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The Guide

A theatergoer's resource edited by the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

The Santaland Diaries

By David Sedaris; Adapted for the stage by Joe Mantello;
Directed by Wendy Knox; Starring Darius Pierce

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About the Artists



David Sedaris

David Sedaris was born December 26, 1956, in Johnson City, New York. He made his comic debut reading *The Santaland Diaries* on National Public Radio's *Morning Edition*. David and his sister, Amy Sedaris, have collaborated under the name The Talent Family and written several plays including *Stump the Host*, *Stitches*, *One Woman Shoe* (Obie Award), *Incident at Cobbler's Knob* and *The Book of Liz*. His best-selling novels include *Barrel Fever* (1994), *Naked* (1997), *Holidays on Ice* (1997) and *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (2000). David Sedaris taught writing at the Art Institute of Chicago for two years and his essays appear regularly in *Esquire*. His original radio pieces can be heard on public radio's *This American Life*. He was named Humorist of the Year 2001 by *Time* magazine, and in September 2001 he became the third recipient of the Thurber Prize for American Humor.

Darius Pierce

Darius is thrilled be spending his fifth holiday season with PCS after two years with *A Christmas Story* and two with *A Christmas Carol*. Other productions at PCS include *The Beard of Avon* (Drammy Award for Outstanding Lead Actor), *Twelfth Night*, *25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps*, *Frost/Nixon*, *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found*, *Misalliance* and the JAW Festival. Elsewhere, some of his favorite productions have



been *The Gaming Table* and *Comedy of Errors* (Folger Theater); *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (Profile Theatre); *As You Like It* (Portland Shakespeare Project); *Les Miserables* (Broadway Rose); *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* (Portland

Playhouse); *The Long Christmas Ride Home* and *A Devil Inside* (Theatre Vertigo). Darius is a co-founder of the Anonymous Theatre Company, which produces the annual theatrical event Anonymous Theatre with Theatre Vertigo. He can also very occasionally be seen on screen, where his credits include *Leverage*, *Mock Trials*, *Train Master II* and *Cell Count*. He would like to thank PCS, Wendy and Mark for entrusting Crumpet to him – a Jew who loves Christmas. In fact, it has inspired him to write a similar one-man holiday show entitled *The Maccabee Chronicles*. 🍷

From Cleaning Out Fridges to April in Paris

by Michael Taylor
November 22, 2005

David Sedaris leapt from obscurity as a New York housecleaner into the national spotlight as one of public radio's best-loved commentators after reading from his *Santaland Diaries* on *Morning Edition* in 1992. He waded through the resulting scattershot of offers from advertisers and television producers before going on to write best-selling books. Thirteen years later, Sedaris has come to uneasy terms with his celebrity. Speaking by phone from his London apartment, he recently talked about the early days, the suddenness of fame, and reactions to his work.

NPR: Many magazine and newspaper articles about you cite *Santaland Diaries* as the first major breakthrough for you as a writer. What kind of reaction did you experience when the piece aired? Did the impact of its popularity strike you right away?

Sedaris: No, *Santaland* was the first thing I ever had on the radio. I'd read out loud before and had things published in small magazines, but no one had ever heard of them. When I did a reading out loud, there might have been eighteen people in the audience. To go from that to the *Morning Edition* audience is a pretty substantial leap.

After *Santaland*, the phone just started ringing. One time, a telephone operator even called me. She called to say that she had heard [the piece]. I didn't know operators were allowed to make calls. I was thinking, "Don't you need to be at your switchboard? Maybe somebody needs to go to the hospital."

Strangers would call, and then people that I'd known all my life whom I'd lost contact with would call and say, "Oh, I heard you on the radio." I think it was then that it

struck me. I have always been an *All Things Considered* listener, but I'd never listened to *Morning Edition*. I've always thought that the definition of a good life was being asleep when *Morning Edition* was on. I never listened to the show, so I never had a concept of anyone else listening to it, I suppose. I was very, very surprised.

Again, it was just from that one story. It was one thing for someone you went to high school with to call, but then people called wanting me to do commercials or write a movie. It was heady to go from no having opportunities to so many. I didn't take any of them, but I was just so happy to be on the radio. That was what I'd always wanted, so I didn't want to do a voice-over for a pain reliever commercial or to write a situation comedy or anything like that. It's always nice to be asked, but that aspect was just sort of overwhelming.

