

## Stitches in Time

By Karen Green

Friday May 18, 2012 06:00:00 am

*Our columnists are independent writers who choose subjects and write without editorial input from comiXology.*

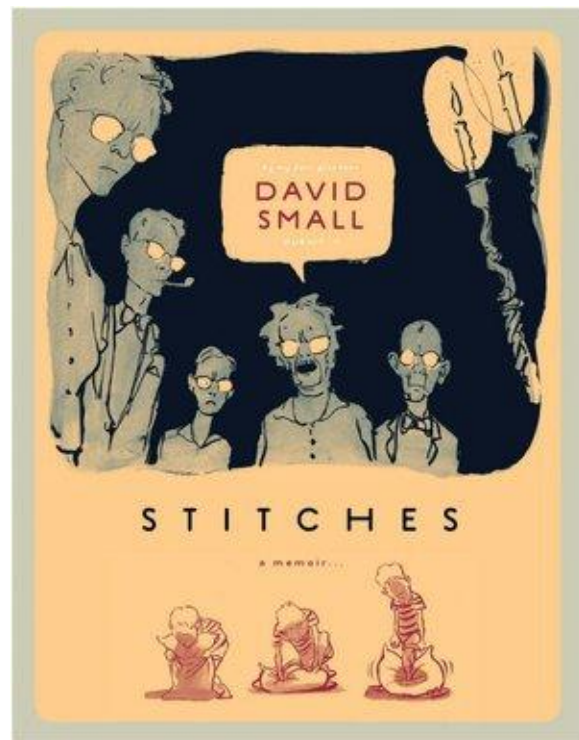
*The opinions expressed are the columnist's, and do not represent the opinion of comiXology.*

Do you ever have so much in your head that you can barely find the words for it? That's my concern this month, as I try to marshal all the thoughts teeming in my head about this topic. (It's also why this column is, once again, late...)

I've recently been reading Hillary Chute's terrific *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*, in which Chute notes how particularly well-suited comics are for narratives of trauma. She observes that such works are "not only about events but also, explicitly, about how we frame them. The authors revisit their pasts, retrace events, and literally repicture them."

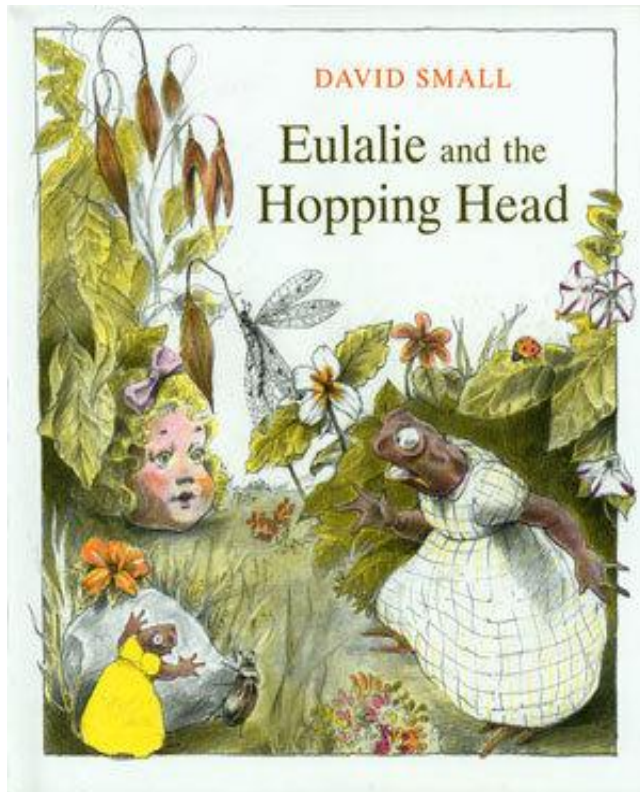
Chute's focus is on women's autobiographical comics—and the women she chooses (Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry, Marjane Satrapi, and Alison Bechdel) are certainly legends in the medium—but her argument can apply to other memoirs as well. Which brings me back to David Small's *Stitches*, a work I've written about, earlier and fleetingly, in the context of med-school humanities classes, but which merits, and rewards, a deeper look.

