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## **Introduction**

The term “disability” refers to any impairment that affects a person’s organs, body parts, or ability to perform daily activities. Attitudes towards disability are deeply embedded in society’s social and cultural norms. As Ronald J. Burger commented that “disability is a social enigma” (25). Traditionally, disability has been viewed as a deficit, misfortune or tragedy. Disability studies challenge such perspectives by shifting attention from disability as an individual experience to disability as a cultural, political, and embodied experience. Disability has always been represented in literature, but it has become academically relevant only after disability studies emerged as a critical field.

Graphic novels, particularly autobiographical graphic novels, have increasingly become fertile ground for change, enabling marginalized subjects to express embodied experiences in visual form. David Small’s *Stitches: A Memoir* is a graphic illness narrative. The memoir foregrounds silence, making disability central to its thematic and aesthetic design. *Stitches* recounts Small’s childhood in the 1950s America, marked by emotional suppression, parental neglect, and a devastating surgery that left him without functional vocal cords. While *Stitches* is often read through the framework of trauma theory, it can also be explored through disability studies. This study attempts to understand how *Stitches* visualizes disability not only as a medical condition but also as a product of emotional violence, institutional power, and cultural expectations of normalcy. By situating *Stitches* within disability studies, this paper highlights how the graphic form enables an embodied storytelling strategy that challenges ableist narratives and offers a deeply affective portrayal of the disabled self.

## **Familial Silence as Disabling Framework**

Small was raised in a family environment defined by emotional suppression and by unspoken suffering. His mother's stoic cruelty and his father's emotional absence create a household where speech is discouraged and vulnerability is treated as a weakness. Small was a sickly child, and he often faked his illness just to get his parents' attention or in other words, it was his way of expressing himself "...getting sick, that was my language" (Small 19). His father, a radiologist, exposed Small to massive X-ray radiation to cure his sinus problems. As a result, Small developed a lump in his throat. His parents hid the truth about his illness from him, which further strained their relationship. The family's refusal to acknowledge illness or emotional distress parallels broader cultural expectations that privilege self-control, emotional austerity and conformity. In the Ph.D thesis titled *Representation of Disability in Contemporary Literature and Cinema: An Analytical Study*, by Mital Ram, she argues that "the attitude towards disability within the family is crucial for the well-being and empowerment of individuals with disability" (12). From a disability studies perspective, familial silence constructs disability before it manifests physically. David lived in a house "...where silence reigned and free speech was forbidden..." (268). David's recurring illnesses are not met with empathy or acknowledgment but with further silence.

In *Stitches*, the family dynamics itself serves as a disabled framework. David's parents are stuck in a loveless marriage that breeds hostility rather than support. His mother's closeted homosexuality and her inability to express her identity manifests as prolonged emotional withdrawals, and sudden burst of rage. Her repressed identity turns into a type of psychic disorder that moulds the atmosphere in the home. In contrast, his father withdraws into work and silence, showing no emotion. Their unresolved disputes collectively produce a home environment that lacks stability, affection, and communication. Long before David physically loses his voice, this dys-

functional family structure creates a disabling ecology from the standpoint of disability studies. His silence becomes an extension of a household that routinely discourages vulnerability, speech, and emotional expression.

### **Medical Violence and the Disabled Body**

*Stitches* offers a deeply critical representation of medical system, showcasing how clinical intervention can function as a form of violence against disabled bodies. The memoir depicts numerous medical encounters, yet none include informed consent, dialogue, or emotional support from the medical staff. The revelation that the repeated exposure to X-rays administered by his father likely caused his cancer underscores how medical harm may be hidden under the guise of treatment. The surgical removal of part of Small's vocal cord marks the most explicit moment of medical violence in the novel. Post surgery, the muteness not only becomes a physical condition, but an existential crisis. He describes returning to school "when you have no voice, you don't exist. Even among my old friends I felt invisible, a shadow flickering around the edges of every event" (213). He starts skipping school and has severe episodes of dissociation, where he imagines himself getting smaller and living inside his own mouth. These instances show that muteness is a crippling condition caused by both physical impairment and social non-recognition. David discovers the truth of his illness years later which is depicted through sharp visuals, silent panels and shocked expression. Lennard J Davis asserts that disabled bodies often become "objects of intervention and repair, expected to approximate the norm" (104). The stitched scar across David's throat becomes a visual emblem of both the violation and identity. It signifies not just injury but also the way disability becomes a framework for meaning-making in storytelling. Small's scar marks the rupture between childhood and adulthood in the novel.

## **Visual Silence and Formal Strategy**

One of the most striking aspects of the novel is its formal choice. Silence is not only thematically present; it is visually enacted. When David attempts to speak after the surgery, he uses speech bubbles as faint whispers. The absence of text communicates more powerfully than dialogue. Small's formal silence forces readers to sit with the discomfort, confusion, and isolation that accompany disability. Dream sequences further illustrate the psychological impact. Figures are grotesquely deformed, dissolved, or expanded, reflecting internalized fear and alienation. In *Stitches*, the metaphor does not erase embodiment. Rather, it externalizes the emotional reality of disability in a medium capable of holding both literal and symbolic meanings simultaneously.

## **Art as Reclamation**

The memoir concludes with a sense of hope. Although Small never regains his former voice, he discovers a new form of communication through art. David's artistic development is depicted in a sequence of panels showing him sketching excessively, first as survival, later as expression. His psychiatrist is one of the few characters who offer language, explanation, and validation. Through therapy and art, David begins to narrate his life, redefining his relationship with his disabled body. The novel does not offer a traditional sense of closure. Instead, it suggests that disability is neither resolved nor overcome; rather, it is incorporated into identity. The memoir rejects narratives of cure, replacing them with narratives of adaptation and reclamation.

## **Conclusion**

*Stitches* is a significant disability narrative as it examines the cultural, medical, and familial factors that contribute to disability as a whole. The memoir challenges medicalized interpretations of the disabled body by portraying disability as relational, emotional, and political through its visual form. Small's stitched scar transforms bodily rupture into identity and narrative

agency, turning it into a material and symbolic site of meaning. *Stitches* emphasizes adaptation, reclamation, and self-articulation rather than recovery or cure, showing how disability can serve as a generative space for self-definition and storytelling. In the end, the memoir asks readers to rethink disability as an embodied epistemology shaped by history, power, and resiliency rather than as absence or deficit.

### **Works Cited**

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