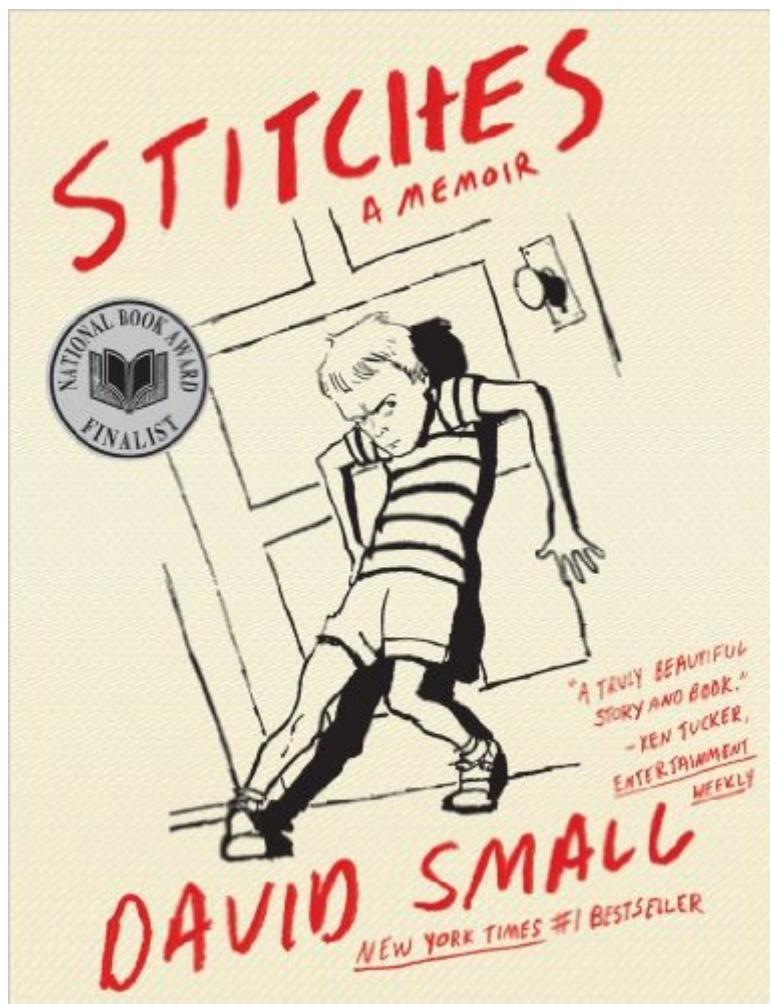


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## Stitches: A Memoir



## Synopsis

The #1 New York Times bestseller and National Book Award finalist that "breaks new ground for graphic novels" (Francois Mouly, art editor, *The New Yorker*). David Small, a best-selling and highly regarded children's book illustrator, comes forward with this unflinching graphic memoir. Remarkable and intensely dramatic, *Stitches* tells the story of a fourteen-year-old boy who awakes one day from a supposedly harmless operation to discover that he has been transformed into a virtual mute—his vocal cord removed, his throat slashed and stitched together like a bloody boot. From horror to hope, Small proceeds to graphically portray an almost unbelievable descent into adolescent hell and the difficult road to physical, emotional, and artistic recovery. A National Book Award finalist; winner of the ALA's Alex Award; a #1 New York Times graphic bestseller; Publishers Weekly and Washington Post Top Ten Books of the Year, Los Angeles Times Favorite Book, ALA Great Graphic Novels, Booklist Editors Choice Award, Huffington Post Great Books of 2009, Kirkus Reviews Best of 2009, Village Voice Best Graphic Novel, finalist for two 2010 Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards (Best Writer/Artist: Nonfiction; Best Reality-Based Work). Illustrated throughout

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## Customer Reviews

Best of the Month, September 2009: Reading *Stitches* may feel unexpectedly familiar. Not in the details of its story--which is David Small's harrowing account of growing up under the watchless eyes of parents who gave him cancer (his radiologist father subjected him to unscrupulous x-rays for minor ailments) and let it develop untreated for years--but in delicate glimpses of the author's

child's-eye view, sketched most often with no words at all. Early memories (and difficult ones, too) often seem less like words than pictures we play back to ourselves. That is what's recognizable and, somehow, ultimately delightful in the midst of this deeply sad story: it reminds us of our memories, not just what they are, but what they look like. In every drawing, David Small shows us moments both real and imagined—some that are guileless and funny and wonderfully sweet, many others that are dark and fearful—that unveil a very talented artist, stitches and all.

