



# Samuel Johnson Is Indignant

*Lydia Davis*

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## **Samuel Johnson Is Indignant** Lydia Davis

From one of our most imaginative and inventive writers, a crystalline collection of perfectly modulated, sometimes harrowing and often hilarious investigations into the multifaceted ways in which human beings perceive each other and themselves. A couple suspects their friends think them boring; a woman resolves to see herself as nothing but then concludes she's set too high a goal; and a funeral home receives a letter rebuking it for linguistic errors. Lydia Davis once again proves in the words of the *Los Angeles Times* "one of the quiet giants in the world of American fiction."

## **Samuel Johnson Is Indignant Details**

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Author : Lydia Davis

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# From Reader Review Samuel Johnson Is Indignant for online ebook

## Gabino G. Ocampo says

I loved this book. It is so weird and mad. Her writing voice is exactly like my train of thought. I felt like my craziness was expressed in a book.

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## David says

My overall rating comes in at 2.5 stars. Here's why:

Begin with the not completely irrelevant observation that I plunked down \$17 to buy my copy of this book, having been seduced at least in part by McSweeney's hype. Seventeen dollars.

Next, observe that here are some of the book's contents: (Note that each page is quoted **in its entirety**.)\*

Page 14: CERTAIN KNOWLEDGE FROM HERODOTUS

These are the facts about the fish in the Nile:

page 44: SAMUEL JOHNSON IS INDIGNANT:

that Scotland has so few trees.

page 71: HONORING THE SUBJUNCTIVE

It invariably precedes, even if it does not altogether supercede, the determination of what is absolutely desirable and just.

page 73: LOSING MEMORY

You ask me about Edith Wharton.

Well, the name is very familiar.

page 167: AWAY FROM HOME

It has been so long since she used a metaphor!

Well, har-de-har-har, Ms Davis. Words are indeed the precious coins of our linguistic currency, and not to be squandered foolishly. But, given the allegedly beleaguered state of literary fiction these days, with readers scampering away in droves, is it really a wise strategy to adopt such a 'pearls before swine' approach in your writing? God forbid that one should apply as coarse a metric as 'words per dollar' to anyone's literary output, but the Swiss cheese nature of this particular collection left me - how shall I put it? - more than a little peckish at the end.

\* These are not the only instances: pages 28, 66, 92, 98, 137, 141, 193, 199, and 200 are characterized by a similar paucity of text.

**BUT**, I cannot remain upset with you, dearest Lydia. How could I be vexed when, upon turning the almost contentless page 73, I find the completely disarming essay "Letter to a Funeral Parlor" with its devastatingly on-point opening sentence -

*I am writing to you to object to the word cremains , which was used by your representative when he met with my mother and me two days after my father's death.*

Oh, Lydia! Why do you tease us so? Next time, give us more of the good stuff, of which you are so obviously capable. More cheese. Fewer holes.

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### **Justin Evans says**

I'll save you another review about how Lydia Davis is good when she's writing really short stories that break the rules/writing standard short stories that are really emotionally affecting, and bad when she's writing standard short stories that are really emotionally affecting/writing really short stories that break the rules. Suffice it to say, she does both of these things fairly well.

That aside, I have no idea what all the hype is about. Having read all of one book by Davis and two by Knausgaard, I'd put them in the same basket: formally adventurous, more or less devoid of content, unless you count what I (and probably you) do every day to be interesting content, which I do not. I've already done it. I barely care about my own little incidences of domestic unhappiness (to be fair, they are very rare and very minor, because my wife is a wondrous human being); I sure as shit don't care about someone else's; and that goes double for invented versions of the same.

So yes, there is some formal inventiveness here, and I don't mean the one line stories, which are neither cute nor interesting. Davis at the very least varies her means of delivering domestic unhappiness, and sometimes even branches out into some slightly more imaginative territory. But I honestly have no idea what people would get out of this if they weren't obsessed with literary form. In that sense, Davis is in pretty good company. I feel the same way about James Joyce, for instance. She's also in pretty bad company, e.g., James Joyce.

