zoo in Australia? What did this reluctance to have others color his world view say about the author?

Vocabulary

vein, cockatiel, diseases, preventative, orphanage, parasites, relaxing, assisted living, guinea worms, sop, marrow, cholesterol, hydrochloride, ossificans, moles, penile, launder, ichthyosis, oxycodone, abnormal, contracture, photogenic

"The Understudy" and "This Old House"

Summary

"The Understudy" is an examination of a week in childhood David and his siblings spent in the care of one Mrs. Peacock, a woman hired by David's mother under somewhat mysterious circumstances, to stay at the Sedaris household with them. Sedaris recalls how Mrs. Peacock rarely fed them properly, relying on sloppy joe sandwiches as the normal diet for the bewildered children. She stayed in bed most of the day and demanded the kids take turns scratching her back with a hand-styled back scratcher they christen the monkey's paw.

When one of David's sisters accidentally dropped and broke the back scratcher, Mrs. Peacock insisted on taking the whole brood back to her cramped, impoverished abode because she has another back scratcher there for just such emergencies. The children were put off by the enormous collection of dolls Mrs. Peacock filled her tiny house with, even though Mrs. Peacock was proud of them.

David reflects that with adult hindsight, it was clear Mrs. Peacock was probably clinically depressive. Nevertheless, he and his siblings awaited the return of their mother with a growing sense of revenge, eager to spill their tale of woe and mistreatment at Mrs. Peacock's hands. To their surprise, their mother was empathetic to Mrs. Peacock's side of the story, taking Mrs. Peacock inside their home and offering her a sympathetic ear. David stared at them through the window, realizing the two women had more in common than he ever imagined as a fifth grader.

"This Old House" is a remembrance of a time in David's life when he was fascinated with the past more than the present. He attributed this initial obsession with watching an old t.v. show about a Depression-era family who grew up poor but with one another as tight-knit company. He contrasted this idyllic televised image of reality with the severely practical, modern manner in which his mother decorated their more spartan home, and how he and his siblings were more distant, he imagined, as a result.

While drifting in life as a young man, David took a job as a dishwasher in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and lived in a boarding house run by Rosemary Dowd. Rosemary dressed out of the past like David, so the two hit it off right away. She also furnished the rooms she rented with antique and fading furniture, which only added to David's rapture at living in such a home (despite the fact his father called the place a dump).

Owing to their peculiar but shared fascination with the past, David and Rosemary bonded, spending many evenings together listening to old radio shows and feeling generally superior to those awash in modern culture. But the insular world they created slowly began to unwind in time. Chaz, a young man, rented a room, but his schizophrenia became so intrusive that it disturbed the peace for the other residents of Rosemary's boarding home. Chaz was forced to leave when his parents took him away.

Even though her own daughter was in an asylum, Rosemary was fed up with dealing with the mentally ill and the elderly who constituted her client base. So she decided to retire by selling her boarding home to the university. David recounts how Ava, Rosemary's mentally ill daughter, lost her father to death shortly before President Kennedy's assassination, and how the two events seemed irreparably conjoined in Ava's disturbed mind. He closed the recollection by noting the contradiction of how everything that was old that he loved so dearly was once new in its time.

Analysis

"The Understudy" is a study itself in perspective. Written to capture the thoughts and feelings of his 5th grade self, Sedaris confines the viewpoint to himself and his young siblings, always characterizing the caretaker Mrs. Peacock as obese, slovenly, idiotic, capricious and inherently grotesque. In other words, it is written with the maturity (and lack thereof) of a young child bewildered to be in the controlling company of a nanny who seems hopelessly beyond the task at hand.

Sedaris is not interested in presenting any rose-colored memoir of the time he spent with Mrs. Peacock. Rather, he distorts the essay so that Mrs. Peacock's viewpoint is hardly present save as a catalyst to provoke David and his siblings. A good example of this perspective-taking is when he describes the horrendous habit Mrs. Peacock has of having her back scratched with a hand-shaped scratcher on a stick. The children are forced to take turns running the fetid device over Mrs. Peacock's back in dutiful if disgusted turns to their mounting dread and sense that such behavior is tantamount to child abuse.

They patiently await the return of their mother to catalog the mistreatment Mrs. Peacock has subjected them to, only to discover their mother is empathetic to Mrs. Peacock more than themselves. This narrative twist serves to remind the reader that although Sedaris has effectively captured the point of view to his 5th grade self, he has nonetheless failed to understand that his mother, an adult, more clearly identifies with another adult, Mrs. Peacock, even though the children have charged Mrs. Peacock with a litany of neglect. It is an eye-opening moment for the author as boy in perspective taking, and he recreates it with his story by confining the viewpoint to a child's only.

"This Old House" is written by Sedaris as a nostalgic remembrance of things past as being superior in all manners to things present. He sets the tone for this contrast between adoration for what has preceded today and what is better for having occurred prior by recalling how drably his mother staged their childhood home. Because she knows children mean broken furniture and decor, his mother settles for practical items that can be easily replaced rather than for antiques and collectibles which are expensive to maintain.

This creates a longing in the author for a sense the past is more comfortable and aesthetically preferable to the modern era. Notice how he cites the influence of what is probably The Waltons t.v. show (though he leaves the show unnamed, the description is

identical to the series) as the beginning of his worship of all things prior in time. Soon he wears outdated clothes from another era and prefers the outmoded culture of older music and books, as well.

The author delineates how he came to lose a lot of this perspective when he actually inhabits a close proximity to it in the boardinghouse run by Rosemary. At first, David lives in his apparent dream room, filled with musty old furniture and a sense of having had the modern time pass it by. But as time progresses and David is subjected to the obvious detriments of his living conditions, such as working poverty, his house mates' mental illness and a lack of a future for himself, the enchantment with the past as sacrosanct slowly vanishes, replaced with a dawning realization one cannot escape the present by vanishing into the past.

The writer clearly makes this point with his concluding thoughts, in which he reflects on an obvious fact that he nonetheless missed under his earlier enthrallment to the past. Sedaris writes that everything olden that he loved dearly was, in fact, once brand new, just like the mundane items he buys in the modern era. He marvels how this perspective is lost in time, thus giving older items their inherent enchantment.

Discussion Question 1

In "The Understudy," are the judgments the narrator made about Mrs. Peacock and her lifestyle derived from a deeper, more complex understanding of the events as they occur, or were they based more narrowly on a child's perspective made without a more mature sense of mercy or kindness?

Discussion Question 2

In "This Old House," why do you think David identified so readily with a culture that was rooted in the past rather than a more modern, dynamic one such as inhabited by his peers? Why didn't he simply choose a more futuristic culture instead of one so firmly rooted in the past?

Discussion Question 3

In "This Old House," what was the initial source of attraction between Rosemary and David? What rituals did they enact that made their time together significant and lead to their deeper bonding?

Vocabulary

forehead, margarine, mermaid, Vaseline, uncolor, carpal tunnel syndrome, verbatim, joists, convoluted, fatigues, buffet, chafing dish, clapboard walls, platform shoes, aspirations, boardinghouse, newsreel, mannish, parlor, doilies

"Buddy, Can You Spare a Tie?" and "Road Trips"

Summary

"Buddy, Can You Spare a Tie?" details the author's less than sartorial splendor when it came to dressing throughout his life. He reveals how his favorite Halloween costume as a child was to dress as a hobo, because he felt that image best summarized his approach to clothing. He chronicles a $400 sweater he owned that was deliberately distressed by designers to look old and ripped up, as well as a pair of flat shoes he called his clown shoes. He wished that he had purchased an entire closet full of the so-called clown shoes, as he liked the way they fit his flat feet.

Continuing a reflection on his fashion sensibility, Sedaris laments the poor choices he'd made in glasses, in particular an oversized pair in the 1970s and a rectangular pair in the 1990s that made him resemble the t.v. character Mrs. Beasley from Family Affair. Next he details an artificial ass he briefly wore which padded his derrière with fake buttocks, thus correcting a problem he perceived in his physical build. Another fashion mistake he made was wearing women's sweaters and clothes in a gender neutral manner, but never feeling fully comfortable as a result.

Desiring a sense of the elicit, David bought a Stadium Pal, a bag that attached to one's leg and allowed the collection of urine during sporting events and the like. He imagined he would use it during book tours as well, but the uncomfortable design and nature of the device soon discouraged Sedaris from wearing it. A final try at fashion entailed David wearing a bow tie. He soon realized through the negative comments he received that it made him appear impotent to observers, who inevitably felt sympathy for Sedaris. He concludes that he felt most comfortable dressing like a hobo overall, and was grateful that he worked at home as a result.

"Road Trips" starts with Sedaris reflecting on how different it is to be gay today versus when he was growing up. In his youth, he masked his homosexuality and feigned interest in girls in order to ward off hostile speculation as to his sexuality. He contrasts this reality with a young gay man he encountered in his home town decades later, whose parents proudly and openly proclaim their son as being gay. Sedaris delineates how such a contrast was truly eye opening and for the better, but equally made him feel ancient and out of place.

Thinking about this discrepancy, Sedaris recalls when he was younger and hitchhiking. Still very much in the closet, he was picked up by a couple in a Cadillac. The husband made sexual overtures to David regarding the man's wife, forcing Sedaris to blurt that he's gay as a form of self-defense, right before he got out of the vehicle. In a sort of reverse of the same scenario, Sedaris was later picked up by a tow truck driver who propositioned him. Despite being gay, David was also a virgin and didn't want his first

sexual experience to be so sordid, so he declined. He used the excuse that he just broke up with his ex-girlfriend to imply he's straight, but the gay tow trucker driver simply stated he's got an ex-wife. Much like his encounter with the couple, Sedaris wound up on the side of the road, alone and still a virgin, though thankfully so for the time being.

Analysis

"Buddy, Can You Spare a Tie?" is a rumination based on the writer's unhappiness with the way most clothes and fashion look on him. He begins with childhood, where he reveals his only real fashion victory was on Halloween, when he dresses like a hobo. He's careful to distinguish hobo from homeless, delineating the difference as being the hobo has a sort of willful vagabond look, whereas the homeless person is a modern variant in which the person is more distressed and less in control of their surroundings.

Glasses also come into focus for Sedaris. He mentions an over-sized pair he wore in the 1970s and then, 20 years later, a rectangular box-like style that were too small on his face. Neither are comfortable or look good on Sedaris. The author uses contrast between the two extremes to suggest that fashion rarely allows for a comfortable middle ground, rather depending on the pendular swing of what is currently popular to dictate styles and tastes, however excessive.

This penchant for fashion excess leads the narrator to write about two extremes of clothing as emblematic of the lengths to which people will go to disguise themselves and their bodily functions: the Stadium Pal and a wearable fake ass designed to make your butt look bigger. Sedaris has varying degrees of success with each device, and yet tells the reader that neither ultimately lives up to the promise that each will deliver the wearer a newfound sense of freedom about an old, vexing problem. Like all previous attempts at fashion and self-improvement using it, Sedaris ultimately abandons both devices as failures.

He recalls his father's sagely advice as to why men wear bow ties, if they must: they set up a sense of underachievement that can be overcome with hard work. In other words, wearing such a bad fashion choice forces employers to underestimate your abilities, which you can then use to your advantage by out-performing any low expectations. Sedaris concludes with being thankful he works at home, where he can dress like a hobo and still do his job.

"Road Trips" is a meditation on the changing roles in society in regards to the perception of being gay. The author is old enough to recall a time in his childhood and early adulthood when the very concept of homosexuality was verboten to discuss in any open, meaningful way. He initially does this by contrasting himself as a closeted gay teen in the past with a more modern era teenager who lives in the same area as Sedaris did growing up, but who is open and unashamed about his sexuality. The more recent gay teen has the loving support of his friends and family, whereas Sedaris had to hide his orientation and pretend to like girls as a cover when he was the same age.

To further delineate how much has changed, Sedaris recalls two incidents that occur to him while hitchhiking as a young man. In both cases, he is lewdly propositioned, first by a swinging heterosexual couple who pick him up, and then in later years by a gay tow truck driver who also gives him a ride. Interestingly, in both cases Sedaris refuses any offers, preferring to keep his virginity intact rather than lose it in such a sordid manner.

The author ironically demonstrates that the adults who make overtures to him care far less about his sexual orientation than he does. Neither the straight couple nor the gay tow truck driver seemingly cares much about Sedaris' own feelings and inclinations in regards to sex. Rather, in both incidents, the adults in question are so busy projecting their own desires and wants, they hardly bother to notice how uncomfortable their overtures make David.

Despite the sardonic but crass tone throughout, Sedaris leaves the tale on a bittersweet note of hopefulness. Rather than just have sex for the sake of having done so, David chooses to prolong his virginity and, it is implied, his innocence about such matters until he meets the supposed right person. The author's unexpected choice to remain without sexual knowledge even though he is repeatedly propositioned makes the sordid qualities in "Road Trips" less offensive. Finally, David does not succumb to the overwhelming social pressure to have sex that he encounters, but remains true to himself. By asserting his innocence as something he can choose to lose on his own (or not), David's decision is finally empowering to the reader as it was to the younger version of the author himself.

Discussion Question 1

David's father attributed David's inability to successfully wear a bow tie as a sign of his lack of personality. Do you think it was a lack of personality, or rather, a personality of a different sort that made Sedaris decide he was definitely not a bow tie wearing man? How would you characterize Sedaris' personality based on this short essay?

Discussion Question 2

How do you think Sedaris feels about the differences in modern views towards homosexuality versus the more repressive ones he grew up experiencing?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you believe Sedaris declined both offers for sex he received while thumbing a ride across the country? What reasons might he have had for wanting to delay sexual gratification under the circumstances upon which he first encountered the offers?

BOOKRAGS

Vocabulary

tramp, merriment, wayfarer, cashmere, infatuation, squeegee, apex, implants, prosthetics, rejuvenate, subdivision, beneficiary, hitchhiking, negligee, silhouette, intersection, phlegm, fellatio, skeeving, dissimilar.