--Anne Bartholomew   Exclusive: David Small on *Stitches* .com: *Stitches* is a hard story to tell. What inspired you ultimately to write it? David Small: I needed a direct confrontation with my past. It wasn't easy, but I was ready to do it, so the work--though it was very difficult--felt rewarding, even exhilarating at times. Now that it's become a book it seems so complete, so seamless, and--looking at it now--it seems as if it simply fell out onto the page. In reality it was like herding cats for three solid years, especially after the book was under contract and I was really committed to doing it. But deadlines are great energizers. (So, I should add, are the faith of a great editor, a great agent, and a great wife. I am lucky. I have all three.) .com: "Graphic novel" is a form that now encompasses all kinds of storytelling, fictional and factual. As an artist, how would you compare reading pictures vs. words? What might your story lose (or gain) if you told it without pictures? David Small: I like to say that images get straight inside us, bypassing all the guard towers. You often go to the movies and see people with tears streaming down their cheeks, but you don't see this in libraries, not in my experience at least. I know now that the graphic form was the only way my memoir could have been told. First of all, drawing is my most fluent means of expression. Secondly, it's a story about being voiceless. It demanded a visual treatment because it involved so much of that guessing game we played in our family, of trying to figure out why someone was mad at us--someone who refused to communicate by any other means than slamming things around. If told in words--even if I could have--the story would have lost that visceral impact. .com: Do you read a lot of graphic novels? Are there artists you'd recommend for fans of this genre? David Small: I've read enough to know that the percentage of really good works in that medium is as small as in any other. For decades I've known and admired the work of Lynd Ward (*God's Man*, *The Silver Pony*), a pioneer of the form. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Craig Thompson's *Blankets* were moving and very pure. Recently I was impressed by Josh Neufeld's *A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge*. A lot of the living artists I admire are European: Blutch, Sylvain Chomet, Winchluss, Frederik Peeters, Nicholas de Crœf, and Gipi are my favorites. .com: We're always curious to know more about what authors like to read. Are there any you'd say who have influenced your own approach to writing? David Small: I frequently go back to Chekov's stories and to the short works of Henry James and Thomas Mann. John Cheever

moves me tremendously. Since I am a visual artist, the most serious influences came from other artists. I used to get totally infected by contact with any artist whose work I admired. So, for a while, in college, I thought I was, among others, Daumier, Rembrandt, Egon Schiele and Kathe Kollwitz. I would drown myself in their ways of seeing the world, to the point that I sometimes wondered if I would ever have a style of my own. .com: One of my favorite scenes in the book begins on p. 62, where you dive into your drawing, Alice in Wonderland-style. It struck me as a cherished fantasy. What scenes might you single out as your favorites? David Small: I like that one also. I'm glad that you equate it with Alice, because the parallel is certainly there. In fact, though, I intended something truer to my own experience, growing up surrounded by x-rays. At six I knew that x-rays were pictures of the secret places inside us. I imagined myself going down into those shadowy places and finding--what? I don't know. A better world, I suppose. That is what I had in mind but, as I said, I have no problem at all with the Alice reference. The party scene--where my entire adolescent social life gets summed up in a one-page image--also seems to work well. I'm happy with all the dream sequences. The 9-page "rain" sequence, in which the landscape is used as a metaphor for a state of mind, came out as I wanted it. .com: The illustrations early in the story on pp 22-23--rendered again, in part, towards the end of the book on pp 290-91--are at once tender and terrifying, and they look remarkably different than most of the other panels that flow between them. Can you talk more about your approach to drawing this scene? David Small: I tried to draw it the way it felt: that is, being an infant under all that hovering, humming x-ray machinery. If I recall correctly, I put an emphasis on the child's eyes looking around him at the dials, gauges, dangling cords and the blank walls of the machines. Later, the infant's gaze is coupled with the eyes of the young man who revisits the scene in his memory. Then, as the past and present fuse together, comes a shock of revelation. He realizes that what happened to him as an infant has now reached out and shaped--perhaps even ruined--his future. The infant's face and the young man's face converge into one. .com: You've illustrated an award-winning roster of children's books. How did writing *Stitches* impact your style of drawing? Were there elements that took more iterations than others? David Small: I took the advice of artist Mark Siegel, an old hand at graphic novels who--although his style is entirely different from mine--recommended that I develop a way of drawing that is more like handwriting than regular drawing. "Otherwise," he said, "the whole process will drive you insane." I leapt on this piece of advice because it sounded so right and because it was a direction I'd been moving toward anyway, especially in my sketchbooks. This was a very different effort from my picture book work. .com: I'm curious which section of the book you found yourself writing first. Did you find that drawing one part would help you to construct other scenes? David

