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ASK THE AUTHOR

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August 19, 2009

Ask the Author Live: David Sedaris

Posted by *The New Yorker*

This week in the magazine, David Sedaris writes about a kookaburra. Today, Sedaris answered readers' questions in a live chat; a transcript of their discussion follows.

THE NEW YORKER: Hello, and welcome to Ask the Author Live. David Sedaris is here today to chat with *New Yorker* readers. We'll do our best to address as many questions as possible. Enjoy!

We'll start with a question from Cecelia Fusillo, who e-mailed us:

The story of the kookabura was very touching. My question: how do you recall in such vivid detail events twenty or more years past? Specifically, I mean the hilarious scene of your dad's mounting rage and your defiance and delight in singing that song. I look forward to your stories and love your take on life.

DAVID SEDARIS: It's odd the things that people remember. Parents will arrange a birthday party, certain it will stick in your mind forever. You'll have a nice time, then two years later you'll be like, "There was a pony there? Really? And a clown with one leg?"

For whatever reason, I've never forgotten singing "Kookaburra" with my sister, Amy, and having my dad go nuts over it. It was never enough for a complete story, at least until I went to Australia and could join the memory to something more current.

THE NEW YORKER: We also have some questions about your writing:

Do you force yourself to write every day, and if so, do you follow a routine or wait until you feel inspired?

Roberta Roberts
Grand Rapids, Michigan

How is it that you are so prolific? I mean that in the most complimentary of ways (of course). I have tried my hand at writing, but it takes so long to achieve a worthwhile sentence—not to mention that coming home drained from work doesn't provide the emotional involvement I feel good work deserves. How did you break out of this cycle?

Jordon Conrad

DAVID SEDARIS: I started writing one afternoon when I was twenty, and ever since then I have written every day. At first I had to force myself. Then it became part of my identity, and I did it without thinking. It helped to have jobs that involved running around, pushing things like dish carts and wheelbarrows. It would be hard to sit at a desk all day, and then come to sit at another desk.

Also, it helps to abandon hope. If I sit at my computer, determined to write a *New Yorker* story I won't get beyond the first sentence. It's better to put no pressure on it. What would happen if I followed the previous sentence with this one, I'll think. If the eighth draft is torture, the first should be fun. At least if you're writing humor.

QUESTION FROM STEPHEN DOST: On Facebook, you have 56,959 fans. What do you think of online social networking (Facebooking, Twittering, etc.)?

DAVID SEDARIS: I've never gone on Facebook and am not sure I understand it. The same goes for Twitter. I have someone sending tweets and pretending to be me, but I don't know why.

THE NEW YORKER: Patricia Sozzi from Tampa, Florida, wants to know:

I understand from seeing your performance recently that you enjoy reading Alan Bennett. Would you be so kind as to share any other authors you particularly like, and, as an aside, have you read Wells Tower's

debut, “Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned?” And, no, this is not Wells Tower submitting this question.

DAVID SEDARIS: I’ve heard great things about the Wells Tower book and plan to get it when I go to the United States next month. Right now I’m reading “Do Not Deny Me,” a new collection by the great Jean Thompson. Before that I finished the galleys to the upcoming Josh Ferris novel, “The Unnamed.” He had a very funny story in *The New Yorker* the other week, and though his new book is completely serious, it’s just as pleasurable.

Earlier this summer I read “The White Tiger” and learned that “beak” is a euphemism for penis. Actually, I listened to “The White Tiger.” (The audio version is excellent, as is the audio for Denis Johnson’s “Nobody Move.”) People are wont to put them down, but I love audiobooks. I listen while ironing, while bathing, while taking walks. The best of all time is Elaine Stritch reading Dorothy Parker stories.

QUESTION FROM STEPHEN DOST: I had the impression you were a technophobe. How did they get you to do a live chat?

DAVID SEDARIS: I have a computer, and they walked me through the setting-up-your-account part.

QUESTION FROM MARYUN: I wanted to ask Mr. Sedaris about his use of life events and family stories as his staples. Most of life seems so banal. Does he recognize the aptitude of an event as a good story when he’s going through it, or does that come with reflection (or the force of an impending deadline)?

DAVID SEDARIS: Every so often, my life will feel like a story. That was the case in “Laugh, Kookaburra,” when I was standing outside the restaurant, watching as Hugh and Pat had their food delivered. It doesn’t have to be a big thing; in fact, most often, it’s just the opposite.

