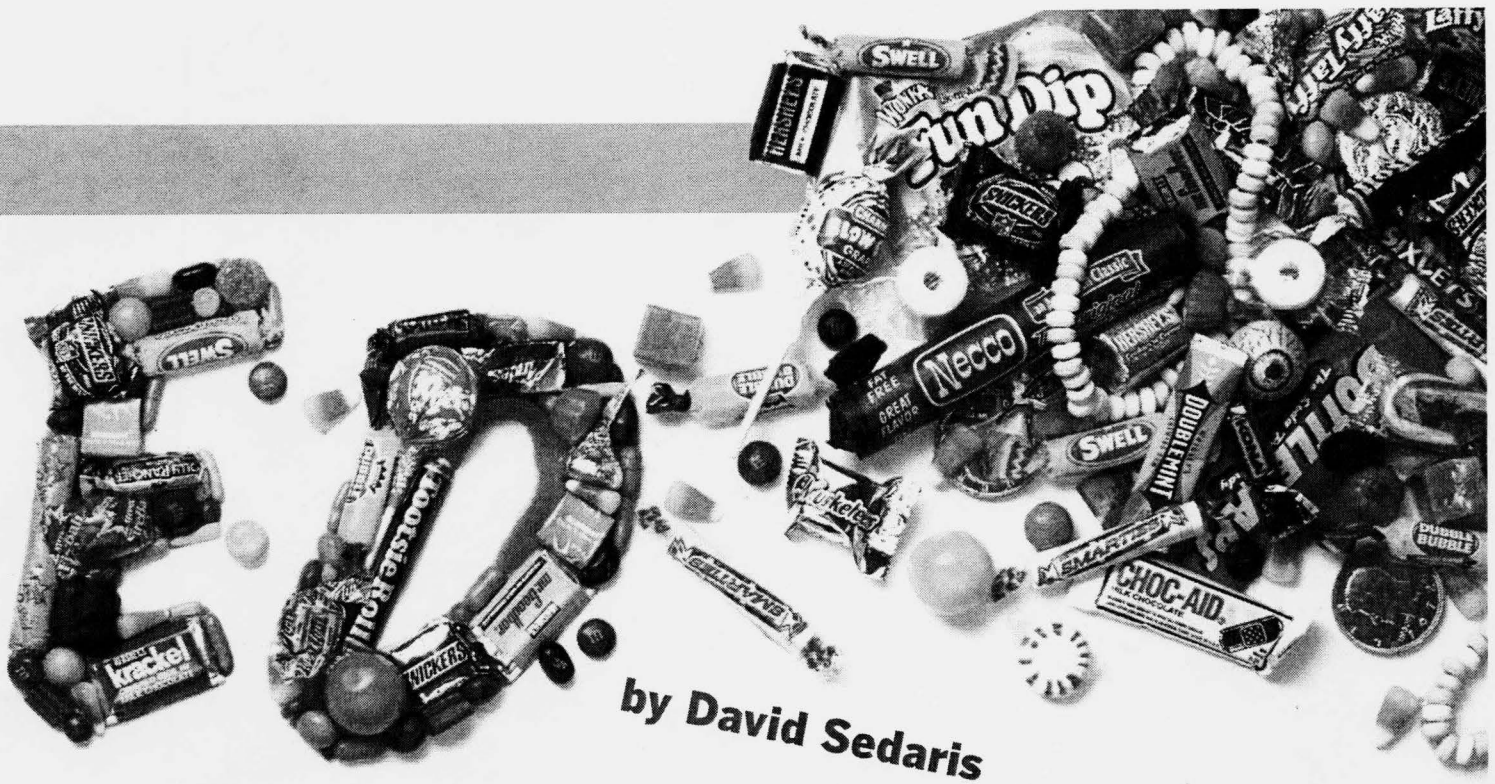




This best-selling humorist tells a story of Halloween, sharing, and the weird family that lives next door



by David Sedaris

**The Story So Far** Growing up, David Sedaris was weirdly fascinated by his next-door neighbors, the Tomkeys. He couldn't fathom how they got along in the world. They were missing something crucial in their lives. Something that everybody else had. The Tomkeys, much to Sedaris's horror, not only did not believe in TV, they didn't even own one.

