

What inspired your most recent collection, *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk: A Modest Bestiary*, and is it a departure from previous works?

I like audio books. Somebody gave me — oh, I don't know, maybe about seven or eight years ago — it was a collection of South African folktales. And so I was looking forward to it. And they were just so lame, just really lame. Like, 'the giraffe and the hyena. The giraffe married a hyena. And then on the wedding night he tore her throat out. Be careful who you marry!' You know, and I just thought, 'Oh my god, I can do better than that in my sleep.' So I just started writing these little — I hesitated to call them fables, because fables have morals, and these don't always.

But also I thought, you know, Aesop and a lot of those fables, they were moral tales for children, so somebody's really, really good and somebody's really, really bad. But we just kind of don't live in that world any more. You know, now the man murders a little girl who lives next door and then you find out that he was sexually abused as a child and she was kind of asking for it (laughs). So in a lot of the stories (in *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk*) everybody's bad and you kind of have to choose, like, 'okay, who's worse here?'

And I think what I liked about them was that, if you're writing a story with human character there's just a lot you need to — you know, even giving somebody a name, giving a character a name says so much about that character. But if you've got the squirrel and the chipmunk, it's fantastic, you know, because people aren't bringing their name judgment into it. But if I were reading a story and it was "the man and the woman," that gets on my nerves fast.

And also, with the squirrel and the chipmunk, everybody knows what a squirrel and a chipmunk look like. I mean, there are subtle variations, but you don't have to describe — you know, if, like, the squirrel has a little white around the eyes, you don't need to get into that.

So really, by the second line you're into your story. You can already move into the action of your story. Whereas in a traditional story it's going to take sometimes a page or more before it kind of — you know, you're going to spend a lot of time setting it up. So, there was something about that I liked. And also it's a genre that pretty much calls for brevity, so you've got to tell your story fairly quickly.

How does the U.S. look from your home in England? (Sedaris grew up in North Carolina, but several years ago moved abroad with his boyfriend Hugh Hamrick, first to France and, more recently, England)

It looks scarier — things look a lot more hopeless from over there than they do here. Because from over there, I mean, it can seem like, okay, the conservative thing in the United States is out of control and it's really scary. But then, when I come here — because I've been doing these readings and the people I'm talking to — it's like, 'Oh, there are lots of sane people left. Like not everybody's crazy.'

Which is the idea you can get from abroad when you're following the American political scene... Hugh, my boyfriend, he can tell you everything about the coalition government in England, and he doesn't know who Michelle Bachman is. But I was never able to make that leap. I can't stop caring.

I mean, sometimes, when it looks like things are going really bad, I think, 'Okay, fine, fine, I can get my British passport tomorrow if I want it. I have my green card, and any time I want my passport I can get it. And so I can think, like, 'Okay, fuck you, you've dug this grave for yourself.' But *I can't stop caring*.

Would you ever consider moving back to your homeland?

I would if I had to. I didn't leave because I was mad at the United States. I just always thought that if I had an opportunity, and if I had the means, I would want to live in other countries. I don't want to live in a hot place. Like, if I had to move to Thailand, I would never stop crying — a hot, humid place. But if I had to move to Poland I would say, 'Great, when do you want me to pack?'

You'll like the weather in Eugene.

Eugene has — okay, it's such a weird contradiction. I've never seen more white people with dreadlocks, and I've never seen so many barbershops. Have you ever noticed how many barbershops there are in Eugene? It's crazy how many barbershops there are.

'STRAIGHT PEOPLE DON'T WANT TO GO AND HEAR ABOUT YOU GIVING A GUY A BLOWJOB WHILE HE'S SITTING ON THE TOILET.'

Are there any subjects you consider off limits in your writing?

Sometimes people will say, 'Oh God, don't you have any shame.' It's like, what do you think you know? I don't mind writing that I'm in a doctor's waiting room in my underpants. That doesn't bother me at all. But I would never write about sex. I never write about having sex. I never write about sitting on the toilet.

I feel really bad for women in the movies now. It's this whole thing, they show women on the toilet in movies all the time now. And I always think, if I was that actress I would say, 'You know what? Take your money and shove it up your ass. I'm not going to sit on the toilet.' Nine times out of ten it's not even necessary.

