

# Naked assignment

Literature



David Sedaris is a brilliant writer. His works are hilarious, but also have a quality of sadness to them. However, at times, Sedaris does not create this poignant feeling in his narratives. There are three stories from his book, *Naked*, that fail to have this deeper understanding. In *A Plague of Tics*, Sedaris describes his childhood of obsessively and repeatedly licking light switches, counting steps, touching telephone poles, jabbing mailboxes, and rocking back and forth, not because he wanted to but “because nothing was worse than the anguish of not doing them” (9).

Instead of focusing on how this disorder affected him negatively, he writes about it in a very humorous way. Two sentences are illustrative. “ ‘ That is Miss Chestnut’s light switch, and she likes to keep it dry. Would you like me to come over to your house and put my tongue on your light switches? ’ ” (7). “ It had come out of nowhere, my desperate urge to summon high-pitched noises from the back of my throat... ‘ Eeeeeeeee – ummmmmmmmm – ahhhh – ahhh – meeeeeeee’ ” (17). Looking back on his or her childhood years, almost every person can find an awkward moment.

And Sedaris seems to find the most embarrassing and painful ones and make them plainly and unabashedly comical. Sedaris just never addresses the pain in this part of his life. Instead, he makes it laughable. In the short story, *Next of Kin*, Sedaris writes about finding a pornographic book as a child. In the book there are many instances of incest. But instead of making these acts the main focus of the story, Sedaris directs the reader’s attention to the spelling errors of the pornography book, which is what makes this story funny.

For example, “ In the opening chapter the daughter is caught with her brother’s ceck in her pissy, calling out ‘ feck me hard, hardir’. When on page thirty-three the son has sex with his mother, he leaves the woman’s ‘ tots glistening with jasm’ ” (41). If you take out the spelling errors, the passage wouldn’t nearly seem as hilarious as it is. What’s disturbing is his failure to address the emotional pain that at least some of the participants must have experienced. Again, as with the first story, one wonders why he doesn’t go further.

This story is superficial compared to others in this collection. While it’s funny, it lacks depth. Cyclops focuses on Sedaris’s father, a man who taught life lessons through anecdotes. In one, he warned his children about the hazards of shooting a BB gun by relating a story in which he claimed that a mishap with such a gun caused his childhood friend, Frank, to lose an eye and spend the rest of his life as a cyclops. This was one of many amusing tales intended to discourage the Sedaris children from engaging in dangerous behaviors.

He told another such story just before Sedaris began to mow the lawn, an assignment that Sedaris was given because his father didn’t want to do himself and didn’t want to pay someone else to do. The story dealt with the misfortune suffered by a man who didn’t appreciate the dangers of mowing the lawn. “ What happened,” he said, “ is that the guy slipped, probably on a pile of crap, and his left leg got caught up in the blade. He found his foot, carried it to the hospital, but it was too late to sew it back on.

Can you imagine that? The guy drove fifteen, twenty miles with his foot in his lap” (49). The oddity of the father’s anecdotes is that they were not true,

something that Sedaris discovers only by chance several years after the telling. Just as oddly, after Sedaris makes this discovery, he doesn't tell the reader what his feelings were about the untruths. Did he then question all the things his father had told him in the past? Did the discovery cause him to doubt his father's words in the present?

Sedaris settles for mere humor, rather than exploring the deeper meaning of the father-son relationship. Sedaris's talents are obvious. He sees the humor in situations that might not normally be thought of as funny and makes us laugh at times when we know we shouldn't. But, at his best, he goes beyond the humorous. His most compelling stories explore complexities and nuances and shine light on the attendant pain and sadness. The three stories discussed here do not reach that standard. They are merely very funny.