



Comics & Graphic Novels

**Stitches: A Memoir**

David Small

W.W. Norton

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This is the story of David Small from Detroit, Michigan. The action begins when he's six, and the first words in the book are, "Mama had her little cough" No, she doesn't have TB, she has the condition William Blake describes in his poem "The Poison Tree."

*I was angry with my friend:  
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.  
I was angry with my foe:  
But, my wrath did grow.*

It's the 1950s, and Small's dad is a radiologist, eager to use technology to cure the world's ills. "They were soldiers of science," he writes, "and their weapon was the x-ray." Ills were close to home also; in fact, they were right inside the skin of young Small's neck—a sebaceous cyst, a "growth." Three and a half years lapse between a diagnosis and operation. Three and a half years of silent fury, resentment, evasion, excess, ignorance, cruelty, and the variations of unspoken but hardly silent angry language. In the end, Small, ironically, finds himself mute.

David Small has worked as an editorial artist for the *New Yorker*, *Playboy*, and *Esquire*. He has won two Caldecott Medals and the Society of Illustrators Gold Medal.

This is a terrible story, a whole lot of terrible stories revolving and radiating. Small's personal story could easily have become another cramped circle of repeated viciousness. But it doesn't. Small is able to see both sides of a problem from the beginning—which is sometimes a curse, sometimes a cure, but it's what ultimately allows him to make choices. The ability to be of two minds also manifests in Small's wonderfully expressive black and white illustrations. This is not a two-dimensional caricature of an unhappy family; these people are painfully historied and complexly pictured, and Small is a powerful teller of their stories.

*Heather Shaw*