Now, I'll write about somebody else on the toilet in a heartbeat. (Laughs) I'll write about somebody else having sex, sure, but not me. I think part of it is because I read out loud so often, and when you're on stage, if I'm reading about, let's say, sitting at the dinner table, then everyone pictures me sitting at the dinner table. And if I read about riding a bike, they picture me on a bike.

So if I read about having sex with someone, then they're going to picture me doing that. And it's like, there *are* people you'd want to picture doing that, but I'm not one of them. I mean, I kind of respect people who will write about that and talk about it. I admire them, in a way... because that's really putting yourself out there.

Well, I don't know, it's just a weird thing to say, but it's not my subject (sex), so I don't write about it, right? But at the same time, if I did write about it my audience would automatically be so much smaller, and my audience would be just a gay audience. Because straight people don't want to go and hear about you giving a guy a blowjob while he's sitting on the toilet.

Now, I don't think that's fair, because I grew up in the Raleigh public library. There were no books about homosexuals. And if I got a book, I would skim through it — you know, like a straight couple having sex, I would scan and skip ahead, but it didn't make me think, 'Oh, no, I'm not gonna...' I had to relate to those characters because they're human and I'm human. I didn't have a mirror. I couldn't say 'I will only read about characters exactly like myself,' because that would have meant not reading. Now your book can be a mirror... but I think you lose out when you do that.

Your writing is very satirical and sometimes considered taboo-breaking or un-P.C. How do you find a balance between propriety and revelation?

What's interesting to me is when people are like, 'Yeah, I want you to comment on that. Like I want you to make fun of those Republicans and stuff.' That's fantastic. But the second you make fun of them... And it's like, yeah, but that's who I am. I'm the person who makes fun of people.

I went to China last year. I never liked Chinese food. So then I went to China, and I really didn't like Chinese food. And I read it out loud ("Chicken toenails, anyone?" *The Guardian*, July 15, 2011). Then there was an article, it got printed in the Guardian in England. Somebody wrote this article as long as mine saying that I was a racist. And the gist of this thing is like — I didn't read it (laughs), my boyfriend read

it for me and then just kind of summarized it, so I could be wrong, I never read anything about myself — my understanding of it was like, you know, 'Why didn't you write about the long tradition of Chinese medicine. Why do you have to focus on the turds?'

Because that's my subject! Turds are my subject! If I see a turd, and if I see a begging child, and if I see a pot of gold, I'm going to go for the turd every time. That's who I've been all my life. That's who I am.

I went to the Philippines. And the Philippines is really a messed up place, and I had a fantastic time. It's different. The Philippines is a poor country, you know. China is not a poor country any more. China is a grown-up. They can take care of themselves, you know? So if I want to write about turds in China, China's a big boy, China can take care of itself. It wasn't on the same level as picking on a poor country.

I was asking people for jokes on my tour last year... You know, I said I want all jokes. I said, 'Tonight I want gay jokes. I want people to tell me gay jokes.' And people were holding back, holding back, holding back.

And then sometimes they told gay jokes that were just like — you know, I would thank them for telling me, but sometimes they just weren't that funny. Other times — I mean, like, somebody said, 'How are fags like tumbleweeds? They blow, and they blow, and they blow, until they wind up stuck to a fence in Wyoming.'

I was like, 'That's fantastic.' I am so glad to know that joke. I was glad to know it's out there, and it's not a bad joke. I mean, you know, it's a hard joke, but it's not an uninteresting joke. I mean, sometimes you just have to hand it to somebody. Even if they're making fun of you.

You said you have eight new, unpublished stories you're reading on this tour. Do you work with a set list? What can Eugene expect?

Sometimes you think, 'Gosh, these people are with me. I'm going to try something I've never read before.' I feel safe trying something new here. So sometimes I change my list when I'm up there. I always sign books beforehand and after.

And so sometimes beforehand I'll meet somebody and alter my playlist according to them.

An Evening with David Sedaris takes place 7:30 pm Thursday, Nov. 3, at Hult Center; tickets at hultcenter.org or 682-5000; \$27.50-\$39.50.