"What I Learned" and "That's Amore"

Summary

"What I Learned" essays Sedaris' experiences before and after attending Princeton, generally regarded as one of the finest universities in America. Coming from a working class family background, his parents sacrificed in order to send him to the elite Ivy League school. They were proud to have a son there, but constantly worried that David wasn't specifying what he intended to do with his general degree once he graduated. In their own way, they pressured him to make a decision as soon as possible, but David drifted through school without making a commitment beyond studying.

He and his classmates begged one of their professors to predict how much money they'd make in the job market, but she refused to speculate, realizing that life can lay many obstacles in the path of even the most deserving of graduates. David returned home unemployed and without job prospects, so his parents adopted a puppy and eventually gave the dog David's old room.

David worked menial jobs in a big city until even those jobs were outsourced overseas. Out of boredom, he began writing, which eventually lead to a book being published of his work. But when his parents read the book and saw how accurately, if hurtfully, David captured their essences in his tome, they regretted ever having sent him to Princeton. David ironically noted that had they not sent him, he would have not become a writer who is known for his painfully honest essays that often brought a sense of embarrassment and shame to his family members for they manner in which David ceaselessly portrayed them.

"That's Amore" chronicles David's stay in New York City and his becoming friends with Helen, a neighbor in the same tenement building. In her 70s and diminutive in stature, Helen was proudly Italian and excessively verbose, particularly when she was insulting the world around her. She took an immediate liking to Hugh, David's live-in lover, but at first did not like David, supposing him to be arrogant.

In time, Helen bonded with David, too, often seeking out his company without invitation. She thought of Hugh as a downer, too obsessed with being nice and working hard to make a living. Helen and David grew closer watching t.v. soap operas like One Life to Live and daytime talk shows like The Oprah Winfrey Show.

Eventually, Helen's health declined, including a sprained wrist in one incident when she fell in the bath tub and more seriously a series of small strokes. She called David one morning and demanded he retrieve her dentures, which she ejected from her mouth by accident while leaning out her window and yelling at a man in the streets below. David dutifully did as told, handing them back to her.

Frequent arguments erupted between David and Helen, though he could never quite anticipate their arrivals or why they happened. One such heated discussion, laced with profanities on Helen's part, resulted in the two not seeing each other for over a month. But they managed to forgive one another (or, more accurately, David managed to forgive Helen) and they rekindled their odd friendship despite the difficulties.

Helen fell off a step ladder and broke her hip, signaling the beginning of her decline in health. After a short stay in the hospital, she was dead. At the funeral, friends and family celebrated her life by remembering all the foul-mouthed times Helen went off on some hapless person Helen always decried had it coming. David reflects how despite their many shouting matches, the quiet moments wherein she allowed him to massage her aching shoulders stayed with him for the unexpected intimacy and the atypical manner in which she permitted someone to physically touch her for a moment.

Analysis

"What I Learned" is a memoir of David's college years at Princeton (although it is fictional as a setting, as Sedaris actually attended School of the Art Institute of Chicago, not Princeton, and merely embellishes the setting as Princeton). As such, it is written with some deliberative, flared exaggeration, such as the way in which Sedaris opens the essay by proclaiming he and his fellow freshman worship not Jesus, but an ancient god named Sashatiba, back in their Princeton days. The fictional god is not designed to provoke cries of religious heresy, but to indicate by the writer just how long ago it was that he attended the school. Much has changed, the author indicates, from a perspective of a more recent visit in modern times, he writes.

Indeed, this is the running theme throughout "What I Learned" -- a sense that time and life experience alter one's perception so entirely that events and places associated with the past can seem positively otherworldly with perspective. David highlights his parents' worry that his intended degree in comparative literature will lead to a nowhere career of dead-end jobs and kill them as his parents, a prediction which (in a figurative sense, early on) actually comes true before David masters the art of writing and becomes a successfully published author.

Seemingly the answer to their prayers, the published book is something of a bane to the parents as they read the entries David crafts about them and their family. His parents feel exposed by their son's essays, and lament that he is killing them. They spend much of the time while sending him to Princeton complaining that he will eventually kill them with his indecision, and so the terrible irony that he is figuratively killing them with embarrassment in his published work is not lost on any of his family. David is grateful for his parents' sacrifice in sending him to college, but realizes ruefully that they really do pay a higher price than mere tuition for their son's successful career as an author.

"That's Amore" is a lengthier remembrance of a woman David befriends when he first moves to New York City. Helen is feisty, foul-mouthed and yet somehow attractive to David despite their differences in age, culture and lifestyle. He expresses his own

surprise that the two ever became friends throughout the essay, owing to Helen's extroverted nature of bad-mouthing any and all who come within her eyesight and David's introverted, more reflective persona, which makes him keep his distance from all but a few close friends and family members.

Helen is an affront to all who get to know her, as the writer captures with her incessant use of profanity and racial slurs. David is shocked by the stream of invective that issues forth from the 70-year-old woman, who seemingly never meets a person she likes (with the exception of mobster John Gotti, with whom she once danced at a party). Helen is in no way or manner portrayed by the writer as an old woman with a heart of gold or possessing a fountain of wisdom, as is the more typical portrait of the elderly. Instead, the author remains true to the enigma of her actual personality, which is harsh, judgmental and without mercy towards any who wrongfully crosses her path.

In staying true to the essence of Helen, Sedaris as author purposefully invites the reader to pause and consider the enormous unlikelihood that lead to his and her relationship. A sensitive, articulate, well-educated gay man who finds himself watching t.v. soap operas with an edgy, unstable elderly woman who is quick to use foul language and threats of violence is not an expected pairing. In real life or literature, their mysterious friendship begs questioning by the reader owing to its atypical nature.

Sedaris as the writer does not provide easy answers that quickly explains their mutual attraction. Rather, he concentrates on the extreme differences between the friends instead. This creates a literary gulf between the two characters that hints at the nature of their unusual friendship. In so many words, the two could not be any more different across any number of considerations, and yet, this very set of unlikely differences creates a vacuum into which both can more easily reside. The old saying "opposites attract" is carefully illustrated by the author and creates a bridge between the two that allows for an uneasy, but strongly felt, friendship.

Notice how Sedaris uses the intimacy of touch to conclude his remembrance. He recalls how he used to rub tiger balm ointment onto Helen's shoulders sometimes when she ached, even as he ironically writes the two otherwise rarely shared any physical intimacy, whether it was to shake hands, to hug, or express themselves in any external manner. The way in which he captures Helen's own sense of bewildered vulnerability as she asks him to rub more balm into her body with the newness of the word "please" added is a moving coda to the inexplicable bond Helen and David shared. In the end, neither could explain their friendship, but neither could deny it.

Discussion Question 1

In "What I Learned," why did David tell his parents that he was majoring in patricide at Princeton? How did his facetious answer foreshadow the events that were to follow when he became a successful writer?

Discussion Question 2

In "That's Amore," why did Sedaris, as the author, first introduce Helen after describing the infestation of rats that lived outside his New York City apartment? Did the metaphorical comparison serve to repulse or attract the reader, and how did Sedaris utilize this literary device to color Helen's character in the following pages?

Discussion Question 3

In "That's Amore," Helen incessantly criticized everyone she ever met, not exempting David. Why do you think Sedaris put up with Helen's critiques of himself, his lazy nature and even his taste in men?

Vocabulary

cordoned, affected, pyre, bloodletter, inflection, patricide, comparative, fathomed, evaporated, gangway, reverie, tenement, paneling, allegiance, manhandled, amplified, Alzheimer's, impersonations, colitis

"The Monster Mash" and "In the Waiting Room"

Summary

In "The Monster Mash," David reflects on a visit to a medical examiner's office circa 1997. He went to gain first-hand knowledge of the intricacies and daily chores of those who deal with the dead and must inspect them for cause of death. The process was so grueling on him psychologically that he showered for over an hour every night after he returned to his apartment in order to rid himself of the day's encountered horrors.

He admits he was fascinated with death since he was a child and would dig up dead pets to see how they were decomposing. The varied manners in which the corpses met their demise also held a powerful connection over his imagination, forcing him to visualize the respective deaths in lurid detail. He writes of hanging out with the technicians who actually had to collect the corpses and bring them back to the medical examiner's offices for inspection, and how they were not the hulking, misanthropic types you might have expected to find, but normal, everyday people with an unenviable job.

Having seen the inner workings of how society processes death so casually and without judgment, Sedaris somberly concludes that a realization set in for all who deal with death on a daily basis: no one was safe, and everyone -- including all the people he loved -- would eventually take their turn being a corpse to an indifferent, if professional, audience of their fellow human beings.

For the first weeks after his visit to the medical examiner's office, the author was gloomy, obsessed with death. He alienated his friends and family with his morose attitude, but eventually, it wore off. However, while shopping at a grocery store and witnessing an elderly lady slip on a grape, Sedaris rushed to her side and somberly reminded her how lucky she was to be alive at all, let alone unharmed. The visit left an indelible impression on Sedaris, and he couldn't help but share his fear of lurking death with everyone he met from that point forward.

In "In the Waiting Room," the author reminisces about using the French phrase "d'accord" (or "yes, I am in agreement") while staying in Paris for a variety of situations, including medical treatment. He regretted his ease of use of the term, as he found himself in any number of painful scenarios as a result, including periodontal treatment, being doused in cologne at a department store, and appearing on t.v. with dental stitches fresh in his mouth.

When he developed a kidney stone, he faced the follow-up medical care offered with a hearty "d'accord!" even though he didn't understand what medical procedure he'd agreed to undergo. Sedaris sat in the waiting room in only his underwear, even though a fully dressed older couple also shared the room with him. While waiting, he remembers

a time his mother told him as a 12-year-old boy she hoped he choked to death on a piece of meat he greedily devoured and how the death wish stuck with him into adulthood.

He concludes by reminding himself that not everyone recorded such moments of embarrassment into a diary as he does to aid his writing. Most simply forgot such incidents in the business of their daily lives, which gave the author a sense of relief. He recalls once seeing a dog with a wooden leg, and a Parisian woman being attended to by paramedics who offered her water out of a wine goblet. Sedaris concludes that such moments are actually the ones worthy of noting, in that they set apart life from the more mundane aspects without meaning or merit.

Analysis

"The Monster Mash" is a chronicle by the author of a time in his life in which his inherent fascination with the macabre overtakes him and leads him to dwell on the horrors of death, especially of those unfortunate humans who meet a violent end. In order to satiate his uncanny fascination, he visits a medical examiner's office and studiously absorbs the nuanced details of the trade, such as the music a pathologist listens to while cutting a cadaver, the type of medical instrumentation utilized, and the many ways in which corpses arrive, either intact or dismembered, for post-mortem analysis.

All great horror novels, movies and related works of macabre art invite the viewer to become a momentary voyeur to the many facets of death and dying, and "The Monster Mash" (notice how the title alludes to a popular novelty song which features creatures of the night cavorting to rock music) is no exception. Sedaris dwells on the morbid details of suicide and accidental death with unflinching detail, partly to capture his own dark fascination with the subject matter, and partly to intrigue and simultaneously repulse the sweaty-palmed reader of his tale. The more specific he delineates a particularly gruesome death, the more repulsively attractive the description becomes for the reader. Herein Sedaris is using literary detail to both attract and repulse, which echoes how the author feels about the subject matter on a deeply held personal level himself.

Sedaris' dark tale is not without a cautionary warning. He describes how difficult it is to forget the imagery he encounters at the medical examiner's office. He spends weeks shaking the horrific impact it has on his psyche, a time during which he frequently imagines the worst possible outcomes for any variety of situations he encounters in his life. Just when he is finally putting the experience behind him, he witnesses the older woman slip on a grape in the store, which forces him to babble to her about how lucky she is to have survived her fall. To his chagrin, Sedaris realizes that while he may put a temporary damper on his morbid imagination, it is always just below the surface, threatening to bubble up and darkly color all he sees.

"In the Waiting Room" posits Sedaris as a semi-naive visitor of Paris who is more than willing to agree to even painful medical procedures because he doesn't fully understand the language and simply wants to be agreeable with natives who speak French well. So

when his doctors and dentists recommend operations he barely comprehends, he goes along with them out of a sense of wanting to get along.

Thus, Sedaris as the writer sets in motion a study about vulnerability, and how it affects a person in the modern age. The situations and medical conditions he addresses are universal and -- unlike a more exotic disease or disorder -- seem like inevitable possible occurrences for a wide range of human beings. He makes himself the center stage attraction of his own chronicle of medical ailments by symbolically choosing to depict himself in the waiting room wearing only his underwear while the other, fully clothed patients sharing the room attempt to avoid staring at him.

By projecting his state of near-nakedness through the eyes of the other patients and nurses who share the waiting room, Sedaris shows how fragile and dependent we are all when it comes to such universal experiences as medical care. His recollection of a woman being attended by paramedics who use a goblet, rather a cup, to deliver a drink of water strikes him as memorable, in that it shows how life should be celebrated with civility and a sense of decorum in even the most banal of circumstances.

Discussion Question 1

In "The Monster Mash," what do you think accounted for David's morbid obsession with death and horrible ways of dying? How did this secretive inner self contrast and compare to his introverted, seemingly shy and retiring exterior nature?

Discussion Question 2

In "The Monster Mash," how did the woman slipping on the grape at the end of the essay trigger Sedaris to recall the earlier trauma he had witnessed post-mortem on the cadavers in the medical examiner's office? Why do you think he felt compelled to tell her how lucky she was she didn't die in the moment?

Discussion Question 3

Explain the irony of "In the Waiting Room" in having Sedaris, who is normally the observer in his essays, suddenly the center of attention as he was forced to sit clad only in his underwear in a room with other patients. How did the author feel having the roles reversed?

