

# Sedaris & the Darker Side of Animal Humor

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Review by  
Brett Kessler

The first thing readers will notice about Sedaris' new production is that it isn't like anything they'd expect from one of the definitive gay Southern essayists. That is to say, it isn't another collection of comic and curiously touching personal essays. His colorful and blunt characters are instantly familiar; this time around, however, they're all woodland creatures.

*Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk: A Modest Bestiary* follows an Aesop's Fables-style structure that is immediately recognizable. Almost every title is either a pair of animals or an animal and an adjective. The language is simple, but not lacking in the author's trademark comic flair, and the stories are well-paced and the perfect length for either literary grazing or a binge.

The real draw here, though, is the characters. They slide back and forth easily between animals (and all the beastly habits one would expect) and their human-like lives (with full careers and complex relationships) within the same story. These aren't simply animals with a lesson to teach; they're people you'll recognize immediately from your own life, possibly even yourself. They're brash or annoying or judgmental, not in a classic way, but rather with a sense of being drawn from modern life. To put it frankly, this is a collection of fables about the assholes around you every day.

If this is a collection of fables, however, then it is an especially twisted one. Sedaris subverts and reinterprets the concept of fable. In some tales, there's an obvious lesson to be learned, and animals get their come-uppance for their various judgment flaws (usually in an ironic and gory fashion). However, the remaining stories are more open and echo Sedaris' own personal essays; these stories are close to poignant and, while they interrupt the morbid fun of the twisted "traditional" stories, they

bring a welcome dose of warmth and humanity to the collection that might otherwise make it overly heavy. With the general lack of sympathetic characters, though, it's usually difficult to tell which type of story it's going to be until you've read through it (hint: something usually dies in the more straight-forward type).

I couldn't talk about *Squirrel* without mentioning the drawings that accompany every chapter. Done in black, white, and a well-utilized orangish-red, they draw the eye and keep it there. This collection is illustrated by Ian Falconer, illustrator of the Olivia series of children's books. He seems right at home matching Sedaris' grim themes; even the most steely-stomached reader will have to pass over a few of his grotesque drawings while reading. However, these are as brilliant as they are uncomfortable, and every reader is guaranteed to flip back to get a squeamish thrill.

However, *Squirrel* does face a few challenges. The most obvious complaint is that the collection is simply too short.

squirrel seeks  
chipmunk

david sedaris  
illustrations by ian falconer