

Lydia Davis

An Appreciation, With Q&A



In true Putney spirit, alumna Lydia Davis '65 rejects corporate control and joins the fight against climate change. Davis shared memories of her time at Putney, and the local activism she is now committed to, with me recently. My experience of her writing, as well as Lydia in her own words, follow.

BY BETH STICKNEY P'23 ✨

Lydia Davis '65 might be the most celebrated writer you've never heard of. A trailblazer of flash fiction and an esteemed translator, she has achieved a kind of otherworldly acclaim. Not only has she been awarded a MacArthur "Genius Grant" and the Man Booker International Prize, France has declared her an Officier and Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters. When asked to speak at Putney's graduation some years back, however, Davis offered bits of surprisingly down-to-earth advice, such as "do spend time with your grandparents" and "wash your feet every day."

There was also this: "Don't pick up a nervous cat when you're wearing a nice sweater."

The line reads like one of the very short stories for which Davis is best known. Sensible yet unexpected—a tad off—and therefore bubbling with comic tension. Also comical is the implied visual—claws meet cashmere. But if you are an over-thinker, as most of Davis's (not so?) fictional narrators are, you might imagine a well-dressed young alum, heading to their first job interview, inexplicably seized by a desire to grab the nearest stray, showing up for the appointment late, in tatters, doomed to failure. What begins as a *jeu d'esprit* ends as a cautionary tale, gently delivered by a woman who sounds like your favorite aunt, who no doubt possesses a nice sweater or two, not to mention a healthy appreciation of human absurdity.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Here's a very short story Davis actually wrote as a very short story, titled "Tropical Storm:"

**Like a tropical storm,
I, too, may one day become
"better organized."**

This is quintessential Davis. She revels in the possibilities of ordinary language, especially when used in surprising contexts. Of course, we probably have heard this term used in weather reports, though we tend to think of a person as being well or poorly organized, and would reach for different words to describe a large-scale meteorological event. What if we flip the comparison around? If a tropical storm can be like a person—better organized someday—in what ways can a person be like a tropical storm? By playing with context, Davis explores the work that an ordinary phrase—"better organized"—might do in eliciting a story, even in the space of just two lines. We end with aspiration tempered by recognition of certain unspoken realities. (In fact, the more time I spend reading Davis, the more clearly I see this tension between different kinds of order and messiness running through her writing. More on that later.)

Even when the length of a story is conventional, say, eight or nine pages, the literary imagination revealed in the work is never so. Generally stingy with plot and generous

with introspection, rendered plainly without symbol or artifice, Davis's stories feed on the mundane peculiarity of daily life. In Davis's world, a story arises around the inner lives of mice residing in the walls of old houses or the intelligence of cockroaches ("such nimble rascals, such quick movers, such clever thieves"). Closely observed husbands and neighbors, in-laws, and strangers—doing what they do and saying what they say—provide Davis, and her reader, with opportunities for recognition and wonder, consternation and delight.

Writing in *The New Yorker* in 2009, when her first *Collected Stories* was released, James Wood described the hefty volume as "a body of work probably unique in American writing, in its combination of lucidity, aphoristic brevity, formal originality, sly comedy, metaphysical bleakness, philosophical pressure, and human wisdom."

I came upon Davis rather late in my life as a reader of fiction. In early 2010, my old friend, Susan, brought her to my attention, inviting me to a reading Davis was giving at the SUNY Albany campus. At the time, I was the mother of a five-year-old boy, and still feeling unsettled by an identity crisis that began in 2003, when I left an academic career (and a very nice apartment) in NYC and followed my then-boyfriend to unemployment (and a very old house) in Vermont. I wasn't unhappy with this new life, just surprised by it. My new routines were mostly quite pleasant, but I missed some of the old ones, such as reading on the subway. I had always considered myself well-read, typically consuming at least a novel a week on the R train from Woodside to my office in midtown. But my reading atrophied those first few years in Vermont. Gone was the daily commute, and then the baby came. (Little did I know how easily I would find kinship with at least one of Davis's narrators.)

Eager for a road-trip, even one to Albany, I purchased Davis's *Collected Stories*, and Susan and I set off in my black Honda Fit. It was the first time I'd traveled on my own without my son; even though it didn't have to be an over-nighter, I insisted on dinner reservations and a hotel room. I was going to make the most of it. (Spoiler: Wine was consumed.)

More than the specific pieces Davis read that night, I remember the sound of her voice. She reads carefully and in a tone that might be described as deadpan, which sometimes creates tension between her delivery and her subject matter, but is also especially well-suited to the kind of humor sprinkled throughout her work. I also remember feeling intimidated when I presented my book to her for signing at the end of the evening. She was so damn *smart*. Wanting to engage with her, ever-so-briefly, I couldn't imagine anything to say, other than (for inscription purposes) my first name.