I am a philistine. I care that people write about something worth writing about. I'll read more of Davis's work, because hey, it's easy to turn the pages and her sentences are okay and really, it's no small thing to be constantly futzing with form. But I lash back at the critics on this one. "A clear eyed and surgical inquiry"? Well yes, Dave Eggers, I agree. "into the nature of existence itself". Er... no.

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### **Keith says**

*"Not long after Gus Van Sant got the bright idea of doing a shot-by-shot remake of Hitchcock's "Psycho" in color, I ran into him at the Calcutta Film Festival and asked him why in the hell he'd come up with that bright idea. "So that no one else would have to," he replied serenely. With his new film, "Gerry," he has removed another project from the future of the cinema and stored it prudently in the past. He is like an adult*

*removing dangerous toys from the reach of reckless kids."* - Roger Ebert

I'm reminded of this over and over again as I go through the short stories and flash fictions that make up this collection. For every brilliant flash of insight ("Happiest Moment"), image-dense paragraph-long epic ("Murder in Bohemia"), or clever-as-fuck one-liner ("Certain Knowledge About Herodotus") there are a lot of experiments that don't seem to go anywhere, pieces that aren't engaging in their own right and seem like they might be attempting to test the patience of the reader on purpose. Davis' writing isn't about narrative movement so much as it is about turning on single ideas, and when a specific musing goes on for more than a page, it tends to lose a lot of steam. The shorter pieces, however, are incredible. She's like the Ramones, the Mitch Hedberg, of short fiction.

The second half of the book really picks up steam from the first. Even "The Furnace," clocking at a whopping 17 page, still works -- anything longer than that and the trouble starts. This reminds me of when I used to listen to Smashing Pumpkins' *Mellon Collie* double album back in the late 90's, lamenting to myself that there was a really good *single* album in there somewhere, simply in need more judicious song choice. I feel the same about this book -- the shorter stories are so bracingly potent that longer stories have trouble with momentum and focus by comparison.

But that one can write a sentence like nobody's business.

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## **Dorian says**

If the house is on fire and there's only time to save one book, this might just be the one.

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## **Weinz says**

Oh Lydia, you lured me. You teased me with the two or three short story gems that I happened to read first. That bar was set high and I had only high hopes for the future. My heart was won over but alas, big plans for our reader/writer love affair were dashed and destroyed as I read on and the stories went doooooownhill.

Fear not dear Ms. Davis, I will not give up on you. Our affair is not over yet Lyds, I have Varieties of Disturbances and will give you another chance. Be warned dear one, no more play on word stories or your odd little forays into new languages, please. Let's just stick to what you know, quirky life observations and our love can continue on.

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## **Ted says**

## **Review Writing**

*She thought that perhaps she should limit the review to 805 words. This was the average length of the stories*

in the book. But the **median** length was far less. She researched, and estimated it to be 205 words. 27 stories had fewer words, the shortest one-pagers being one-liners. She thought to quote those shortest:

**Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:**

*that Scotland has so few trees.*

*he certainly looks indignant*

*and*

**Certain Knowledge from Herodotus**

*These are the facts about the fish in the Nile:*

*so his book was fishless?*

*These made her laugh, even out loud upon some readings. On other readings however they only caused her to smile. Still, she appreciated them, thankful for so little effort required on her part.*

*But what else to put in so short a review? Perhaps some brief comments on named stories? Something like the reviews that a friend wrote? She wondered if the friend was paid for those reviews. Probably just in the usual currency, she thought. Anyway, wouldn't that be plagiaristic?*

*She thought of introducing the review with a section about as long as this median story. Would that seem simple-minded? Would her editor approve? But she had no editor. And, she thought, she wasn't a she anyway. But the writer being reviewed was. Or rather is.*

Stories she made special marks beside: Boring Friends, A Mown Lawn, Jury Duty, A Double Negative, Information From the North Concerning the Ice:, Away From Home, Two Sisters (II).