Back in October, I was asked to interview Small for a session at last month's Wildcat Comic-Con, at Penn State's Pennsylvania College of Technology. In preparation, David and I exchanged a few emails, in one of which I'd asked him if he wanted me to talk solely about *Stitches* or if I should address his children's-book work as well. He answered that he'd be happy to talk just about *Stitches*, noting how different it was in style and tone from his children's work. But he went on to describe some of his books: *Imogene's Antlers* is "about a little girl who—Gregor Samsa-like—wakes up one morning to find herself metamorphosed, with a huge rack of antlers on her head." *Hoover's Bride* is "about a man who marries his vacuum cleaner." *Fenwick's Suit* is about a man whose "suit of clothes takes over his whole identity." And, finally, he added that his very first

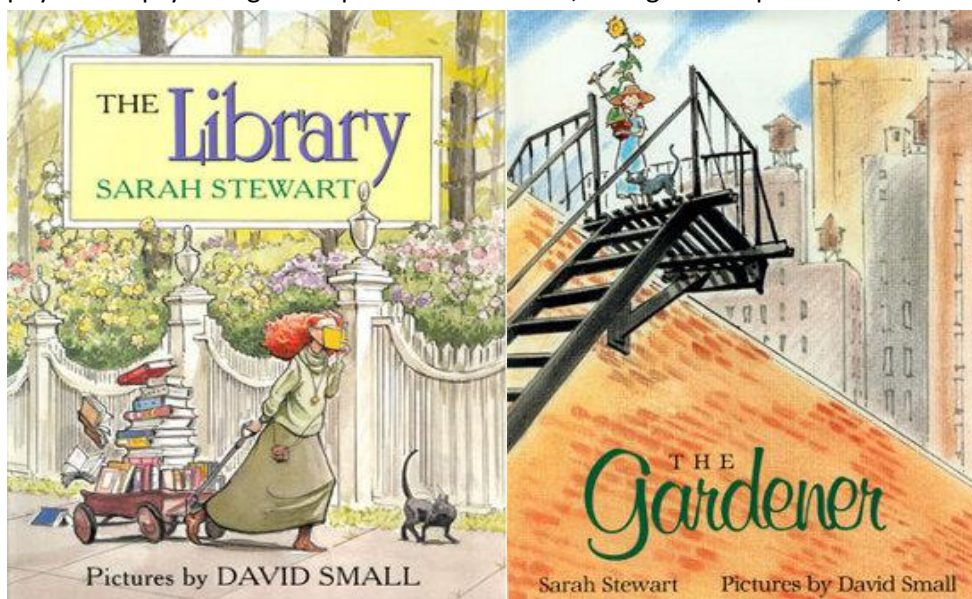


picture book, *Eulalie and the Hopping Head*, "was about such strange goings-on I don't quite know how to describe it."

Clearly, that was the one I was going to buy.



David added that the books he writes and draws himself are also quite different from the ones he illustrates for his wife, Sarah Stewart, which are generally about young women who triumph over physical or psychological displacement. Curious, I bought a couple of those, as well.



Finally, David volunteered an observation that I found especially fascinating, without even having read his children's work: "perhaps my brief descriptions show how they might spring from the mind of the boy from Stitches. The problem of identity which seems to permeate my work makes sense in that context, as does the dilemma of separation (both physical and psychical) from one's family, which typifies Sarah's stories."

Do you all know Stitches? Do I need to give you a little background? Basically, it is a memoir of Small's childhood: an accounting of his painfully dysfunctional family and the operation he underwent to remove a cancerous tumor from his throat—a tumor that no one bothered to tell him was cancerous. Or even a tumor. The book is atmospheric and painterly and cinematic; there are often entire pages of panels that are close-ups of the character's eyes, truly windows to the soul in this case. The book will break your heart.

In anticipation of the interview, I compiled a slideshow and some questions. The show opened with some images from his children's books, notably this page from his *Eulalie* and the Hopping Head and a double-page spread he'd created for one of his wife's books, *The Gardener*:

It seemed significant to me, in light of the nightmarish ways young David is treated by father, mother, and grandmother in *Stitches*, that Small would write in *Eulalie* that Mother Lumps' noisy, troublesome child was the one she loved a thousand times more than her quiet, perfect one. When I mentioned that to him, he informed me that no one had ever made the connection between *Stitches* and his children's books before.

I believe it was at that moment that we bonded.

The image from *The Gardener* demonstrates Small's masterful use of color. When we first met in Williamsport, he had his sketchbook with him. He opened it first to a breathtaking black-and-white drawing of the Hamburg Rathaus tower, completed "in about 20 minutes" (and which I'm still kicking myself for not sneaking a shot of). Other pages were filled with drawings he'd made in trips abroad, some, as in this spread from *The Gardener*, washed with color that evoked the Dufy-esque paintings that open the ballet in "An American in Paris" (see time-stamp 1:35 of the first video here; you knew this would come back to film, didn't you?).