THE NEW YORKER: Via e-mail, Pat Donohue, from Point Pleasant, New Jersey, asks:

As a resident of France and an American citizen, your point of view on health care in the two nations is of interest to those of us who have never received medical treatment via a system such as France’s, which, I understand, is a hybrid between single-payer (the government of France) and some private insurers. We receive so much information to the negative on France’s health care, and I would like to hear your viewpoint and/or comparison between the two. Thanks.

DAVID SEDARIS: Allow me to answer with kidney stones. I had my first one at the age of thirty-four. At the time, I was living in New York and had no health insurance. Never in my life had I experienced such pain, but I couldn’t afford to go to the hospital, and so I passed it at home, not knowing until the end what it actually was. (I thought I was delivering Satan’s baby through my penis.)

I had my second kidney stone seven years later, in Paris. It was ten o’clock in the morning, and after looking at my options in the phone book in the phone book, I took the metro to a hospital in the 15th. Two minutes after walking through the door, I was in a private room. Delicious, mind-numbing drugs were delivered to my blood stream by way of a tube and life was beautiful. I was in the hospital for four hours, and as I was leaving, I asked the receptionist how I was supposed to pay.

“Oh,” she said, “We’ll send you a statement.”

“But you never even asked me my name.”

“Really?”

A few weeks later I got a bill for the equivalent of seventy dollars, this because I'm not a French citizen and am therefore not entitled to free care.

I got my third kidney stone a few months ago, while on a lecture tour of the United States. The hospital I went to was in Westchester County and the service was outstanding. Maybe I arrived at the slowest time, but, like in France, I was waited on immediately, and the doctor and nurses could not have been more pleasant. Again I was there for four hours, though this time the bill came to five thousand eight hundred dollars. Not including medicine.

I'm completely fascinated by the health-care debate going on in the United States, especially by posters of Obama with a little mustache drawn on his upper lip. Is that what Hitler is really known for, his health-care plan? To quote Bill Maher, "I haven't seen this many pissed-off old white people since they cancelled 'Murder She Wrote.'" "

Now I live in England. I've just been granted Indefinite Leave To Remain, which allows me access to the N.H.S.

QUESTION FROM MIKE T: I enjoyed your descriptions of Australia. Are there other places you plan to travel to and write about?

DAVID SEDARIS: I don't like travelling if I know I have to write about it. For instance, I went to the Philippines a few years ago and spent five days. Though I had a perfectly wonderful time, it wasn't story-worthy, and I'm glad I didn't have to pretend otherwise.

QUESTION FROM STEPHEN DOST: How does your father react to his appearances in your stories? Has he seen his underwear-only cameo in the latest story?

DAVID SEDARIS: I read the story to my dad, and he had no problem with it. Remember, please, that I said he looked good in his underpants. Whenever I write about my family, I start by getting their approval. I like to think I write about them with obvious affection. When it comes to the people I'm related to, I consider myself to be very lucky.

QUESTION FROM JOSH: I've worked in libraries for close to a decade. One thing I've never been able to figure out is how authors feel about libraries. On one hand, great distribution of your work. On the other, lots of book purchases are not happening because of them. What's your take?

DAVID SEDARIS: When someone tell me they illegally downloaded one of my audiobooks I think, Thanks a lot, Pal. When someone tells me they checked my book out of the library, I'm delighted. I've always been a big library user, and feel a kinship with others who do the same thing. Plus, libraries have bathrooms and pay phones.

QUESTION FROM SAMMY KIBET: Do you still write your diary?

DAVID SEDARIS: I've been keeping a diary for thirty-three years and write in it every morning. Most of it's just whining, but every so often there'll be something I can use later: a joke, a description, a quote. It's an invaluable aid when it comes to winning arguments. "That's not what you said on February 3, 1996," I'll say to someone.

QUESTION FROM ASHLEY IN BOSTON: I just got your postcard today about the Craisins and wanted to say thanks for writing back! I'm sure the folks at Ocean Spray feel comforted that any Craisins in France will be safe with you on the road. What are some of the American comfort foods you miss most when you're in France?

DAVID SEDARIS: I miss canned clams and a certain kind of frozen burrito that tastes very much like cardboard. I also miss magazines at the check-out counter.

QUESTION FROM JACK MILLER: Your comment about turning off the friends burner seems sad to me. Do you really

not maintain important friendships despite having a partner?

DAVID SEDARIS: I've maintained old friendships, like with people I knew in the nineteen-seventies, but have lost the knack for meeting new people. This has a lot to do with my writing schedule. I don't want to be disturbed, and the willingness to be disturbed is, I think, part of being a good friend.

