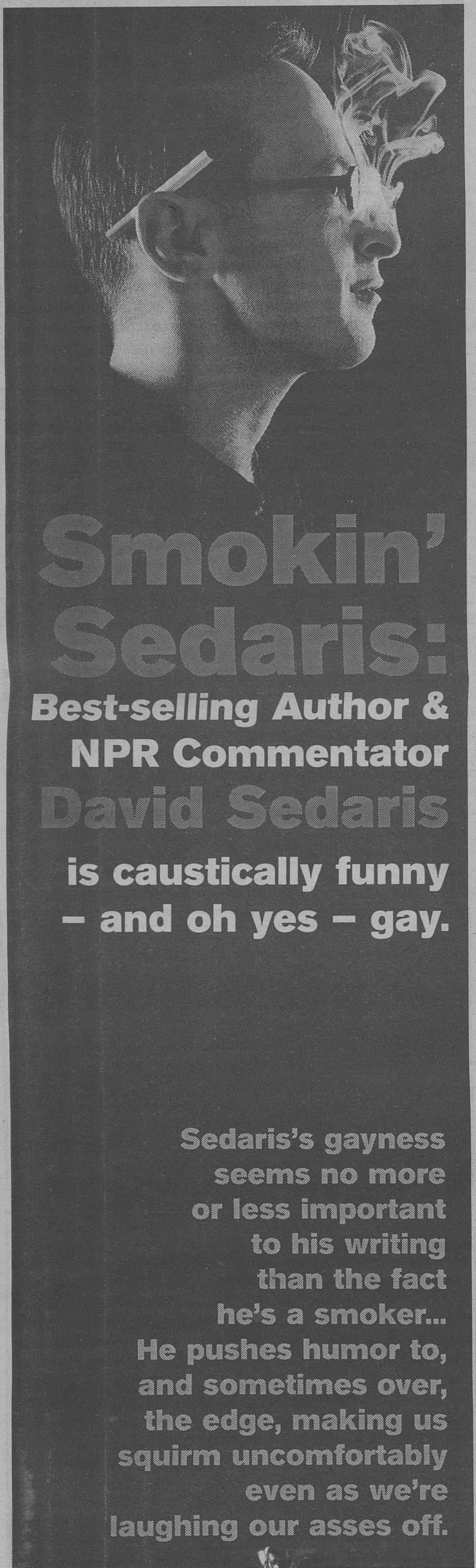


## arts



**Smokin'  
Sedaris:  
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NPR Commentator  
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BY ERNIE MCLEOD

**D**avid Sedaris has been called many things, among them, “the funniest man alive,” “the most brilliantly witty New Yorker since Dorothy Parker,” and “a caustic mix of J.D. Salinger and John Waters.” To me, he’s a terrific writer who happens to be hysterical and, oh yes, gay.

With some gay comic writers — Bob Smith and Michael Thomas Ford come to mind — you get the feeling their gayness is their *raison d'être*, not that there’s anything wrong with that.

Sedaris’s gayness, on the other hand, seems no more or less important to his writing than the fact he’s a smoker.

Actually, his smoker status no doubt trumps his fag status. The last time Sedaris was at the Flynn Theater — during those heady Civil Union days — someone from the audience felt compelled to shout out that Vermonters like gays. Perplexed for a moment and clearly not well-versed on Vermont’s place at the forefront of the gay rights movement, Sedaris replied: “I’d rather you liked smoking.”

Those seeking feel-good gay humor and political correctness are advised to steer clear of the Flynn when Sedaris returns to Burlington April 2nd.

Like many people, I first became aware of Sedaris’s work back in the early 90s, when he performed his now famous “SantaLand Diaries” on NPR’s “Morning Edition.” The “SantaLand Diaries” chronicled Sedaris’s stint as a Christmas elf at Macy’s and, besides being hilarious, something about the way his voice flatly relayed the absurdities and indignities of this experience struck a universal chord. Add in acid-drenched observations of holiday shopping behavior (i.e., human nature at its worst), and you have one of those rare artistic moments when friends start telling friends: You’ve got to hear this!

Since then Sedaris has gone on to write several highly successful books, including *Barrel Fever*, *Naked*, and *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, excerpts from which were the highlight of his last Flynn performance.