After setting the scene, I switched to images from *Stitches*:

When I was re-reading the book to choose slides, I'd noticed that there were very few references in the book—until he gets to his life apart from his family—to any artistic activity. I wondered, then, why the book's frontispiece was almost the only image of the young artistic David as well as how aware he'd been, as a child, of his artistic ability. He replied that, if you'd asked any people who'd known him growing up, they would have assumed he would become an artist. But he wanted to be a writer. Partly, he noted, because writing came harder to him than did art, which, unsurprisingly, given his upbringing, he therefore believed made writing more worthwhile, more virtuous. So he worked diligently at being a writer: short stories, plays, etc. And then one day, in college, his roommate said to him, "You know, those doodles you draw when you're on the phone are better than anything you write." Not a welcome

observation but, upon reflection, a valid enough one that he changed his course of study to art, and the rest, we know. My question wasn't unique; it turns out that more than one person had read the story and asked, "Where's the art?" Small's reply: "The art is in the book."

Oh, and that surprising frontispiece? Turns out his editors chose it for him.

Here is an example of one of those wordless pages of eyes. Young David, whose father is a radiologist, is waiting in the hospital for his family and finds a long, deserted hallway perfect for sliding on in sock-feet. But he gets creeped out by a bottled fetus in a case on the wall—which, nonetheless, he can't stop staring at. The panels cut quickly back and forth from young David's eyes—in which the irises become the fetus at one point—to the implausibly opening eyes of the creature, glaring at him: glaring in a way that we'll soon find all too familiar.

Eyes are incredibly important in the book. Nearly all the adults wear glasses—with the interesting exception of the clear-eyed neighbor woman who is the first to notice the unusual swelling on David's neck—and the lenses are often reflective, masking the wearer's thoughts. When the lenses turn clear, revealing the person's eyes: that is the moment to pay close attention. In this image, young David is staying with his incredibly disagreeable grandmother, and the look on her face in that final panel, when her eyes are revealed, says pretty much everything you need to know about her store of familial love.

In the spread below, about ten pages later, David's mother has arrived to pick him up, and, again, her eyes are masked until that final panel, in which her face is in many ways a mirror of her own mother's earlier, but with cruelty replaced by fear. This, in turn, tells you everything you need to know about how she became the mother she was.

Even tertiary characters, like the many medical personnel David meets during his ordeal, tend to have glasses that mask their thoughts. Here, one doctor's eyes and smile are equally blank, revealing nothing through the layers of false bonhomie often associated with medical care. The arrogance and assumed omnipotence of doctors was pronounced in the 1950s, and David knew it well through his father's medical connections. The only eyes we see here are his mother's, as she focuses on the aspect of David's medical care that's most important to her: the price tag.

The image below occurs the evening after preliminary surgery revealed—unbeknownst to 14-year-old David—that he had a cancerous tumor rather than a sebaceous cyst, as he'd been told. His mother comes to his room and asks him if there's anything he wants: an unexpected kindness. David is understandably suspicious. The one thing he wants is the copy of *Lolita* that his mother had discovered in his room, removed, and burned to ashes. Her accustomed anger has softened, and his accustomed deference has hardened into resentment. Again, we see his mother's eyes—then his belligerent face is presented dually with her bemused one. Small mentioned in our interview that he took after his mother in looks and that resemblance is made concrete here, as their glowering brows, long noses, and sour mouths combine into a single face. This is the fearsome consequence of cruel parents—the possibility of becoming cruel ourselves, of the resemblance becoming more than merely physical. Just as his mother carried on some of her own mother's traits, those traits clearly live within her unhappy son, as well.

David's angry mother is complemented by a relatively remote father. At one point early in young David's diagnostic journey, his father calls him into the living room. His mother is practicing tying nautical knots, as if to enclose safely the elements in her nature she fears too much to expose. His father begins, "Your mother has asked me to speak to you about something we both feel is important." If you think this is the moment that David is going to be told the nature of his illness, you are mistaken. Instead, his father launches rather pompously into a lecture on David's posture and the medical dangers of slouching. As he goes on, 11-year-old David hunches lower and lower in his chair, with Small at last showing the father towering blankly, as seen from below, and then David, dwarfed by the easy chair, revealed in little other than his stubborn brow.

This final image is from late in the story. Young David has lost his voice as a consequence of the cancer surgery; he retains only one vocal cord. He loses his voice metaphorically as well; he disappears at school, first virtually and then actually. After being expelled from an east-coast boys' school, he is called on the carpet (well, into a chair, once again). His father demands, "Have you nothing to say? About all the money we spent? All the money we **wasted** on you and your education?"

