

COMPARISON ESSAYS

BRUCE CATTON

BRUCE CATTON (1899-1978) became America's best-known historian of the Civil War. As a boy in Benzonia, Michigan, Catton acted out historical battles on local playing fields. In his memoir *Waiting for the Morning Train* (1972), he recalls how he would listen by the hour to the memories of Union army veterans. His studies at Oberlin College interrupted by service in World War I, Catton never finished his bachelor's degree. Instead, he worked as a reporter, columnist, and editorial writer for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and other newspapers, then became a speechwriter and information director for government agencies. Of Catton's eighteen books, seventeen were written after his fiftieth year. *A Stillness at Appomattox* (1953) won him both a Pulitzer Prize for history and a National Book Award; other notable works include *This Hallowed Ground* (1956) and *Gettysburg: The Final Fury* (1974). From 1954 until his death, Catton edited *American Heritage*, a magazine of history. President Gerald Ford awarded him a Medal of Freedom for his life's accomplishment.

Grant and Lee: A Study in Contrasts

"Grant and Lee: A Study in Contrasts" first appeared in *The American Story*, a book of essays written by eminent historians for interested general readers. Contrasting the two great Civil War generals allows Catton to portray not only two very different men but also the conflicting traditions they represented. Catton's essay builds toward the conclusion that, in one outstanding way, the two leaders were more than a little alike.

When Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee met in the parlor of a modest house at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, on April 9, 1865, to work out the terms for the surrender of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, a great chapter in American life came to a close, and a great new chapter began.

These men were bringing the Civil War to its virtual finish. To be sure, other armies had yet to surrender, and for a few days the fugitive confederate government would struggle desperately and vainly, trying to find some way to go on living now that its chief support was gone. But in effect it was all over when Grant and Lee signed the papers. And the little room where they wrote out the terms was the scene of one of the poignant, dramatic contrasts in American history.

They were two strong men, these oddly different generals, and they represented the strengths of two conflicting currents that, through them, had come into final collision.

Back of Robert E. Lee was the notion that the old aristocratic concept might somehow survive and be dominant in American life.

Lee was tidewater Virginia, and in his background were family, culture, and tradition . . . the age of chivalry transplanted to a New World which was making its own legends and its own myths. He embodied a way of life that had come down through the age of knighthood and the English country squire. America was a land that was beginning all over again, dedicated to nothing much more complicated than the rather hazy belief that all men had equal rights, and should have an equal chance in the world. In such a land Lee stood for the feeling that it was somehow of advantage to human society to have a pronounced inequality in the social structure. There should be a leisure class, backed by ownership of land; in turn, society itself should be keyed to the land as the chief source of wealth and influence. It would bring forth (according to this ideal) a class of men with a strong sense of obligation to the community; men who lived not to gain advantage for themselves, but to meet the solemn obligations which had been laid on them by the very fact that they were privileged. From them the country would get its leadership; to them it could look for the higher values—of thought, of conduct, of personal deportment—to give it strength and virtue.

Lee embodied the noblest elements of this aristocratic ideal. Through him, the landed nobility justified itself. For four years, the Southern states had fought a desperate war to uphold the ideals for which Lee stood. In the end, it almost seemed as if the Confederacy fought for Lee; as if he himself was the Confederacy . . . the best thing that the way of life for which the Confederacy stood could ever have to offer. He had passed into legend before Appomattox. Thousands of tired, underfed, poorly clothed Confederate soldiers, long-since past the simple enthusiasm of the early days of the struggle, somehow considered Lee the symbol of everything for which they had been willing to die. But they could not quite put this feeling into words. If the Lost Cause, sanctified by so much heroism and so many deaths, had a living justification, its justification was General Lee.

Grant, the son of a tanner on the Western frontier, was everything Lee was not. He had come up the hard way, and embodied nothing in particular except the eternal toughness and sinewy fiber of the men who grew up beyond the mountains. He was one of a body of men who owed reverence and obedience to no one, who were self-reliant to a fault, who cared hardly anything for the past but who had a sharp eye for the future.

