



Stitches

David Small

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One day David Small awoke from a supposedly harmless operation to discover that he had been transformed into a virtual mute. A vocal cord removed, his throat slashed and stitched together like a bloody boot, the fourteen-year-old boy had not been told that he had cancer and was expected to die.

In *Stitches*, Small, the award-winning children's illustrator and author, re-creates this terrifying event in a life story that might have been imagined by Kafka. As the images painfully tumble out, one by one, we gain a ringside seat at a gothic family drama where David—a highly anxious yet supremely talented child—all too often became the unwitting object of his parents' buried frustration and rage.

Believing that they were trying to do their best, David's parents did just the reverse. Edward Small, a Detroit physician, who vented his own anger by hitting a punching bag, was convinced that he could cure his young son's respiratory problems with heavy doses of radiation, possibly causing David's cancer. Elizabeth, David's mother, tyrannically stingy and excessively scolding, ran the Small household under a cone of silence where emotions, especially her own, were hidden.

Depicting this coming-of-age story with dazzling, kaleidoscopic images that turn nightmare into fairy tale, Small tells us of his journey from sickly child to cancer patient, to the troubled teen whose risky decision to run away from home at sixteen—with nothing more than the dream of becoming an artist—will resonate as the ultimate survival statement.

Stitches Details

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From Reader Review Stitches for online ebook

Oriana says

book #6 for Jugs & Capes!!

Holy motherfuck, this book is *intense*. It's a real fast read, despite its intimidating heft. And it's just terribly devastating—powerful and aching and sparse and horribly beautiful, and oh also did I mention that it's terribly devastating?

I mean, not devastating in an irredeemable way, like those maudlin mass-market bestsellers where everyone dies slowly & tragically while staring meaningfully into their loved ones' eyes and gently speaking words of unbearably sad and corny wisdom (you can tell how many of those books I've actually read, right?). No, *Stitches* is devastating in a harrowing, can't-look-away-from-the-car-accident way. It's this insane extended snapshot of a SERIOUSLY fucked up family, done in an illuminating, fascinating, and ultimately kind of a little bit slightly maybe sort of hopeful way.

What I'm saying, basically, is that it will leave you shaky and reeling and gasping for breath, and so so invigorated by the journey.

Mariah says

This book was an interesting graphic novel. There weren't many words, so I got through it very fast! I enjoyed his picture la and the fact that this was a memoir! He had a very hard life!!

However, I struggled with the transitions between fantasy and his dreams and reality and the true story. This left me, at many times, confused and that is why I only gave the book 3 stars.

Lee says

Such strange compressions of time: 24 years of the most significant moments in the author's life laid out in comparatively spare, sane, elegant, mature, b&w drawings (compared to the work of many other leading graphic artists) over 329 pages that surely took years to complete, read in an "enjoyable" hour, immersed in that sort of cinematic bookishness that comes from turning pages so much more quickly than those covered in text. A great passage of pages where the kid-aged author dives through a drawing and down a tunnel through the floor that leads to a secret hideout of cartoon mice and heroes and such. The b&w drawings work well to depict thriving old Detroit and domestic tension expressed as clenched silence. As fiction, the story's a bit much in terms of '60s-era Midwestern repression but thankfully this is memoir, another coming-of-age portrait of the artist in several hundred frames. It's affecting but sometimes it may have poured too much poignancy (pages of rain) on me. It's novel length but there's nothing particularly novelistic about it. It feels more like a story, in terms of length and depth. But still I'd recommend it for brief immersion in the sort of characteristically sucky childhood that -- without fail, apparently -- turns a child into the sort of artist who eventually publishes an excellent (if in this case at times a somewhat hasty/thin-seeming) fictional memoir.

Jan Philipzig says

Not sure how David Small's *Stitches* passed me by when originally published back in 2009 - I guess there are just too many fascinating comics coming out these days for me to keep up. Luckily, a few days ago I came across the title in a GR list of comic-book memoirs and finally ordered it from the library: what a revelation! Told in a sparse and subtle yet fluid and emotionally charged style, Small's coming-of-age memoir is as devastating as it is cathartic - the kind of book that stays with you long after you put it down. I don't think I have ever seen a more accurate or convincing depiction of the vulnerability of childhood in comic-book form.

