



Break It Down

Lydia Davis

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Published to huge acclaim in the US, Lydia Davis' important debut collection of 34 stories seems to assure us that reality is ordered and reasonable. However, as the characters in the stories prove, misunderstanding and confusion are inherent in everyday life.

Break It Down Details

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Author : Lydia Davis

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From Reader Review Break It Down for online ebook

Lauren says

Amazing--so incredibly underrated. Raw, real, and painful. These prose pieces stick with you and eat at you throughout the day--they never leave the reader. The title piece is incredible, reads so easy. I devoured this book and wanted more the second I closed it. Absolutely recommend--leaves you feeling changed yet the same.

Delia says

If I'm being honest I would give this collection of short stories a rating between 4 and 5 stars because, well, not all of the stories were AMAZING. In fact, a few towards the middle of the book were uneventful, and not in the type of way that holds any depth or meaning. They just seemed pointless. BUT...there were a bunch of other stories that walked up to my rib cage, knocked twice, then passed the ivory gates only to settle down in the deepest crevices, crevices that I knew existed but didn't KNOW until those stories came and plopped in each unlit corner. Does that make sense? I don't really write book reviews. For all the performance anxiety they give me, I might as well be dedicating that energy to creative writing instead.

Anyway, these stories are sweet understated little gems that crawl into bed with you one night and then you wake up and you can't get them off. Among my favorites were The Fears of Mrs. Orlando, Break It Down, Mr. Burdoff's Visit to Germany, The House Plans--I should stop there, you get the point.

Pete says

my previous experience w lydia davis has been overall positive if limited but good lord is this book excruciating. i cannot imagine someone reading this end to end, or even reading one of the longer stories (it's 75% longer stories by volume) and saying to themselves with any semblance of honesty "i enjoyed that" or even "i will someday think about this story ever again". one star because the short ones are great! a second star because the title story is rad! but the other long ones are actual CIA torture! art is a weapon we use on ourselves!

Daria says

It's not a pleasant sensation, reading Lydia Davis. She writes well, she's a disciple of the "simplify, simplify" school, but.... I take my words now from the response I wrote to *Break it Down* for class:

There is much within-ness within Davis' work. It invites the reader to examine herself, and not in the cajoling way that some texts have of encouraging such examination, but an inescapable one that isn't necessarily optimistic or pretty. I sometimes feel as if Davis reveals more about me to myself than she reveals about Davis. To read her is to be uncomfortably introspective, and Davis' anonymous heroines, delineated only by "she"s, can easily take the form and face and shape of the reader herself. Davis' stories make me restless, and

I think that I, too, am at great risk of wandering through soulless suburban spaces, a neurotic woman-writer... Her endings do not do what stories should do, they do not give closure; they are liberating, but at the cost of peace of mind, I think. Nothing Davis ends with offers the reader hope – she is not really in the business of cheering her readers up – but reveals an uneasy, insomniac, fretful examination of the self and the world that ultimately seems to yield nothing:

"Then she looks out at the smokestacks far away and nearly invisible across the sound and thinks, though, that this was not the revelation she was waiting for, either." (177)

"[...]but I kept forgetting to ask, until finally I put them away in a drawer to give her when they came out again, because by then it wasn't going to be long, and it made me tired all over again just to think of it." (164)

"[...] though her eyes rest on the darkening woods, she is not so much watching as waiting, and often, now, feels she is waiting." (152)

"[...] she remembers everything that happened and remembers, though she will have forgotten when I see her again, that she has told it to me now, though just barely." (150)

"They have never known such disappointment as I have." (148)

"I'm not the one who can answer it and anyone else who tries will come up with a different answer, though of course all the answers together may add up to the right one, if there is such a thing as a right answer to a question like that." (98)

"They have suffered for our sakes, and most often in a place where we could not see them" (80)

"They shook him out of the mattress, brushed him over the floor, wiped him off the windowpane, and never knew what they had done." (77)