These frontier men were the precise opposites of the tidewater aristocrats. Back of them, in the great surge that had taken people over the Alleghenies and into the opening Western country, there was a deep, implicit dissatisfaction with a past that had settled into grooves. They stood for democracy, not

from any reasoned conclusion about the proper ordering of human society, but simply because they had grown up in the middle of democracy and knew how it worked. Their society might have privileges, but they would be privileges each man had won for himself. Forms and patterns meant nothing. No man was born to anything, except perhaps to a chance to show how far he could rise. Life was competition.

Yet along with this feeling had come a deep sense of belonging to a national community. The Westerner who developed a farm, opened a shop, or set up in business as a trader could hope to prosper only as his own community prospered—and his community ran from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from Canada down to Mexico. If the land was settled, with towns and highways and accessible markets, he could better himself. He saw his fate in terms of the nation's own destiny. As its horizons expanded, so did his. He had, in other words, an acute dollars-and-cents stake in the continued growth and development of his country.

And that, perhaps, is where the contrast between Grant and Lee becomes most striking. The Virginia aristocrat, inevitably, saw himself in relation to his own region. He lived in a static society which could endure almost anything except change. Instinctively, his first loyalty would go to the locality in which that society existed. He would fight to the limit of endurance to defend it, because in defending it he was defending everything that gave his own life its deepest meaning.

The Westerner, on the other hand, would fight with an equal tenacity for the broader concept of society. He fought so because everything he lived by was tied to growth, expansion, and a constantly widening horizon. What he lived by would survive or fall with the nation itself. He could not possibly stand by unmoved in the face of an attempt to destroy the Union. He would combat it with everything he had, because he could only see it as an effort to cut the ground out from under his feet.

So Grant and Lee were in complete contrast, representing two diametrically opposed elements in American life. Grant was the modern man emerging; beyond him, ready to come on the stage, was the great age of steel and machinery, of crowded cities and a restless, burgeoning vitality. Lee might have ridden down from the old age of chivalry, lance in hand, silken banner fluttering over his head. Each man was the perfect champion of his cause, drawing both his strengths and his weaknesses from the people he led.

Yet it was not all contrast, after all. Different as they were—in background, in personality, in underlying aspiration—these two great soldiers had much in common. Under everything else, they were marvelous fighters. Furthermore, their fighting qualities were really very much alike.

Each man had, to begin with, the great virtue of utter tenacity and fidelity. Grant fought his way down the Mississippi Valley in spite of acute personal discouragement and profound military handicaps. Lee hung on in the trenches at Petersburg after hope itself had died. In each man there was an indomitable quality . . . the born fighter's refusal to give up as long as he can still remain on his feet and lift his two fists.

Daring and resourcefulness they had, too; the ability to think faster and move faster than the enemy. These were the qualities which gave Lee the dazzling campaigns of Second Manassas and Chancellorsville and won Vicksburg for Grant.

Lastly, and perhaps greatest of all, there was the ability, at the end, to turn quickly from war to peace once the fighting was over. Out of the way these two men behaved at Appomattox came the possibility of a peace of reconciliation. It was a possibility not wholly realized, in the years to come, but which did, in the end, help the two sections to become one nation again . . . after a war whose bitterness might have seemed to make such a reunion wholly impossible. No part of either man's life became him more than the part he played in their brief meeting in the McLean house at Appomattox. Their behavior there put all succeeding generations of Americans in their debt. Two great Americans, Grant and Lee—very different, yet under everything very much alike. Their encounter at Appomattox was one of the great moments of American history.

Journal Writing

How do you respond to the opposing political beliefs represented by Grant and Lee? During the American Civil War, nearly every citizen had an opinion and chose sides. Do you think Americans today commit themselves as strongly to political and social causes? In your journal, explain why, or why not. (To take your journal writing further, see "From Journal to Essay" on p. 263.)

Preparing to Read

Do you think it's possible for two people to look at the same thing and see it quite differently? Consider how a loving owner might view an overweight, bowlegged dog and how a neighbor might view the same animal. Can you think of other examples?