**THE NIGHT AFTER HALLOWEEN, WE WERE SITTING AROUND** watching TV when the doorbell rang. Visitors were infrequent at our house, so, while my father stayed behind, my mother, sisters, and I ran downstairs in a group, opening the door to discover the entire Tomkey family on our front stoop. The parents looked as they always had, but the son and daughter were dressed in costumes—she as a ballerina and he as some kind of rodent with terry-cloth ears and a tail made from what looked to be an extension cord. It seemed they had spent the previous evening isolated at the lake, and had missed the opportunity to observe Halloween. “So, well, I guess we're trick-or-treating now, if that's OK,” Mr. Tomkey said.

I attributed their behavior to the fact that they didn't have a TV, but television didn't teach you everything. Asking for candy on Halloween was called trick-or-treating, but asking for candy on November 1st was called begging, and it made people uncomfortable. This was one of the things you were supposed to learn simply by being alive, and it angered me that the Tomkeys did not understand it.

“Why, of course it's not too late,” my mother said. “Kids, why don't you . . . run and get . . . the candy.”

“But the candy is gone,” my sister Gretchen said. “You gave it away last night.”

“Not that candy,” my mother said. “The other candy. Why don't you run and go get it?”

“You mean our candy?” Lisa said. “The candy that we earned?”

This was exactly what our mother was talking about, but she didn't want to say this in front of the Tomkeys. In order to spare their feelings, she wanted them to believe that we always kept a bucket of candy lying around the house, just waiting for someone to knock on the door and ask for it. “Go on, now,” she said. “Hurry up.”

My room was situated right off the foyer, and if the Tomkeys had looked in that direction they could have seen my bed, and the brown paper bag marked “My Candy. Keep Out.” I didn't want them to know how much I had, and so I went into my room and shut the door behind me. Then I closed the curtains and emptied my bag onto the bed, searching for whatever was the crummiest. All my life, chocolate has made me ill. I don't know if I'm allergic or what, but even the smallest amount leaves me with a blinding headache. Eventually, I learned to stay away from it, but as a child I refused to be left out. The brownies were always eaten, and when the pounding began I would blame the grape juice or my mother's cigarette smoke or the tightness of my glasses—anything but the chocolate. My candy bars were poison but they were name brand, and so I put them in pile No. 1, which definitely would not go to the Tomkeys.

*continued* →

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Out in the hallway I could hear my mother straining for something to talk about. “A boat!” she said. “That sounds marvelous. Can you just drive it right into the water?”

“Actually, we have a trailer,” Mr. Tomkey said. “So what we do is back it into the lake.”

“Oh, a trailer. What kind is it?”

“Well, it’s a boat trailer,” Mr. Tomkey said.

“Right, but is it wooden or, you know . . . I guess what I’m asking is what style trailer do you have?”

Behind my mother’s words were two messages. The first and most obvious was “Yes, I am talking about boat trailers, but also I am dying.” The second, meant only for my sisters and me, was “If you do not immediately step forward with that candy you will

never again experience freedom, happiness, or the possibility of my warm embrace.”

I knew that it was just a matter of time before she came into my room and started collecting the candy herself, grabbing indiscriminately, with no regard for my rating system. Had I been thinking straight, I would have hidden the most valuable items in my dresser drawer, but instead, panicked by the thought of her hand on my door-knob, I tore off the wrappers and began cramming the candy bars into my mouth, desperately, like someone in a contest. Most were miniature, which made them easier to accommodate, but still there was only so much room, and it was hard to chew and fit more in at the same time. The

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## Classic Connections

THREE MORE DAVIDS WHO’LL MAKE YOU LAUGH OUT LOUD  
—AND MAYBE CRY

### THE BOOK



**A SUPPOSEDLY FUN THING I’LL NEVER DO AGAIN (1997)**

by David Foster Wallace

### THE STORY

This collection of essays takes on everything from a luxury Caribbean cruise to the Illinois State Fair, satirizing the strangeness of American culture every step of the way.

