

HAVE NO FEAR: DAVID SEDARIS IS STILL HERE

a review by Jennifer McGaha

David Sedaris. *Happy-Go-Lucky*:
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DAVID SEDARIS was born in Johnson City, NY, but grew up in Raleigh, NC. Sedaris shared a recording of his essay "The Ship Shape" (read by him) for the *NCLR Mirth Carolina Laugh Tracks* CD. He is the bestselling author of numerous books, including *The Best of Me* (Little Brown, 2020; reviewed in *NCLR Online* Fall 2022), *Calypso* (Little Brown, 2018; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2019), *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* (Little Brown, 2004; reviewed in *NCLR* 2005). He regularly contributes to *The New Yorker* and BBC Radio 4.

"Seek approval from the one person you desperately want it from, and you're guaranteed not to get it" (100). This is the hard-won wisdom that David Sedaris brings to his latest book, and if you were concerned that Sedaris's edges might be softening as he hits the publication of his twelfth book, have no fear: The Sedaris of 2024 is just as hilarious and close to the bone as the Sedaris of the '90s. In his latest collection, *Happy-Go-Lucky*, Sedaris's work is raw and honest yet tender in just the right doses.

In essays spanning from New York's Upper East Side to Normandy to Emerald Isle and Raleigh, NC, Sedaris recounts natural, familial, and national crises alongside everyday moments with his characteristic sardonic wit. Humor, as always, is both a way in and a way out of the darker moments, and part of the power of this book lies in how well Sedaris captures both the ordinary and extraordinary as stories about his ninety-five-year-old father's decline and subsequent death, his sister Tiffany's mental health issues and suicide, gun violence, the pandemic, Hurricane Florence, and the Black Lives Matter movement are interspersed with discussions of shopping, book tours, a flea market adventure in Serbia, some long-awaited dental work, and so on. Timing is everything in both comedy and in writing, and Sedaris's timing is, as always, impeccable. The scenes with Sedaris and his family of origin, but especially with his sisters and longtime partner, Hugh, are often wickedly funny, and these moments are even more compelling when put in the context of Sedaris's growing awareness of his - and

their - mortality. "I cannot bear watching my sisters get old," he writes. "It just seems cruel. They were all such beauties." (59). The closeness of his bond with his siblings is always apparent on the page, such as in the chapter "Hurricane Season," when Sedaris writes about when his sisters complain about Hugh's moodiness: "I'd like to be loyal when they complain about him. I'd like to say, 'I'm sorry, but that's my boyfriend of almost thirty years you're talking about.' But I've always felt that my first loyalty is to my family, and so I whisper, 'Isn't it horrible?'" (60). It is funny, of course, but it is also evidence of the deep bonds this family shares. Later, in "Pearls," as Sedaris describes listening to Hugh practice piano and his determination to "to get it right" (162), readers sense that we are talking about more than piano playing. We are talking about love, about all the ways we are loved and misloved, and all the ways we love and mislove in return, and all the ways we keep on trying to love better nonetheless. While many essayists and memoirists seem to spend a lot of time turned inward, rebuking themselves for their moments of indiscretion or insensitivity to the point of self-flagellation, Sedaris's work is often refreshingly unapologetic. For example, he refers to his multiple homes (including two Upper East Side apartments in the same building), his penchant for shopping, his professional successes, and his travels without what has become customary in memoir: the "I know how lucky I am" disclaimer. Though he says he doesn't read negative reviews himself, at one point, his sister Gretchen tells him she has been

reading people's negative comments about him online. "A lot of people just can't stand you," Gretchen says. "I know," Sedaris writes. "It's a consequence of putting stuff out there" (65). In other words, if you tell the hard truths, some people aren't going to like you. It's simply part of the job. And in characteristic form, Sedaris does not hold back as he recounts a couple of cringe-worthy moments such as when he offers to help fund a stranger's dental work (the stranger does not take him up on the offer) or when, visiting an actor's home to discuss a possible collaboration, he mistakes the actor's Black wife for an employee. "My face still burns to think of this," he says (172). Still, the fact that he has told readers this story, his willingness to say it all, to lay bare what most of us would never have spoken of again, is part of what keeps us reading, what allows us to see our own flawed selves on these pages. Another such moment happens when Sedaris is roaming the streets of New York during the pandemic and finds himself accidentally swept up in a mass protest. "As the days passed and the marches became ubiquitous, I grew to think of them much the way I do about buses and subways. *I'll just take this BLM down to 23rd Street,*" he says. "The people were friendly, the snacks plentiful, and it felt good to walk in the middle of the avenue" (170). His descriptions of the protests imply boredom, certainly, disillusionment, perhaps, and also a sense that, for a lot of the white protestors, the marches are largely performative, devoid of any clear plan of action or true reckoning with their own complicity in systems of racial injustice. Finally, Sedaris

brings his scathing cultural critique full circle when he asks, of the march literally but also of the deep cultural divides in this country, "How might I cross? How do I, how do all of us, get to the other side?" (177). For all its meandering, though, the touchstone of the book (the through-thread, if you will) is Sedaris's problematic father. Though his father has softened in his advanced age, become "happy-go-lucky" as never before, Sedaris is always mindful of the other, younger version, the critical, unreasonable, unwavering father who was "strange in a lot of ways" (199). Before he dies but when he is in a "neither-here-nor-there state," Sedaris's father asks his children, "Am I . . . real to you kids?" (97). Moments later, he says to Sedaris, "I want to tell you . . . you . . . you won" (95). The moment is perplexing and confounding. Is this an apology of sorts? If so, it seems to be too little, too late, and it is perhaps Sedaris's candor about the way his father treated him and the lasting impact of his abuse that makes this exploration of grief so compelling. "As long as my father had power," he says, "he used it to hurt me" (238).

A particularly poignant moment in the book comes at a restaurant just after his father's burial when Sedaris laments the platitudes that people offer the bereaved, such as reassurances that their loved one will always be with them in a sense.

"What – if I don't want him with me?" Sedaris asks. "What if sixty-four years of constant criticism and belittlement were enough, and I'm actually fine with my father and me going our separate ways, him in a cooler at the funeral home and me here at the kids' table?" (195). Sedaris's anger and sense of betrayal here are palpable, and this rhetorical question feels like the purest expression of grief – grief not for the dead father but for the father he never had. Nonetheless, *Happy-Go-Lucky* leaves us both reassured and amazed that this family, what is left of them anyway, have pulled together to survive the worst of their childhood traumas. Leaving the restaurant that same night, Sedaris, Hugh, and some of the other family members happen to look across the street and see, through an open window in the house across the street, a naked "middle-aged and buxom" woman. Instead of looking away, they marvel together at the sight. "To hear us in a gang like that, the wonder in our voices, the delight and energy, you'd almost think we were children," *A Few Lines Later*: Sedaris says (103). The moment is, like the other best moments in this book, both funny and sad in a strange and edgy way, which is to say, in true Sedaris style, and the final chapter's title, "Lucky-Go-Happy," underscores the sense of wonderment and gratitude that permeate this candid and, once again, supremely funny book. ■

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