Two Views of the Mississippi

MARK TWAIN

Before becoming Mark Twain, America's most beloved humorist, Samuel Clemens (1830-1910) was a riverboat pilot, a journalist, and an unsuccessful gold miner. He said late in his life that those days on the river were the happiest he ever spent. In *Life on the Mississippi* he explains in detail how he became a pilot—how he learned to “read” the river. In the following slightly edited passage, Twain tells of one drawback to that otherwise rewarding experience.

TERMS TO RECOGNIZE

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| trifling (<i>para. 1</i>) | small, a tiny detail |
| acquisition (<i>para. 1</i>) | something gained or acquired |
| solitary (<i>para. 2</i>) | all alone |
| conspicuous (<i>para. 2</i>) | obvious |
| opal (<i>para. 2</i>) | a gemstone showing many shades of pink, blue, lavender, and gold |
| radiating (<i>para. 2</i>) | spreading |
| somber (<i>para. 2</i>) | dark |
| unobstructed (<i>para. 2</i>) | not hidden or blocked to view |
| rapture (<i>para. 3</i>) | joy, delight |
| wrought (<i>para. 3</i>) | brought about, caused |
| bluff reef (<i>para. 3</i>) | steep ridge of sand just beneath the surface of the water |
| shoaling (<i>para. 3</i>) | building up mud and sand |
| compassing (<i>para. 4</i>) | guiding (as with a compass) |

Now when I had mastered the language of this water, and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made

a valuable acquisition. But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry, had gone out of the majestic river!

I still keep in mind a certain wonderful sunset which I witnessed when steamboating was new to me. A broad expanse of the river was turned to blood; in the middle distance the red hue brightened into gold, through which a solitary log came floating black and conspicuous; in one place a long, slanting mark lay sparkling upon the water; in another the surface was broken by boiling, tumbling rings, that were as many-tinted as an opal; where the ruddy flush was faintest was a smooth spot that was covered with graceful circles and radiating lines, ever so delicately traced; the shore on our left was densely wooded, and the somber shadow that fell from this forest was broken in one place by a long, ruffled trail that shone like silver; and high above the forest wall a clean-stemmed dead tree waved a single leafy bough that glowed like a flame in the unobstructed splendor that was flowing in the sun. There were graceful curves, reflected images, woody heights, soft distances; and over the whole scene, far and near, the dissolving lights drifted steadily, enriching it every passing moment with new marvels of coloring.

I stood like one bewitched. I drank it in, in a speechless rapture. The world was new to me, and I had never seen anything like this at home. But as I have said, a day came when I began to cease from noting the glories and charms which the moon and sun and the twilight wrought upon the river's face; another day came when I ceased altogether to note them. Then, if that sunset scene had been repeated, I should have looked upon it without rapture, and should have commented upon it, inwardly, after this fashion: "This sun means that we are going to have wind to-morrow; that floating log means that the river is rising, small thanks to it; that slanting mark on the water refers to a bluff reef which is going to kill somebody's steamboat one of these nights, if it keeps on stretching out like that; those tumbling 'boils' show a dissolving bar and a changing channel there; the lines and circles in the slick water over yonder are a warning that that troublesome place is shoaling up dangerously; that silver streak in the shadow of the forest is the 'break' from a new snag, and he has located himself in the very best place he could have found to fish for steamboats; that tall dead tree, with a

single living branch, is not going to last long, and then how is a body ever going to get through this blind place at night without the friendly old landmark?"

No, the romance and beauty were all gone from the river. All the value any feature of it had for me now was the amount of usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat.

DEBORAH DALFONSO

GRAMMY REWARDS

Deborah Dalfonso is a contributor to *Down East*, *Yankee*, and other magazines, including *Body and Soul*, where she writes a column on spiritual practice. "Grammy Rewards" appeared in *Newsweek* in 1990. It compares two grandmothers "who are as different as chalk and cheese" and who influence her then six-year-old daughter Jill in wildly different ways. The daughter is puzzled by the contrasts, but Dalfonso herself finds a common ground between them.

XX

Our daughter, Jill, has two grandmothers who are as different as chalk and cheese.

One grandmother taught her to count cards and make her face as blank as a huge, white Kleenex when she bluffed at blackjack. They practiced in the bathroom mirror. The other grandmother taught her where to place the salad forks. When Jill was three, this grandmother taught her not to touch anything until invited to do so. The other grandmother taught her to slide down four carpeted stairs on a cookie sheet.