"Then the poem, and she thinks she can smell something there, though she is probably smelling only the ink." (56)

Isn't this a sobering collection of last sentences? This restlessness, this feeling of having been left hanging, can be seen as positive because it invites motion, perhaps. But I could quote Davis herself in counterargument, from the final sentence of "What an Old Woman Will Wear": "And now that she had said this out loud, she thought that maybe there was no joy, after all, in even thinking about such freedom." (159) There is no joy in Davis' tales, no permission to exhale. There is only restless scrutiny. Searching for something and not finding it. Exhaustion. Waiting. The exhaustion caused by endless waiting. Unrealized futures, unanswered questions, unrecognized people and deeds.

It is an accurate if depressing picture, perhaps. We are all told to "live in the moment" and "carpe diem" this and that, but the truth is that so much of our lives revolves around waiting – always looking to some wiser, better, more incredible tomorrow, and so we stumble over today in anticipation. Retrospection or some gloomy inquisitiveness, that is how Davis' stories begin and end, and in between the two stretches the tedious now, made up of the minuteness of the everyday.

Tao says

I like the last story and the first story and some of the other stories.

I like "The Fish."

Lee Foust says

I've been reading and worshipping Ms. Davis' translations of Maurice Blanchot since my college days in the 1980s and, weirdly to me, have only just recently discovered that she has been, since about that same time (1986) been working herself to redefine and/or expand the possibilities of the short story form with a series of critically well-received collections. Perfect timing, in a sense, as I am currently writing a novel in frames, a system of linked short narratives and I, too, want to both write the greatest short stories ever written while also simultaneously redefining and/or expanding the boundaries of what can be accomplished in a short prose narrative. So, yeah, I had a total agenda in reading this book: to steal her inspirational fire like a little literary Prometheus in an attempt to create a new narrative humankind out of a slip of the divine creative power of invention.

So, bias out on the table (in front of everyone!), I am both interested enough to keep on reading Davis' short stories in the future (yeah, I actually have the Penguin collected stories edition but plan on reading the books collected in it one at a time) but also rather disappointed. What I took from my feelings after whipping through the collection--the shortness and compactness of the tales leads one on quickly--is that some of these experiments in short prose tend, often, to come out cold. Very cold. While I know that it's often more powerful to describe heightened moments of human passion in a semi-detached way--in order to be more honest and to fight the stench of melodrama--but still, many of these stories were, literally, chilling and the feelings I drew for them were more concern, pity, and annoyance with Ms. Davis.

Such a chilly reaction to this book on my part might also be at least partially provoked by the last book I read, *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus, which I loved too much perhaps for my own good. Often it's hard for that first book after a great, great read to seem at all good as it will not stand up to the comparison. What interest me, however, most about my having read these two texts back-to-back and my response (and to raise the gender issue, which also fascinates me, even as I would seek to collapse gender differences and not be forced ever and always to have to define myself via my own maleness) is that I fell in love with Ms. Kraus while reading her book--certainly seduction is a theme so I do also believe that, as a reader, any reader, I was meant to fall in love with that narrator and that exactly is why that narrative so worked for me. The many narrators of the tales of *Break It Down* are the kind of neurotics that are often attractive because of their neuroses but you also know from the moment that you meet such characters that your relationship, whether friendship or romance, causal acquaintance or messy, ambiguous long-term bugfuck, will end with their own neuroses running the show completely as if you were never there before them. The reader feels left out of the stories, helplessly witnessing over self-absorbed characters creating their own alienating scenarios. A literary/romantic shut door; I walk on through the wintry cold to the next book.

Rob Findlay says

Picked this up for a local Twitter book club, glad I did as this is not normally the kind of stuff I would read.

The writer has a very different voice than most of the 1st person narratives I tend to read so it took some adjusting. That said, her writing style is just incredible

The stories themselves--all rather short--where interesting in different ways. Davis' voice is very insular and cathartic one moment and then stand-offish and stoic the next.