I'd been writing for a long time, and I'd been in New York for two years. I'd been working steadily, it's just I owe Ira Glass. He just changed my life.

NPR: Could you explain how that relationship developed? How did you and National Public Radio find one another?

Sedaris: It was by accident. I was living in Chicago, and someone from WBEZ was doing a show about diaries, so they asked me to read something from my diary. It was me and two or three other people at my local NPR station that I listened to all the time. So that happened, and then it was all forgotten about.

I was reading somewhere later, and Ira Glass was in the audience. He introduced himself. A few years later, he called, asking if I had anything Christmassy for a show that he was doing at the time called *The Wild Room*, which was sort of a primitive version of *This American Life*.

So I recorded the Santa story for that, and then he put it on *Morning Edition*. It was just by accident. Again, I'd always listened to NPR, but I'm not a very aggressive person, so I would not ever have sent a tape or done anything like that. I just sort of wished a lot.

NPR: What do you remember about the process of recording your pieces for broadcast? Did it seem odd to be reading them into a microphone?

Sedaris: There's such a huge difference between reading out loud and reading into a microphone. [On the radio] you don't stop if you make a mistake.

If you get too close to the microphone, you just back up and you continue. If you flub a word, you just pretend it never happened. I think there was pressure, having the microphone there.

NPR: Did you feel you were prepared to read stories over the radio? Did you have confidence in your voice?

Sedaris: None whatsoever. It doesn't make any sense that my voice would be on the radio. You know, I was walking down the street yesterday, and I saw a policeman in a wheelchair. Now, if you were paralyzed, chances are that you would draw up a list of occupations you might want to do and then you would put a line through the ones you couldn't. And policeman? You'd just say, "Nope. Can't be a cop..." There was something so great about this man being able to be a policeman, even though he was in a wheelchair. I think that's the way I think of myself on the radio: "I can't do that." People have sonorous radio voices, and mine is not that at all.

NPR: How did you adapt your writing to radio format?

Sedaris: Ira taught me a lot about writing for the radio. If you're writing something for the page, you can say, "I was at dinner with Frank and Stephanie and Philip and Rudy and Janet and Curtis, and Curtis said something about [Makes buzzer sound]." You can't put seven names into a radio listener's head, especially if they don't all play an active part of the story.

Ira taught me to pay attention and to understand why I listened to certain things, and that you can't flood people's minds. You have to sort of pace the story out. And, of course, there's always words you can't use.

NPR: Do you have any memory of any words you can't use?

Sedaris: Pussy! No, let's see... There was a story I did one time, I think the word "turd." And then there were words, and there were concepts, say, that couldn't be used on the radio. I find that, for all the pretense, it's nearly impossible to talk about race in America.

I've learned too that from reading on the radio and reading out loud since I've been on the radio, that you can always count on people being offended by something, even if it's something you didn't mention. For instance, I did three little stories about monkeys, and this woman wrote a very angry letter saying, "The first time you said monkey, I laughed along with

everybody else. And then you said it again. When you got to the third time, I saw what you were really about. And not only are you a racist, you're a GAY racist. In case you didn't know, African Americans have been referred to as monkeys for years."

Well, monkeys have been referred to as monkeys longer. I mean, they were stories about monkeys! They weren't code! And I get letters sometimes, and sometimes you think, "Oh, this will piss people off," but that's not really the case. Often it's just things that are completely unintentional.

NPR: In what way do you feel your career was shaped by those initial readings for National Public Radio?

Sedaris: I think that one big change was that before NPR I had been writing fiction, and when I'd read aloud, I would tend to read fiction. Every now and then I'd read from my diary, but not higgledy-piggledy; they were things I sensed might work out loud. But for the radio, things had to be non-fiction, which is something that really hadn't occurred to me. *Santaland* was just stuff in my diary. All I did was take things from my diary and arrange them. When they said, "Do you want to be on again?" I thought, "Well, what would I talk about?!" At that point I wasn't used to writing non-fiction. By now, I can't remember how to write fiction anymore.

NPR: What's the most memorable reaction to one of your radio pieces?