They are both widows, these grandmothers, and one lives in a trailer park in Florida from October until May, then moves north to an old lakefront camp in Maine for the summer. This is a leaning discouraged-looking structure filled with furniture impervious to wet swimsuits. Raccoons sleep on the deck every night. The other grandmother resides in a townhouse at the Best Address in the City—a brick, regal-looking building boasting a security system and plants in the hallways that are tended by florists who arrive weekly in green vans.

One grandmother plays Lotto America, Tri-State Megabucks, and bingo at the Penobscot Indian Reservation. The other grandmother plays bridge every Tuesday afternoon with monogrammed playing cards. One wears primary colors, favoring fluorescents when she has a tan; the other wears Leslie Fay suits, largely taupe or black.

They both take Jill on adventures, these grandmothers. One took

her to a Bonnie Raitt concert, and the other to a Monet exhibit at a fine arts museum.

One grandmother believes in magic; the other believes in the stock market. They both believe in security. To one, security means plenty of white mushrooms, Vermont cheddar, and fresh limes in the refrigerator when the meteorologist says, "We're gonna have some weather." The other thinks security refers to a financial planner with solid references.

Both grandmothers are near 70 and have hair the color of good wood smoke. One wears her hair long and braided, and pins her plaits into a crown around her head. Sometimes in the evening she lets Jill loosen all of that heavy hair and fluff it free with an ancient hairbrush. The other grandmother has her hair done twice a week by Cyril, who wears silk shirts with shoulder pads and discourses on the art world.

One grandmother would be delighted to learn that many people think of her as eccentric. The other hopes that people will refer to her as "correct." This grandmother, when startled, says "Oh, my word," her strongest expletive. The other one says "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph" or "hot damn," or both, or worse.

Before entertaining, one grandmother hires help to come in for an extra half day to polish the silver and attend to the table setting. From this grandmother, Jill will learn about civility and elegance and the gleam of things well cared for. The other gram kills the lights, burns candles, smiles, and says, "They're coming to see me, not my house."

During Hurricane Bob, one of Jill's grandmothers bought her a duckling-yellow slicker and took her to Higgins Beach to watch the wind kicking up the surf. She believes that the ocean throws off positive ions, excellent for growth and peace of mind. While they were experiencing the elements, Jill's other grandmother called to make certain that we were safely down in the cellar.

"Are there many ways to live?" my puzzled six-year-old asked me after a recent overnight visit to the Best Address in the City, where she was expected to bathe and dress for dinner.

"Yes," I said gently. "There are many, many ways, and you may choose which feels right for you." And, I promised myself silently, I will let her make her own choice.

Two grandmothers, two different worlds. Both want for Jill no less than the lion's share. One will be her anchor; the other will be her mainsail.

2. Commenting on the differences in the ways girls and boys use language to make friends, Tannen writes: "Typically, a girl has a best friend with whom she sits and talks, frequently telling secrets" (3). Talking together makes them best friends. Boys, she says, make friends through "activities" (3). Consequently, they "use language to seize center stage," to take control (3). How do Tannen's observations square with your experience of making friends while growing up? Write an essay in which you compare and contrast how you made same-sex friends with the way, as you recall, the "opposite" gender did so. Please give specific EXAMPLES and include ANECDOTES when possible.

DAVID SEDARIS
REMEMBERING MY CHILDHOOD
ON THE CONTINENT OF AFRICA

David Sedaris (b. 1957) is a satirist and playwright who contributes to *Esquire* and other magazines, and whose voice can be heard regularly on NPR's *This American Life*. Named humorist of the year in 2001 by *Time* magazine, he is the author of *Barrel Fever* (1994), *Naked* (1997), and *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (2000), from which this selection is taken. Although Sedaris once worked as a Christmas elf for Macy's department store, he did not grow up in the exotic settings he remembers here. In this essay, Sedaris steals memories from his friend Hugh, the son of a career diplomat, who actually grew up in Africa. Point by point, Sedaris compares his childhood with his friend's. "Certain events are parallel," he says: for example, they both saw the same movie about a talking Volkswagen. But by comparison with his friend's early years in the Congo and Ethiopia, Sedaris's own childhood in North Carolina was "unspeakably dull."