Turn the page to find a spread featuring one of the most savage images in the book, brush-strokes like claw marks striping David's face as he depicts the voice inside his head...and then uses the classic broken-line speech balloon to indicate the whispered voice in which the actual David counter-accuses his parents, revealing that he knows about the cancer they never mentioned to him. Soon after this confrontation, young David begins therapy. His psychiatrist is depicted as the White Rabbit from the Alice stories, and with this benevolent figure David's healing truly begins. He finally, tearfully, faces the truth that his mother doesn't actually love him—an almost unthinkable taboo. (About that taboo, Small noted that nothing is worse than a mother who doesn't love her children, which is why we see the motif worked out in fairy tales. "But those are stepmothers," I protested. And he replied, of course: the stepmother is used as a displacement tactic, since it's so forbidden to talk about unloving mothers. Oh! Right.) Eventually, as with all successful therapy, he finds help to break out of the pattern that led from his grandmother's behavior to his mother's, and he can begin to become a whole person, a loving person, the very kind and gentle person he now is.

In our talks, Small mentioned that he is still friendly with that psychiatrist and that, when sent a copy of the book, the doctor's only quibble was a plaintive "Why did you make me a bunny??" In the book, David's love affair with the Alice books is made clear, but the doctor didn't see the homage in this depiction. But, as Small observed, the White Rabbit and the psychiatrist were both escorts into a sort of underworld, and so he merged them into a floppity-eared Hermes, Psychopomp, beginning David's journey into hell in order to lead him out of it.

One could be forgiven for thinking David an only child, as the book only cursorily indicates an older brother. Small told us that, just as he was delivering the book to his editor at Norton, a news story broke about a critically-acclaimed memoir of LA gang life that had just been revealed to be a complete fabrication. The author's own sister had blown the whistle on her. Small's editor had asked if he had any family who might object to the book and, in the wake of the gang memoir debacle, insisted that the brother be sent a copy before release.

Small and his brother hadn't spoken in four decades; not since the brother's early escape from their family. But Small dutifully sent off the book and soon, with some trepidation, contacted his brother to get his reaction. On the phone, there was a pause, and then his brother's deep, slow voice, "David...it blew me away." The brother was taken aback at the clarity and accuracy of Small's memories of their childhood. A rapprochement followed; their estrangement had been, in great part, a retreat from the pain of their own memories. A story of healing became a vehicle for healing.

One question I had for Small concerned the grey washes that characterize Stitches' visual palette, and which stand in such stark contrast to the luminous color of his children's-book work. What drove the choice? Was it a result of a different intended audience? Of the subject matter? Both? Mostly the latter: "Color is a distraction," he said. For reader and for artist. At one point, when shopping the book, Small met with Mark Siegel, editorial director of First Second, who gave him what he said was the best advice he'd ever gotten: "Draw it like you're writing." A careful reading reveals that he took Siegel's advice to heart; the lines are often simple, with much of the complexity of the panel coming from the greys of the overlaid wash (I was reminded of that 20-minute Hamburg Rathaus drawing). He noted that when he wanted to slow the reader down, he would load a panel with more detail. At one point, for example, young David's love affair with Lewis Carroll's Alice led him to don a talismanic yellow towel to evoke her long blonde hair and to dash about the neighborhood; one such adventure leads to a confrontation with a crowd of young toughs, whom he must escape. The hurried line—those quick cuts—culminates in a meticulous rendering of the mass of brutishly grinning faces, each one distinct. This technique provides the highs and lulls that carry readers along without exhausting them.

Heavens, there's so much more I could say. It's really just a remarkable and rewarding book. I've barely touched on the way the cinematic nature of those quick-cut panel images serves as a nod to one of Small's first loves: film, especially movies of the late 1960s and early '70s. Filmmakers like Antonioni, Bergman, and Hitchcock exercised a profound influence on him—he told us that image of his grandmother, above, is a swipe from "Psycho"—and watching their films, with strong, expressive-faced actors and sometimes claustrophobic interior scenes, is a window into Small's artistic evolution.

I've also barely touched on the ways Stitches gets used in the curriculum. That column from two years ago details one approach, in the medical school. The Narrative Medicine faculty also use it in workshops with health-care workers, patients, and their families. One of the program's professors, who also teaches at Sarah Lawrence, has also used it in a "fictions of embodiment" course—and all who teach it talk about how accessible and inviting it is to their students.

But, geez, enough from me! It's your turn. If you haven't read it, go read it. If you haven't taught it, go teach it. You won't be sorry. Then come back here, and tell us how it went, won't you?

*Karen Green is Columbia University's Ancient/Medieval Studies Librarian and Graphic Novel selector.*

Comic Adventures in Academia is © Karen Green, 2010