Small: The scenes in the empty hospital--the elevator ride and so forth--were my strongest childhood memories. Of that whole sequence, the little fetus in the jar stood out most clearly in my mind. I found, as I started drawing, that by some natural-seeming process of visual mnemonics, I could make connections from one thing to another. Then, gradually, whole scenes and episodes would flood back. To put it a simpler way: when I could "see"--that is, draw--the room, and had it all furnished again, the actors (the ghosts) would move in and begin saying their lines. I found all that really quite remarkable. .com: Memoirists are often asked questions about memories—“the tools of their trade, in a way—but do you think memories tell the whole story? David Small: No. They are only your memories. The other people there saw it through their own lens.

It’s Rashomon. Pure truth doesn’t exist. We shouldn’t insist on it, and we should always be willing to bend. .com: The afterword to *Stitches* was unexpected, but I found I appreciated the visual reference points for you, and for your mother and father. Why did you feel this was important to include? David Small: I’m glad you found them helpful. I always do, too, when I’m reading about the lives of others; I go to the photographs, maybe as a way of affirming the descriptive skills of the writer, but also to meet the subjects in a more concrete way. Now you’ve got me thinking. Maybe I was showing off. It was like saying, “Here! Look! I’m so certain I’ve done my job well that I’m not afraid to show you these people, whom I’ve been drawing for 300 pages.” Mainly, though, it seemed like the right and fair thing to do. .com: Reviews of *Stitches* seem to swivel on the question of whether the book is redemptive or cathartic. What do you think? Did you write it with any expectation of how you’d feel afterwards? David Small: Seeing my early life again from the perspective of an adult, I came to know my family members as fellow human beings. I understood their drives. This broke the spell they had over me. It freed me of their influence. I’d had enough, frankly, of living and thinking the way they had taught me to think and behave. Did I expect that this would happen? No. I had no expectations, only the need to do it. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Starred Review. In this profound and moving memoir, Small, an award-winning children’s book illustrator, uses his drawings to depict the consciousness of a young boy. The story starts when the narrator is six years old and follows him into adulthood, with most of the story spent during his early adolescence. The youngest member of a silent and unhappy family, David is subjected to repeated x-rays to monitor sinus problems. When he develops cancer as a result of this procedure, he is operated on without being told what is wrong with him. The operation results in the loss of his voice, cutting him off even further from the world around him. Small’s black and white pen and ink

drawings are endlessly perceptive as they portray the layering of dream and imagination onto the real-life experiences of the young boy. Small's intuitive morphing of images, as with the terrible postsurgery scar on the main character's throat that becomes a dark staircase climbed by his mother, provide deep emotional echoes. Some understanding is gained as family secrets are unearthed, but for the most part David fends for himself in a family that is uncommunicative to a truly ghastly degree. Small tells his story with haunting subtlety and power. (Sept.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