Stories she wrote *cryptic comments* for:

City People - *sad tale*

Betrayal - *somewhat dark*

The White Tribe - *disturbing*

Priority - *trials of a wife & mother*

The Meeting - *very unusual style for her*

Blind Date - *curious*

Old Mother and the Grouch - *Unhappiness on the home front*

New Year's Resolution - *more quandaries*  
 Interesting - *not much is interesting*  
 Happiest Moment - *mind-bogglingly curious story in a sentence*  
 Happy Memories - *sad/ominous/hopeful*  
 Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman - *Astounding. Very moving.*  
 Mir the Hessian - *Quite a one-pager*  
 Alvin the Typesetter - *ominous ending*  
 Special - *made me laugh out loud*  
 Selfish - *liked on second read*  
 My Husband and I - *yew*  
 Spring Spleen - *downer? or amusing?*  
 Her Damage - *a woman & her forgiving husband*  
 Workingmen - *them & us*  
 In a Northern Country - *horrifying*  
 Company - *quite good - and something I relate to.*  
 The transformation - *many adjectives can apply*  
 The Furnace - *Strange. True?*  
 The Silence of Mrs. Iln - *strangely upbeat*  
 Almost Over: Separate Bedrooms - *my eyes leaked*

*Other comments, most longer, that she wrote:*

Happiest Moment – *a story she has written is a story she read about what a Chinese student said, to his English teacher, was the happiest moment of his life being a trip his wife made on which she ate duck and of which she often spoke to him about.*

Jury Duty – *This one-sided narrative composed entirely of Answers with the Questions missing has a curious feel to it. The Answers express an ambivalence about the whole experience. The comparison with lady bugs is perhaps telling, and perhaps not. The 'Yes!' at the end utterly enigmatic.*

Right and Wrong – *one of her old types of narrative.*

Alvin the Typesetter – *what do you think of? **my reader, you must read it to know!***

My Husband and I – *very weird*

Two Sisters (II) – *see the other Two Sisters (in Break It Down).  $5 \times 2 = 10$  sisters, and 10 women with sisters – all different. How many women all together?*

There were six stories more than ten pages long. She noticed that she had done a lot of underlining in three of these, some underling in a fourth. In one she had done much underlining at first, then hardly any. Had she lost interest? Had she forgot to read the last few pages? But in the longest one, the fictional biography of Marie Curie, which she had found very moving, there were no underlines at all.

She wondered what this all meant. There were many possibilities ... but

she decided to quote more stories.

## **A Double Negative**

At a certain point in her life, she realizes it is not so much that she wants to have a child as that she does not want not to have a child, or not to have had a child.

## **Information from the North Concerning the Ice:**

Each seal uses many blowholes and each blowhole is used by many seals.

## **Special**

We know we are very special. Yet we keep trying to find out in what way: not this way, not that way, then what way?

## **Almost Over: Separate Bedrooms**

They have moved into separate bedrooms now.

That night she dreams she is holding him in her arms. He dreams he is having dinner with Ben Johnson.

*She decided that was good enough.*

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## **Greg says**

I think plot can be an overrated thing. I suspect Lydia Davis might share this sentiment.

Looking through some of the reviews for the book from people I know on goodreads.com the major criticism seems to be the super short stories. For example this one:

*SAMUEL JOHNSON IS INDIGNANT:  
that Scotland has so few trees.*

I don't know exactly what this story 'means' but I love that she thinks it's a self-contained piece. yeah it's only a sentence but I get more of a kick out of it than a lot of literary stories about middle-age marital ennui.

Like Kafka I think that Davis works best in brevity. Yeah, I love *The Trial* and really like *The Castle*, but where Kafka really shines for me is in stories like "The Hunger Artist" and "The Judgement", and in his Biblical parables and paradoxes. In Kafka these are the short-ish pieces that revolve around a 'punch-line'. Possibly one doesn't find the punch-line of "The Judgement" too funny, dad rising out of bed to tell his adult son that he's been a shitty son, an even worse human being so go kill yourself and the son goes off dutifully to do it, but to me there is something darkly funny about the story. Never mind the hilarity of "The Hunger Artist". Lydia Davis operates in a similar way when she is at her best in this book, the story is a joke of sorts. As in her story "Letter to a Funeral Parlor" where the point of the story is the letter-writers disgust at the bastardized word 'cremains'.

