

A STUDY OF THE HUMAN ANIMAL

a review by Timothy K. Nixon

David Sedaris. *The Best of Me*. Little, Brown and Company, 2020.

David Sedaris has certainly attained fame, celebrity, and recognition. He has appeared on numerous late-night talk shows, is adored by fans of public radio, and can be seen doing cooking segments on daytime TV with his sister, actress Amy Sedaris, even though he has admitted before that he cedes the kitchen almost entirely to his husband, Hugh. David Sedaris's distinctive voice – slightly nasal, slightly lispy, what he himself describes as “high-pitched and girlish” (56) – is readily recognizable to listeners of *This American Life*, and his sold-out audiences in public venues are repeatedly shocked and amused by his swings from the profane to the philosophical, from the obscene to the astute. More than this notoriety, however, Sedaris has earned for himself the designation of an established American writer. His essay “Jesus Shaves” has been anthologized by W.W. Norton in its *Introduction to Literature*, placing his work in college classrooms across the US – no surer sign of having arrived, of having become canonical, exists.

It seems appropriate, then, for us to be presented with *The Best of Me*, a greatest hits collection if there ever was one. *The Best of Me* includes pieces extracted from almost all of Sedaris's previous books, from *Barrel Fever* (1994) to *Calypso* (2018), and many of these pieces have also appeared in publications like *Esquire*, *GQ*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Paris Review*. However, his published diary entries from *Theft by Finding* (2017) do not find their way into this collection. What we uncover in *The Best of Me* is a sampling of some of

the finest public writing Sedaris has authored. More than that, though, we are confronted with a career that has an obvious and notable through line: a study of the human animal.

Whether it is through careful curating or because of his body of work's persistent focus, *The Best of Me* demonstrates emphatically that David Sedaris relishes placing *Homo sapiens* beneath the proverbial microscope. In the fictional pieces included in the collection, Sedaris attempts to inhabit the minds of people far removed from and even distasteful to the author himself. The collection opens with “Glen's Homophobia Newsletter Vol. 3, No. 2.” The reader could be forgiven for assuming Sedaris would align himself with the narrator of that piece, given that they are both gay men with writerly ambitions. However, what becomes quickly apparent is the derision and disdain Sedaris feels for his narrator, someone he depicts as happily aggrieved, an individual enrobed in victimhood. Likewise, “Just a Quick E-mail” reveals the bitchy cattiness of a woman relishing her social, financial, and relationship successes, which come at the expense of her sister's happiness and well-being. In these and other fictive pieces within the collection, Sedaris appears to be, not unlike James Baldwin, trying to see the world through the eyes of people who hold views he finds repugnant, albeit with more humor and irony than Baldwin ever employed.

Other works in *The Best of Me* also show Sedaris examining human subjects, trying to understand their motivations,



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limits, and worldviews. He is not beyond laying himself out on the examination table so readers can observe these dissections. The account of his sister Tiffany's suicide in “Now We Are Five” and his mother's alcoholism in “Why Aren't You Laughing?” are stunningly candid considerations of David Sedaris – the individual, the brother, the son – and are rife with pathos. Additional, more light-hearted essays in the collection demonstrate Sedaris's willingness to be the butt of his own jokes, whether his awkward queerness is highlighted in accounts of his childhood in Raleigh, NC, or his neurotic quirks is foregrounded in anecdotes about his interactions with family and neighbors during his frequent trips to Emerald Isle, NC, as an adult. Furthermore, it is truly interesting to see how the reader is occasionally studied as well, as is the case in “Dog Days.” This brief sampling of doggerel proceeds from the infantile and silly – “Rags, the Shatwells' Irish setter, / doubles as a paper shredder” (75) – to the indecent and disgusting. Rather than being somehow ill-suited to this collection because of its wandering into experimen-

tal genres, however, this particular piece seems to be doing nothing more than testing the reader's sense of humor and tolerance, as if Sedaris is repeatedly asking, “Okay, you're still with me? Well, how about this?” Nevertheless, in all cases the works included in *The Best of Me* illustrate how Sedaris repeatedly places individuals – his characters, his readers, and himself – under a magnifying glass.

In addition to laughter, readers' initial reactions to the individual pieces, not to mention the collection as a whole, will be a mixture of confusion and curiosity. Nothing seems to motivate Sedaris more than forwarding bizarre juxtapositions that take the reader a bit of time to understand. His essay “Laugh, Kookaburra” provides an especially useful example. In that piece, Sedaris considers family relationships and his connection to his siblings and parents, but it is all done through this seemingly random, somewhat unrelated account of a trip to Australia that included the experience of feeding a wild kookaburra strips of raw duck meat. The encounter with the bird, narrated in vivid, almost breathless detail,

captivates the reader, but it is a memory trigger for Sedaris as he recalls a spanking from his father and more recent tensions. These juxtapositions occur frequently and should lead the reader to contemplate whether they are non sequiturs or analogies or something else entirely.

In his introduction to *The Best of Me*, Sedaris reflects on his public writing. He says, “When I first started writing essays, they were about big, dramatic events, the sort you relate when you meet someone new and are trying to explain to them what made you the person you are. As I get older, I find myself writing about smaller and smaller things. As an exercise it's much more difficult, and thus – for me, anyway – much more rewarding” (6–7). The emphasis on scale is significant here. Sedaris is talking about his scope and perspective; he is not referring to his subject. Although unstated, it becomes apparent to readers of *The Best of Me* that over the span of his career, the public writing David Sedaris has produced has engaged in a persistent, repeated study of the human animal: those around him, his readers, and the author himself. ■

