

The Editor

Darinda Sharp

I worked my way through the crowd, into a line of more than 300 people to meet one of my favorite authors and get him to sign his latest book. It was October of 2009 and more than 1,500 captivated fans packed into a school auditorium to hear to him speak. David Sedaris had come to Little Rock, and I was there – front row, stage right.

I assumed he'd read from previous works. He had seven books and dozens of articles to his name, so he didn't have to search for material. My assumption was wrong. He treated us to some of his unpublished work.

One piece was from a forthcoming book of animal fables. In the story, several critters stood in an airport-like line grouching about unreasonable procedures and bureaucratic inflexibility. The counter agent, a black snake, refused to bend the rules. An argument ensued and ultimately, the duck walked away.

Something about the story bothered me, but I couldn't figure out exactly what. Was it one of the points of the story? There were several messages – some more subtle than others – about violence, racism, security, ignorance, and hypocrisy. Was one of the lessons hitting too close to home? I didn't think so, but I wasn't sure.

As I stood in line, waiting to meet this man whose words had been part of my life since college, the story continued to eat at me. He warned us during his talk that he always asks questions of people when he does signings. If we were going to pry into his life it's only fair for him to do the same, right? By the time I reached him it was almost midnight, and I had identified my aggravation with the story. I had my question ready, but he went first.

His question led us into a nice little conversation about Fayetteville – my hometown and the next stop on his tour. Then it was my turn.

“In the animal story, when the duck walks away, why does he *walk* away?” I said. “Why doesn’t he *waddle* away?”

He looked at me, expressionless. “I don’t know,” he said.

I was afraid I might have offended him, so I kept talking. “It’s just that you’re typically so precise with your word choice.”

He kept looking at me, but it felt more like he was looking through me. So I kept talking. I’ve never been one to get star-struck, but I’ve watched plenty of people become flustered and stupid when meeting an actor, singer, or politician. This time I was the flustered, stupid one.

“I thought there might be a reason that you chose— I, um. I was just wondering.”

I finally shut up long enough for him to answer.

“I don’t know,” he said again, seeming to come back into the moment. “That’s a very good observation.”

“Thanks!” I said, beaming like a kindergartener who just got a gold star from the teacher.

Then, the unbelievable happened. He reached into his jacket pocket and fished out a little notebook. I’d read about this notebook for years. I knew what it was, and I couldn’t believe I was actually seeing it. He opened the notebook and started scribbling.

“I’m going to change that,” he said, still scribbling. He stopped writing and looked directly at me, “on your suggestion.”

I thought I might faint on the spot. *Now I can die happy. I just edited David Sedaris.*

I pulled myself together, and managed to speak in a steady voice (I think).

“Thank you,” I said. “It’s nice to meet you. Please say hi to Fayetteville for me.” And I walked off – no, I *bounced* off.

I could think of nothing else for several days. I eventually stopped boring my friends with the story, but everyone must have heard it at least three times before I realized I had become a broken record.

In early November of the following year, I was listening to NPR and heard someone reference a new Sedaris book. *That has to be the book*, I thought. *It’s been more than a year. It must be out by now*. In fact, it was released in September. I completely missed it.

One question remained: Had he actually made the change?

I rushed to Barnes & Noble, found the humor section, and then the book. It was on the bottom shelf, so I squatted in front of the bookcase, and picked up *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk* by David Sedaris.

Not bothering to move to a chair, stand back up, or even sit down on the floor. I flipped through the pages with reckless abandon, as if I was going to turn directly to the story, or recognize it on sight. I stopped. I needed a plan. I decided to start with the table of contents, but what was I looking for? It had been a year. I didn’t remember the whole story, much less the title. Something about a duck, of course, and a snake.

Each chapter had animals in its title, “The Cat and the Baboon,” “The Parenting Storks,” “The Judicious Brown Chicken.” Only one mentioned a duck, and only one mentioned a snake. The duck tale came first, so I decided to start there, “The Turtle, the Toad, and the Duck.”

Oddly enough, I didn’t scan the story. I actually read it. Within three paragraphs I knew it was the one. I kept reading slowly. I enjoyed it the first time, so I knew it would be fun to let the story unfold as my memory caught up.

Then, there it was. I was so excited that I immediately sent texts to the kind souls I had exhausted with the story a year earlier.

Text 1.

New Sedaris book, p 27:

Text 2.

“Yeah, well, to hell with both of you,” said the duck and he waddled off . . .

Text 3.

WADDLED!!!

I had to fight my impulse to squeal and jump around. Instead, I closed the book, stood up, walked directly to the front counter, and bought it.

Driving home, my mind drifted back to the euphoria of that October night. *I can die happy. I just edited David Sedaris.*

Then, a new question crept into my head. When I hit the door I went straight to my MacBook and started checking all the standard online sources for the answer to my newest dilemma. After half a dozen websites, I reached for my well-loved *Oxford Dictionary/Thesaurus*, and then the two writers’ handbooks I keep beside it. Gaining confidence with each source, I became comfortable with the answer.

“Edit” is a transitive verb meaning: to prepare material (written, audio, or video) for publication by correcting, condensing, or otherwise modifying it. “Edit” is what I had done. I had been his “editor.”

As I closed my laptop and returned the books to their shelf, my WJSAT folder caught my eye. This is where I keep the letters from places that have rejected writing submissions. It stands for “We’ll Just See About That.” I leaned back in my chair and smiled.