The first short-story, called "Story" interestingly enough was the most moving for me. It's about a woman obsessing over the minutia-of-the-moment involving the activities of her BF and his ex-GF, what got me was that this speaks to everyone...we've all sat and waited for the phone to ring, stared at it, called back 5 minutes later just in case they were taking the garbage out.

It seemed to embody the irrationality that love can induce.

-R

Jim says

I was bemused by the fact that Lydia Davis, whose translation of Proust's **Swann's Way** is so excellent, is also likewise a superb writer of short stories. In *Break It Down: Stories*, some of the stories are very short indeed, often no more than a middling paragraph in length.

What struck me first, however, was the almost complete lack of dialog, it being one of the principles of the modern short story that the reader is drawn to come to his own conclusions by reading what the characters say to one another. One result of a lack of dialog is a growing feeling of dread: Instead of a Godlike narrator (a la Anthony Trollope), we frequently have a confused narrator who goes from bad to worse.

I am hard put to say which stories I like the most, but "Break It Down" must surely be one. It deals with the monetary value of love from both a male and female perspective. I can understand why Davis chose to name her collection as she did.

Kevin says

I heard the story "Break it Down" on *This American Life* and had to check this collection out. The title story is so great. I love it. The rest of the stories in the rest of the collection share a similar narrative style, but hardly any of the emotional weight. They read more like clever exercises, but after just a few I realized I didn't particularly care about the people, the story, or the ideas she was playing with. It reads to me as sort of "academic literature," where they kiss the story and feelings behind it goodbye in favor of experimentation, but why sacrifice? Donald Barthelme pulls off both consistently.

Rachel León says

Hmm... so this book was my first introduction to Lydia Davis and I may have come to it with unfairly high expectations. While I recognize her skill at condensing a short story, I also felt like her writing has a clinical quality that kept me from connecting (which is my favorite thing about reading fiction).

Gina says

Love her writing.

Adam says

This book pissed me off a little. It's not that there aren't flashes of greatness in this ultra-short story collection. Because there are, particularly in the title story. But at her very worst, Lydia Davis inundates her readers with terse anecdotes or observations that don't seem to have anything going for them. They aren't linguistically or rhythmically interesting. They don't suggest or allude to some Grand Ineffable Something going on behind the scenes. They aren't affecting. They aren't amusing. They're often just flat reportage of nothing at all very interesting.

For example. In one two-page story, the narrator describes how her husband (or boyfriend, I forget) gets a fish bone stuck in his throat in France. They try various remedies but nothing dislodges it. They go to the hospital. [Spoiler!] A doctor uses some medical tool to remove it. End of story. There's no affective embellishment to the story, no oblique commentary on relationships or foreignness or even fish bones. It's just an anecdote. There's nothing else there.

I do like very short fiction in general (because my attention span is dwindling with age), but brevity demands precision and economy. In this collection, Davis is not quite there.

Adam Dalva says

Disclosure: Lydia was a grad school professor of mine, but I really do love this book. What's great about it - possibly unique - is how the stories revolve around the same central trauma (divorce, loneliness) in a way that feels incredibly personal without connecting in any tangible way. It's therefore not really linked, but it is certainly spoked. The book ebbs and flows in quality, but is always perfect on the line level (sometimes to the fault of being overly systemic. She never omits the "step b" in a flow.) Despite the seemingly pedantic narratives, there is just a strange, dark vibe here that will make you read it fast. It would be, I think, the perfect break-up book. I can think of a few earlier times in my life that I wish I had read it.

Oh, and the title story is worth about 6 stars on its own. One of the best.

Audrey says

A few of these stories stood out as stronger than the others and genuinely interesting. I think this collection and Davis' work was influential in other flash fiction collections and a style of exploring neuroses.