Vocabulary

pathologists, autopsy, fibroid tumor, booties, aesthetic, forensic, grotesque, narrative, casualties, prosecution, banal, D'accord, concierge, periodontist, Demerol, bonjour, gorging, suffocate, diagnosis, plaintive, comparatively

"Solution to Saturday's Puzzle" and "Adult Figures Charging Toward a Concrete Toadstool"

Summary

In "Solution to Saturday's Puzzle," the author delineates an encounter with a fellow female airline passenger that did not go well. The woman was separated in seating from her husband, who was at the front of the plane, and she asked David to exchange places with him so that they may sit together. But Sedaris declined, explaining to her that he hated sitting in the front of the plane, and from that point forward, the woman despised him.

He pretended that the woman's name was Becky, but the feigned intimacy only made Sedaris more uncomfortable. He tried working out his anger by doing a newspaper crossword puzzle and using the spaces to spell out his objections to the woman's (to him) unreasonable request. When that failed to work, he imagined that he'd misread her, and that Becky was a dying woman who was only trying to spend her remaining time on Earth with her soon-to-be grieving husband. But that stratagem didn't work for very long, either, before David realized she was quite fine, just mad at him.

To find some hope of reconciliation with Becky, David remembered how when he and Hugh fought, they sometimes deliberately stopped arguing and flipped an imaginary reset button, wherein both pretended like they couldn't remember why they were angry with one another. But as he considered doing this with Becky, David sneezed and ejected a throat lozenge onto the sleeping Becky's lap, further embarrassing himself as he had no polite way to remove it. Their flight arrived and David bolted out of his seat, unfortunately having to stand near the exit door and Becky's husband as the passengers prepare to disembark. Becky called him a rude name, ending his tension-filled flight.

In "Adult Figures Charging Toward a Concrete Toadstool," David recalls his fascination with art, beginning with Sundays as a teenager when he skipped church and attended nearby art museums. He began a collection of art postcards with the idea of one day acquiring actual original paintings, even if his meager monies from babysitting wouldn't allow it at the time. He was befriended by Ruth, the owner of a small gallery, and she encouraged David's interests.

David introduced his mother to Ruth and soon they were best of friends. Ruth encouraged David's mother to indulge in original works of art as an investment strategy, and David's formerly chaste childhood home slowly filled with purchased art. Most of the work his parents bought was beyond David's understanding or appreciation, but occasional works struck a chord in the entire Sedaris family.

In college, David realizes that most of the artists his parents collected were not just obscure regionally, but nationally, as well. No one had ever heard of any of them when he mentioned their names as creators. He eventually indulged his own previous desire to purchase original paintings when he entered his thirties, but even still, the works were modest in price. Most people were impressed by the small collection he had, everyone, that is, except his visiting father, who compared David's display ("your taste stinks") to his own, which he glorified by contrast.

Ironically, there was one item David's parents owned as artwork that David and his siblings all loved and adored: a concrete toadstool with a smiling troll located beneath it. Sedaris imagines a day when both of his parents have passed and he and his surviving family members all race headlong into the back yard of their parents' home in order to fight over the concrete toadstool. He explains that the piece, however tacky, perfectly captures the people his parents were, and thus everyone who survived them will want it for their own.

Analysis

"Solution to Saturday's Puzzle" is a look at the uncomfortable nature of what constitutes modern travel, where strangers are often packed into cramped spaces beside one another and forced to socially make the best of a bad situation. His encounter with Becky and her husband is the perfect distillation of this theme, as nothing goes right for either party from flight's take-off until landing.

Sedaris metaphorically uses The New York Times and its famous crossword puzzle in order to externalize some of the angry thoughts racing through the author's mind as he is forced to endure the rudeness of Becky. This is imaginative and important, as Sedaris is throughout this collection of essays a largely internal character who reflects, rather than reacts, to awkward encounters with others. By allowing his character to add fictional words that capture his inner rage onto the crossword puzzle, the mood is made blackly comical rather than grimly uncomfortable.

Another literary device Sedaris uses is to have his character pretend, ala Walter Mitty, that the situation is different. For example, Sedaris imagines that Becky is dying from an incurable disease and has just been given the bad news by her doctor, who recommends she relax her final weeks alive. But even this act of imagination doesn't induce Sedaris into giving up his seat for the woman's husband so they may sit together.

What is lacking in the story is communication, and this is Sedaris' main point. At any moment in the story, either he or Becky could simply do as Hugh and David sometimes do, and start over with better lines of communication between themselves. Alas, because of the nature of airplane travel, where folks are crowded into roles they are forced to play to get along, such words of reconciliation seem beyond the ability of any one person to summon or say. Instead, only the hurtful or anger-filled sentences and words are uttered, and everyone is made to feel less as a result.

"Adult Figures Charging Toward a Concrete Toadstool" is a look at the subjective nature of all artwork, and how merely espousing a personal preference for one particular piece of art versus another doesn't actually render the preferred artwork superior. In fact, the author is careful to delineate how the personal relationships behind the purchased works of art account more for the acquired work's meaning than any objective status.

Sedaris explores this concept by concentrating on the manner in which his parents collect art after their children have been born. Prior to this, he positions his parents as frugal and without a sense of art appreciation in their home. But as soon as David introduces his mother to Ruth, the art gallery owner, both parents become addicted to the idea of acquiring original works of art as both a hobby and an investment.

David focuses on how his parents' passion for art collection arises not from any genuine sense of aesthetic appreciation, per se, but from a social relationship that forms with Ruth, the woman who sells them the artwork. Because the link to Ruth is personal, in other words, his parents readily invest without their normally skeptical attitude about such matters. Sedaris crafts a believable portrait of competitiveness and jealousy within his family when David later begins collecting works of art himself, said works varying enormously in tone and style to his parents' tastes.

Through all the conflicts and disagreements about their respective tastes in art, David concludes by suggesting that when his parents pass away, it will be a singular concrete statue of a toadstool, complete with grinning troll, that unites the surviving family, albeit temporarily. The reason he suggests this is so is because it is the one piece of art that always brings joy and unity to the Sedaris family household, a place of refuge for smiles and good feelings. Ironically, Sedaris concludes it will be a race to see who can take the concrete toadstool first in such a scenario, which means the unity the artwork created will no longer exist.

Discussion Question 1

In "Solution to Saturday's Puzzle," why do you think David refused to exchange places with Becky's husband and allow the couple to sit together? How would the story's outcome have differed if he had made the opposite decision early on?

Discussion Question 2

In "Solution to Saturday's Puzzle," Sedaris incorporated a newspaper crossword puzzle as part of the story's construction. To what literary use did the author employ such a device? What points did he make with it that he might otherwise have difficulty expressing as a writer?

Discussion Question 3

In "Adult Figures Charging Toward a Concrete Toadstool," Sedaris suggested an underlying tension between himself and his parents as to what constituted good vs. bad artwork. Did the writer foresee any resolution to this competitive streak between the characters as portrayed?

Vocabulary

lozenge, circumstances, bulkhead, hardened, enlightenment, significance, embossed, finicky, portfolio, accusation, imperceptibly, brushstrokes, composition, connoisseur, elongated, investment, competitive, allure, multitude, haddock

"Memento Mori" and "All the Beauty You Will Ever Need"

Summary

"Memento Mori" chronicles the author's lifelong fascination with gift giving, and all the emotional drama that often accompanied such acts of kindness and obligation. He recalls how unsubtle he is personally in pressuring Hugh and other loved ones to buy him presents, such as a painting of a whippet, until they relented and purchased what he wanted, whereupon he acted surprised by their generosity.

David explains that Hugh was very difficult to buy presents for because he is so non-communicative about his preferences. Sedaris writes about a time when Hugh verbalized a desire for a human skeleton as a gift because Hugh was a painter and wanted to use the skeleton for his work. At first, David was happy Hugh actually stated a rare preference for a present, but soon the acquisition of a genuine skeleton left Sedaris exasperated owing to the difficulties of purchasing such an item in France, where he and Hugh reside during the reminiscence.

He first tried a shop in which Hugh saw a skeleton in the window, but the owners considered the item a mascot and would not sell. Next Sedaris located skeletons (a mature man and a baby) via bulletin boards and bought the adult one for Hugh, who was delighted with the purchase. This leads Sedaris to reflect on the emotional impact of the presents that one never purchased that really linger with a person, rather than the ones that were purchased only to be forgotten.

Sedaris concludes the tale by lamenting how the skeleton took on a life of its own whenever he was alone with it. Soon David heard the skeleton warning him that death was always lurking, which terrified the writer. Sedaris struck an imaginary bargain with the skeletal remains, telling the bones he would reform in his errant ways if the phantom quit reminding him of Sedaris' mortality. The skeleton only slightly altered his morbid litany (really just a pretend voice in Sedaris' own mind), but the harried author was grateful for any relief.

"All the Beauty You Will Ever Need" finds the author in France, contemplative of his lover Hugh and Hugh's down-to-earth ability to do such things as bring home wildflowers and wash the couple's dirty clothes in a French creek. Sedaris was far more sophisticated (or is that reluctant?) about doing such hardscrabble work, preferring the intellectual world of a writer he mostly inhabited to physical labor.

David remembers a rural couple he once purchased pot from as he considers Hugh, many years prior to he and Hugh becoming a couple. Paul, David's brother, introduced David to Little Mike, a marijuana dealer, in a trailer in remote North Carolina. Beth, Little Mike's wife, ignored the transaction to watch t.v.

The encounter heated when Little Mike and Beth argued in front of David and Paul about the miseries of married life. In particular, Little Mike berated women for their lack of sexual sympathy for their menfolk, and how they refused to please them over time. Paul dropped a bombshell when he suddenly announced David's homosexuality.

This lead Little Mike and Beth to ask unguarded questions of David's sexuality that they would never ask of a heterosexual couple. They were preoccupied with who played the woman and who played the man in a gay relationship. Sedaris writes such a stereotype (aka "Which one of you is the man?") is unfounded in his experience, as he and his lover consider themselves equals.

Later, as he considers Hugh's qualities as a lover, David concludes that Hugh was a complicated mixture, as much masculine as he was other times feminine. David decides that they're a good match this way and that David is all the beauty in the world that Hugh will ever truly need.

Analysis

With "Memento Mori," Sedaris combines a personality quirk in terms of gift giving (he prefers to receive rather than give, and to alert the giver in no uncertain terms what he desires so there is no confusion) with a penchant study about how one's inner thoughts and dialogue can become overbearing. The writer uses the Latin phrase "memento mori" ("remember that you have to die") to build a connection between the idea of giving gifts and the meaning of possessing gifts, even as they possess you.

He introduces the concept of torment in the first paragraph when he mentions how he keeps a notebook handy for jotting down such things as gifts he'd like to receive as well as various ideas that occur to him of how to torment people. This introductory note continues thematically throughout the piece as he details how gift-giving leads to torturous thoughts in his own mind over the years, particularly in one egregious example in which he purchases a human skeleton for his lover Hugh as a gift.

The skeleton is well received by Hugh, but David soon hears an imaginary voice coming from it. The remains admonish him with relentless antagonism that Sedaris is going to die. Sedaris tries everything to stop the voice. He ignores it, he tries to bargain with it, but only when he promises to make amends with people he has hurt in the past does the skeleton slightly alter the cadence of his monotonous monologue, instead saying "you are going to be dead... some day."

The author is dealing with grief, guilt and the dreadful sense that all human beings wrestle with that life is a finite possibility. The skeleton becomes a personification of these complex psychological issues, in effect tormenting David as readily as David prepares to torment others by keeping a list as he does in the beginning of the story for just such occasions. The irony makes a full circle herein, starting with David's willingness to torment others, and ending with the skeleton's willingness to do the same

to David. Only by making a truce with the skeleton's nagging voice does Sedaris achieve a temporary, not lasting, sense of inner calm.

In "All the Beauty You Will Ever Need," Sedaris examines the concept of couples as a pairing using various points of view to portray them. For example, he positions the couple of Little Mike and Beth from his own perspective, which stereotypically renders them as a charmless redneck pair who fulfill the worst aspects of a rural husband and wife. Crass, insensitive, and judgmental, they only show an interest in anything beyond their trailer home when it is outside their narrow field of experience, such as the particulars of David's homosexuality, which excites their curiosity.

Conversely and at the same time, Sedaris as the author is projecting his own bias against the redneck couple who sell him pot, portraying their own existence in the most unflattering terms and imagery possible. The couple do not communicate as much as vent on one another, and this leads Sedaris to contemplate his own vantage point with Hugh, his lover, and whether or not David is equally as blind to Hugh's better qualities.

The author concludes by writing it is staggering the amount of time straight people spend obsessing over the sex lives of gay couples. His own tendency is to consider the finer qualities he and Hugh share, not merely their conjugal aspects. The writer tosses out wild flowers that Hugh collects earlier and leaves in a vase. This metaphorically implies that he, David, is all the beauty Hugh will ever need in life. For David, the deeper connection between Hugh and himself is more important than the exterior qualities, such as the kind of flowers one selects or their color.

Discussion Question 1

In "Memento Mori," why do you think the skeleton tormented David with a constant refrain that David was going to die? Could another present David theoretically gave Hugh render as much poetic impact on the reader? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

In "Memento Mori," why was it ironic that the skeleton voiced such a horrible reminder to Sedaris? What habitual action did Sedaris reveal in the opening paragraph he routinely utilized that later prefigured what the skeleton in turn did to him?

Discussion Question 3

In "All the Beauty You Will Ever Need," what forced David to re-examine his relationship with Hugh, and what conclusion did David draw from his reconsideration of his lover?

Vocabulary

observations, torment, whippet, cryptic, sidetracked, boutique, obscure, linchpin, alternatives, tiered, laundromat, champagne, reconstruction, bestowed, bouquet, hardscrabble, Bromine, circumstances, molester

"Town and Country" and "Aerial"

Summary

"Town and Country" is a study in contrast between different classes of Americans who are united by the same vulgar culture. An older, affluent couple boarded a jet airplane and complained about the canned music being played, the food being served, and every other inconvenience to which they were subjected. The author shared a close seating proximity to them the entire flight, and so became privy to their inner workings even as they indifferently ignored him.