Sedaris: When I first started out on the radio on *Morning Edition*, they would say, "David Sedaris cleans apartments in New York." I worked for a house-cleaning company, so I had regular clients, and then after I was on the radio, I got all these calls from people who wanted their houses cleaned. I thought, "I can make some money out of this!" But nine times out of 10, I would go to the person's house, and it would be spotless, and they would be home. The people I had been working for before, they were never home, so I would get paid for three hours of work and be out of there in an hour and a half.

I would go to these new clients' homes, and they would be just sitting there with nothing for me to do. And they would say, for instance, "I work with the deaf. And if you could do a radio story about my organization, it would be one hand washing the other." I really wasn't prepared for that at all.



NPR: Would they pay you for stopping by?

Sedaris: Well they would, but I wouldn't want to go back. [Appearing on the radio] sort of ruined my job. In many ways, cleaning apartments was the best job I ever had. It had paid well, and it suited me. Being on the radio sort of ruined that.

NPR: Had your career taken off enough at that point that you had something to fall back on?

Sedaris: Not really. When I moved to New York, cleaning apartments was my job. If Ira hadn't put me on the radio, I would still be living in New York, cleaning houses. I don't have any skills. Even if my first book had come out, that's what I'd still be doing. I think people have the idea that you get paid a ton of money for a book, but you don't really.

I mean, I don't ever feel like, "God-damned public radio! I could be cleaning the Rosenblatts' refrigerator right now!" But it did cost me my job. I assume that happens to everybody who is a commentator on public radio. They just do a commentary, and then their life just changes. ■

Macy's: Home of the World's Only One, True Santa

by Cynthia Kirk

Although department stores in other cities had had sidewalk Santas, in 1862 Macy's became the first store in New York with its own Santa, on site. Macy's lost no time in heightening the mystique around its Santa, billing itself in holiday advertising as the "Home of Santa," "Santa's Headquarters," etc. By the 1870s, Macy's toy department had tripled in size. The addition of mechanized holiday windows – another R.H. Macy innovation – added to the department store's Christmas allure.

By 1918, family visits to Macy's Santa had become so popular that two Santas reigned in back-to-back thrones. In 1914, the store launched the Macy's Christmas Parade (the name was changed to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in 1932), its aim being to welcome Santa to town. Santa usually brought up the rear of the parade; once it reached the store, he leapt from his sleigh, climbed a ladder to the center of the store's mid-34th Street marquee, and dramatically unveiled the elaborate Christmas

windows. The shopping season had officially begun!

Throughout the '20s and '30s, a special home – usually in the toy department -- was created each Christmas for Santa and his elves. It was variously called Santa's Wonderland, North PoleLand, etc. Picture-taking of children with Santa began in the 1940s. With

the huge popularity of the movie *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), people from all over the world came to Macy's and the store became a holiday must-do, like the Rockettes or Rockefeller Center.

In 1976, SantaLand became a permanent, year-round fixture on the eighth floor of the store. In 1997, it was rebuilt with a magic forest, a bakery, animated teddy bears, mechanical trees, a sleigh, and of course Santa's house where elves escort each family to a private session with Santa. In 1978, 150,000 people toured SantaLand; by 1990, that number jumped to 300,000. 180 people – including 120 elves – work at SantaLand. Elf duties are diverse: in addition to SantaLand, their duties may include working the Christmas marionette theater, or performing in one of two strolling group of singers – the Dickens Quartet or Tree-O, three singing Christmas trees.

In addition to David Sedaris, celebrity inhabitants of SantaLand include Monty Wooley (New Yorker writer and inspiration for *The Man Who Came to Dinner*), Santa 1944; and elves F. Murray Abraham (actor, *Amadeus*), Tammy Doring (actor, TV's *Popular*) and Tom Murphy (1998 Tony Award, Best Featured Actor, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*).

The overwhelming success of *The SantaLand Diaries* – article, NPR commentary and play – has only increased interest in SantaLand. And, perhaps more significantly according to Macy's, it actually changed its culture. Elves are now better paid, working conditions have improved and the true spirit of Christmas -- not just toys and photos – is the first order of business. 🏠



About *This American Life*

"The Santaland Diaries" were originally broadcast by NPR's Morning edition, then continued on the WBEZ Chicago Program, "This American Life." Since then, David Sedaris has become a regular contributor to the program.