Anyone who’s heard Sedaris in person or on the radio (he’s a regular contributor to NPR’s “This American Life”) knows how perfectly his voice matches his material. Once you’ve heard him, you’ll hear him even if you’re reading his book at home in silence. Such is not always the case with writers. And he definitely is a writer, not a stand-up comedian. The one

place I’ve heard him read where he seemed truly a fish out of water was on the “Late Show with David Letterman.”

Asked in a “Playboy” interview whether he thought of himself as funny, Sedaris replied no, adding that everyone in his family, with the exception of his humorless father, was funnier. Sedaris’s family has indeed been the source of much of his funniest material. They’re one wacky bunch, but one of the pleasures of reading or hearing Sedaris’s work is the recognition that we all come from pretty wacky families, each in its own oh-so-special way.

Sedaris particularly excels at using humor to get at all the things we’re either too embarrassed or too afraid to talk about, focusing his microscopic gaze on all the details of everyday life one’s expected to politely ignore. He pushes humor to and sometimes over the edge, making us squirm uncomfortably even as we’re laughing our asses off. (Or, in some cases, not laughing. A friend of mine who attended a reading in Northampton said a portion of the largely lesbian audience walked out in response to something deemed offensive. Sedaris wasn’t apologetic.)

Sometimes Sedaris’s perceptions of others do seem, on the surface, a bit harsh. Until you realize his perceptions of himself are even harsher. In the title story from “Naked,” after he’s goaded his boyfriend Hugh into calling him a “big, fat, hairy pig,” he declares: “Being a pig isn’t so bad. I wiped a dribble of snot from the tip of my snout and lay there feeling sorry for myself.” Further on in this adventure, set in a nudist trailer park, he describes his penis as “simmering in my lap like a boiled shrimp.” Any man brave enough to use “shrimp” as a simile for his penis should be cut a little slack in his assessment of others.

“I’m always happy if I have, like, humiliating asshole things that I did,” Sedaris said in a *January Magazine* interview. “I think: Oh good, that’s a good story. Because if you write about humiliating asshole things other people do it doesn’t work as well. I mean, you can, but you can get away with it better if you talk about what an asshole *you* are.” In the same interview he confesses what most of us have felt at one time or a lot: “I hate myself pretty much.”

An evening that taps into one’s inner asshole and self-loathing, what could be more fun than that?! And oddly comforting, too, since you realize that everyone laughing with you is recognizing equally humiliating and despicable things inside

themselves.

I’m not sure what Sedaris has up his sleeve for his day-after April Fools’ Day performance. A recent piece in the *New Yorker* imagines how a dispute over whether a man’s artificial hand was made of plastic or rubber could spell doom for his long-term relationship with Hugh. Perhaps he’ll dip into his archives, which means one can expect anything from light-switch licking, to the absurdity of attempting to convey the peculiar significance of the Easter bunny in broken French to a non-Christian, to bowel movements (or lack thereof) and homophobic cruelty among budding gay comrades at a Greek summer camp, to his mother’s refusal to succumb to sentimentality as she’s succumbing to cancer.

Sedaris’s topics aren’t always light or obviously humorous — parental mortality, for instance, doesn’t immediately announce itself as a knee-slapper — and oftentimes the humor slides unexpectedly into darkness and poignancy. It’s a delicate balancing act to simultaneously locate the pathos and comedy in, say, sprinkling your cat’s ashes on the carpet and vacuuming them up because she never expressed an interest in the outdoors. But, more often than not, Sedaris deftly keeps his comic footing without tumbling off the high-wire.

As for blatant queer content, there’s certain to be some, when it fits. Unless Sedaris has headed in a new direction, however, don’t expect a lot of titillating sexual exhibitionism. In “Naked” he admits the only time he’s naked “outside of the bathtub or an occasional doctor’s visit” is when he’s “talked someone into having sex” with him. Sex, in fact, is one of the few topics around which Sedaris treads gingerly. He speculates that mainstream audience acceptance of his sexuality may be due, in part, to his reluctance to include sentences like “Hal’s balls bobbed against my chin” in his writing.

So, if you have tickets to the Flynn show, don’t expect a cameo from Hal. Do expect Sedaris’s typically unexpected take on the world and to laugh, a lot. ▼

*Ernie McLeod drove up from Middlebury to laugh his ass off in the balcony at the April 2 show.*