The lengthier pieces in this book are where I think she falls flat, they are in my opinion like "The Hunter Gracchus" or "The Metamorphosis" to me, kind of interesting but a little too played out in their delivery,



kind of like an SNL sketch that just doesn't know when to end.

I wouldn't say that her dozen or so uber-short-stories are her best in this collection, but I love that they are there. And maybe it's just because they force me to do what I should be doing when I'm reading; reading to make every single word count. Wondering why each one was chosen and what they 'mean', why Davis thought this particular sentence should stand on its own, what are the different ways it can be read and really pull apart the one sentence for its 'essence' or something like that. It's what can be done in Kafka's super short pieces too, and maybe for both writers (for me) they work their best when they are in the happy medium between not too short and not too long.

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### **Nathan says**

There's a thin line between real literary innovation and cheap gimmicks. Lydia Davis dances on it in a performance to rival Philippe Petit's. When she's good, she's sharp, funny interesting and forward thinking. She writes stories like "Almost Over: Separate Bedrooms" which is as follows:

They have moved into separate bedrooms now. That night she dreams she is holding him in her arms. He dreams he is having dinner with Ben Johnson.

which conveys a feeling perfectly. Because of her sheer verbal austerity, a lot of her stories fall completely flat. Take, for instance, "Samuel Johnson is Indignant" which is one tiny dependent clause long: "that Scotland has so few trees" which to me means almost nothing.

I think these stories were a lot more interesting in the pre-Twitter days. They're clever little witticisms, but now the world is filled with clever little witticisms. Davis has Dorothy Parker level zings sometimes, but I'm not content to read a book of sharp little phrases. Luckily, there's more to *Samuel Johnson is Indignant* than just the flash fiction pieces. A lot of the one-ten page stories I would gladly give 5 stars to, because they're so well trained to human feeling and thought processes. They're just long enough to convey a feeling, but they never sacrifice quality.

So in other words, I think there's probably a five star collection in here, provided that I get to cherry pick the good pieces and leave behind the kind of pointless ones. As they stand, I'm giving it a solid 7/10 because no matter how clever she is, I can't make myself love the parts that felt like little nothings.

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### **Trever Polak says**

A return to form for Davis after the disappointing (to me, at least) *Almost No Memory*. I always end up skipping the longest story in Davis's collections because they're almost never as good as any of the other ones; in this case I skipped "In A Northern Country". I'll probably buy her *Collected Stories* anyway, so I can always go back and reread it. This is probably a good place to start if you've never read Davis before, also.

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### **mwpm says**

*Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* is a testament to Davis's range, and the range of her influence. Indeed, Davis is

a writer's writer; she is well read and knows how to apply the styles and techniques utilized by writers such as Russell Edson, Gertrude Stein, Jorge Luis Borges, Donald Barthelme, etc...

We know only four boring people. The rest of our friends we find very interesting. However, most of the friends we find interesting find us boring: the most interesting find us the most boring. The few who are somewhere in the middle, with whom there is reciprocal interest, we distrust: at any moment, we feel, they may become too interesting for us, or we too interesting for them.

- **Boring Friends**, pg. 1

(see also: "My Husband and I", pg. 140 *and* "The Transformation", pg. 171)

Among the most interest of Davis's stories (which is saying a lot, because I find all of her stories very interesting) are the stories that implement a form of wordplay, or a technique that I haven't encountered before. In "Jury Duty", a story unfolds from the answers given during a Q&A, while the questions themselves remain blank, leaving to the reader's imagination the content of the questions the speaker is answering...

Q.

A. Jury Duty.

Q.

A. The night before, we had been quarreling.

Q.

A. The family.

Q.

A. Four of us. Well, one doesn't live at home anymore. But he was home that night. He was leaving the next morning - the same morning I had to go in to the courtroom.

- **Jury Duty**, pg. 51

The stories that are most indicative of Davis's style are those that in which the author plays word games or logic games or both, stories such as "" and "Right and Wrong", in which the story is not grounded by the conventions of character and plot, but is a free expression and/or exploration of the playful nature of words (at times reminiscent of Samuel Beckett)...

She knows she is right, but to say she is right is wrong, in this case. To be correct and say so is wrong, in certain cases.