Before that reading, I had only had time to dip in and out of the stories. The more I read of her work (and about her for this piece) the more convinced I am that, given time enough and proximity, Davis and I would be great pals. After all, we have much in common. It seems that we both enjoy a glass of white wine and are quite fond of public transportation. Neither of us has read the entirety of *Don Quixote* and we find the *Harry Potter* books overrated. We aspire to kindness, but sometimes treat our husbands badly. Surely, many friendships are based on shallower affinities.

"Glenn Gould" is one of my favorite stories, perhaps because it is the one in which I felt the strongest flash of recognition, that kinship with the narrator I mentioned earlier. It's impossible to satisfactorily summarize, because it interweaves two narrative threads—or possibly even three, depending on how you count—but here goes: The narrator, who bears more than passing resemblance to Davis, is a newish mother, transplanted from a city to a small town. She develops a daily routine with her young son, walking him in the stroller to the library, the hardware store, the post office, the park. She always makes it home in time to watch *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, in its syndicated reruns. She learns through a friend with whom she is corresponding (one thread of the story) that Glenn Gould, a pianist she idolizes, was also a fan of the show (in another thread, we learn quite a lot about Gould and his eccentricities). This knowledge gives her obsession meaning. If Gould loved the show, it must be worth watching. And watch she does.

"At the end of the half hour I am sorry the show is over. I hunger for more. If I could, I would watch another half hour, and another. I wish the baby would go to sleep and my husband would not come home for dinner."

We know that in an earlier phase of her life, the narrator was devoted to the piano, not as a profession, but for the pleasure playing gave her (this is true of Davis). Clearly, practice is

no longer part of her daily routine. Instead, she communes with Gould in this very abstract, slightly absurd way, through an icon of pop culture—Mary Richards, single and childless. In a world where mothers of young children are supposed to be selfless in their devotion, Davis's narrator feels the tug of divided attentions. She writes:

"I want to stay in that other place, that other city that is a real city but one I have never visited. I want to go on looking through a window into someone else's life . . . someone else's apartment, a friend coming in the door, a friend staying for supper, usually salad, a woman tossing salad, always neatly dressed. There is order in that other world."

(If you, too, were a fan of the show, you know that the unnamed friend is Rhoda, and you can readily picture Mary in the tidy kitchen of her tidy studio apartment, tossing salad.)

"Mary says that order is possible and, since she is gentle and kind if somewhat brittle, that kindness is possible, too. The friend who comes down from upstairs and stays for supper is not so tidy, and is not always kind, but sometimes selfish, so there is also room for human failing, and for a kind of recklessness or passion."

As with the tropical storm and the possibility of becoming better organized, I see shifting perspectives here. On the one hand, the narrator aspires to Mary's tidiness, even though, perhaps, it comes at the cost of brittleness. But in Mary's kindness, the narrator—as unnamed friend—finds something like forgiveness (a word Davis might reject) or at least, kinship.



Lydia holding her grandson, Asa, summer 2023

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Your mother was a writer and your father taught at Columbia University. You would have had many good options for high school. What brought you to The Putney School?

I was living in New York City with my parents at the time we applied to Putney. A primary motivation for seeking a boarding school in the first place was probably to get me out of the tight space of a smallish apartment and expand my horizons after five years of a good day school but over confined city life. I know my mother researched schools in Europe as well as here, but I don't remember visiting any other schools besides Putney. I was at heart a "country" girl, and also very keen on classical music in all forms, so it was a good fit. My parents and I were probably also enchanted by the beauty of the hilltop.

I immersed myself very completely in the musical program at Putney—violin lessons, piano lessons, music theory classes, orchestra, chorus, Friday night Sing, and madrigals. It was all immensely fulfilling and satisfying. The rigorosity of Norwood Hinkle's instruction was a good fit for me. The English literature classes were also enriching, and the evening activity of simply reading was a deep pleasure. During my senior year I became very serious about keeping a journal of ideas, drafts, notes, one that I continued over the years. The library was a great resource—I remember vowing to read all of Benjamin Franklin's many-volume autobiography, though I didn't get far. Some of my closest friends were deeply interested in literature then, and are also writers now. Writing for schoolwork, however, never quite left the realm of a difficult school task, to enter the realm of delight, as music studies did.

What might you say to Putney grads today (as if you were speaking at graduation)?

