

Hi everyone, it's an absolute privilege to be here in Zurich, at the Jonathan Swift prize, and to have the opportunity to talk to you all about one of our greatest living comic writers: Jerry Seinfeld. My husband and I don't just like Jerry Seinfeld; we've made him a part of our lives. We've watched Seinfeld so often that we've absorbed it osmotically, to the point where we no longer see a distinction between our existence and that of the show. Long before we married, my husband propounded the theory that there's a Seinfeld episode for everything, and so it turns out to be: on a daily basis, for years, one of us would say to the other of some event or other – running out of toilet paper, maybe, or buying soup – “It's like that Seinfeld episode”. “It's like that Seinfeld episode where Elaine tries to dance” – this at our wedding. Or “Oh for god's sake, it's like that Seinfeld episode where George tries to carry everything in his wallet” –this one actually comes up a lot. It was our lingua franca, the conversational glue that held our relationship together. And so things would have continued, I'm sure, had I not discovered David Sedaris.

I first came across him when I was running. I'm a reluctant runner, easily bored, so to keep myself going, I decided – like every other 30-something newly in possession of a smart phone – to listen to the This American Life podcast while I was doing it. I worked my way through the episodes as I trundled around the streets near my house, and it was in this state – panting, sore-footed, wretched – that I heard David Sedaris read Santaland Diaries: his piece on working as an Elf at Macy's. It didn't spur me to run faster or further; far from it. It was so funny that I actually had to stop. I sat down on a park bench to listen properly, and laughed hard enough that people began to steer their children away from me. I thought: I've got to buy this book. And I did – and then Me Talk Pretty One Day, and then Let's Explore Diabetes with Owls. And pretty soon, my husband and I had a problem. Because I started stopping him mid-anecdote, and telling him: “It's like that David Sedaris essay...”

And things were difficult for a long time – right up to the point that Sedaris published Calypso. I was reviewing it for the Guardian newspaper, which involved me spending a couple of days with my head buried in the book, snorting with laughter, and periodically emerging to yell to my husband “You've got to let me read you this bit! He's called his holiday home the Sea Section! He's feeding his tumour to a turtle!”. Don't ask my how, but he held out: right the way up to the moment when I forced him into a chair and made him listen to the essay on fitbits. And it got him. He's in his early 50s, his skinny, tennis-playing days are far behind him, and like Sedaris, he'd been seduced by the step count. When I read the bit about marching on the spot in the airport to get your steps up, I could see that the battle had been won. Harmony had been restored. He read his way through the Sedaris oeuvre too, and is now just as likely as I am to be heard to declare, “It's like that David Sedaris essay where he goes to a fancy restaurant and all the food is served in towers!”. Or “Oh my god, I feel like David Sedaris' dad when he comes across the frozen slugs in the basement freezer” – this, after we stumbled across our youngest arranging dead woodlice into patterns in the back yard. There is, it turns out, a David Sedaris anecdote for everything.

And that's half of his brilliance. Through his essays, Sedaris holds up a funhouse mirror to our own lives, and by doing so, he allows us to see, clearly, the ludicrousness of them. He lets us laugh at him, and through that lets us laugh at ourselves. Just the other week, as I was walking home and indulging in my favourite early-evening winter pastime of gazing into the brightly-lit but uncurtained windows of the rich people's houses by the station, it dawned on me that I was effectively reenacting the opening of his essay The Great Leap Forward, in which he's living in New York without a job and entertaining himself by “staring into the windows of the [city's] handsome, single family townhouses, wondering what went on in those well-appointed rooms”. He

confesses to hoping that “the revolution would not take place during [his] lifetime” on the grounds that “he didn’t want the rich to go away until he could at least briefly join their ranks”. As a social democrat from a long line of social democrats, I consider myself to be entirely for the redistribution of wealth, but I’ve got to admit I’d really love the chance to spend a bit of time in one of those houses first. The contradiction has always slightly discomfited me, but catching onto the Sedaris reference helped me come to terms with my own cognitive dissonance – and I will now stare through the windows of the city of Bath’s more fortunate denizens with pride - right up to the moment that they catch sight of me and draw the curtains. It’s public service humour: and it’s effective as hell. As I said, it’s half of his brilliance.