Jackie "the Librarian" says

Back in the 50's, people did NOT talk about issues. Everything was internalized - unhappiness, anger, resentment were all swallowed. When illustrator David Small was a boy, he felt all those repressed feelings, even though they weren't spoken. His mother's little cough, his father's absences, all spoke volumes.

He internalized his own feelings, of not feeling loved or wanted, but they manifested physically as asthma and sinus troubles, exacerbated by the smoke from the nearby factories, and his own father's smoking habit.

The treatment at the time, especially given the fact that his father was a radiologist, was x-rays. Lots of x-rays. Not that going to the hospital was anything new for David. It was a place of both familiarity and comfort, and of the worst kind of nightmares.

Later, in his early teens, David developed a growth on his neck, and eventually had surgery to remove it. The surgery did literally what life in his family had tried to do - it silenced his voice. His parents hid the truth from him, but that was nothing new. He discovered on his own that it was cancer, as he discovered the truth about other things happening in his family. And as he regained his ability to talk, therapy began to uncover the truth behind the tacit lies of his family life.

This book broke my heart, for all the unhappy lives represented by this one family. The illustrations of David's dreams and nightmares may just give ME nightmares. The 50s were NOT a golden era for America. Underneath all that conformity was simmering resentment and lost happiness. Be glad you live now.

Mariah says

This book was an interesting graphic novel. There weren't many words, so I got through it very fast! I enjoyed his picture a lot and the fact that this was a memoir! He had a very hard life!!

However, I struggled with the transitions between fantasy and his dreams and reality and the true story. This left me, at many times, confused and that is why I only gave the book 3 stars.

Stacy268 says

Heart breaking.

I read this last night and was left very pensive. Once wakened by my daughter around 1am, Small's story would not leave my brain. Upon reflection I think I will be haunted by this one for a long time.

Raeleen Lemay says

4.5

WOW. This was a very quick read, but a very interesting one!

The art was all in black and white, and looked like it was painted in watercolor paint, which was super cool! The transitions were incredible, and the ending of the book blew me away. Highly recommend.

Sam Quixote says

David Small's childhood wasn't a happy one. His mother was cold, emotionless, and brutal toward him. His father was distant and barely spoke to him. His brother was around but just barely. Nobody spoke to one another. Then we find out about their tormented inner lives. His mother was a closet homosexual while his father was numbed by the knowledge that he had given David cancer through x-rays. His grandmother was an insane person who tried to murder her husband by burning the house down and his great grandfather tried to kill himself by drinking Drano.

Due to the x-rays his father shot at him when he was born, David developed a tumour on his throat which led to cancer and after two operations left him with one vocal chord making speaking an enormous task.

Similar to Alison Bechdel's "Fun Home" a few years ago, David Small's "Stitches" tells the story of a family and their secrets, of pain, of triumph and human relationships, and of hope. The drawing style reminded me of Will Eisner's - Small draws without panels and the drawings and words swirl together and spill over onto other pages.

However Small has enough of a style to call his own. The drawings in this book are incredible. Flicking back through the book there's something on every page that's extraordinary. The ones that stand out are the expressions of emotion - David finding a kind fatherly figure in a psychiatrist (depicted as the White Rabbit from Lewis Carroll's Alice books) and crying. The sequence of tears covers several pages and is beautiful. Similarly the one page depiction of a now voiceless David expressing his inner frustration toward his parents, a screaming mouth within a mouth within a mouth ad infinitum, is very powerful.

There's so much to recommend this book, the amazing art, the storytelling ability and the power of the story - if you're a fan of comics you will love this. Even if you're not a big reader of comics there's a lot here to appreciate and like. It's a tremendous achievement.

Tatiana says

This is a very strong graphic novel. No superheroes here, just a very emotional memoir about a child growing up in a deeply dysfunctional family but who manages to overcome the damages that had been inflicted upon him by his relatives. A very, very unhappy family depicted here. And David is not very forgiving either.

I do not recommend reading the plot summary printed on the dust jacket. It gives the entire story away.

If you like *Stitches*, you will probably like *Blankets* too.

Suad Shamma says

I was highly impressed with this book, way more than I thought I would be. When I bought it, it was on a whim. I had never heard of David Small, I don't know who he is or what he does. I was taken in by the cover, the fact that it was a memoir written in graphic novel style, and with a quick skim through it I knew I liked the artist's style and would enjoy the story.