XX

When Hugh was in the fifth grade, his class took a field trip to an Ethiopian slaughterhouse. He was living in Addis Ababa at the time, and the slaughterhouse was chosen because, he says, "it was convenient."

This was a school system in which the matter of proximity outweighed such petty concerns as what may or may not be appropriate for a busload of eleven-year-olds. "What?" I asked. "Were there no autopsies scheduled at the local morgue? Was the federal prison just a bit too far out of the way?"

Hugh defends his former school, saying, "Well, isn't that the whole point of a field trip? To see something new?"
"Technically yes, but . . ."

"All right then," he says. "So we saw some new things."

One of his field trips was literally a trip to a field where the class watched a wrinkled man fill his mouth with rotten goat meat and feed it to a pack of waiting hyenas. On another occasion they were taken to examine the bloodied bedroom curtains hanging in the palace of the former dictator. There were tamer trips, to textile factories and sugar refineries, but my favorite is always the slaughterhouse. It wasn't a big company, just a small rural enterprise run by a couple of brothers operating out of a low-ceilinged concrete building. Following a brief lecture on the importance of proper sanitation, a small white piglet was herded into the room, its dainty hooves clicking against the concrete floor. The class gathered in a circle to get a better look at the animal, who seemed delighted with the attention he was getting. He turned from face to face and was looking up at Hugh when one of the brothers drew a pistol from his back pocket, held it against the animal's temple, and shot the piglet, execution-style. Blood spattered, frightened children wept, and the man with the gun offered the teacher and bus driver some meat from a freshly slaughtered goat.

When I'm told such stories, it's all I can do to hold back my feelings of jealousy. An Ethiopian slaughterhouse. Some people have all the luck. When I was in elementary school, the best we ever got was a trip to Old Salem or Colonial Williamsburg, one of those preserved brick villages where time supposedly stands still and someone earns his living as a town crier. There was always a blacksmith, a group of wandering patriots, and a collection of bonneted women hawking corn bread or ginger snaps made "the ol' fashioned way." Every now and then you might come across a doer of bad deeds serving time in the stocks, but that was generally as exciting as it got.

Certain events are parallel, but compared with Hugh's, my childhood was unspeakably dull. When I was seven years old, my family moved to North Carolina. When he was seven years old, Hugh's family moved to the Congo. We had a collie and a house cat. They had a monkey and two horses named Charlie Brown and Satan. I threw stones at stop signs. Hugh threw stones at crocodiles. The verbs are the same, but he definitely wins the prize when it comes to nouns and objects. An eventful day for my mother might have involved a trip to the dry cleaner

or a conversation with the potato-chip deliveryman. Asked one ordinary Congo afternoon what she'd done with her day, Hugh's mother answered that she and a fellow member of the Ladies' Club had visited a leper colony on the outskirts of Kinshasa. No reason was given for the expedition, though chances are she was staking it out for a future field trip.

Due to his upbringing, Hugh sits through inane movies never realizing that they're often based on inane television shows. There were no poker-faced sitcom martians in his part of Africa, no oil-rich hillbillies or aproned brides trying to wean themselves from the practice of witchcraft. From time to time a movie would arrive packed in a dented canister, the film scratched and faded from its slow trip around the world. The theater consisted of a few dozen folding chairs arranged before a bedsheet or the blank wall of a vacant hangar out near the airstrip. Occasionally a man would sell warm soft drinks out of a cardboard box, but that was it in terms of concessions.

When I was young, I went to the theater at the nearby shopping center and watched a movie about a talking Volkswagen. I believe the little car had a taste for mischief but I can't be certain, as both the movie and the afternoon proved unremarkable and have faded from my memory. Hugh saw the same movie a few years after it was released. His family had left the Congo by this time and were living in Ethiopia. Like me, Hugh saw the movie by himself on a weekend afternoon. Unlike me, he left the theater two hours later, to find a dead man hanging from a telephone pole at the far end of the unpaved parking lot. None of the people who'd seen the movie seemed to care about the dead man. They stared at him for a moment or two and then headed home, saying they'd never seen anything as crazy as that talking Volkswagen. His father was late picking him up, so Hugh just stood there for an hour, watching the dead man dangle and turn in the breeze. The death was not reported in the newspaper, and when Hugh related the story to his friends, they said, "You saw the movie about the talking car?"

