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David Sedaris Unfiltered:
When You Are Engulfed In Flames



(Little, Brown)

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Reviewed by Wendy Walker

David Sedaris reemerges in the publishing world finding it perhaps a little bit smaller, harsher and truthfully — what with this ongoing literary fraud controversy — a bit more difficult to define. So it comes as no surprise that, like many authors, Mr. Sedaris chose to add a disclaimer in the front matter of this book stating, quite simply, “The events described in this book are realish.” In further response he said, “I guess I’ve always thought that if 97 percent of the story is true, then that’s an acceptable formula.”

When You Are Engulfed In Flames is his sixth collection of comic essays and, as always, it is both autobiographical and self-deprecating. Of course, for those who read *GQ* or *The New Yorker* regularly, there's not a lot new here, save for his essay on quitting smoking, titled "The Smoking Section," which — surprise, surprise — was just recently (partially) excerpted in *The New Yorker*. And yet, it is the sum of its parts which affords Mr. Sedaris' books such affinity with his audience, even here. After all, he admits himself, "I get paid to read out loud."

While the first half of this new book seemed a bit on the quiet side, I chalked it up to the notion that several of the stories were already familiar to me, having read them elsewhere. This time the laughs (at least for me) erupted in the second half of the book, beginning with "In the Waiting Room", where David decides to give up on his French classes and simply say *D'accord*, which translates to "I am in agreement." When Mr. Sedaris first chose to take on the French language in *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, I felt as if he had perfected this longstanding art of "I thought you said" slapstick comedy. So when he revisits this again in "The Waiting Room" and, later on in "The Smoking Section," I find myself utterly joyous as I turn the page.

As for "The Smoking Section", the final, longest and brand-new essay in this collection — Sedaris splits it off into three parts: before Japan, Japan and after Japan. In doing so, he certainly proves how important this quit was, and remains, in his life. For all those suffering smokers, ex-smoker's, and you-should-quit-smoking Nazis, it's also great fun. When David tries to calculate how much money he's going to save from quitting smoking he realizes, "between the plane tickets, the three-month apartment rental, the school tuition, and the unused patches and lozenges, it had cost close to twenty thousand dollars to quit smoking."

Smoker's and nonsmoker's alike will not be disappointed by this new collection as Mr. Sedaris continues to deliver his trademark batch of humor. And amid these dim times in our dwindling book-buying world, it's nice to see Mr. Sedaris is still out there delivering. And I'll accept 97 percent of the truth; in fact, I'll settle for less — just as long as the laughs are good.