However, I found myself kind of bored after reading a few in a row. Even then, I think the stories I liked would have bumped this up to a three, if not for the fact that Davis was sprinkling in marginalized people as

shortcuts for adding flavor/depth in her story

- In the first story, "The Fears of Mrs. Orlando": "She walks past many black men who are planning different crimes." The woman is coded as paranoid, but there isn't an explicit critique of racism, and the narrative normalizes tropes about threatening black men; there isn't progress or resolution, just the same woman noticing threatening men all over the city, and each one happening to be black.

- In another story (about a sock), Vietnamese is used as shorthand for exotic/strange: "there was this one sock in his back pocket in a strange neighborhood way out in the eastern part of the city in a Vietnamese ghetto, by the massage parlors"

- Another neurotic character is looking for an apartment: "She is told about an apartment in a nice small street, but she won't look at it because she is also told that on the floor below lives a [ableist slur] man and his father and they argue and shout and she would have to listen to that."

I was actually reading "The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis," but I'm not interested in slogging through more of her prose when I am as likely to be surprised by her casual use of or marginalization of people of color as I am to find a piece I think actually works.

David says

This is the second collection of "short stories" by Lydia Davis that I've tried, and it will be my last. The other collection, "Samuel Johnson is Indignant" had enough flashes of genuine wit to make it almost tolerable, despite Ms Davis's predilection for microscopically short "stories" (sometimes no more than a sentence long) and a preternaturally detached prose style. The kind of writing that garners raves from the usual suspects - "The best prose stylist in America" (Rick Moody), "one of most precise and economical writers we have" (Dave Eggers), "few writers now working make the words on the page matter more" (Jonathan Franzen).

Well, allow me to differ, Herr Franzen. "Break it Down" is as dismal a collection of bleak, emotionally constipated, tales of misery as I've had the misfortune to read in the last ten years. And let's be clear, Ms Davis's trademarks - "dexterity, brevity, understatement" - are not necessarily virtues. Not when they lead to passages like these, which are ubiquitous

"She stands over a fish, thinking about certain irrevocable mistakes she has made today"

"My husband is married to a different woman now, shorter than I am, about five feet tall, solidly built. Next to her I feel bony and awkward .."

"I moved into the city just before Christmas. I was alone, and this was a new thing for me. Where had my husband gone? He was living in a small room across the river, in a district of warehouses."

"He said there were things about me that he hadn't liked from the very beginning."

"Though everyone wishes it would not happen, and though it would be far better if it did not happen, it does sometimes happen that a second daughter is born and there are two sisters. Of course any daughter, crying in the hour of her birth, is only a failure, and is greeted with a heavy heart by her father.."

"She can't say to herself that it is really over, even though anyone else would say it was over, since he has moved to another city, hasn't been in touch with her in more than a year, and is married to another woman."

"The fact that he does not tell me the truth all the time makes me not sure of his truth at certain times, and then I work to figure out for myself if what he is telling me is the truth or not, and sometimes i can figure out that it's not the truth and sometimes I don't know and never know, and sometimes just because...."

Oh Christ, why don't I just slit my fucking wrists right now? It would surely beat reading this kind of drivel. At a guess, at least half of the 34 'stories' in this book consist of a 3rd person or 1st person narrative, centring

on a clinically depressed doormat of a woman either in, or trying to recover from, a toxic relationship with a man who psychologically abuses her. None of these women has a name - they are all just "she". And Davis writes about them with a detachment that borders on the clinical.

In contrast to Jonathan Franzen, I can't imagine how a writer could make the words on the page matter **less**. The dreary 'stories' in this volume adhere to the dismal prevailing conventions of the late 1980s - tales of narcissistic or bipolar protagonists in which nothing much ever happens, served up in a kind of minimalist prose with that knowing ironic detachment. The kind of tripe that drives me up the wall, in other words.

(on edit, after posting this review: I notice that many of my good friends here on GR don't share my opinion - well, bring it on, Jessicas!)