### THE STYLE

Wallace has a journalist’s eye for detail that brings red-velvet leisure suits and all-you-can-eat buffets to life with hilarious clarity. His thoughtful footnotes guarantee that you’ll learn between laughs.

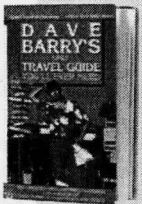


**A HEARTBREAKING WORK OF STAGGERING GENIUS (1999)**

by Dave Eggers

When Eggers was 22, both of his parents died and he became a “single mom” to his 8-year-old brother. Hilarity (and tears) ensue.

Eggers describes the ups and downs of orphan life with tenderness and self-conscious wit, making fun of himself and his book even as he writes it. The style is an artful stream of consciousness.



**DAVE BARRY’S ONLY TRAVEL GUIDE YOU’LL EVER NEED (1991)**

by Dave Barry

This book mocks travel guides with vignettes about the perils of travel: bad airline food, non-English-speaking hotel clerks, and the mysterious trolls that make the baggage-claim carousel go ‘round.

Barry’s writing doesn’t claim to be anything other than a big joke. You won’t find any of the cultural commentary that the other Davids offer, but you’ll get charts and drawings to illustrate the spoofs.

PHOTO CREDITS: SEDARIS: ©BRYAN REDDER/GETTY IMAGES; STOPWATCH: PHOTODISC VIA SODA

headache began immediately, and I chalked it up to tension.

My mother told the Tomkeys that she needed to check on something, and then she opened the door and stuck her head inside my room. "What the hell are you doing?" she whispered, but my mouth was too full to answer. "I'll just be a moment," she called, and as she closed the door behind her and moved toward my bed I began breaking the wax lips and candy necklaces pulled from pile No. 2.

These were the second-best things I had received, and while it hurt to destroy them it would have hurt even more to give them away. I had just started to **mutilate** a miniature box of Red Hots when my mother pried them from my hands, accidentally finishing the job for me. BB-sized pellets clattered onto the floor, and as I followed them with my eyes she snatched up a roll of Necco wafers.

"Not those," I pleaded, but, rather than words, my mouth expelled chocolate, chewed chocolate, which fell onto the sleeve of her sweater. "Not those. Not those."

She shook her arm, and the mound of chocolate dropped onto my bedspread. "You should look at yourself," she said. "I mean, really look at yourself."

Along with the Necco wafers she took several Tootsie Pops and a half dozen caramels wrapped in cellophane. I heard her apologize to the Tomkeys for her absence, and then I heard my candy hitting the bottom of their bags.

"What do you say?" Mrs. Tomkey asked.

And the children answered, "Thank you."

While I was in trouble for not bringing my candy sooner, my sisters were in more trouble for not bringing it at all. We spent the early part of the evening in our rooms,

then one by one we eased our way back upstairs, and joined our parents in front of the TV. I was the last to arrive, and took a seat on the floor beside the sofa. The show was a Western, and even if my head had not been throbbing I doubt I would have had the **wherewithal** to follow it. A **posse** of outlaws crested a rocky hilltop, squinting at a flurry of dust advancing from the horizon, and I thought again of the Tomkeys, and of how alone and out of place they had looked in their dopey costumes. "What was up with that kid's tail?" I asked.

"Sh-h-h," my family said.