Sedaris was fascinated by the variance between the way they presented themselves (well dressed, coiffed) and the manner in which they spoke unending profanities as if they were the stars of a rap music video. While they dress like country club types, they're actually vulgar and obscene in language skills. Everything they see, touch, hear or taste became subject to their attaching an expletive to it in order to feel alive.

Rattled but grateful to be back in New York City, David took a taxi. Unfortunately for Sedaris, the driver was foreign and anxious to utilize his only passable English speaking skills to practice on a captive Sedaris in the back seat. At first, the conversation was strained but pleasant, all about how wonderful New York City was to live in. Soon, however, the driver talked only of sex with women and in the crassest language possible.

Pent up from first the airplane flight and now this, Sedaris unleashed, rebuking the driver and even mocking him by poorly imitating the way the driver spoke as a foreigner. David arrived at his sister's apartment and was surprised when she handed him a pornographic magazine. The two of them laughed and leered at the images, and suddenly Sedaris realized he was not so different from the older couple or the taxi driver.

"Aerial" posited David and Hugh in their French countryside apartment and suddenly prey to birds who wish to enter their abode. The birds repeatedly flew into the windows, as if doing so would gain them entry. David tried making a simple scarecrow, but it failed to alarm the birds. Next he tried using pictures of terrorists from an art project Hugh created in the windows. These worked, but soon he ran out of scary-looking faces with many windows left to cover.

With Hugh's blessing, David used Hugh's album covers next, filling the remaining windows with pictures of Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin and other classic rock stars. This worked to quiet the birds and so David took a long walk in the countryside to calm his nerves. Alas, as he passed by a neighbor's cottage he encountered a pair of caged magpies who desperately but fruitlessly attempted to escape their confinement. This sent Sedaris into a panic attack and he rushed home. There, the imagery of the various

faces in the many windows of his own cottage greeted and comforted him, with no birds anywhere in sight.

Analysis

In "Town and Country," Sedaris as writer wants to comparatively show both the differences and similarities between wealthy people in society and those who work in its lower classes. He surprises the reader by starting with an upper class couple who seemingly have everything in life such as money and power but lack manners and civility. They are vindictive, complain incessantly about all accommodations afforded them, and (worst of all from Sedaris' point of view) are profane in their language.

This is startling to both author and reader in that wealthy types are typically portrayed as having upper class manners and sophistication, which would preclude them from cursing openly and without regards as to whether others hear them doing so. The couple hardly even notice David is present, excluding him from their circular, curse-filled conversation as if he were an ashtray full of cigarette butts. Sedaris feels stifled and belittled by the rich couple, and is glad to exit the plane when it lands so he can escape them.

Irony (which is used for frequent effect in all of Sedaris' writing in this collection) plays its hand, however, with a taxi driver Sedaris encounters who cannot stop using profanities to describe women with whom he's had sex. The more David withdraws into silence to combat the degrading tone of the driver's speech, the more the driver takes it as David's complicit agreement for the driver to continue with his profanity-laced monologue. Sedaris' blow up at the driver reads as harsh and even offensive (in that he mocks the foreigner's accent back to him), but structurally is necessary in the essay because it shows a line has been crossed for Sedaris that he can no longer tolerate.

Hence the effectiveness of the last heaping of irony Sedaris ladles on the reader when he depicts himself and his sister reading a pornographic mag concerning bestiality. This taboo-shattering indulgence by Sedaris forces the final, supremely ironic realization by David that his pretense to be superior in civility to the older couple and the taxi driver is merely so much bourgeois pretension.

"Aerial" is a study in mood by Sedaris using birds for both symbolic and literal imagery. First, he sets up a suspenseful if amusing "threat" involving chaffinches who wish to bang their way through the windows into the cottage David shares with Hugh. The use of pop music icons such as Bob Dylan and Kate Bush with which to scare them away is also grimly ironic, in that these same images when sold in stores and online generate enormous monies and followings. But for the chaffinches, it is enough to scare them away from any so-covered window pane.

Sedaris finally covers all windows of the cottage with such images (including terrorists from 9-11) and discovers his virtual photographic scarecrows have done the job. Whether good (rock stars) or evil (terrorists), the menagerie of human faces diverts the

chaffinches from bombarding the windows. It seems as if for the birds, there is no real difference between the humans, as all are worthy of fear.

David takes a stroll through the countryside to feel better about the earlier bird attack. Irony yet again rears its head when he comes across a neighbor with two magpies imprisoned in a cage on their front porch. They restlessly move about their cage, trapped, but unwilling or unable to settle down into their captivity. Their captivity fills Sedaris with anxiety. Notice how the imagery echoes the earlier assault David and Hugh were under, and how they felt as a couple when the chaffinches were bombarding them and trapping them inside their modest cottage.

The ending is a nice release from the tension as Sedaris returns home in time to catch the sun's rays falling across the windows of his cottage, illuminating all the different faces he has used to block the chaffinches. Some of the photographed faces smile, some are contemplative, but all form a warm welcoming return for the author, who basks in the moment.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think there would have been any difference in impact if Sedaris had opened "Town and Country" with the taxi driver or himself and his sister first in the essay instead of the older rich couple? Why did he choose to order the encounters in the sequence in which he did?

Discussion Question 2

What realization did Sedaris come to by the concluding paragraph of "Town and Country" in terms of morality? Does he feel superior or not to the people he had earlier encountered in the essay?

Discussion Question 3

In "Aerial," what do you think the caged magpies represented in terms of David's and Hugh's own relationship? How did seeing the pair of magpies desperately trapped in their tiny domestic abode metaphorically reflect on the way the human author lived with his mate?

Vocabulary

cashmere, shamrock, refinement, bistro, typhoons, troughs, diligence, expressway, enchanting, circumstances, irritating, predictability, obtuse, trilling, din, chaffinches, magpies, stucco

"The Man in the Hut" and "Of Mice and Men"

Summary

"The Man in the Hut" is Sedaris' contemplation about a French countryside neighbor named Jackie. Jackie had a metal plate in his head and limped, while his daughter was mentally challenged. Despite their differences in nationalities and lifestyles, David looked forward to the times he ran into Jackie and his daughter, as they were always friendly to him. So it came as quite a shock to David when Jackie was arrested and charged with child molestation one day, as Sedaris saw no warning signs.

Three years later, David was surprised again when Jackie was released from prison. Hugh was appalled that David awkwardly befriended Jackie one more time, but David was certain that Hugh was mistaken about their former neighbor. Because he did not approve of Hugh's judgmental attitude towards Jackie and his offenses, David believed (somewhat ambivalently) that Jackie deserved a second chance.

A few years later David gave a speech at a prestigious American university. To his surprise, a notorious right wing political candidate whom David loathed congratulated Sedaris, telling him how much he enjoyed David's speech. David tried to distance himself from the politco, but maintained a friendly facade despite his inner misgivings about the man and his stands on social issues important to Sedaris.

Jackie invited David into his hut and showed him x-ray pictures of the metal plate in his head. Jackie explained he could travel for a discount rate on French government trains because of his injury, and asked David to travel with him sometime. Because he is homosexual, David felt uncomfortable and did not want to risk being seen by his provincial neighbors while with Jackie on holiday. He mostly avoided Jackie from this point forward even though he learned Jackie was dying from cancer. Considering Jackie's passing with hindsight, David contemplates whether or not he did the right thing in ignoring Jackie, deeply uncertain.

In "Of Mice and Men," Sedaris writes about a newspaper clipping sent to him which details a mouse accidentally setting fire to a man's house. The man in the article cleaned his abode from a plethora of rodents which occupied it. The elderly man fumigated the mice and watched in dismay as they fled to a pile of leaves in his yard. The owner set the leaves ablaze, only to watch in horror as the mice, aflame and terrified, ran back into the home and promptly burned it to the foundation.

David cherished the morbid qualities of the story and often told it to strangers to get a reaction from them. However, he typically does not receive the reaction he desired, from either a taxi driver in New York City (who failed to appreciate any of the story's ironies)

or a chauffeur driving David on a book tour (the latter of whom doubted the story's veracity in its entirety, which infuriated Sedaris).

Because the chauffeur called David a liar about the story, David returned to his home and reread the original article. To his dismay, Sedaris realizes he is incorrect about key parts of the newspaper account, including the number of rats (it was only one, not many) and manner and setting of the house fire. He deduces his original, flawed reading was an attempt to dramatize the details in his mind's eye. But he concludes by lamenting that details aside, these are dark times for all involved, whether for those on fire or those setting them ablaze.

Analysis

"The Man in the Hut" is a study by the author of how perception, both static and changing, influences how one thinks of strangers and acquaintances. This is especially true of folks who are noticeably different in appearance from others. Notice how Sedaris first shows Jackie and his daughter through the innocent perspective of being his neighbors. Though Jackie possesses some physical limitations such as a metal plate in his head and a pronounced limp, and his daughter is mentally retarded, Sedaris paints them as thoroughly likable and socially agreeable to most of the rural French community in which they all reside.

After Jackie is arrested for child molestation, however, perceptions change. When Jackie returns to his home, he resumes his old life as best he can, even though many of his former neighbors shun him. David is put off by the crime Jackie commits, but cannot bring himself to simply ignore the man in silent judgment. When Hugh questions David's action of befriending Jackie again, David reflects on a politician with whom he disagrees and vehemently dislikes. After they meet at a college speech David delivers, David is polite to the politician in much the same was as he is with Jackie. This forces the author to question whether or not he can be rude to even those with whom he disagrees, and why he identifies so deeply with those who are being ostracized from their community.

Sedaris alters the perspective when Jackie asks David to travel with him as a companion on holiday. An invisible line is crossed and Sedaris is offended, not desiring to be seen in the travelling company of a former child molester. The author implies as long as his friendship with Jackie is kept at arm's length and is strictly, politely social (such as saying "hello" and "goodbye" as they pass on the country road they share), it is tolerable to David, but that anything more is verboten. In a final twist of dark irony, Sedaris allows Jackie to die alone from cancer, withdrawing from the companionship they share, though this leaves the essayist emotionally conflicted.

"Of Mice and Men" is a contemplation about miscommunication and misunderstanding in the modern world, and how easily both occur on a daily basis. Sedaris accomplishes this by clearly showing all participants in the conversation about the flaming mouse as basically incorrect, though each insists he is the sole purveyor of the truth. The more each person insists he is correct, the more the person basically resorts to hyperbole and

insult to paint themselves in the best light possible and render those who disagree as simply disagreeable.

Sedaris uses literary contrast to make this point by having both a taxi driver and a limo chauffeur react to the story with disbelief. While the taxi driver accepts some of the story as truthful, he insists on setting the story in New York City rather than in New England where David tells him it actually takes place. The chauffeur disbelieves the story entirely, and even goes so far as to call David a liar to his face. Both men's reactions leave Sedaris furious because he wants to hear their honest reactions to the story itself, and not their interpretation of its veracity.

Determined to prove the story true, Sedaris rushes home to reread the original clipping. To his dismay, he realizes he misread the story incorrectly himself, embellishing several minor but important details in his own mind at the time of his initial reading. Sedaris contemplates the mistake and wonders if we don't all confabulate such stories, even as he insists (somewhat facetiously) as a writer that he did get more of the details correct than did either the taxi driver or the chauffeur.

The author works September 11 and the World Trade Center attacks into the premise in the exchange with the chauffeur. In a metaphorical sense, Sedaris implies that the misreading of one another's stories in life is a significant contributor to how such heinous acts arise in the first place. By insisting our own stories are correct and the other person's wrong, a vacuum is created that is all too easy to fill with distortions and outright lies.

Discussion Question 1

In "The Man in the Hut" why do you think David was more readily able to forgive and befriend Jackie than Hugh, even though David disapproved of the child molestation Jackie had allegedly committed? Did Sedaris later regret this decision or was he at peace with the series of attitudes he had taken in regards to Jackie and their friendship?

Discussion Question 2

In "Of Mice and Men," does it matter to you that the original newspaper story was so twisted to fit so many different characters' perspectives in the essay? What is Sedaris saying about our shared reality that so many different takes on a simple news story are so convoluted and at odds with one another?

Discussion Question 3

In "Of Mice and Men," what do you think the author meant when he alluded at the end that although there may be variances in the nuance of the burning mouse story, these were nonetheless dark times, both for those aflame and those who started such fires?

Vocabulary

quonset, corrugated, contradiction, comprehension, councilor, molested, eyesore, immersion, imperative, acquaintance, mutilated, hearsay, scarlet, fumigated, icebreaker, entrée, swamis, napalm

"April in Paris" and "Crybaby"

Summary

"April in Paris" portrays the author as contemplative over nature documentaries he watched on t.v. He laments how obsessive viewers tend to care about the well-being of people's pets during natural disasters more so than the human beings involved themselves. Sedaris recalls Hurricane Katrina and how t.v. watchers wept over all the dead dogs and cats lost to flooding but not their owners. He then devotes time to dissecting a nature show about camels in which the camels were anthropomorphized and their plight made to echo a human-like emotional landscape.

One day in his French countryside cottage, Sedaris watched as a spider devoured a trapped fly. Fascinated, David studied the spider more closely, discovering she was a Tegenaria by species' name when he looked up the information. Soon, Sedaris named her April and was completely hooked on her daily habits. He trapped flies with a glass jar and fed them alive to April, obsessed with the ritual of life and death playing out before his wide-stretched eyes. Before he knew it, he was getting up at night to feed April, and spent his days thinking about her non-stop, having formed an emotional attachment.