I just found out that she was at one time married to Paul Auster. Why am I not surprised?

William says

Certainly inventive. These are stories like no others. They are quick glimpses of life, an individual's thoughts and relationships. They tend to start nowhere in particular, and stop rather than end. Davis shows a wide range in one sense, since the stories range from a hyper-detailed view of everyday life to occasional ventures into the absurd. There is an unusual mix of strong emotions with the utter banality of life for the character who has them.

I liked the creativity and readability of these short takes. There is also the shock of recognition since Davis records thoughts (mostly negative ones) which are probably common human experiences. They seem compellingly real; there is a sense, even when the story is a bit off-center, that "this really happened."

But the downside is a pervading bleakness. Relationships show no hope, and project sadness occasionally but more often a phlegmatic boredom. Couples who were married re-encounter each other and nothing much happens. Siblings are always estranged or tense with each other. Mothers are uniformly hypercritical.

Many of the stories focus on an inability to communicate -- with another person, with the outside world in general. Several characters lose their ability to be heard by others, twice because they develop a habit of speaking inaudibly. And on more than one occasion, the character in a story is so distracted that they bump into strangers while walking.

The central characters are both male and female, and to Davis' credit they are equally effectively rendered. And the themes and styles of the stories are so similar that, while none of them connect with others (no character appears more than in one story), there is a kind of unity to this collection which makes it read a bit like a novel.

At the end, I found myself anxious to read more of Davis' work, and I am hoping for more variation in style and mood. There is little humor in this collection, very little hope and no joy. A little of these ingredients would add depth and texture.

Carrie Lorig says

lydia davis punched out every lady author i worshiped before her. so much tougher and aware than didion. none of the light self-pity that is sort entwined in loorie moore's work. it's clean and sad. it's less of a game than her ex-husband's (paul auster) books can be. i feel like lydia davis is peeping in my apartment at night. and that is so much more terrifying than any of the premises and theory of the new york trilogy. god. she cracked my heart open like a pomegranate, but i enjoyed looking at all the red pieces inside.

Kate Weinland says

I would give this book five stars if it were just for the title story "Break It Down." The rest paled in comparison to it, which is more a compliment to "Break it Down" than a criticism of the others.

I have been in love with "Break It Down" for five years--it was assigned for a creative writing class I took in college. Every time I read this story, it makes me cry. And that's not something I do easily.

No story better captures the feelings we all experience after breaking up with someone we really cared for. The protagonist in the story has just ended a short-lived romance with a woman, and his heartbreak has driven him to try to reason out what he has lost in terms of dollars. Even though as we all know, and as the the protagonist figures out by the end of the story, what we lose (and gain) in loving is impossible to quantify or measure.

I don't want to give too much away. If you pick up this book for no other reason, pick it up after a difficult breakup and find a best friend in the protagonist of "Break It Down."

Dawn says

Are you kneeling and putting your hands on the carpet like that. Are you. On the carpet, your hands are on it?

Ted says

perfect for the holidays ... very short fiction

One of Davis's influences, from a young age, was Samuel Beckett. In this interview <http://www.believmag.com/issues/200...> Davis talks about her craft and other things literary. Here's a second interview with very little overlap to the previous one: <http://brickmag.com/interview-lydia-d...>

boneless fiction

It's been said that Davis has, with her short stories, created her own genre. Well, what is this genre? I'll be so bold as to attempt a description. Most of the stories in this collection, one of her earliest, are, I believe, fairly representative of her style. They employ a first person narrator much more commonly than usual; there is usually very little in the way of plot; characters are employed sparingly (usually only the narrator, who may be talking about one other person, often unnamed); no dialogue between characters (except in the narration itself: "I said ... and you said ..."); and at times extremely short stories, a paragraph in some cases, even a sentence. *Bare bones* is something that suggests itself, because her stories are so stripped down.

