

TURDS ARE MY SUBJECT

**DAVID
SEDARIS**
DISCUSSES
READING,
WRITING, SEX,
CHINESE FOOD
AND EUGENE
BARBERSHOPS



INTERVIEW BY RICK LEVIN | PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNE FISHBEIN

In his most recent *New Yorker* article (“Memory Laps,” Oct. 24), David Sedaris recalls competing on the kids’ swim team at the Raleigh Country Club, a place where the city’s fine old families “could enjoy one another’s company with out being pawed at” and where “Mr. Sedaris” — as he was addressed by the club’s black employees — learned the difference between play and performance. “I never thought of how well I was doing them,” he says of things like walking, biking and swimming. “It was only in competing that an activity became fraught and self-conscious.”

This is classic Sedaris: painfully introverted and emotionally blunt, funny yet bittersweet, like a scoop of vanilla dropped on a hot sidewalk. Longtime listeners of NPR’s *This American Life* broadcasts, where Sedaris first broke big, are familiar with his readings — autobiographical anecdotes delivered in a bemused, wry voice that is as recognizable as those of Daniel Schorr or Sarah Vowell.

Sedaris is currently on a lecture tour taking him to 41 cities in 42 days; he’s in Eugene Thursday, Nov. 3, for “An Evening with David Sedaris” at Hult Center.

It was radio that catapulted Sedaris into the rarefied heights of celebrity — Grammy nominations, more than seven million books sold, most perennial *NYT* best-sellers — but it’s his writing that will endure as art. Working in the tradition of American humorists stretching from Mark Twain to Kurt Vonnegut, Sedaris writes personal essays that are chiseled from the raw, messy stuff of experience, turning moments of discomfort, disillusion or awe into the universal language of understanding. His anecdotes are steeped in autobiography and served up with wit.

Sedaris is, as has been repeatedly noted, outrageously funny. He writes with cringing candor and a satirical eye, and his comic timing is crushing. But he’s not just a punch-liner. A lovely strain of sadness runs through most of Sedaris’ work — an elegiac but unsentimental sense of innocence perpetually lost, of a past riddled with venal sins and wounds of ignorance. In the *New Yorker* swimming story, he contemplates his father’s inability to acknowledge a hard-swum victory:

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

Last week, Sedaris took some time from his frantic schedule to talk with me about a variety of hot topics, from Chinese food, writing about animals and his new stories, to turds, Michelle Bachman and why there are so many barbershops in Eugene.

(Note: Print is a poor substitute for the pleasure of listening to Sedaris, a master storyteller whose inflections can convey complex meanings ranging from irony and satire to bathos and pathos. His words here have been transcribed verbatim, though I have included italics and various punctuation marks in an attempt to capture Sedaris’ tone and meaning while we were talking. Any failures of communication, therefore, are entirely mine. Enjoy.)