She may be correct, and she may say so, in certain cases. But if she insists too much, she becomes wrong, so wrong that even her correctness becomes wrong, by association.

It is right to believe in what she thinks is right, but to say what she thinks is right is wrong, in certain cases.

She is right to act on her behalf, in her life. But she is wrong to report her right actions, in most cases. Then even her right actions become wrong, by association.

If she praises herself, she may be correct in what she says, but her saying it is wrong, in most cases, and thus cancels it, or reverses it, so that although she was for a particular act deserving of praise, she is no longer in general deserving of praise.

- **Right and Wrong**, pg. 129

Many of the stories of *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* are less than a page in length. And many of those stories are one, maybe two sentences. Here they are, in their entirety...

These are the facts about the fish in the Nile:

- **Certain Knowledge from Herodotus**, pg. 14

We are sitting here together, my digestion and I. I am reading a book and it is working away at the lunch I ate a little while ago.

- **Companion**, pg. 21

*Remember* that thou are but dust.

I shall try to *bear it in mind*.

- **Examples of Remember**, pg. 28

that Scotland has so few trees.

- **Samuel Johnson Is Indignant**, pg.44

At a certain point in her life, she realizes it is not so much that she wants to have a child as that she does not want not to have a child, or not to have had a child.

- **A Double Negative**, pg. 66

It invariably precedes, even if it do not altogether supercede, the determination of what is absolutely desirable and just.

- **Honoring the Subjunctive**, pg. 71

You ask me about Edith Wharton.

Well, the name is very familiar.

- **Losing Memory**, pg. 73

Each seal uses many blowholes and each blowhole is used by many seals.

- **Information from the North Concerning the Ice**, pg. 92

"It's *extraordinary*," says one woman.

"It *is* extraordinary," says the other.

- **They Take Turns Using a Word They Like**, pg. 98

We know we are very special. Yet we keep trying to find out in what way: not this way, not that way, then what way?

- **Special**, pg. 137

I am happy the leaves are growing large so quickly.

Soon they will hide the neighbor and her screaming child.

- **Spring Spleen**, pg. 141

It has been so long since she used a metaphor!

- **Away from Home**, pg. 167

They have moved into separate bedrooms now.

That night she dreams she is holding him in her arms. He dreams he is having dinner with Ben Johnson.

- **Almost Over: Separate Bedrooms**, pg. 199

I don't want any more gifts, cards, phone calls, prizes, clothes, friends, letters, books, souvenirs, pets, magazines, land, machines, houses, entertainments, honors, good news, dinners, jewels, vacations, flowers, or telegrams. I just want money.

- **Money**, pg. 200

I have only to add  
that the plates in the present volume  
have been carefully re-etched  
by Mr. Cuff

- **Acknowledgement**, pg. 201

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## Jessica says

I first learned about Lydia Davis from Michael Silverblatt's Bookworm radio show (podcasts available online here: <http://www.kcrw.com/etc/programs/bw>, changed my life here in lonely Japan with no books to read and no one to talk to about books), and he said that she ought to be read at the rate she appears in the little mags, one short piece per every few weeks, and I agree. This is a writer to be savoured. That hasn't stopped me from gorging myself on her writing for the last couple of months though. Her hyper-rational tone, all the while veering wildly towards the irrational, the unsayable, I recognize from my inner voice, the one that talks to me, soothingly, when I am in a panic, the one that knows about devastation and how to dish it out in bite-sized pieces. But I get to hear this voice of comfort, and of irony, on all subjects when I hear Lydia Davis do it, not just on what is about to push me over the edge, but on what is about to push others over the edge, or towards the edge, in infinitesimal little moves.

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## Julie Franki says

Ain't nobody writes short stories like Ms. Davis. See those five stars? That's right, five. And because she's a genius, she breaks rules, and will twist your cranium at times, but most of all she will move you. I'm a big fan of McSweeney's, who first showed me the Light (of Lydia). I didn't figure out the title out until many years after I read this (probably because my historical knowledge is patchy at best). Who is Samuel Johnson? And why is he indignant? Read Davis, do a Wiki search on Johnson, and you'll figure it out.