But what's missing from them, plot, character, dialogue (never narration, that is the only thing that can't be jettisoned) are, after all, the skeleton of traditional fiction, are they not? So to do without them is not "bare bones", it is "boneless". *Boneless fiction*.

Break It Down (1986)

This collection of short stories contains 33 stories in 140 pages. Fourteen stories are less than three pages long; most of those are a page or a paragraph. These were probably the best short stories I've ever read, taking into account how little time they required, and how tempting it was to keep picking up the book. Having finished it, and now moving into her second collection, *Almost No Memory*, I keep going back to stories in this volume. They do cast a spell.

Here's one of my favorite micro stories.

What She Knew

People did not know what she knew, that she was not really a woman but a man, often a fat man, but more often, probably, an old man. The fact that she was an old man made it hard for her to be a young woman. It was hard for her to talk to a young man, for instance, though the young man was clearly interested in her. She had to ask herself, Why is this young man flirting with this old man?

Themes and Style

In the first version of this review, I thought that I could get away with simply presenting the following stories. No. No. Not only did I try to learn a new trick, I also learned that I didn't do the trick very well.

At any rate, these are the stories, but with a little bit of context, that should make the points better. (The stories themselves are the same as before.)

First of all. I said above that Davis employs first person narration *often*. Yet in the four of these stories that have a narrator, I employed the first person in ALL of them. That's actually what I was thinking that Davis did. But no, I was fooled by seeing it so much that I thought I'd seen it nearly everywhere.

Here's an actual count from the collection.

First person narrator: 9 (7 female, 2 male)

No narrator: 2

Third person narrator: 22 (Some of these are difficult to categorize, since so few pronouns appear.)

About 1 in 3 are first person, not 4 in 4! SO. These stories are not representative in that sense, for sure.

Instances of Disturbance

This story is a retelling of the last selection in the book, *Five Types of Disturbance*. For whatever reason, I transferred the narrator from an impersonal one, to first person. But not the person whom the story is about. And why I inserted the very last sentence somehow escapes me. Lydia's version is a very disturbing tale; near the end I wrote that it reminded me of Polanski's movie *Repulsion*.

(view spoiler)

How to Decide?

I discovered, rereading some of Davis's stories, that certain details in this one have been taken almost exactly from *The Letter*, which she wrote in the third person narrative style. I had no recollection of that when I was writing.

This story attempts to illustrate a theme that I found in several of the stories, exemplified by this sentence in the middle of the first story in the collection, *Story*:

I try to figure it out.

I guess the name for what I'm talking about is *analysis paralysis*. The inability to arrive at a decision about the likely truth of a situation, because each analytical statement leads to a further refinement of the analysis, further consideration of unlikely but possible exceptions, further qualification of a once asserted conclusion. I was very alert to this in Davis' narratives, because I'm very familiar with the condition.

(view spoiler)

The Housemaid of Notre Dame

This story is a version of Davis's *Housemaid*. Both are first person narratives. My version careened off on a different track when the title occurred to me, but retains, I think, the rather frightening mood of hers.

(view spoiler)

A Very Short Introduction to Very Short Stories

This is my weird tribute to twelve of the one and two page stories in the collection. Random linkings of pronouns, story subjects, and a quote from a story.

(view spoiler)

The House of Anti-Contraction Therapy

This is a story inspired by one of Davis' stories (*Therapy*) and a story by Jorge Luis Borges (*The House of Asterion*). I had just read the latter, and had picked up the Davis collection and started reading the former. As soon as I started reading, I scribbled, "Coming straight from Borges, it seems as if the narrator hasn't changed!?" Finally, it seems to me that some (not all) of Davis's stories are worded very *primly*, where she favors not using contractions, but spelling each word out. I could be wrong.

(view spoiler)

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Previous review: My Antonia
Random review: Iberia *second review*
Next review: The Blind Assassin

Previous library review: The Manchurian Candidate
Next library review: Almost No Memory *more Lydia Davis*