One of our problems from the start has been that when we try to describe *This American Life* in a sentence or two, it just sounds awful. For instance: each week we choose a theme and put together different kinds of stories on that theme. That doesn't sound like something we'd want to listen to on the radio, and it's our show.

So usually we just say what we're not. We're not a news show or a talk show or a call-in show. We're

not really formatted like other radio shows at all. Instead, we do these stories that are like movies for radio. There are people in dramatic situations. Things happen to them. There are funny moments and emotional moments and—hopefully—moments where the people in the story say interesting, surprising things about it all. It has to be surprising. It has to be fun.

Each episode has a theme. That's mostly because a theme makes it seem like there's a reason to sit and listen to a story about a contest where everyone stands around a truck for days until only one person is left on their feet...or a grown man trying to convince a skeptical friend that not only has he heard the world's greatest phone message, but that it's about the Little

Mermaid...or a man who's obsessed with Niagara Falls, lives minutes from the Falls, writes and thinks about the Falls all the time, but can't bring himself to actually visit the Falls because, as he says, "they've ruined the Falls." If you're not doing stories about the news, or celebrities, or things people have ever heard of elsewhere, you have to give people a reason to keep listening. The themes make it seem like you should.

We view the show as an experiment. We try things. There was the show where we taped for 24 hours in an all-night restaurant. And the show where we put a band together from musicians' classified ads. And the show where we followed a group of swing voters for months, recording their reactions to everything that happened in the campaign, right up through their final decision. And the show where we had a story for each of the Ten Commandments. Or the one where our producers all collected stories for a weekend at the same rest stop. We also occasionally do our own versions of stories that are in the news, including award winning economics coverage that spawned another entire program called Planet Money.

We think of the show as journalism. One of the people who helped start the program, Paul Tough, says that what we're doing is applying the tools of journalism to everyday lives, personal lives. Which is true. It's also true that the journalism we do tends to use a lot of the techniques of fiction: scenes and characters and narrative threads.

Meanwhile, the fiction we have on the show functions like journalism: it's fiction that describes what it's like to be here, now, in America. What we like are stories that are both funny and sad. Personal and sort of epic at the same time.

We sometimes think of our program as a documentary show for people who normally hate documentaries. A public radio show for people who don't necessarily care for public radio.

Some of the writers whose work has been on the program: David Sedaris, Sarah Vowell, Russell Banks, Dave Eggers, David Rakoff, Tobias Wolff, Anne Lamott, Michael Lewis, Michael Chabon, Nick Hornby, Alex Kotlowitz, Dan Savage, David Foster Wallace, Spalding Gray, Gay Talese, Aimee Bender, Lydia Davis, Junot Diaz, Mike Birbiglia and Shalom Auslander.

This American Life started in 1995 in Chicago. It went national in early 1996 and in the years since, it's won a lot of awards—the Peabody, the duPont-Columbia, the Murrow, and the Overseas Press Club, to name a few. Ira Glass, the host of the show, was named best radio host in the country by Time Magazine and received the highest individual honor in public broadcasting, the Edward R. Murrow Award. The



American Journalism Review declared that the show is at "the vanguard of a journalistic revolution."

The program is produced by Chicago Public Media, distributed by Public Radio International, and airs on more than 500 public radio stations across the country. They say 1.7 million people listen to us on the radio each week, which sometimes is hard to imagine. It's probably airing this weekend on a station near you. Most weeks This American Life is also the most popular podcast in the country, with more than half a million downloads. 📻