When the time arrived for Hugh and David to return to Paris, David impulsively took April with them in a container. Alas, flies were practically non-existent in their Parisian apartment, and David's obsession with feeding April turned into a full-time job of securing live bait crickets from a nearby pet shop. When Hugh and David returned to the French countryside months later, April crawled from her container and promptly vanished, never to be seen by David again.

Sedaris reflects on his fascination and concedes that anthropomorphizing life forms was a mistake. But it was a mistake he couldn't help repeatedly making, only with spiders rather than mammals. He imagines himself watching the Katrina t.v. coverage and crying over all the arachnids that drowned during the hurricane rather than weeping about the lost humans.

"Crybaby" is a meditation by Sedaris on the distinct differences between flying coach and business elite class on an international flight. He begins his essay by explaining the pampered nature of flying business class and how it made you feel as special as the elite in its name, especially compared to the poor schmucks who flew the economy class.

An airline attendant requested a favor from Sedaris. She wondered if he would mind allowing a Polish passenger to share the empty seat next to him. She explained the man was crying non-stop owing to his mother's passing, and that he was flying to Europe in order to attend her funeral. Touched by the plight of the man's situation, Sedaris agreed. The Polish man was seated next to him.

Sedaris tried any number of activities to block out the man's distraught emotionalism, but nothing quite worked. David savored his dinner as the man ignored his own. Next the author indulged in a sundae as a treat but still he couldn't block the Polish passenger's grief from his thoughts. This lead David to memories of his own lost loved ones. He recalls the feeling of outrage at others as he watched them go about their lives, even as his was full of heartache over his loss.

Eventually Sedaris tired of feeling empathy for the man, wanting to get on with his own life aboard the plane. He imagined the Polish man felt guilty for being a poor son and that he was only flying to his mother's funeral because he was trying to make up for it. But soon Sedaris recalls his own grandmother's passing, and memories of his sisters and himself sharing the kitchen table with her sparked a flood of tears from his own eyes. The two men sat in business elite, side-by-side, each quietly sobbing.

Analysis

In "April in Paris," Sedaris contemplates the ease with which one can feel empathy with another species (especially when presented on t.v.) versus a lack of empathy for our fellow human beings in the same format. He correctly attributes this empathy to anthropomorphization, in which viewers project human-like behaviors and reasons onto the actions of animals but fail to generate similar feelings for their fellow Homo sapiens. He singles out the vast array of animal documentaries on the air as proof and examines the mechanics behind their success at manipulating watchers.

Sedaris does not set himself above the average viewer in this regard, as when he implies crying over the sad ending of a camel documentary (even if he lies to his fellow watcher and suggests he only got something in his eye). But he does put his own peculiar variation of fascination under the literary microscope by ruminating about April, the spider in his windowsill, and how her care and feeding takes over his own life before he is even aware of it.

David feeds April live flies, which on first thought seems cruel. The author rationalizes that his French cottage is overrun with flies, anyway, and that they are disease carriers that inflict much misery on human beings throughout the world. But his words ring hollow in that April does fine without his intervention in trapping flies on her own, and in fact, she becomes obese when David begins regularly overfeeding her out of force of habit. As the author himself expresses, there is a certain thrill in watching the life and death struggle between fly and spider that is blackly addictive to David.

Later, when April escapes and (with complete indifference) leaves David, the author is forced to reflect about his projections onto his favorite arachnid. He realizes he has made her into something far more mammalian than her spider pedigree would normally suggest wise or even sustainable. As the realization sinks in, Sedaris' passion for spiders diminishes, and he once again sees spiders as a species apart rather than through human eyes.

In "Crybaby," the author examines grief and bereavement, and how the two are a highly subjective experience, often endured from a lonely perspective of self-isolation. He uses the setting of business elite class on an international airplane ride to suggest a certain safety and distance from the average traveler and, hence, the average traveler's sense of woes. In business elite, one is pampered, the author writes, and so implies that there is a temporary suspension from the harder realities of life, as well.

But when a man who has lost his mother and cannot stop crying uncontrollably is seated next to Sedaris, the author comes face-to-face with a starker, more truthful reality: grief, dying and suffering are not a matter of where one is seated in an airplane, but universally applicable to every row in the plane (and, indeed, the cockpit, too).

Sedaris tries to utilize all the business elite privileges to mitigate the annoyance of having to share a space with a grieving passenger. He indulges in a fancy meal and a decadent dessert. He watches a movie he would normally find hard to watch and enjoys it beyond measure. But none of these attempts to divert his mind from the suffering passenger quite work, and Sedaris finds himself lapsing into his own morbid thoughts despite his best efforts to the contrary.

Soon, the author is reflecting on his own mother's passing, and how at her burial everyone else in the world seemed quite content to go about their business, many without the slightest apparent regard for Sedaris' suffering. Thinking about his sisters and grandmother from 40 years ago, and how much of who they were as people is now gone, David weeps, too.

Here Sedaris as essayist has gone full circle. What starts as a banal series of observations about first class travel made in an almost anonymous tone winds up becoming a deeply personal, sadness-filled remembrance of the loved ones he has lost in his own life. The use of irony is a major force in much of Sedaris' writing, and "Crybaby" ends on a perfect note of it.

Discussion Question 1

In "April in Paris," how do you feel about the author feeding live flies to the spider on a routine basis? Is there anything similar in your own life that echoes this kind of fascination cruelty?

Discussion Question 2

In "April in Paris," Sedaris writes about anthropomorphisis and how humans deceive themselves with it. Have you ever indulged in this phenomena, and if so, onto which animals or other life forms did you project human emotions?

Discussion Question 3

In "Crybaby," the author was trapped on a lengthy international flight with a bereaved stranger. Have you ever been forced to share space like this in any form of public transportation? If not, how do you imagine you might act, feel and think if so?

Vocabulary

anthropomorphize, loincloths, tsunamis, exaggeration, misconception, veterinarian, intestinal, depressed, tapeworm, crossbreeding, omelet, limousine, privileges, adolescence, savored, shopworn, leukemia, bouquets

"Old Faithful" and "The Smoking Section"

Summary

"Old Faithful" is a recollection by the author of a time when he developed a boil on his backside and it grew progressively worse. He delayed going to the doctor to lance the boil, as costs were astronomically high in London. Also, he was afraid the prognosis by the doctor would be worse than a boil, such as cancer or a related medical emergency.

Sedaris remembers when he and Hugh caught the same stomach virus and competed over who had it worse. This triggers a memory of a former boyfriend before Hugh who competed with David in every situation, no matter how mundane. Sedaris also recalls a time as a teenager when his father blurted out for no reason that he never cheated on David's mother. David concludes his own lack of infidelity may originate in such life commitments being honored, and he confesses he has never cheated on Hugh or any other boyfriend, either.

To distract himself from his cyst, David reviews the life he and Hugh have shared together, including how they met and of their fear of AIDS and related promiscuity-based diseases. David's pain from the boil increased to the point Hugh offered to lance it. David was skeptical, fearing Hugh's skills lacking in the boil lancing department. But he relented because the pain was severe beyond his endurance.

David thanked Hugh for the medical intervention and mentioned that such tasks come with being an aging monogamous couple. David slept soundly knowing his boil was healing from the procedure, but Hugh remained awake this and many other nights, troubled by the thought he and David were getting older and that medical care was part of the responsibility.

"The Smoking Section" chronicles David's lifelong vice of smoking, and the lengths to which he went to quit the habit later in his adult years. He writes about his friend Ronnie and how David picked up the habit of cigarettes while traveling with Ronnie in Canada. He records his mother first offering him a cigarette when he still lived at home, and how he hated the smell of cigarettes as a teenager because his sister smoked.

He picked up smoking pot in college, which lead to cigarettes shortly thereafter. His mother, a heavy smoker, was actually excited and proclaimed she knew what to put in his Christmas stocking as a result -- a carton of cigarettes. A forensic pathologist David encountered warned Sedaris of the dangers of smoking, but David was unable to stop, a chain smoker who relished his filthy habit. But David notes the increasing amount of negative public attitudes towards smokers and how smoking was increasingly banned in public spaces.

David's aunt and uncle died from cigarette smoking, and his mother developed a nasty cough. David's work was censored when reprinted in high school textbooks, all mentions of cigarettes removed. But still David insisted on smoking and smoking heavily as his right as a free citizen. He writes about the growing difficulty in his life of smoking and traveling, and how badly managed the hotels that allowed smoking were in comparison to those that prohibited it. Eventually, smoking was more work for him to maintain as a habit than was the relief he derives from it.

David decided to quit and -- taking the advice from many "how to quit smoking" books -- chose a new environment. He and Hugh took a 3-month residency in Tokyo, Japan, the author certain this would shock him out of his smoking vice. In order to distract himself from his nicotine cravings, David enrolled in a Japanese language course. Alas, despite his gifts as a writer, he fared poorly in the course and realized that he is the worst student in the class, a blow to his ego.

Meanwhile, David endured withdrawal symptoms from cigarettes with the help of a nicotine patch and lozenges. His withdrawal urges nearly overwhelmed him, but he endured the cravings for a month. After six weeks, he noticed his skin and health considerably improved from not smoking. Freed from his habit, David and Hugh celebrated by immersing themselves in the Japanese culture, such as eating fine meals, visiting kabuki theaters and conversing with Japanese citizens.

David found ironic amusement when he read a hotel safety booklet with a section entitled "When You Are Engulfed in Flames," instructing the reader in tortured English how to survive being set ablaze. On his plane ride back to the United States, David calculated his cost at having quit smoking at $20,000 U.S. dollars. He sought praise from those he met about his accomplishment, but most were indifferent to his achievement.

He chronicles his regrets at being a cigarette butt polluter all the years he smoked. He recounts a time in Thailand when he was arrested for tossing a cigarette butt on the street. As penance for his earlier habits and polluting, David explains he picked up trash he encountered on the streets, though not cigarette butts themselves. He concludes he was afraid that if he picks up butts, he would fall back into the habit of smoking again.

Analysis

In "Old Faithful," Sedaris makes a double-edged meaning out of the title. In the most obvious sense, "Old Faithful" refers to the cyst on David's back, and how like Old Faithful (the geyser at Yellowstone Park) the boil keeps erupting no matter how long Sedaris attempts to wait it out and not seek medical treatment. Towards the latter goal of non-action, Sedaris even goes so far as to show his boil a directory of doctors that he threatens to call if his malady doesn't heal itself.

The secondary meaning is deeper and refers to an earlier comment David's father made while David was younger and driving with him. Suddenly and unexpectedly, David's

father states that he has never cheated on David's mother. Friends attempt to convince David that his father must have said such a thing because of a guilty conscience, but David doesn't believe them. He believes his father is sincere, as David confesses to the reader that he has never cheated on any of his boyfriends, nor does he harbor any desire to do so.

So in this sense, "Old Faithful" also refers to David himself, who is more interested in being with one person at a time rather than a series of empty, meaningless lovers who will leave him without a long-term relationship (which is what he really desires). The manner in which Hugh offers to lance David's boil and take care of it medically (despite the disgusting aspects of doing so) re-confirms David's faithful monogamy, as David sees this as an inevitable caretaker role all must play in a long-term relationship with another human being.

Ironically, while David is left feeling reassured by Hugh's magnanimous gesture, Hugh is left bothered for the rest of the night. Hugh's deep realization that he and David will need to take care of each other in progressively declining states of health over the years leaves Hugh frightened and apprehensive. In a strange way, David's anxiety about his boil is lanced, but Hugh remains anxious, troubled by his new role in their relationship.

In "The Smoking Section," Sedaris chronicles his lifelong habit of smoking and his subsequent desire to stop as he ages. Many of his influential family members smoke in his youth, including an aunt and uncle who later die from smoking-related diseases. Even his beloved mother is a smoker without apology and refuses to quit despite developing an ominous cough from her habit. She eventually dies from her addiction but jokes about it until the end, which has a weirdly calming effect on David's own habit.

Sedaris details the cultural change that occurs which leads in part to his desire to quit smoking. At first, when he is in his college years, everyone smokes and no one cares much about the associated health risk. But slowly, society erects barriers. Sedaris is keen on notating these increasing stop-gap measures as a source of his continued need to smoke: rebelliousness and resistance.

Notice how he belabors to show that the more smoking free zones appear in his surroundings (in bars, schools, movie theaters, etc.), the more his non-conformity requires him to defiantly smoke. Sedaris details the societal prohibitions with a growing sense of inevitability, showing smokers going from accepted, for example, in bars and airports and winding up stuck in "smoking zones" which are difficult to utilize and self-shaming in terms of societal impact on smokers.

Sedaris decides to quit by traveling to Japan for three months and enrolling in a class to learn how to speak Japanese. By his own confession, this added pressure is a bad choice in retrospect, but at the time, he finds comfort in the fact he will be distracted by the coursework as he battles his addiction to nicotine. Ironically, Sedaris actually beats his need to smoke, but fails the course work in Japanese, unable to master the difficult ability to suddenly immerse himself in an entirely new language and culture while simultaneously quitting smoking.

David spends much of the essay detailing the day-to-day life of a Westerner traveling in Japan. In one particularly vivid section, he remarks on the strange English translations one often finds there. While he appreciates the attempts made at bilingualism, one hotel that features a safety pamphlet with the badly-worded title "When You Are Engulfed in Flames" catches his eye, as this echoes the smoking addiction he is attempting to cure.

One of the last Japanese citizens David and Hugh meet is an old man who runs a street shop. David talks easily enough with the old man until the old man unexpectedly confesses that he is dying from cancer. To his surprise, David feels elated. Not because the old man is dying from cancer, but because Sedaris himself suddenly has a profound sense that since he has successfully quit smoking at this point in his stay in Japan, he will not share the old man's fate. It is a case of wishful thinking in all probability, as David boasts to the reader he is certain of this by way of sudden insight, but given his history of smoking and his mother's death by it, the reader is left unconvinced, at least with any certainty, that Sedaris' prediction is without question or doubt. In fact, the declaration by Sedaris reads more in the realm of deniability rather than prophetic certainty. It is, ironically, the same deniability that allows Sedaris to smoke for decades and pretend he will pay no price for it.

