



{PAGE TURNER}

## He Talk Prettier

STANDING ACROSS FROM GARRISON KEILLOR, THE ICONIC VOICE OF ALL things Lake Wobegon, **David Sedaris** was speechless. In what should have been a special moment — the meeting of two well-known literary personalities — Sedaris was panicking, waiting in line to get a book signed. “Everything I’d say he’s heard a million times before,” recalls the author of the best-selling *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. “I’d sound so stupid.”

Finally, he gathered himself, only to blurt out the unfathomable. “Make it out to ‘My Friend Patsy,’” he told Keillor. “P-A-T-S-Y.” And just like that — they never met. In awe of Keillor’s passionate reading and commanding presence, Sedaris froze. “You felt so special in that audience,” he says. “You felt that he was doing this especially for you.”

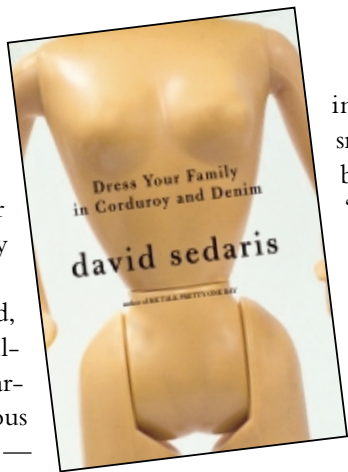
People feel that way about Sedaris as well. From his bitter chronicles of life as a department store elf in *Holidays on Ice* to his appalled observation of nudist camp volleyball in *Naked*, Sedaris’ essays have cracked up critics and knocked the modern memoir on its ear. His latest book, out this month, *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*, laughs just as loudly, but a softer side emerges, exposing a true literary talent hard at work amid all the giggles.

A popular voice on Public Radio International’s *This American Life*, Sedaris has a writing process that’s a lot like that of a stand-up ►

comedian. “I go on tour with a group of new stories, read them, and rewrite them,” he says. Last summer, Sedaris flooded Boston’s Berklee Performance Center with chuckles and giggles. The 1,200-person-capacity crowd whooped so much that some missed the finer points of his stories, wistful commentary of regret and remorse that punctuate his book better than any curse word

or pithy remark. “It’s not that hard to get a laugh,” says Sedaris. “I think it’s a lot harder to get people to really listen to something.”

And so he revised, developing this brilliant collection. Characters from his previous books reappear —



including his chain-smoking mother and his basely eloquent brother, “The Rooster” — but Sedaris doesn’t just sprinkle them with vinegar as he did in the past. He gives them simpler voices, portraying his family members more as

people and less as parodies.

“When I put myself on paper, I become a character,” says Sedaris. “It’s just a version of myself.” The same holds true for his family. In real life they are close, often speaking several times a week by phone. But as characters in his books, they have trouble communicating their love.

“I don’t like you people,” says his sister Tiffany in one story. “*You people*,” muses the author. “As if we’re a collection agency.”

Sedaris allows his family to edit the stories before they are published, but there are some things he cannot control. For instance, a preview of the book in *Entertainment Weekly* mentioned his “paranoid” sister. “To me she did not come across as paranoid at all,” he says. “That’s the last word I would use. When I saw that, I thought how hurt she’s going to be.”

As for the author, hurting is fine, as long as the pain is his. In *Dress Your Family*, he is hit in the face with a rock thrown by the most popular boy in school; years later, he befriends a 9-year-old neighbor, only to have her pillage his apartment; and he falls victim to the most inhumane indecency of all — wearing a paper hat and selling sodas at the state fair.

“The sorrow in the story seems to stick more,” Sedaris says. Perhaps, but he turns this collection of bruises into jokes, written especially for us.

— John Patrick Pullen

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