How to Be a Mall Santa Claus for Christmas Cash

1. It helps if you can develop a good Ho Ho Ho. Forget the nutty Australians. I know it sounds unnatural but you gotta do the Ho Ho Ho thing. Kids expect to hear Ho Ho Ho, parents expect to hear Ho Ho Ho. So you go: Ho Ho Ho!
2. You have to know the names of the reindeer. Just try to get that popular Rudolph line down to get them in order and that'll help: Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner, Blitzen. Some child will eventually ask their names.
3. You'll need to think fast on some other questions. I got asked: who is your mother? I fumbled a bit, but then said "Mrs. Claus. Not Mrs. Claus my wife, but Mrs. Claus my mother." It worked.
4. Expect the occasional child who brings cookies or maybe oats for the reindeer. Just set them aside with appropriate comments. For cookies, just say you'll love to have them later with your milk. For the oats, just say the reindeer love oats more than anything.
5. The child may not want to sit on your lap. Go with it. If they show reluctance, I tell them they can sit on my lap or just stand next to me, "whatever you want." Interestingly, most then jump onto my lap.
6. Ask their name first. Use it once or twice if you can.
7. Expect some mumbling and soft voices. It isn't important you really hear clearly what they want since your response will always be the same. However, keep in mind that there will be kids who will bring you a written list or who will show you a magazine clipping showing what they want. Use that: examine the picture closely, ask if they have anything similar already—that sort of thing.
8. Do not promise them anything specific. Just say "I'll see what I can do. But whatever you get for Christmas, I'll make sure it's something you like."
9. Be ready to make adjustments to this advice depending on the circumstances, whether you are a guest at a children's party or in public with a line of kids ready to jump in your lap and provide their list.

Source: <http://yhoo.it/SFEVF9>





SANTACON GUIDELINES:

1. Santa does not make children cry. Really, if you see kids, don't do anything to freak them out. Give them a nice smile and possibly a gift of some kind (toys, candy etc). Parents and tourists are a different matter altogether - adjust based on their attitude.
2. Santa dresses for all occasions. It's December. Smart santas wear multiple costume layers. Dress to maximize merriment whether singing Christmas carols in the snow or swinging from a stripper pole in a hot nightclub.
3. Santa doesn't whine! We will be outside a lot and commuting mainly on foot - bring enough "snacks" to keep your pie-hole filled until we get indoors.
4. Bring gifts: NAUGHTY gifts to give grown ups; NICE stuff to give kids. Throwing coal at people is discouraged no matter who they are. YES THAT INCLUDES POLITICIANS. But giving out coal might actually be appreciated.
5. Watching Santa get drunk and rowdy is fun. Babysitting Santa while he vomits in an alley is not. Don't be that Santa.
6. Make sure you always pay for your beer and tip the bar staff. We want to be able to do this again so be polite and cultivate the goodwill of the local community.
7. Please pay for your drinks as soon as you get them. Santas get tired of waiting on other Santas to clear their tab before being able to move on. This entire adventure should be cash-only.
8. "No Santas left behind!" - Don't think only of #1. Santa is not inconsiderate of his fellow Santas like that. Pick a few people you know and keep an eye out for them when it's time to move to the next location. If you don't see them, speak up so other Santas know to wait a moment. Every Santa should have at least 2-3 other Santas they look out for and 2-3 that look out for them in turn.
9. Stay with the group. It's not just a case of "the more, the merrier" - Santa is safer with large numbers of fellow Santas and what one Santa can't achieve (or get away with) is a possibility for 50 or more!
10. Dress up! You don't have to dress exactly like Santa proper. In fact, unusual interpretations of Santaness are much appreciated, both by those we bring joy to - as well as your fellow Santarchists! Elves, reindeer themes etc. are fine as well!
11. Please remember that this is all about having fun. Most Santas like to take their fun with a little alcohol which is fine. What is not fine, however, is getting completely sh#t-faced to the point that Santas end up being abusive or violent. Remember that there is no "bail fund" for incarcerated Santas and if you cross the line you'll be on your own.
12. Santa doesn't drink & drive and neither should you. If you're going to drink you must make sure that you can get safely home without driving yourself. Check public transport, carpool with a designated sober driver, make arrangements to sleep over at someone's place, etc. Organizers sometimes try to coordinate transportation to get Santas safely home. Check the message boards and groups for your local SantaCon to find out if this is being done in your area.
13. You MUST address everyone as "Santa."
14. You SHOULD "ho-ho-ho" like Santa.
15. You OUGHT to give out gifts like Santa.
16. You MIGHT want to drink like Santa.
17. Santa doesn't talk to the press. Even "Ho-ho-ho" is too dangerous these days.
18. Santa doesn't get arrested - please read these guidelines one more time.
19. If you have reached this rule, it means you didn't get locked into a loop reading the guidelines over and over again as per the previous rule. You are therefore intelligent enough to take part in SantaCon!
20. Have a VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS!

from <http://santacon.info/About.html>