Discussion Question 1

In "Old Faithful," why do you think Hugh finally suggested lancing the boil on David's backside? What was the outcome for both Hugh and for David as a result of Hugh's loving gesture?

Discussion Question 2

In "The Smoking Section," why do you believe Sedaris was so defiant about continuing to smoke despite the death of his family members due to smoking? Was there some underlying motivation or belief system at work for David beyond mere nicotine addiction?

Discussion Question 3

In "The Smoking Section," what effect did running into the old man who was dying from cancer at the end of the essay have upon David? Why do you think David reacted the way he did?

Vocabulary

cyst, insignificant, insubstantial, virus, umpteen, exploratory, fidelity, monogamous, conscience, companionable, convert, masculine, braid, prohibitionist, misshapen, cordoned, brainwashed, forensic, sternum, chemotherapy

Characters

David Sedaris

David Sedaris is the author/narrator/protagonist in each of the essays presented in When You Are Engulfed in Flames. In no particular chronological order, Sedaris writes about the various episodes in his life, both small and large, that shape him as a human being and drive him to be a writer. As he writes and reveals the deeper truths about his life to the reader, Sedaris also re-examines the choices he's made (and sometimes not made) which have had consequences beyond his reckoning.

Sedaris grows up in North Carolina with five siblings and two parents, the latter of whom are working class but comfortable. It is a largely dull upbringing free of drama, which only stimulates David's imagination and curiosity to see what lies beyond his quiet existence as he matures. He remains closeted about his sexuality until after he graduates from high school for fear being openly gay will not set well with his friends or family. To compensate for his closeted sexuality, Sedaris rebelliously uses marijuana and smokes cigarettes to feed his restless nature. Unlike some gay men when they eventually declare their sexuality, David is relatively monogamous, preferring to have one lover at a time and for long periods of commitment.

Eventually his talent for writing observant essays about the disappointments and challenges of modern life are published to great acclaim, launching his career as a writer. David uses the opportunity to record his thoughts and feelings about such moments in his life as the death of his mother, admitting he is gay, his attempt to quit smoking, his darkly obsessive thoughts, a love of spiders, and other deeply moving and/or strangely lighthearted observations.

Hugh Hamrick

Hugh Hamrick is David's lover and lifelong adult partner. Hugh is a painter and compliments David's many quirky qualities with opposite, but sometimes equally stranger, qualities of his own personality. Because opposites attract, the bond they share is deep and for all practical purposes, they are married, committed to staying with one another until death do they part.

Hugh possesses some traits that are manly and others that are feminine. Typical macho characteristics of his personality include an ability to fix anything that is broken without having to resort to asking others for help first, and a need to always be in the lead when he and David are on a trip and walking to a destination together. In such instances as the latter, Hugh prefers to use his naturally faster stride as a walker to leave David far behind, a trait which bothers David to no end as he's always having to catch up with Hugh. But Hugh also has a softer side, such as his willingness to lance a growing boil on David's backside and nurture David to health afterwards, pick wildflowers for their

French home and wash the couple's underwear in a river because their cottage does not have a washing machine.

Sharon Sedaris

Sharon Sedaris is David's mother. Sharon manages the household while her husband Lou works to support the family. Sharon is Protestant by birth, but not particularly religious in daily practice. Sharon chain smokes in front of the children, which leads to some of her offspring also picking up the habit. She dies from smoking when David is mature, adding to David's own incentive to quit. Both of his parents are influential on his life choices, but often not in the way they intend, as David sets out on his own path which sometimes varies greatly from the lifestyles and experiences of his parents.

Maw Hamrick

Maw Hamrick is Hugh's elderly mother. She is from Kentucky and very hard working, even in her 70s. David writes about his guilt whenever Maw Hamrick is around him because he allows her to wait on him without helping in return. For her part, Maw does not seem to mind the arrangement, eager to spring into action whenever someone needs their glass refilled or an ashtray emptied. Maw is a study in contrast to David's own mother, the latter of whom is far less eager to please others and less likely to care what others think of her ideas and tastes. Maw Hamrick appears in "It's Catching."

Mrs. Peacock

Mrs. Peacock is an overweight white woman that David's mother selects to act as nanny for himself and his siblings while David's parents are away on a trip. She is, by David's estimation, trashy and limited in her education, which makes him disdainful of her manner and attitude. She insists the children eat sloppy joe sandwiches for most of the time she supervises them, and forces them to take turns scratching her itchy back with a device that David describes as resembling a monkey's paw on a stick. David reflects she is most likely depressive in his recollection of her, but from his childhood perspective, such distinctions carry no weight or mercy. Hence, he views her as a monster who abuses kids. He is surprised when his empathetic mother returns and sides with Mrs. Peacock over the children's point of view that she is incompetent at her job. Mrs. Peacock appears in "The Understudy."

Rosemary Dowd

Rosemary Dowd is an older woman who rents David a small room in her boarder's house. Rosemary dresses and reveres the past with a nostalgic indulgence rivaled only by David's own impassioned enthusiasm for all things retro. Rosemary wears heavy make-up and dresses from an earlier period, favoring flamboyant fashion style over the more staid wardrobe of a modern era. She bonds with David because he dresses in an

eccentric style also favoring the past, and the two listen to old radio shows together and generally bemoan the changes that have happened in American life. Rosemary appears in "This Old House."

Helen

Helen is an elderly Italian woman who lives in the same tenement building David and Hugh occupy in New York City. She is physically small but verbally large, filled with an innate ability to pick a fight via insult with almost everyone she encounters on a daily basis. She loves watching soap operas and cooking strange variations on classic Italian dishes which she claims are "famous" to all within earshot. Helen and David bond for inexplicable reasons which even David cannot entirely fathom, as Helen does not spare David from his share of nearly hourly put-downs about his sexuality, his position in life and even his taste in boyfriends. Despite her entrenched racist and sexist attitudes, Helen is a magnetic figure, and David writes about his attraction to her character despite the many seeming barriers keeping the two apart. Helen appears in "That's Amore."

Becky and Eric

Becky and Eric are a young married couple who share a flight with David. Becky asks David to switch places in the seating with her husband so that the couple might sit together during the trip. Because David does not like the area of the plane where Eric is seated, he refuses, which leads Becky to despise David. Becky is in turns indifferent to David, preoccupied with her own situation, and finally recalcitrant in her anger towards David for refusing her request to switch seats with her husband. She rudely ignores him during the flight and even calls him a profane name when the flight finally lands. Becky personifies David's innate fear of having to relate to strangers when communication goes askew and people talk around and at each other, rather than to each other, in awkward social situations. Eric remains an almost off-screen character, more a source of Becky's frustration than a fully realized character in his own right. Becky and Eric appear in "Solution to Saturday's Puzzle."

Jackie

Jackie is a lonely father of a mentally challenged daughter who lives in a hut in the French countryside where David and Hugh own a cottage. He has a metal plate in his skull from an incident as a child when he accidentally detonates a grenade left over from the war. He also walks with a limp from the same incident. Jackie is viewed as a hardworking father until the local authorities arrest him for child molestation, at which point his neighbors' view of him shifts to a negative campaign of whispered disapproval. Jackie is quiet and reclusive save for his attachment to David, which David admits makes him uncomfortable once Jackie is released from jail after the molesting charges. Jackie appears in "The Man in the Hut."

April

April is a spider David grows fond of during his stay in his French cottage one summer. She is from the species Tegenaria, which David delightfully learns when he studies her body style and distinguishing characteristics in a book about arachnids. He personifies her otherwise predictable personality of largely feeding on flies trapped in her web and then vanishing until the next victim is to be devoured. For David, April is a constant companion, worthy of his admiration and devotion. He catches flies in jars and feeds them to April in hopes of strengthening their bond. When Hugh and David must travel to Paris, David traps April in a container and takes her along with him. And when they eventually return to the cottage, David brings April with him. To his dismay, she crawls away from him and vanishes, never to be seen again. David realizes he is guilty of personifying April and imbuing her with human characteristics such as loyalty and friendship when none is present. April appears in "April in Paris."

Lou Sedaris

Lou Sedaris is David's father. He supports the family by working as an IBM engineer. Lou is Greek Orthodox in background, but not particularly religious. Lou remains mostly a quiet figure in the background, mainly working and relaxing when he comes home. Apart from a passion for buying and collecting original art, he is a quiet man not given to excessive talking. Both of David's parents are influential on his life choices, but often not in the way they intend, as David sets out on his own path which sometimes varies greatly from the lifestyles and experiences of his parents.

Symbols and Symbolism

Guinea Worm

The guinea worm is used in "It's Catching" as a symbol of the inability of a human being to control one's own body from invading parasites. In a literal sense, it represents David's, and everyone else's, complete vulnerability to a horrific organism that preys upon its host. This is bad enough from anyone's point of view. But for a gay man in who grows up in the era of AIDS' first introduction into the public consciousness such as David's background, the guinea worm is also a figurative symbol of the fear of such communicable diseases and parasites, and how one can never predict whether or not one will become the next victim of such an organism.

David's Street View from His Parisian Apartment

David's window view of the Parisian street corner below his apartment is symbolic of the pressures couples face when they travel abroad. From his vantage point as a detached observer, David watches as countless couples wind up on the corner and argue between themselves about their direction and plans on their vacation. Later, the symbol of this street corner is echoed by David when he describes his own relationship with Hugh, and how Hugh often leaves David behind because of Hugh's fast-paced stride when he is walking to a destination. In a sense, David discovers there is a metaphorical street corner in everyone's romantic life, hence the symbolism of the view outside his apartment window in "Keeping Up."

Mrs. Peacock's Back Scratcher

In "The Understudy," Mrs. Peacock forces David and his siblings to scratch her back with a bizarre "hand on a stick" device which David describes as resembling a monkey's paw. Because Sedaris and his brothers and sisters find Mrs. Peacock revolting as a caretaker, they transfer much of their loathing and disgust onto the back scratcher itself. Hence, it becomes a symbol of their unified rejection of Mrs. Peacock as their nanny, and a stand-in for the many repulsive aspects of Mrs. Peacock (such as her general slovenly nature and inability to properly feed them) which Sedaris describes in his essay. When one of David's sisters accidentally drops the back scratcher and breaks it, they are forced to temporarily move to Mrs. Peacock's home so that she can retrieve another back scratcher and continue to order them to use it on her back. So the scratcher also acts as a kind of repressive symbol, as well, in that they cannot escape its uncanny hold over them as children.

The Andrews Sisters

The Andrews Sisters were a popular sibling team of singers in the 1940s. For many who grew up listening to them, they represent a lighthearted escape in musical tunes from the horrors of World War II. But in "This Old House" the Andrews Sisters represent a generational divide between David and his parents. For David, they stand for a more innocent era which is to be appreciated for its simplicity and carefree attitude, as represented by the sisters' upbeat songs. But for his parents, the sisters represent a darker time when nationwide economic depression and a global war were the day's likely headlines. The symbolic divide between them is beyond reconciliation, in that David views the past romantically and his parents pragmatically, and neither side can see the other's perspective with true clarity.

David's Bow Tie

David's bow tie in "Buddy, Can You Spare a Tie?" symbolically represents his sense of estrangement from the idea of fashion. While he attempts with varying levels of success to more properly dress himself throughout his young adult and then adult life, Sedaris finds the task challenging, in that he prefers to be a creature of comfort rather than fashionable to the latest trends. He relates his many failures at finding bliss in this regard with the singular symbol of the bow tie, which for him represents the ultimate sense of having no taste in attire. For Sedaris, the choice of wearing a bow tie is symbolically linked to being sexually impotent, as when he writes that anyone wearing a bow tie is basically advertising to others they're lonely and without romantic appeal.

Hitchhiking

In "Road Trips," Sedaris uses the symbol of hitchhiking as a metaphor for the long process of coming of age in terms of sexual maturity. Because he thumbs rides as a young man before he is openly gay in his sexual preference, David presents an uncertain self image. For one older couple who pick him up and desire to swing with him, David is seen as a young heterosexual participant in their fantasy sex scheme. Sedaris declines and quickly abandons the couple, terrified by their overtures. In another hitchhiking scenario gone awry, Sedaris accepts a ride with a lonely truck driver who states his desire for gay sex with David. Because he has not yet come out of the closet, Sedaris also cuts this ride short, not yet willing to own up to his homosexuality with a complete stranger. In symbolic language, hitchhiking for Sedaris represents the chance encounter along life's sexual highways, and the sense that all too often, one is unable to select one's lovers with any certainty, only random chance, which he finds disturbing.

Princeton

In "What I Learned," David uses the symbol of Princeton to represent a sense of elitist entitlement. He writes of the false modesty Princeton graduates are taught to exhibit in regards to their university generally being considered as one of the finest in America, even as the student body there knows they are destined for privilege and potential greatness because of their college alma mater. Ironically, Sedaris did not attend Princeton but only pretended to do so in this essay, so in another, deeper sense, there is a secondary symbolism. This secondary symbolism represents a satirical sense of parodying the very idea that attending one college versus another makes one superior. Ironically, in real life, Sedaris wrote and delivered "What I Learned" to a graduating Princeton class.

David's Diary

Throughout When You Are Engulfed in Flames, David Sedaris writes of keeping a diary since the 1970s in which he records his daily life and penchant observations about how each day goes. The symbolic importance of this self journal is that it represents Sedaris' reflective attitude about the various happenings that move him and/or cause him to reflect more deeply about something he witnesses in the parade of his own life. Because he is primarily an essayist who draws from autobiographical details in his writing, such a diary is a key symbol in his life, as it represents his commitment to not avoid the truth, but capture it in however much detail his daily observations allow him. These salient facts and perceptions are at the heart of his creative writing, and thus, a rich source of symbolic perspective for him as author.