But it is only half of it, and anyone who’s read him, which I trust is every single person in this room, will know that it is, finally, the less important half. With apologies to Jerry Seinfeld, what Sedaris is doing isn’t stand-up comedy: it’s knottier and weightier and far, far riskier than that. You may come to Sedaris for the observational humour, the anecdotes about trying to explain the meaning of Easter in a French conversational class, or being inducted into the darker reaches of a taxidermy shop while on a quest to buy a stuffed owl, but you stay, in the end, for something else. You stay for his family. At first, if you reach back through his collections, his father and mother and sisters and brother feel like secondary characters; flitting through the background of his essays. Over time they become familiar players, people in their own right, rather than stock family characters. But there’s a shift – and it comes, I think, in *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* – when they finally take up their place centre stage; where they move from being the supporting cast members, to the stars. And it’s here, for me, that form and content in Sedaris’s writing come together in a way that is simply unique. There is no story, so far as I can discover, that David Sedaris can’t tell brilliantly – I refer you to the essay on fitbits, which do not obviously lend themselves to comedy. But there are no stories that Sedaris tells AS brilliantly – as sharply, and luminously, and furiously and adoringly – as those he tells about his family.

And it’s quite a trick. What we’re talking about, when you get down to it, are family jokes – the fact, for example, that his father always takes his trousers off before eating dinner - and family jokes are, almost by definition, exclusive: in the normal run of things, there are few experiences more isolating, and more tedious, than other people’s families, making in-jokes to one another. So it’s a measure of his skill that he manages not just to open a window onto the Sedaris clan in all its enraging, enthralling, technicolor glory, but to make us feel, in doing so, as if we’re members of it: to create for his readers the illusion that we all belong; that their jokes are our jokes; their quirks and foibles somehow ours too. His essays have the texture of confidences: through tricks of tone and turns of phrase, he manages to make us believe that he’s talking directly to us and only us; as if we’re on the inside with him, standing alongside him and looking on with wry eyes as his brother gets heavily into juicing or his mother locks all the kids out of the house after too many snow days, or his sister Amy asks to be made-up like she’s been in a fight for a magazine photoshoot. He makes us feel like one of the family, so that in the end, like him, we’re laughing with them, rather than at them. And he makes us care.

Which is, I think, what made his most recent collection, *Calypso* - the one I was lucky enough to review - a work of art. In between all the anecdotes and the one-liners and deliciously pithy observations that we’ve come to expect, Sedaris took his readers’ familiarity with his family, deepened and enriched over the course of nine collections, and used it to take the legs out from under us. The subtexts which had hovered beneath his family anecdotes, giving them their shade and their bite, suddenly become text. Having made us care about his family, having allowed us to

take a seat at the table, he showed us what it truly means to belong. This was a book about not family comedy, but family tragedy; about things fraying and falling apart, and he let us see it all, and it was devastating.

But we still laughed. We trusted him enough to laugh at the good bits and cry at the bad bits, and understand that they both exist and that neither cancels the other out. There's a saying that comedy is tragedy plus time. But the brilliance of this book is that, as in families, the comedy and tragedy coexist; they're two sides of the same coin. We value the humour because we understand the cost. And we understand the care, and the love, that goes into it.

Back in the late-90s, I made the profoundly misguided decision to take A level Latin. I don't know why I did this – I think I had some idea that it was kind of the god particle of English literature. And it may well be that it is; I wouldn't know; I still can't understand much more than the Latin bits in Asterix. But I did fall head over heels for Catullus, the great Latin love poet, and as a result of my devotion, my Latin teacher and I began an argument that raged on and on over the course of two years. Catullus's poems, according to my teacher, were too perfect: the lines were too balanced, everything was too beautifully composed, to be sincere. I thought then, and I still think now, that this is bullshit. If you care about something, if you really love it, then you TAKE care. You make it as good as it can possibly be. To do so isn't a fabrication, it's an act of love.

And that's how I feel about David Sedaris' work. Great comic writing comes at you fast; and the speed with which it overtakes you means that more often than not, you miss the care, the craft, that has gone into it. Sedaris is a great comic writer, a master of his craft. And his finest writing is about his family. Those essays close in on perfection, and that perfection, that creation of perfection, is an act of love. David Sedaris has transformed, for me, what comic writing can be, and that's why I'm delighted that he's receiving the Jonathan Swift prize today. I hope his family are very proud; the rest of us, his readers, who feel like his family, certainly are. So congratulations, David; I cannot think of a more deserving winner. And please know that the real triumph from my point of view is that my husband has asked me to ask you for your autograph. Thank you.