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## notgettingenough says

Ensnared, as I am right now, in short stories, one could scarcely imagine a greater contrast with Alice Munro. This is not just because Davis does rather stretch – or should I say shrink – the boundaries of what a short story is. Take this, for example:

Certain Knowledge from Herodotus

These are the facts about the fish in the Nile:

That's it, the entire enchilada. It made me google Herodotus, fish and Nile, which sent me to this rather wonderful quotation:

There are many ways how to hunt crocodiles; I shall describe the way I think is most worth mentioning. The hunter baits a hook with a pig's back, and lets it float in the river. He remains on the bank with a live piglet and beats it. The crocodile hears the squeals of the pig, follows the sound, and finds the bait, which it swallows; then the hunter hauls in the line. When the crocodile is ashore, he covers its eyes with mud; then the quarry is very easily overcome, but without that it would be very difficult.

Herodotus, Histories 2,70

Handy advice when I'm back in Australia next.

Rest here:

<http://alittleteaalittlechat.wordpress...>

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## **Margaret Wappler says**

I don't know why, maybe because they look alike but I can't stop thinking about Laurie Anderson whenever I read Lydia Davis. They both have this blunt, bone-dry sense of humor and a completely awesome disregard for what's "supposed" to happen in their art.

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## **MJ Nicholls says**

The stories of Lydia Davis differ from most modern short stories in that each short or longish tale is distinct and memorable, taps into several emotions at once, and lends itself to an enlightened or enlightening re- or re-reread. Flitting between profound seriousness and intellectual impishness, Davis has that unique *tone* all writers of the short form seek and spend far too long attempting to cultivate (looking at thou, George Saunders). Whether indulging in language games or light whimsy, as in 'A Mown Lawn' or 'Honoring the Subjunctive,' or probing into human relationships with astonishing insight using a series of scalpels and unspecified sharp implements, as in 'Old Mother and The Grouch' or 'The Furnace' (to select two random favourites), this collection and all her others deliver a blissful reading experience and celebrate that special blend of striking universality and tireless playfulness that only enviously skilled masters with Genius grants can deliver with aplomb. Alongside 2007's *Varieties of Disturbance*, this is my favourite of her collections.

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## **Summer says**

A joy to read. Sweet like dried fruit, not candy. No, really. While many authors process reality so it's delectable and you want to suck on the words all day, Lydia Davis has a way of preserving the texture of a single moment or entire relationship so it's nummy, chewy, and yet immediately recognizable for what it was while fresh, alive, or being lived.

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## **Kathrina says**

I started reading this as if I had found my muse, a writer's voice who said the things I'd always been urged to say, but couldn't say all that well. Isn't that a sign of great writing -- when someone else is saying what you wish you could? Short, tight, brilliant constellations of words. I was mesmerized, and, at the same time, thought maybe the moment had come to finally pick up my own pen. Driving home from the library I was forming my first Davis-inspired lines. But something must have happened between reading some in the library and picking it up again at home. I think it happened at "Marie Curie", an interesting story, but not the same movement that the previous stories had. And then "Mir the Hessian" set the bar too low for the rest of the collection. Each one disappointed me more as I approached the end. What happened? Did I grow jaded to her style, or did she add a bunch of lesser work to the end to make her pub date?

Davis's greatest strength is in recognizing the absurd in the hopelessly normal. She misses the mark when she attempts the opposite, to describe the absurd as completely normal. The best reason to pick up this book is to read her "Old Mother and the Grouch". And then close the book and savor it.

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## **Kevin Fanning says**

I enjoyed the pieces where she messes with language and grammar. It reminded me of *Tender Buttons*, and I could have read a whole book like that. But I didn't care for the more straight-forward fiction pieces. She does thing to keep the reader detached from the action and emotionally distant from the characters, which is an interesting stylistic choice, but not to my taste.

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## **Lucas Miller says**

i really enjoyed this book. it made me feel that i was reading an answer key to a creative writing class. these stories feel like exercises. the point is rarely plot driven, but more as if there is something specific to be achieved. i thought that this would become really tiresome, but davis is very intelligent, and funny and sad and a very good writer.

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