The New York Times Crossword Puzzle

In "Solution to Saturday's Puzzle," Sedaris uses the famed New York Times crossword puzzle to symbolically capture the inability to communicate as experienced by himself and a young couple who share a flight together. The author refuses to switch seats with the husband in order for the couple to share two seats, side-by-side, which leads to an immediate disliking between Sedaris and them. In order to vent his rage, Sedaris uses the blank spaces of the crossword puzzle to add biting, sarcastic comments about the couple that he cannot bring himself to utter in real life. The worse the spat between the couple and Sedaris grows during the long flight, the more Sedaris pours his rage into the crossword puzzle, adding successively more insulting words to describe the couple. Ironically, David's inability to simply communicate using words, rather than escaping into a crossword puzzle, goes to the heart of why symbolically Sedaris so often fails in such chance encounters, preferring as he does to hide behind convenient escape mechanisms (such as the puzzle) rather than find the words to talk to someone.

Business Elite Travel Class

In "Crybaby," Sedaris shares an international flight with a man who is unable to stop crying because of his mother's recent death. Throughout the essay, Sedaris elevates the superior sense of being he and others experience when they fly in Business Elite Class rather than Coach. Symbolically, Business Elite Class takes on the elegance of privilege, in that one is pampered by the attendants, given every luxury imaginable, and even called by one's proper name when addressed. The irony is that while the symbol is true, by the end of the essay being in Business Elite Class does not prevent Sedaris himself from joining in sobbing with the crying passenger who has lost his mother. In this sense, Business Elite Class also symbolizes the hollow promise in life that wealth and power protect from the calamities and disappointments every human being experiences at some time or another in their lives.

Settings

Raleigh, North Carolina

Raleigh is the setting for most of David's childhood and teenage recollections about his growing up. To Sedaris, Raleigh is a quiet, uneventful city that nevertheless holds enchantment for his younger imagination. As a boy, the city represents a safe, city-wide playground which he can explore and understand the larger world around him. Although he has much in the way of personal freedom, David is also somewhat sheltered in Raleigh, which is far more conservative when he is growing up than today.

New York City

New York City occupies many of the essays in When You Are Engulfed in Flames but mainly from the vantage point of when David was working his way up the ladder, and rarely from the perspective of his later success as an author and public speaker. Because of this perspective, much of the New York City David writes about takes place in the city's economically challenged areas, such as tenements and alleyways, which he encountered working various menial labor jobs as a younger man. The promise and allure of New York City are forever on the distant horizon as a result, and David occupies the city from a restrained stance, one eye on his future and one eye firmly watching over his shoulder for trouble.

Paris

As he grows in stature as a known writer with bestselling books, David escapes to Paris and the relative anonymity of living abroad he experiences there to continue his career. He travels to Paris with Hugh for months at a time in order to write unhindered by media requests and the constant need to self-promote, both of which he encounters while stateside. Ironically, Paris is also a source of overwhelming estrangement for Sedaris at times. He barely speaks the language and more often than not finds himself agreeing to whatever is said to him in French simply for fear of being unmasked as just another American who doesn't speak the language.

French Countryside

When the Parisian hustle and bustle becomes overwhelming, David and Hugh flee to the French countryside in Normandy, where they own a small cottage. Here David relaxes in the remote village and enjoys even more anonymity than he does while in Paris, as the locals who live nearby express little or no interest in what David does for a living or his celebrity status in America. Left to his own devices in the cottage, David tends to indulge in peculiar obsessions, such as the time he "adopts" a spider named April in his windowsill and begins to feed her flies. In a sense, the countryside acts for

him as both a positive and a negative. The positive aspects include quietness and an ability to work unhindered by constant interruptions. The negative aspects include too much isolation and a sense that the countryside is alive and out to get him, as in the essay "Aerial."

Tokyo, Japan

Tokyo is prominently featured in "The Smoking Section," Sedaris' lengthy essay about his attempt to quit smoking. Rather unwisely as he concludes in his piece, David figures that moving to Tokyo with Hugh, staying there for a few months, quitting smoking and at the same time learning the Japanese language is the perfect way to kick nicotine. While he is successful in his smoking cessation, the price he pays is high in terms of emotional and physical stress. Sedaris' attempts to master Japanese backfire, and he soon realizes he is the poorest student in his class. The vibrant, busy, chaotic Japan he sketches as backdrop to his attempt to quit smoking is very much an externalization of the addictive craving Sedaris experiences as he catalogs first days, then weeks, and finally months without a cigarette. David ironically meets an elderly Japanese shop seller dying from cancer near the end of David's sojourn in Japan, but Sedaris feels confident that he will not follow suit, even though his mother and several other relatives died from smoking-related illnesses. In this sense, Japan acts as a mecca for self-denial with its busy streets and hectic lifestyles, all of which seemingly stifle critical self-insight at times.

Themes and Motifs

Introversion versus Extroversion

Throughout When You Are Engulfed in Flames, Sedaris as essayist carefully delineates his own inner states of mood, thinking and feeling versus the outside world which is often busy, self-distracted and without much in the way of meaning for the author save to remind him of how he doesn't fit it.

Sedaris accomplishes this tone in large part by using an introverted narrator (himself) and an extroverted outside world of busy sights, sounds and motions which threaten to intrude into the author's quiet, inner space. It's not that David Sedaris is aloof entirely or uninterested in the outside world. Indeed, Sedaris is a world traveler and constantly encountering new people and places as a writer and a human being. Rather, Sedaris prefers the world of the writer, a space inside his own brain wherein he can contemplate the absurdities and cruelties he observes, rather than become beholden to them as an extrovert who thrives on such chaos might (for example, a police officer who loves responding to the scene of an accident, etc.).

A good example of this interior versus exterior mode of preference is "It's Catching." In this essay, David is an observer and eavesdropper in large part to his family and friends one Christmas dinner as they discuss all the horrific encounters they've had with various pests and parasites. As long as the discussion is centered around his loved ones' horrific misadventures in this regard, David is thrilled, feeling safe and secure in his own little world as a reactive, but non-involved, participant. But as soon as the horror stories become too close to his own life, David wishes to change the subject.

Another good example of this preference to an inner versus outer world is "April in Paris," wherein David becomes obsessed with spiders and feeding them live flies. While outwardly horrific, David is so enamored with his "pet" spider April that he overlooks the morbid nature of his own private fascination because it gives him such a thrill. This preference by the author for an introverted lifestyle over an extroverted one continues throughout much of the book as Sedaris returns to it as a theme over and over again.

The Subjectivity of Perception

One of the themes Sedaris constantly explores in his essays in this collection is the idea of the subjectivity of perception, and how such a viewpoint continuously isolates us in ourselves as humans and limits our ability to ever truly see or understand our fellow human's perspective.

Sedaris is keenly interested as an essayist in recording the outside world as he experiences it, but the process is often convoluted by the fact that other human beings so radically perceive and react to their own internal construction of what goes on around them far differently than everyone else. A good example of of this theme Sedaris uses

repeatedly is in "Adult Figures Charging Toward a Concrete Toadstool," in which Sedaris and his parents vary widely in the perception of what is good art versus bad art.

David's parents in this essay believe wholeheartedly that the local pieces of artwork by unknown creators they purchase from a small gallery are not just fine examples of art in and of itself, but likewise are fine investments for the future, sure to appreciate in value. Yet David and his siblings disagree, seeing most of the art his parents purchase as without merit or future monetary value. The disagreement is then echoed in reverse when David buys artwork for himself which his father does not believe is interesting as art or valuable as a collectible. The essayist realizes that his parents have a distinctive need in their perception of art to appreciate it in a far different manner than he does as their son. Despite the fact he loves his parents and vice versa, they never come to any agreement over their respective collections of original art, save for one tacky (in David's point of view) concrete toadstool in his parents' back yard which Sedaris believes will be fought over by his siblings and himself when his parents die. Ironically, David does not believe the toadstool is necessarily good art (therefore carrying his subjectivity of perception beyond even his parents' graves), but representative of their poor tastes in artwork (which, in and of itself, is another example of subjectivity in perception, too, as there is no definitive standard by which one can judge a work of art).

Sedaris is not unaware of this contradiction (subjectivity versus objectivity), and in fact, writes about it often in his essays. Typically David is made aware of the startling gulf between what a person believes and what a person later comes to view as a more objective reality they earlier missed perceiving, but only after something happens in the narrative that forces himself and others to see what was earlier masked by subjectivity.

The Difficulty of Social Interaction

One theme Sedaris is particularly interested in examining in his many essays is the idea that even when well-intended (or not) people attempt social interaction, the vagaries of their own personalities mixed with the confusing, rapid pace of the outside world make social interaction between human beings almost impossible to accomplish without conflict or resentment entering the picture.

A good example of this theme (though it can be found throughout his essays) is "Of Mice and Men." In it, Sedaris believes a newspaper clipping sent to him by a reader of his work is the perfect conversation starter in that it involves an outlandish premise. According to the clipping, a man accidentally sets a mouse ablaze outside in his yard while cleaning his house, only to see the mouse run inside the home and start a fire which burns the home down. David insists on telling the story to various strangers he encounters, including a taxi driver and a limo chauffeur. Neither hears the story as David relates it to them, however, instead imagining a version of the tale that more adequately fits their own respective beliefs and world views. Enraged by their inability to comprehend the story as he tells it to them, Sedaris returns to his home and re-reads the clipping, only to discover he also misread it initially himself and got several key facts wrong, too. Ironically, Sedaris realizes it is not the information, but the manner in which

people fail to actually listen to one another when they're telling stories, that often leads to difficulties in human affairs.

Another good example of this awkwardness between well-intended humans is "The Man in the Hut," which focuses on a man living as David's neighbor in the French countryside. The Man is considered odd by most of the locals because of a steel plate in his head and his mentally challenged daughter, but David strives (in a limited fashion) to be neighborly with the man out of a sense of sympathy. When the man is convicted of child molestation, however, David's perception is challenged, and he is forced to struggle with his sense of fairness when the man is released after serving his time. Whereas before his other neighbors' perception of the man mattered less to him, David finds himself increasingly wary about not only spending time with the man, but more importantly, how his other neighbors will perceive him doing so. Herein Sedaris illustrates that even though one may be well meaning in terms of social interaction, the expectations and pressures of others in one's community often influence a person's ability to make spontaneous choices in terms of friendship and loyalty, limiting them and even preventing them from happening.

Miscommunication

Of all the themes Sedaris utilizes with frequency as a writer of essays, miscommunication is one of the most frequent. In his world view, the inability of human beings to simply talk with one another in any meaningful, sustained way is at the heart of so much heartbreak in the world.

"Town and Country" is a perfect example of this theme. David first attempts to communicate with a rich, elderly couple when they board a flight with him, but right away, David feels inferior to the well-dressed husband and wife. One of the main reasons he feels this distancing from them (besides their obvious upper class status) is because he cannot effectively speak with them on any terms either he or they can mutually understand. Sedaris makes the already strained relationship between himself and the couple even more pronounced by having them only speak in the most profane manner possible. Given one expects this kind of curse-filled ranting in younger people today owing to its popularization in the culture, it comes as a shock to him (and reader) that the old couple also prefer to communicate in this style of four-letter words. While some readers may object to the use of profanity by the author, it captures the distancing effect Sedaris experiences, in that he prefers not to use such crude language in communicating with others himself, even though he is decades younger than the couple. In effect, the author is cowed by the couple's very modern use of word choice, because he is old-fashioned and they are very much hip (too much so for Sedaris' tastes, even though he finds himself secretly admiring their audacity).

The author continues exploring this theme of miscommunication when he next takes a ride with a taxi driver of foreign origin who barely speaks English. The crude, lewd manner in which the driver speaks is at first off-putting, then offensive, to Sedaris, even though ironically the taxi driver is trying his best to speak what he believes to be

colloquial English. Sedaris feels patronized and reduced by the driver's profanity, however, even more so because it is not even well-spoken but mangled English. David entirely comprehends what the driver is saying, however, the same way in which he understands the wealthy couple despite their own use of profanity-laced language. And herein lies the irony of Sedaris' miscommunication with both the driver and the couple: everyone is entirely comprehensible. In other words, their language skills, however sophisticated (the couple) or blunt (the driver), communicate the meaning of their spoken words. It is rather the way in which both the couple and the driver insist on lacing their conversation with degrading profanities that singularly alienates Sedaris as listener and forces him to feel disgust and anger.

In the concluding passages, Sedaris reveals he's no better in terms of his prurient interests and language than the couple or the taxi driver, and here again, Sedaris' use of irony to convey his theme of miscommunication is adroit. Sedaris implies we are all obsessed with debased attitudes in the modern world, and part of our miscommunication is because we deny this fact to ourselves and others.

Obsessions with Dark Subject Matters

Though Sedaris' writing is well reviewed by critics for its wit and pacing, the most obvious quality to his work herein beyond the high level of craftsmanship as author is his mordant obsession with dark subject matters for his essays. Thematically speaking, it is unusual for any Sedaris essay to not at least touch on a subject matter that at least some readers are guaranteed to find shocking or offensive.

Sedaris is actually quite adroit in only alluding to the potentially offensive themes rather than dwell on them with lurid details. For example, in "Town and Country," he has a passage detailing bestiality from a pornographic magazine, but it is important to stress that the paragraphs pertaining to this are not merely there to shock, but to make the author's point about modern culture and its debasing effect on everyone. Without this passage, in other words, the entire point of Sedaris' essay would make little or no sense, and so in this regard, Sedaris has wisely chosen to potentially offend the reader at the same time as make his point as author. While some sensitive readers will doubtlessly still object to any such portrayal in an essay aimed at the general reading public, astute readers will immediately grasp that Sedaris' concluding dark theme is meaningless without the supposed "shock" ending to jolt the reader into grasping the ironies of the essay. Simply put, there is no other way to make his point.