This isn't a happy story, it's quite dark, and you can't help but think it must be fiction. This can't actually be true. This can't actually be what happened to David. But it was and it is, and this thought keeps resonating in your head as you read through his childhood and adolescence. The way he describes his family as silent, each expressing themselves silently in different ways was brilliant. When he gets to the point where his silence is not a matter of choice anymore, I thought wow. This book is a lot more than I bargained for. This is profound, and quite painful to tell you the truth.

You're sad and in pain and you want to protect this boy from his family who are hurting him, albeit unintentionally. His mom, who plays an integral part in his pain fascinated me. Her anger and her silent suffering, the big revelation at the end was shocking that I couldn't begin to imagine the impact it had on him at the time.

I loved the little snippets at the end about his family and what happened to them after the story had ended, it made it all the more real to me.

Great memoir.

MJ Nicholls says

Understated and elegiac inkery. Strictly from the misery memoir staple, grainy and grotty, but not gratuitous. Cinematic panels opening up wistful wounds and profound childhood emptiness. The graphic novel is almost alone among contemporary art/fiction in capturing that peculiar form of youthful *Weltschmerz*.

Lindsey Rey says

This is officially my favorite graphic memoir! Loved it so much!

~Geektastic~ says

If it were up to me, all biographies and memoirs would be written in graphic novel form. *Fun Home: A Family Tragcomic*, *The Complete Maus*, *The Complete Persepolis*, *Blankets*; these are all near-perfect expressions of personal and familial experience. The power of imagery saves the subject matter from being bogged down by the excessively wordy, self-justifying tendencies of some, and the oblique, pseudo-poetic drivel of others. The best graphic novel memoirs and biographies seem to combat these tendencies by utilizing a profound economy made possible by the concentrated effect of the visual. Everyone knows the old truism, “a picture is worth a thousand words,” but books like these show you what it really means to tell a story visually.

Stitches is perhaps one of the best examples of this, even compared to the aforementioned masterpieces of the genre. Spare is the keyword here, as simple and often entirely silent series of panels tell a heartbreakingly redemptive coming of age story.

Childhood is a bizarre and dangerous time; so much of who we are is the result of those formative years, and so much can go wrong. Some of us get lucky and we enter adulthood with nothing but a few minor scrapes and mental bruises, mitigated by affection and happy memories. But some of us are like David Small, and we are scarred.

A bleak childhood and the questionable practices of 1950’s medicine (including the ministrations of Small’s radiologist father) leave Small scarred inside as well as out. The story is not a pleasant one, and there is no real humor to lighten the burden of disclosure, but it is told with such subtle beauty that it is worth the pain, like life itself often proves to be. (I apologize at this maudlin tendency, but there it is).

Silence, both literal and metaphorical is the tool most often and effectively used by Small as he relates his traumatic and disturbing youth. Rendered voiceless for years by a mysterious medical procedure, he understands the power and difficulty of silence. His family doesn’t communicate—typical of their repressive time—and even with a voice, Small is rarely heard. Perhaps it is this lack of voice that gives him the ability to encapsulate a swathe of years in a few lines and the subtle shading of a face. He is definitely a master of facial expressions, if not of vocalization.

There are moments of, if not joy, then understanding from time to time. And there are some truly disturbing events as well. (view spoiler). But life is full of both, it just seems that he got a bit more of the latter and at the end of his story I found myself surprised that he didn’t grow up to be a serial killer. David Small (and the rest of us) should be very thankful for the cathartic effect of storytelling. And good therapists.

Greta says

"Mama had her little cough..."

*Once or twice, some quiet sobbing, out of sight...
Or the slamming of kitchen doors.
That was her language.*

*Dad, home from work, went down to the basement and thumped a punching bag.
That was his language.
My brother, Ted, beat on his drum.
And I, too, had learned a way of expressing myself wordlessly...
Getting sick, that was my language.*

Stitches is a poignant, sometimes tragicomic memoir of David Small, best known as the author and illustrator of numerous picture books for children.

Through this emotional and cathartic graphic memoir, David takes the reader back to his childhood in Detroit, which was not a happy one.