QUESTION FROM JESSE A: For whatever reason I'm picturing you participating in this chat while sitting at a coffee shop, maybe a Starbucks, and brushing people aside as they try and talk to you: "Excuse me, please, but I'm doing something for the *NEW YORRRKER*." I'd italicize the name of the magazine for emphasis, but I don't think I can. So, where are you?

DAVID SEDARIS: I'm not much for writing in public, but since I got e-mail a year ago, I've found that I can sometimes answer messages in airports.

Where am I now? I'm at my house in London. That's mainly where I live now.

QUESTION FROM CHUCKD: You mentioned that the story wasn't complete until you went to Australia and were able to join it to a current vignette. Do you have a collection of story fragments floating around, waiting for the "a-ha" moment when you can connect a fragment to a current event? If so, how developed are they—do you write them down, or are they just ideas bouncing around your head?

DAVID SEDARIS: I actually have quite a few fragments waiting to be plugged into a story. One that works quite well involves a story told to me by a flight attendant. Another involves a friend who checked into a hotel and found shit on his shower curtain.

QUESTION FROM MARK DANOWSKY: Do you have any reference books about on writing that you return to again and again?

DAVID SEDARIS: I like high school and college writing textbooks and find them very helpful. Whenever I'm stuck and seem to have no ideas, I open one up and turn to the back. There I'll find questions like, "Have you had any experiences with an alcoholic or a sailor?"

QUESTION FROM BARBL: You mentioned you love audiobooks. I, too, am an avid audiobook listener. What authors or genre of books do you enjoy listening to? (Oh, and thank you for reading your own books—your voice adds so much to the words.)

DAVID SEDARIS: When it's audio, I tend towards fiction, and often the sorts of books I might not sit down and read with my eyes. For example, I loved the Harry Potter books—the English editions read by Stephen Fry. When the last one was finished, and I felt I had nothing more to live for, I went to my audiobook store and was put on to "His Dark Materials." I guess it's a fantasy book, but, boy, was it great. I felt the same about "Jonathan Norrel and Dr. Strange." (I might have the names reversed.)

Then, too, I like flat out novels, and collections of stories. Audible just released Tobias Wolff's latest collection, and I like the reading.

QUESTION FROM TERRY: I love reading about you and your partner! Does he mind when he appears in your stories? And do you sometimes hope that something will go terribly wrong so you can have a funny story to share?

DAVID SEDARIS: I prefer the word "boyfriend" to partner, but to answer your question, Hugh prefers to know nothing in advance. He just bought a *New Yorker* this afternoon, and will sit down tonight to read the Kookaburra story. This is to

say that he hates my reading out loud to him, and that he trusts me not to write horrible things about him.

QUESTION FROM JOAN: When and where was your first piece published, and how did it make you feel?

DAVID SEDARIS: I think I was first published in the newspaper put out by School of The Art Institute of Chicago, where I was a student. I wince to read that story today, but I published it with an odd photo I'd found in a junk shop, and at least I still like the picture. I had a few things in the school paper, and then I got published in a small literary magazine called *ACM*. I hoped I would one day get published in *The New Yorker*, but I never allowed myself to actually believe it. Getting published is one of those things that feels just as good as you'd hoped it would.

QUESTION FROM JOHN: What authors of recent years do you enjoy? I've noticed your and George Saunders's writing styles are similar. Do you enjoy his work?

DAVID SEDARIS: I love George Saunders and recently spent some time with him. Sometimes you meet people you admire and are disappointed, but he was as funny and interesting in person as he is on the page. Is our writing similar? I hadn't noticed.

THE NEW YORKER: Asmaa Malik from Montreal, Quebec wrote over e-mail:

First, there was you. Then your sister, Amy. Now, Zach Galifianakis. Who's going to emerge as the next great Greek North Carolinian?

DAVID SEDARIS: Oh, how I love that Zach Galifianakis. Have you seen "Between Two Ferns"? And I could watch those Absolut movies forever. A future Greek from Raleigh? I nominate Yann Stavropoulos.

THE NEW YORKER: That's all for today. Thank you, David. And thank you, everyone, for participating and reading. We hope you'll return for more. Visit newyorker.com for the time and topic of the next Ask the Author Live chat.

DAVID SEDARIS: I'm sorry I'm such a slow typist. For me, this has been a pleasant experience. I liked the questions and wish I could have answered more of them.

Thank you.

Keywords

- Ask the Author;
- Australia;
- David Sedaris;
- Kookaburra

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