For months I had protected and watched over these people, and now, with one stupid act, they had turned my pity into something hard and ugly. The shift wasn't gradual but immediate, and it provoked an uncomfortable feeling of loss. We hadn't been friends, the Tomkeys and I, but still I had given them the gift of my curiosity. Wondering about the Tomkey family had made me feel generous, but now I would have to shift gears, and find pleasure in hating them. The only alternative was to do as my mother had instructed, and take a good look at myself. This was an old trick, designed to turn one's hatred inward, and while I was determined not to fall for it, it was hard to shake the mental picture snapped by her suggestion: Here is a boy sitting on a bed, his mouth smeared with chocolate. He's a human being, but also he's a pig, surrounded by trash and gorging himself so that others may be denied. Were this the only image in the world, you'd be forced to give it your full attention, but fortunately there were others. This stagecoach, for instance, coming round the bend with a cargo of gold. This shiny new Mustang convertible. This teenage girl, her hair a beautiful mane, sipping Pepsi through a straw, one picture after another, on and on until the news, and whatever came on after the news. ■

*continued* →

**POWER WORDS**

**MUTILATE:** to damage or disfigure | **WHEREWITHAL:** the necessary means  
**POSSE:** a group of people

**MEET THE AUTHOR:**  
**David Sedaris**

**BORN**  
1956,  
Johnson  
City, New  
York

**LIVES**

Paris, France

**FIRST JOB**

Housecleaning

**ON THE RADIO**

Worked as a

radio humorist,

expounding on life

as a Christmas elf

in the Macy's

holiday display.

The broadcasting

job brought

attention to

Sedaris's literary

talents, and as a

result, his first

book was

published—17

years after he

started writing.

**QUIRKS**

Collects and

decorates his

apartment with

terrier and turkey

taxidermies. Was

once afflicted with

juvenile Tourette's

syndrome.

**ON HIS WRITING**

"You know, I just

started writing

and then I wrote

every single day

at the same time.

I never have to

make myself sit at

the typewriter."



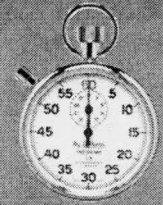
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**SKILL DRILL**

CIRCLE THE BEST ANSWER FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING:

1. **Why was David fascinated with the Tomkeys?**
  - (A) They didn't own a television.
  - (B) They had just bought a boat trailer.
  - (C) Their children wore clever costumes.
  - (D) They didn't believe in celebrating holidays.
2. **Why does the Tomkeys' arrival place David's mother in an awkward position?**
  - (A) She has run out of apples.
  - (B) They have invited themselves to dinner.
  - (C) She finds it difficult to make small talk with them.
  - (D) They have strange political views.
3. **How does David's mother resolve the problem of having run out of candy?**
  - (A) She sends David to the store for apples.
  - (B) She offers the Tomkeys freshly baked cookies.
  - (C) She asks David and his sisters to share some of their candy.
  - (D) She tells the Tomkeys to go home.
4. **Why would David rather destroy some of his candy than give it away?**
  - (A) He doesn't want the Tomkey children to get cavities in their teeth.
  - (B) He resents the Tomkeys' "weirdness."
  - (C) He is selfish.
  - (D) Both B and C.
5. **What does David's mother discuss with the Tomkeys?**
  - (A) the weather
  - (B) boat trailers
  - (C) her children's reluctance to share
  - (D) her favorite television programs
6. **How does David keep his "best" candy for himself?**
  - (A) He hides it in a dresser drawer.
  - (B) He throws it out the window.
  - (C) He feeds it to the cat.
  - (D) He begins stuffing it into his mouth.
7. **Which candy does David particularly object to sharing?**
  - (A) Pez
  - (B) Nerds
  - (C) Necco wafers
  - (D) Skittles

**>>Your Turn!** Write about a childhood incident in which you did something that was extremely selfish or bratty. Is there a humorous side to the story? Do you feel ashamed when you look back on it?



**20-Minute Essay**

**>>TAKE 20 MINUTES**

TO PLAN AND WRITE AN ESSAY BASED ON THE FOLLOWING:

Who is Sedaris making fun of in this piece? The Tomkeys? Sedaris? Both? Use examples from the story to make your case.