I did give a graduation speech at Putney a few years ago, and it was a most interesting challenge. I talked about my Putney days (of course) because some things have changed, such as lights out times (early, then) and smoking (seniors were allowed to then). I talked a little about college and what to expect. I talked from the teacher's point of view. For instance, I said teachers could see quite clearly what was going on in the back row. I also told them not to be shy about going to office hours—professors sometimes just sat there waiting! But of course the typical Putney student probably wouldn't be shy about taking advantage of what a teacher had to offer. Then I ended with the traditional offerings of advice, some of it serious and some of it not—do

spend time with your grandparents; don't pick up a nervous cat while you're wearing a nice sweater; wash your feet every day. I told them the good friends they had right now would quite likely still be good friends in another fifty years—that has been true for me and my Putney friends.

What can you say about your decision not to sell your next book, *Our Strangers*, through Amazon? How is that even arranged—what are the mechanics of that?

Over the years, I've come to be more and more deeply disturbed by Amazon, its ruthless business practices, its poor treatment of workers, its outsourcing to irresponsible companies. Long ago I stopped buying anything through them. Then, two years ago, when my last book came out, I decided I did not want to have my next book sold by them. Of course, given the structure of the publishing and bookselling industry at this point, I

knew this would probably mean smaller sales and a smaller readership, but I had no hesitation. Amazon is a destroyer of community, whereas an independent bookstore is often the heart of a community. The publisher I had had since 1986 certainly wanted to bring out my next book, and they tried to see how it could be done, but their hands were tied by contracts—they could not have bypassed Amazon. The same would be true for a number of other larger publishers. My agent—who was completely on board with this move—decided to speak to Andy Hunter, of Bookshop.org, and ask for his thoughts, since he had founded that organization as a way to provide an alternative to Amazon. To her surprise, he offered to publish the book himself. This would be his first print book. He had to think of a name for his imprint—Bookshop Editions. The publishing process has gone well so far, the book will be out in October, it will be available only in independent bookstores, libraries, and select online retailers, though not Amazon!

I read that you have decided not to travel internationally—or by plane—any more. For someone who is in love with languages and other cultures, that seems like a major decision. Can you say something about that? This was born of principle, too. A few years ago, just before Covid, actually, I made

the decision not to fly anymore because of the dire situation of the world regarding climate change and the huge carbon-emission cost of flying. I had made my share of trips to Europe, especially, but also around the U.S. when I traveled for a reading or residency. I felt it was time to stay on the ground. I do have family and friends in England, and I will miss France, but at this point I don't believe we can live the same way, do the same things we did years ago, given the real emergency of our present global situation. I only wish we all had the resolve to go on general, universal strike until radical change was put in place.

What can you say about your civic involvement where you live?

What I regretted leaving out of my graduation speech at Putney was the importance of community involvement. I think I was not as involved myself, then, as I am now, and maybe that's why it wasn't at the forefront of my mind. Now—again, because of the urgency of climate change—I am very involved in my village and surrounding communities. We have formed a Climate Smart Committee, and we have embarked on various projects within two very effective New York State initiatives: the Climate Smart Communities program and the Clean Energy Communities program. Since we are aware of the loss of biodiversity and what a crisis that is, in itself, one of our projects has been to create parks and garden beds of native plants around the village, as heavily planted in wildlife-sustaining plants as we can manage. We are working on five different sites at the moment. But we also host a speakers series, have prepared an emergency response guide, and join neighboring towns to host repair cafés—which are wonderfully inspiring and even fun events. (Some people love to fix things, most of us like to at least watch!)

What can you say about your friendship with filmmaker Errol Morris and the fact that the two of you are classmates AND MacArthur fellows? (I wonder how many other high school classes have had TWO MacArthurs?)

I thoroughly enjoy that remarkable fact, and I'm sure he does too. It helps that we were friends at Putney. We both had our ups and downs at school. He was more eccentric than I was—for instance, he wore a tie, white shirt, and formal jacket most of the time, in the days of jeans and lumber jackets. He talked incessantly (and brilliantly) to his friends late into the night, annoyed his teachers, and did not keep his eye on the conductor's baton during Orchestra (he played the cello; I played the violin). As for me, I was not a diligent student in all my



Lydia Davis in 1973

subjects, and I rebelled in certain ways which I won't identify . . . But I like the fact that two not-stellar students nevertheless later proved to be hard-working and determined in our two fields! I'm sure Putney had some wonderfully beneficial effects on both of us. I don't know about Errol, but I certainly loved my time at the school—the beauty and freedom of it, compared to life in New York City, and the constant stimulation of the long day's schedule; I actually couldn't wait for vacations at home to be over. Errol and I have remained friends, but we don't see each other often. We had a plan to get together and rehearse a cello and piano sonata someday—I can't remember which one. But life always intervenes.

Beth Stickney lives in Bellows Falls. The young son she mentions in this piece, Gerrit Blauvelt, graduated from Putney in June and will attend Middlebury College in the fall.