"April in Paris" is another essay containing potentially offensive dark subject matter. David develops a taste for feeding live flies to a spider he befriends and names April. Hugh, David's lover, objects at first, repulsed by the dark nature such an act hints is within David's soul. But David rationalizes that flies harm millions of people every year by carrying diseases and that everyone kills them with swatters and other traps, anyway. David's attempt to justify his cruelties works at a basic intellectual level, but it still does not explain nor excuse his sadistic need to capture live flies and then feed them to April. Instead, Sedaris leaves it to the reader to examine the dark subject matter

and draw his or her own conclusions about the mental well-being and stability of the author. It is easy to see some readers will find the subject matter too dark and disturbing to consider whether or not the essay has literary merit. Others, however, will find "April in Paris" a keen distillation of the complex ironies at work in the soul of a writer who is unafraid to reveal his darkest, most sinister impulses even as his word craft makes the reader smirk or darkly laugh with profound recognition.

Styles

Point of View

Because David Sedaris as the author concentrates his essays from his own perspective, all of his work in When You Are Engulfed in Flames is from the first person point of view. In effect, reading the book is not unlike reading the private journal or diary of someone who has left their intimate recordings out on a desk for the reader to gleam. Sedaris is the main character in each and every piece he crafts because of this structural decision, and the reader is forced to see events unfold from the perspective of the author/protagonist rather than by examining the thoughts and feelings of other characters from a third person perspective.

This doesn't mean that Sedaris fails to capture said thoughts and feelings of other characters besides his own. Ironically (and Sedaris is a huge believer in the use of literary irony), Sedaris as main protagonist is often murky in his feelings and thoughts, while the other characters are far more transparent in their emotional and intellectual states of being. The author accomplishes this by having his own character/narrator struggle to understand his own heart and mind, while at the same time having the other characters outside his first person point of view on much more solid ground in terms of how they think and feel about subjects and situations. In fact, the essence of a typical Sedaris essay is in having the muddled, troubled, inwardly-obsessed Sedaris as narrator encounter a person outside his sphere of influence who is dead-set in his or her ways, much more openly opinionated and willing to act while Sedaris prefers to momentarily retire and consider a course of action.

By having an entire book comprised of collective essays all written in this manner, When You Are Engulfed in Flames has an unusually intimate feeling, again attributable to the first person point of view. Because the viewpoint is restricted to David's thoughts, feelings and reactions, the book is personable and warm as if the writer is a genial host to his own life's events, and the reader privy to read the text from Sedaris' most intimate point of view.

Language and Meaning

When You Are Engulfed in Flames is a very modern collection of essays, filled with vernacular and meanings stripped of literary pretensions and flowery language (even though the sly author is adept at turning modern language into a form of essay-like poetry and imbuing meaning into even the most seemingly banal of everyday conversations). Rather than use a thesaurus to gift his characters with a content-rich manner of speaking, Sedaris prefers to strip away eloquence in favor of having his characters talk like ordinary people accustomed to a constant media bombardment of television news, internet tweets, and office gossip, and having to compete with it to be

heard. Comments characters utter to one another are generally short and to the point, not long and eloquent.

The author also prefers to avoid pretentious language in his own text. This serves the function of making him seem "at home" in all of the essays, not estranged from the other characters who speak in a common modern language (sometimes crudely so), but equal to them. This choice by the writer lessens the severity of distancing the reader feels from the text and characters, making them intertwine into one blended whole. It also draws the reader more deeply into Sedaris' own often veiled perspective, as well. Because Sedaris as narrator/writer does not write in a lofty style or tone of voice, and because the characters he portrays are likewise not elevated above the narrator in terms of manner of speech, a certain equality of characterization and plotting is achieved and sustained throughout a disparate collection of work. All the essays very much feel as if they are from the same narrator, and much of this effect Sedaris achieves by deft use of language.

There is a considerable amount of language some may find objectionable. Sedaris does not shy from sprinkling profanity and lascivious acts into some of his more mature essays. In keeping with his literary style of making the language and actions believable to modern culture, the essayist does not shy from examining an array of topics such as gay and straight sex, drug use, sadism and other darker themes. Placed into proper context, however, such language and meaning is not present to shock but to provoke deeper thought and reflection about what it means to be a modern human being in a culture overrun with such ideas and word choices.

Structure

Because the book is a collection of previously published essays, When You Are Engulfed in Flames does not have a narrative structure that threads throughout the entirety of its pages, per se. Each short essay basically stands on its own literary merits, and the proof of this is that one may read the book out of order in terms of the essays presented with no considerable change in the book's overall impact or merit. Because most novels work by accretion of succeeding chapters, this makes When You Are Engulfed in Flames different than many fictional titles.

Even though the collection is non-narrative in accumulative effect, Sedaris nonetheless utilizes many similar structural devices in his various essays. So while there is no overall narrative structure for the book, most of his individual essays are heavily structured for impact on the reader. For example, Sedaris typically starts an essay with an inciting incident which will only later in the essay come to have more significant meaning. In the middle portion of his essay, Sedaris usually develops his theme by having an echoing incident that reflects on the opening one. Many times, this will be a secondary observation by Sedaris as narrator that amplifies the earlier, previous incident. Finally, he frequently concludes the essay by having a narrative twist via a third incident or reaction which dramatically concludes the earlier incidents, often with ironic consequences.

A good example of this formula is "Keeping Up," in which David first delineates a street corner outside his Parisian apartments where tourist couples often fight. He next echoes the opening incident of watching a visiting couple argue by recalling when he and Hugh visited an Australian zoo. Hugh angers David by leaving David behind while Hugh strolls ahead (hence the essay's title). The final third incident which echoes the previous two in the essay occurs when David finally makes up to Hugh and forgives Hugh for leaving him behind. The first two incidents -- each involving an arguing couple -- climax with the third incident, in which the arguing couple reconciles, thus placing a narrative change or spin on the preceding examples.

Quotes

Why do you do that?" I asked, and she looked at me, saying, "Germs, silly. Think of all the people who have rested their heads there. Doesn't it just give you the creeps?
-- Patsy (1 -- "It's Catching" paragraph 2)

Importance: Patsy, David's friend, sets up the theme of "It's Catching" with this quote. She introduces the notion of shared public spaces, and how they can lead to the spreading of communicable parasites and/or diseases. As the essay progresses, this quote acts as the opening chord of social fears of catching something from someone else, in particular a total stranger with whom one has shared any form of contact.

And when he asks where I have been, I answer honestly and tell him I was lost.
-- Narrator (2 -- "Keeping Up" paragraph 24)

Importance: David is answering Hugh's question as to where David has been while Hugh was ahead of him during a walk while on vacation. David is literally explaining to Hugh that he was lost, but more significantly, David means he was lost without Hugh's sense of guidance and love, which is what made David really feel lost.

Naw," she said. "That's just Keith.
-- Mrs. Peacock (3 -- "The Understudy" paragraph 17)

Importance: Though a simple utterance made by Mrs. Peacock in answer to David's questioning about who it is who drives her to babysit David and his siblings, this answer perfectly encapsulates Mrs. Peacock's inscrutable nature, and the manner in which she remains a mystery to Sedaris even though she takes care of him and his brothers and sisters for two weeks. Mrs. Peacock never bothers to explain to David who "just Keith" is, anymore than she explains any of the bizarre utterances and rationalizations she makes while in charge of the children. She remains a mystery to her wards and never directly answers any of their many curious questions, as this quote indicates.

You think those pre-war years were cozy?" my father once asked. "Try getting up at five a.m. to sell newspapers on the snow-covered streets. That's what I did, and it stunk to high heaven.
-- Lou Sedaris (4 -- "This Old House" paragraph 4)

Importance: David's romantic view of the past and its (to him) superiority to the present is directly challenged by his father Lou in this quote. In terms of the past and how one views it, Lou's quote reminds David that it is all subjective. David sees the past as romantic and preferable, while his father -- who lived through the Great Depression -- views it quite differently, preferring the material comforts of the present to his past hardships as a child.

Work on your run," I wrote in my diary the following morning.
-- Narrator (6 -- "Road Trips" paragraph 11)

Importance: David is told this quote when he asks his best friend Ronnie if she knows he is gay. She explains it was obvious to her because of the manner in which he flops his arms when he runs. Humiliated that Ronnie perceives his sexuality by such on overt physical trait, David decides to practice his run so that his homosexuality is not so obvious. Thematically, the quote illustrates the conflicted nature of David's coming out as gay, and how he struggles to keep the ability to tell others on his own terms versus unwittingly reveals his orientation by such acts as running, his manner of speaking, etc., over which he has far less control.

What's wrong?" he said. "I'll tell you what's wrong: you're killing us.
-- Lou Sedaris (7 -- "What I Learned" paragraph 41)

Importance: David asks why his parents are upset with the books he writes about their family's history, including all the sordid details they prefer he leave out of his highly personal essays. His father, Lou, explains that the stories are "killing us" in response. Lou does not mean David is physically committing homicide against his family. Rather, Lou means emotionally it is very difficult for David's family members to read such intimate examinations of their collective lives without feeling exposed and unable to offer rebuttal to readers who may misunderstand any one family member or another. The quote indicates the price his parents and siblings pay in order for David to be successful as an essayist.

She said, "What? You got something better to do?
-- Helen (8 -- "That's Amore" paragraph 5)

Importance: Helen is a cantankerous old neighbor of David's and Hugh's in their New York City tenement building. She asks Hugh to carry her groceries up many flights of stairs when they first meet, baffling Hugh and leaving him speechless. Helen reacts to his befuddlement by questioning Hugh's plans for the day, thereby reducing him even as she demands he carry her load for her. This quote perfectly captures the contradictory way in which Helen imposes her will on others and, at the same time, leaves them unable to easily speak back to her because of her diminutive, elderly facade. Throughout "That's Amore" Helen presents this Jekyll and Hyde personality type, sometimes nice, sometimes rude, which leaves those who encounter her at odds over how to proceed with interacting with her.

I do believe in spooks, I do believe in spooks, I do, I do, I do, I do, I do.
-- Narrator (9 -- "The Monster Mash" paragraph 2)

Importance: David utters this quote in the shower after a long day spent at the medical examiner's office. Because he sees every imaginable harm and mutilation done to the various corpses that fill the office from a variety of fatal accidents and intentional harms, Sedaris is understandably overcome with shock. He mouths these words as a way of escaping the horrors he witnesses, as if doing so will relieve his guilt-ridden conscience for his voyeuristic indulgences. Despite this ritualistic chant, David is still deeply affected by the relentless carnage. He maintains a facade of stoic indifference while at the

medical examiner's office to preserve his sense of professionalism, but in reality, he is moved by the parade of dead bodies.

Odd little guy, creepy. Hair on his shoulders. Big idiot smile plastered on his face, just sitting there, mumbling to himself.
-- Patient (10 -- "In the Waiting Room" paragraph 20)

Importance: When David visits a Parisian hospital for an exam, he is forced to sit in the patient waiting room clad only in his underwear. Embarrassed, he imagines one of the other patients keeping a diary much like he does. The quote, while pretend, actually describes the way in which David imagines the patient might view David because of his near nudity. Sedaris captures a less-than-flattering portrait of himself from the imaginary patient's perspective, which ironically mirrors the manner in which much of what David records about the world is colored by his own darkly-hued, cynical outlook. In essence, David is swallowing a taste of his own medicine, and he does not like the flavor.

Listen," she said. "I'm not asking you to switch because it's a bad seat. I'm asking you to switch because we're married.
-- Becky (11 -- "Solution to Saturday's Puzzle" paragraph 14)

Importance: Becky is a fellow airline passenger seated next to David who wants David to swap seats so that her husband may sit next to her during the flight. This quote, uttered in all innocence by Becky, is what incites all the misunderstanding that follows between Becky and David. David does not want to swap because Becky's husband sits in the bulkhead section, an area of the plane David loathes to occupy. Becky fails to grasp David's aversion to sitting in any particular area of the plane, especially given David's refusal will force her and her husband to fly separately. All of the conflict that follows this exchange arises from both Becky and David being unable, or unwilling, to understand the other person's needs. In Sedaris' essays, individuals frequently state, and then re-state, their desires and goals, rarely stopping to comprehend the other person's response or imagine a solution in which both parties are mutually satisfied by the outcome.

What more do you want from a group picture of six spoiled children?
-- Sharon Sedaris (12 -- "Adult Figures Charging Toward a Concrete Toadstool" paragraph 13)

Importance: Sharon, David's mother, utters this quote in response to David's critique of a family portrait of the Sedaris children (minus the parents) created by a street artist at a fair they all attended. Besides restating the large size of David's family, the quote serves to show how Sharon views them as a group collective, as well. While loving of her family, Sharon often believes her children take too much for granted and, at the same time, expect too much from life and their parents. Her comments are half-heartedly facetious, but there is a grain of truth in the quote (from Sharon's perspective), too. She believes the crummy nature of the artist's capture accurately distills an essential quality about David and his siblings, hence her sarcastic response to David's bad mouthing the sketch.

And the skeleton says, "You are going to die.
-- Skeleton (13 -- "Memento Mori" paragraph 33)

Importance: In order to please Hugh, David buys his lover an actual human skeleton. Hugh desires to use the skeleton as a life (or death) model in his artwork, and so enthusiastically keeps the remains in their apartment so he can sketch it. David is repulsed by the manner in which Hugh refuses to store the wired set of bones in proper storage when he is not utilizing it for his art. Soon, the skeleton is "talking" to David (via his overactive imagination), and the only phrase the skeleton ever utters is "you are going to die." To ward off the skeleton's ominous message, David tries talking other subject matters with it, but all the skeleton ever says is that David is going to die. The quote is imaginary, but David's persistence in hearing it in his own mind is all too real for the writer. As long as the skeleton is around, David cannot stop thinking about his own mortality, hence his hearing the skeleton's quote as an actual voice.