I could have done without the flies and the primitive theaters, but I wouldn't have minded growing up with a houseful of servants. In North Carolina it wasn't unusual to have a once-a-week maid, but Hugh's family had houseboys, a word that never fails to charge my imagination. They had cooks and drivers, and guards who occupied a gatehouse,

armed with machetes. Seeing as I had regularly petitioned my parents for an electric fence, the business with the guards strikes me as the last word in quiet sophistication. Having protection suggests that you are important. Having that protection paid for by the government is even better, as it suggests your safety is of interest to someone other than yourself.

Hugh's father was a career officer with the U.S. State Department, and every morning a black sedan carried him off to the embassy. I'm told it's not as glamorous as it sounds, but in terms of fun for the entire family, I'm fairly confident that it beats the sack race at the annual IBM picnic. By the age of three, Hugh was already carrying a diplomatic passport. The rules that applied to others did not apply to him. No tickets, no arrests, no luggage search: he was officially licensed to act like a brat. Being an American, it was expected of him, and who was he to deny the world an occasional tantrum?

They weren't rich, but what Hugh's family lacked financially they more than made up for with the sort of exoticism that works wonders at cocktail parties, leading always to the remark "That sounds fascinating." It's a compliment one rarely receives when describing an adolescence spent drinking Icees at the North Hills Mall. No fifteen-foot python ever wandered onto my school's basketball court. I begged, I prayed nightly, but it just never happened. Neither did I get to witness a military coup in which forces sympathetic to the colonel arrived late at night to assassinate my next-door neighbor. Hugh had been at the Addis Ababa teen club when the electricity was cut off and soldiers arrived to evacuate the building. He and his friends had to hide in the back of a jeep and cover themselves with blankets during the ride home. It's something that sticks in his mind for one reason or another.

Among my personal highlights is the memory of having my picture taken with Uncle Paul, the legally blind host of a Raleigh children's television show. Among Hugh's is the memory of having his picture taken with Buzz Aldrin on the last leg of the astronaut's world tour. The man who had walked on the moon placed his hand on Hugh's shoulder and offered to sign his autograph book. The man who led Wake County schoolchildren in afternoon song turned at the sound of my voice and asked, "So what's your name, princess?"

When I was fourteen years old, I was sent to spend ten days with my maternal grandmother in western New York State. She was a small and private woman named Billie, and though she never came right out and asked, I had the distinct impression she had no idea who I was. It was the way she looked at me, squinting through her glasses while chewing on her lower lip. That, coupled with the fact that she never once called me by name. "Oh," she'd say, "are you still here?" She was just beginning her long struggle with Alzheimer's disease, and each time I entered the room, I felt the need to reintroduce myself and set her at ease. "Hi, it's me. Sharon's boy, David. I was just in the kitchen admiring your collection of ceramic toads." Aside from a few trips to summer camp, this was the longest I'd ever been away from home, and I like to think I was toughened by the experience.

About the same time I was frightening my grandmother, Hugh and his family were packing their belongings for a move to Somalia. There were no English-speaking schools in Mogadishu, so, after a few months spent lying around the family compound with his pet monkey, Hugh was sent back to Ethiopia to live with a beer enthusiast his father had met at a cocktail party. Mr. Hoyt installed security systems in foreign embassies. He and his family gave Hugh a room. They invited him to join them at the table, but that was as far as they extended themselves. No one ever asked him when his birthday was, so when the day came, he kept it to himself. There was no telephone service between Ethiopia and Somalia, and letters to his parents were sent to Washington and then forwarded on to Mogadishu, meaning that his news was more than a month old by the time they got it. I suppose it wasn't much different than living as a foreign-exchange student. Young people do it all the time, but to me it sounds awful. The Hoyts had two sons about Hugh's age who were always saying things like "Hey that's *our* sofa you're sitting on" and "Hands off that ornamental stein. It doesn't belong to you."