David Small tells the story of his unhappy childhood in this graphic memoir. About 50 years ago, when Mr. Small was 14, he underwent surgery that rendered him mute for all intents and purposes and also resulted in his thyroid gland being removed. He believed that a cyst was being removed, but it turned out that the "cyst" was a tumor that had begun to grow as the result of the x-ray treatments performed on David when David was just an infant by his own father (who was a radiologist). At the time that David was an infant, radiological treatments were used to cure sinus and breathing issues, which David had as a child. As a result of the insane amount of radiology used, David developed cancer. For nearly a decade after his surgery, he couldn't physically speak above the level of a hoarse whisper, no matter how hard he trained his remaining vocal cords. The fact that David's father gave him cancer is one of the devastating sad parts of the story; but there is a second theme that is just as devastating: the communication, or lack of it, that is apparent in David's family. The fact that David was exposed to a high risk of cancer by his father isn't really discussed by David, his father OR his mother aside from a very, very brief conversation a few months after the surgery. In fact, it's almost as if David learned that he had cancer by accident and would have continued to believe that a cyst was removed if he hadn't accidentally stumbled upon it. Other communication was non-verbal - his mother only communicated her displeasure by a little cough that she had. She wasn't very adept at showing her love for her son, if she even loved him at all. It's also about having a voice - or finding an alternative method to having your voice heard when your original voice has been literally ripped from you without your knowledge or consent. The book is really raw. My heart wrenched, particularly at the parts where David is flashing back to getting the high doses of radiation when he learns that he, in fact, was exposed to cancer by his father. Mr. Small has a way of illustrating the raw, strong emotions without words being necessary to convey what he intends. Needless to say, if you haven't figured it out yet, I loved how Mr. Small drew this book. While the story itself moves quickly because of the careful format, I urge you to slow down or

go back after the first read through so that you can study the illustrations and really appreciate them.

Do not let the fact that this is a graphic novel turn you off. It's not comic book/Watchman type art, this is pen and ink drawings. This is a complete story, and, I'm not exaggerating, this is one of the best autobiographies I've ever read. Most of it is told unflinchingly from the standpoint of David Small as a child, starting at age 6. His was not a happy household and the story includes a grandma, who, at one point, descends into physical abuse. I had, up to that point in the story, no sympathy with Small's mother. If she protected him from that point on from his grandmother, it isn't told. But her reaction when David said he was afraid of his grandma, because she was crazy, made me sit up and acknowledge something - David's mother's coldness didn't just spring out of nothing. There was something or somethings that helped shaped her that way. Near the end of the story, we learn that there was more than one thing that shaped her unhappiness. David acknowledges on the last pages, his later "maturity, reflection and some family research" helps him at least understand his mother. It's not an excuse for not loving your own son, but it helps. It's not an excuse for his father enabling his mother, either. But read the story and make up your own mind. There is no whining; there is no using the past as a crutch. The story starts, I think, in the 50's, and medical knowledge and sociological acceptance were much different than they are now. Notice, I'm trying not to give too much away - I don't want to spoil it for you when you pick up this book. Finally, I'd like to mention that David's imagination, which oftentimes plagued him as a child, also allowed him to write and illustrate this memoir, which may have been cathartic. Oh, and in case you're wondering, the "Stitches" did not result from abuse. At least, not the stitches in his body. Much recommended. Happy Reader

## GREAT BOOK!

I loved this book! It was a quick read that really drew me into the story. The images were wonderful!

This is an absolutely phenomenal autobiographical story that is made even richer through the illustration of Mr. Small. Some of the most profound moments are expressed without words but through simple yet highly expressive images that allow the reader to literally view the story from Mr. Small's eyes. The play of light and dark in the black and white drawings is almost cinematic at times it's so well executed. While the story is quite shocking and often depressing the images bring it a sense of immediacy that is never overwhelming emotionally. When I first opened it, I expected to

read for maybe ten minutes or so before a show I liked started. Instead, I found myself tearing through the book in one sitting, completely forgetting that the show I had planned on watching even existed. This is one of the few graphic novels that I've successfully gotten graphic novel haters to read and actually love. It truly transcends its genre in that regard. So if you're hesitant to read this because you don't want to read a 'comic book', please do yourself a favor and try this book out. Even if you never read another graphic novel in your life, this one is worth trying.

I really liked this graphic novel. I will keep it on my private shelf. Small's use of illustrations over text was perfectly placed. I liked all of the emotion he captured. There are three graphic (nude) pictures in it. Not a problem for me, but it makes putting it on the school shelf a little bit of a problem. I appreciate the artistry of it, but because of it the target audience's ages, 13-15, I have trouble being able to shelf it. Other than that, this novel is a touching story about a boy who is abused and lied to, only to later find his voice after losing his voice. Some great discussions can be had with this story about honesty, family, health issues, and beliefs.

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