

All in the family



Grammy Award-nominated humorist David Sedaris at the launch of the Greek translation of his collection *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*.

Slight of build with thinning blond hair, David Sedaris entered the packed auditorium at the Hellenic American Union on April 7, immediately drawing the audience into his eccentric and comic universe. Sitting beside the humorist and best-selling author was journalist Tina Mandilara, who asked him questions about his work and his impressions of Greece. In Greek translation (Melani Editions), she read the excerpts that he read, often stopping to burst into laughter before composing herself to continue. Laughter is the natural effect of reading or listening to a Sedaris story.

His books are actually collections of essays about his life and the life of his family—including a Greek father, American mother and four sisters and a brother—growing up in Raleigh, North Carolina. As Sedaris told us, the Greek Orthodox church had a prominent role in his upbringing as well as his Greek grandmother. In fact, families are important to Sedaris and he noticed that Greeks talk much more of their parents and other relatives than Americans do, who value more the opinions of friends. He was excited to be here, he said, since the last time he was in Greece was twenty-five years ago.

The first selection he read was a chapter in the book “Me Talk Pretty One Day” about his attempts to learn French at Alliance Francaise in Paris. In the story, the mixed nationality class, most with

very limited French abilities, is trying to answer the question of a Moroccan woman unfamiliar with the Easter holiday: “What is an Easter?”

For the last ten years Sedaris has divided his time mostly among London, Paris, and a village in Normandy. He plans to continue living in Europe where he shares his life with his partner Hugh. The village in Normandy provided the backdrop for the second story he read to us “Nuit of the Living Dead” from his collection *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*. The story begins “I was on the front porch, drowning a mouse in a bucket...”

Like the best humorists and satirists, Sedaris has an eye for details that most of us overlook and an ear for dialogue that makes him bring characters and situations to life. He successfully uses human foibles as a source of humor and has the great ability to laugh at himself. As the story reaches its conclusion, the humor increases as he sees his familiar house through the eyes of another, a lost tourist. The bizarre details multiply; besides the drowning mouse, we see such objects as a model of human anatomy scattered on a table, skulls decorating tables, pens shaped like human fingers, and a meat cleaver lying on top of some photographs.

After reading, Sedaris sat back bemusedly listening to Mandilara’s reading of his story, enjoying the way it took shape in Greek. In fact, the Greek

version brought out some interesting comments on the nature of translation—in the story a non-English speaker pronounces the word 'village' as 'willage.' How do you translate this pronunciation into another language? In Greek, 'horio' (village) becomes 'korio' (bug) thus playing with the "hi" and "kappa" instead of "v" and "w".

Sedaris described another example of being "lost in translation". In one story he wrote about his brother "making spanakopitta with 'Pam'". "Who's this 'Pam' person he's cooking with?" his French translator demanded. "You haven't mentioned her before." Hearing that Pam is the name of a vegetable oil used in the United States, the French translator hit his head in despair: "Oh no, I'll have to use a footnote for that one!"

On this trip to Greece, Sedaris carries index cards with Greek words that he's learning. Grinning, he calls out his newest word "*splinandero*" meaning both sheep intestines and someone strange... And everywhere he goes he takes a notebook with him where he records aspects of life that intrigue him.

Reading directly from his notebook is, in fact, how he was "discovered". In Chicago where he was living at the time, and at a low point of his life involved with drugs, he decided to get up at an "open mike"

gathering at a club and read a story about working as an elf (with the name of "Crumpet") at Macy's Department store during Christmastime. In the audience was a producer at National Public Radio who asked him to read on the air. Suddenly, as he described it, "10 million people knew my story". One of those listening was an editor from Brown, Little who asked him if he had a book and he did indeed, tucked away in his drawer, waiting for just this lucky moment.

Sedaris related how much he enjoys traveling and doing book talks as a way of getting to know the people of a particular country. He obviously enjoyed the book signing afterwards and conversing with every person individually. "How long have you been here in Greece?" "Do you speak Greek? Oh you're Greek?" "You speak English perfectly, no accent." "That's a beautiful name." "What do you do?" "What's it like working in a hospital?" "What do you study at the university?" "Tell me, who writes all this graffiti everywhere?" Throughout the questions, Sedaris showed a genuine interest in people, that is indeed reflected in his writing. And the audience walked out, happy to listen to this gifted writer, happy to be allowed a glimpse into Sedaris's surreal and comic world.

Sherri Moshman Paganos



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