He'd been living with these people for a year when he overheard Mr. Hoyt tell a friend that he and his family would soon be moving to Munich, Germany, the beer capital of the world.

"And that worried me," Hugh said, "because it meant I'd have to find some other place to live."

Where I come from, finding shelter is a problem the average teenager might confidently leave to his parents. It was just something that came with having a mom and a dad. Worried that he might be sent to live with his grandparents in Kentucky, Hugh turned to the school's guidance counselor, who knew of a family whose son had recently left for college. And so he spent another year living with strangers and not mentioning his birthday. While I wouldn't have wanted to do it myself, I can't help but envy the sense of fortitude he gained from the experience. After graduating from college, he moved to France knowing only the phrase "Do you speak French?"—a question guaranteed to get you nowhere unless you also speak the language.

While living in Africa, Hugh and his family took frequent vacations, often in the company of their monkey. The Nairobi Hilton, some suite of high-ceilinged rooms in Cairo or Khartoum: these are the places his people recall when gathered at a common table. "Was that the summer we spent in Beirut or, no, I'm thinking of the time we sailed from Cyprus and took the *Orient Express* to Istanbul."

Theirs was the life I dreamt about during my vacations in eastern North Carolina. Hugh's family was hobnobbing with chiefs and sultans while I ate hush puppies at the Sanitary Fish Market in Morehead City, a beach towel wrapped like a hijab around my head. Someone unknown to me was very likely standing in a muddy ditch and dreaming of an evening spent sitting in a clean family restaurant, drinking iced tea and working his way through an extra-large seaman's platter, but that did not concern me, as it meant I should have been happy with what I had. Rather than surrender to my bitterness, I have learned to take satisfaction in the life that Hugh has led. His stories have, over time, become my own. I say this with no trace of a kumbaya. There is no spiritual symbolism; I'm just a petty thief who lifts his memories the same way I'll take a handful of change left on his dresser. When my own experiences fall short of the mark, I just go out and spend some of his. It is with pleasure that I sometimes recall the dead man's purpled face or the report of the handgun ringing in my ears as I studied the blood pooling beneath the dead white piglet. On the way back from the slaughterhouse, we stopped for Cokes in the village of Mojo, where the gas-station owner had arranged a few tables and chairs beneath a dying canopy of vines. It

was late afternoon by the time we returned to school, where a second bus carried me to the foot of Coffeeboard Road. Once there, I walked through a grove of eucalyptus trees and alongside a bald pasture of starving cattle, past the guard napping in his gatehouse, and into the waiting arms of my monkey.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX FOR DISCUSSION XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

1. When he was in elementary school, David Sedaris went on field trips to places like Old Salem and Colonial Williamsburg (7). How do these experiences COMPARE with the typical field trips that his friend Hugh took as a child? What is his point in comparing the two experiences?
2. When they were growing up, both Sedaris and Hugh saw the same "unremarkable" movie about a talking Volkswagen (10). How, then, was Hugh's experience different from Sedaris's?
3. Sedaris says that he has learned "to take satisfaction" in Hugh's experience rather than "surrender to my bitterness" (21). What does he claim to be "bitter" about? How seriously are we supposed to take this claim?
4. After comparing and CONTRASTING their adventures for several pages, how does Sedaris finally "take" satisfaction from the life of his friend?
5. On the whole, whose childhood would you prefer to remember having lived, Sedaris's or his friend Hugh's? Why?

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX STRATEGIES AND STRUCTURES XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

1. In COMPARING his childhood with Hugh's, Sedaris obviously stresses the CONTRASTS. What similarities does he nonetheless mention?
2. In paragraph 8, Sedaris constructs a point-by-point mini-essay in comparison and contrast. How does the order of his sentences and their grammatical structure help to heighten the contrasts he draws between "parallel" events in his life and Hugh's?
3. Parallel lines run along together but never intersect. Point out examples in this essay where Sedaris shows events in the two boys' lives as parallel but contrasting.
4. Paragraph 10 recalls a rare common experience in the two boys' lives—going to the movie about the talking Volkswagen. How—and why—does Sedaris turn this identical experience into another contrast between them?