"Dad never there except occasionally for one of mother's dry, burned little meals ; mother coiled tight inside her shell of angry, resentful silence ; my brother in his, and I in mine."

When David was eleven, a friend (!) of his mother noticed that he had a growth in his neck. It took his uncaring and egotistical parents, who had other priorities, more than three years, before they decided to let the 'cyst' surgically remove.

The consequences were devastating for David, but nevertheless at home, everything stayed the same. Needless to say that the indifferent, hostile attitude of his parents, left deep scars, possibly even deeper than the stitches on his throat. David became a resentful teenager, and at the age of fifteen, he was sent home from his school with the advice to seek psychiatric help.

This is a very accomplished graphic memoir ; a small masterpiece even. The art is gorgeous and highly creative in conveying David's vulnerability, emotions, and the pain inflicted on him by his oppressive, uncaring parents.

David never learned to speak his mind at home. This book shows that he nevertheless found his voice. Beautiful, unforgettable and highly recommended.

Shawn Mooney says

Whoever would've thought I'd be so deeply moved by a graphic memoir? My bibliophile buddy Lindy, that's who! I am grateful for the recommendation, as I'd adopted a rather snooty attitude towards graphic novels, etc. While I don't expect to start reading them all that much more regularly, I certainly get it now that they can convey powerful narratives like this one. Just wonderful!

Carol says

My Goodness. Horrendously cruel and unloving parents, a nasty grandma, lies and a shocking surprise lead to a nightmare of a memoir and rather disturbing, but powerful work of graphic art.

STITCHES is aptly named with creepy book cover and illustrations to match depicting a horror of a family and a sad child turned troubled teen.

"When you have no voice, you don't exist."

Interesting and unusual medical reveal about David's mother at the conclusion.

Melki says

Wow! What a heartrending look at children's book writer/illustrator David Small's sad and miserable childhood!

We see him first as a small boy, lying on the floor, happily drawing pictures.

His dad is mostly absent, and his mother, well, let's face it...she's HORRIBLE! Verbally and physically abusive, she's a monster.

But as this graphic novel, done in muted shades of gray suggests, not everything is black and white.

After spending some time with David's grandmother, his mother's mother, we get some inkling of how the monster got to be that way.

David has a rough time of it, yet his delightful imagination manages to pull him through. From drawings that come alive on his pages to pretending to be Alice in Wonderland, the life within his head is SO much better than reality.

Things truly go from bad to worse, and like his hero Alice, David will tumble down a dark hole. There he meets a white rabbit savior who helps him find his voice, and a measure of forgiveness.

Maggie Stiefvater says

I am not going to tell you anything about this book.

I'm sure you're thinking that's an odd way to begin a review, but that's how I went into this book, and it worked for me. I was doing an interview with Booklist last weekend and I asked the interviewer what he thought was the graphic novel of the year so far. Without even having to consider, he said, "STITCHES." My publicist picked an advanced review copy up for me at ALA and I am thrilled that she did. I didn't know anything about it except that it was a memoir written as a graphic novel, and that it was supposed to be fabulous (which makes me naturally mistrustful, of course). I didn't even read the back -- just opened it up in the airport and fell in.

So I won't tell you what this book is about. I will tell you this: David Small shines in illustrating the small details that make people real. This is a fairly dark book, but there were parts where I laughed out loud at Small's cunning characterizations. If you read other reviews, you'll see they call the style "cinematic" and "stunning" and it's both of those things. It's also whimsical, sad, and ultimately uplifting. It has possibly the best final line of any book I've read. Definitely one I'll be buying in hardcover and my favorite graphic novel for the past several years. Stunningly done and a good pick for adults who haven't stuck their toe in the

graphic novel pool. The water's fine.

wondering why all my reviews are five stars? Because I'm only reviewing my favorite books -- not every book I read. Consider a novel's presence on my Goodreads bookshelf as a hearty endorsement. I can't believe I just said "hearty." It sounds like a stew.

Lyn says

Wow.

David Small's graphic novel *Stitches* is unlike any graphic novel book I have ever read. There are no zombies, no superheroes and no arcane or occult subjects at all, and yet my jaw dropped more than once.

It took me about an hour to get to the end and it was riveting. This reminds me of what a storyboard for an Augusten Burroughs film might look like. Very much worth the very minimal investment in time to experience.
