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### Book Review Essay Final Draft

It is widely known that 1 in 3 people alive in the world today will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in their lives (NCI). With that being said, the odds that any person will contract cancer themselves or at least have a loved one who contracts cancer at some point in their life are extremely high. Comforting a loved one who has been diagnosed with cancer is an extremely delicate and challenging thing. Both *Stitches* by David Small, as well as *In Between Days: A Memoir About Living With Cancer* by Teva Harrison touch on the topics of how a person can best help a loved one with cancer, as well as give valuable insight into the emotions and pain that a cancer patient deals with on a daily basis.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, a troubling trend began to show. This trend was that less and less people were receiving cancer diagnoses. That may sound like a positive thing at first, but experts believe that this was because of the elimination of “non-essential,” visits to the doctor’s office, which led to a dramatic decrease in examinations and testing. ABC News reported in May 2020: “But as weeks have now turned to months, doctors are registering a troubling trend: a precipitous drop in cancer diagnoses. Some experts fear that with each passing day, the prognosis for some of those undiagnosed cases may be getting worse as potential patients huddle at home. ‘My level of concern is up with the eight or nine level (on a scale to 10),’ said Dr. J. Leonard Lichtenfeld, deputy chief medical officer at the American Cancer Society, referring to patients who might be showing cancer-related symptoms but defer medical care for fear of contracting

the coronavirus at a healthcare facility” (ABC News). The report continues to say that many hospitals reported as high as 80% drop in cancer diagnoses from the start of the pandemic to the time of the report in May 2020. Because of the nature of cancer where early diagnosis and treatment can greatly increase the likelihood of survival, this is an alarming statistic. Nearly two years later, the pandemic is still affecting many people, and may still be discouraging people from visiting the doctor for cancer screenings and examinations. The reduction in visits to the doctor’s office two years ago would definitely lead to people receiving delayed diagnoses and having to receive a more aggressive form of treatment, or potentially worse. Because of this recent trend, books like *Stitches* and *In-Between Days* that educate patients and families on life with cancer are more relevant than ever. Reading these books provides great examples of how to treat a family member or loved one that may be dealing with cancer or could offer a refreshing perspective to someone receiving cancer treatment themselves.

*Stitches* by David Small is a graphic memoir that takes a deep dive into how cancer can affect a young boy for the rest of his life, and how his family’s handling of the cancer diagnosis can affect their relationship for years to come. David grew up in Michigan just outside of Detroit in what may have seemed like a normal family from an outside perspective. However, through the inside look that David gives in *Stitches*, it becomes clear to the audience that his family had many internal problems. His parents’ emotional neglect within the household is one of these problems, and David spends a lot of time analyzing this throughout his graphic memoir. His relationship with his mother was always strained, and she is depicted as a hardened woman who shows almost no affection towards her family. David’s dad is a doctor who pays slightly more attention to David in general, but still not quite as much general affection as a young boy likely needs. Small does a great job of emphasizing the nature of these relationships through his artistic

style in *Stitches*. The entire memoir is illustrated in black and white, potentially a metaphor for the lack of love shown in his household throughout his childhood. The fact that David's father is a doctor remains relevant throughout the story because it eventually is what leads to him developing cancer. He would often have small illnesses when he was younger, so his father would perform various medical tests in search of a diagnosis that exposed David to a lot of radiation. Years later, a tumor was discovered in David's neck that turned out to be cancer. The young boy needed surgery that left him with a large scar on his neck and unable to talk for years. Both things left him feeling alienated and alone from everyone around him, and his home life only made things worse. Somehow his mother seemed to harbor some sort of resentment towards David for developing cancer, and she offered no additional affection to him despite the scary experience he had been through. This presents the theme of how important support from the family is for a cancer patient. David's scar and his lack of a voice had made life hard enough of him as it was, and his mother's craziness only made him feel worse. He goes on in his memoir to say how this affected their relationship for the rest of her life. The lack of emotional support from his family leads David to attend therapy, where he finally discovers some sort of calm in his life and can understand his feelings of isolation. Overall, *Stitches* does an excellent job of emphasizing how cancer treatment can have lasting impacts on a person years after they are finished with treatment. It emphasizes the importance of familial support for cancer patients, and through illustrations, gives a closer look to the emotions that young cancer patients deal with in a way that words likely could not. All these things make *Stitches* by David Small an important graphic memoir for anybody to read.

Small's memoir about his life growing up and his experiences being diagnosed with cancer at a young age contains many themes that are important to understand, particularly the themes of

isolation because of his cancer treatment as well as the role his family plays in how he feels during this period of his life. As mentioned earlier, the illustrations in *Stitches* are drawn entirely in black and white which is a unique technique. The black and white colors used throughout the memoir can be seen as a symbol of this isolation that David encounters many times throughout his life. Some of the darkest pages within the book, or the pages that are almost entirely black, come when David is emotionally at his lowest from pages 256 to 265 after his therapist tell him that his mother doesn't love him (See Images 1 and 2). The pages get progressively brighter as the scene continues, showing that David is slowly making peace with this information about his mother. Scott McCloud analyzes this strategy in his book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* when he discusses the different affects that black and white comics have on the audience versus color comics. McCloud says: "In black and white, the ideas *behind* the art are communicated more directly. Meaning transcends form. Art approaches *language*. In flat colors forms *themselves* take on more significance. The world becomes a playground of *shapes* and *space*" (McCloud 192). As McCloud says, the black and white art used by Small communicates his inner feelings of isolation and loneliness throughout the book more than anything. The art found within *Stitches* also emphasizes the lack of care and attention that was found within David's family. This can be seen by the depiction of David's therapist being depicted as a rabbit (See Image 3). This is an example of what Scott McCloud calls iconography: "Now the word icon means many things. For the purposes of this chapter, I'm using the word 'icon' to mean any image used to represent a person, place, thing, or idea" (McCloud 26). Here, the rabbit therapist can certainly be considered an icon that represents a new beginning for David, and an unfamiliarity in having someone listen to and care about his feelings. The different artistic forms that David Small uses, including black and white imagery and iconography, do a tremendous job

of emphasizing the themes of loneliness, isolation, and lack of family love in his life, and they do so in a way that words could not do justice.

Teva Harrison does many similar things to David Small in her graphic memoir, *In Between Days*. She discusses many of the emotions she deals with during her cancer treatment, and how she manages the physical and mental pain that comes with a cancer diagnosis. Harrison's book differs from Smalls in a few ways, including that Harrison is a grown adult when she receives her cancer diagnosis, and that her cancer is terminal. Specifically, she is diagnosed with stage IV breast cancer, and she is only 37 at the time of her diagnosis. This brings in a whole different range emotions and thoughts because the author is forced to come to grips with their own mortality and death. This is something that makes the book intriguing to everybody, as Harrison looking death in the eye and discussing how it changes her outlook on her current life is something that everybody should read about. Harrison spends a significant amount of time discussing the role that her husband plays in helping through her cancer treatment. She describes how he drives her to and from treatments, helps her take her medications, comforts her when she is distressed, and does everything he can to ensure she can enjoy things she had before her diagnosis, like dancing for example (see image 4). Her husband is a role model for anybody with a loved one struggling with cancer and can be looked at as an example of how a family member can greatly help the life of their loved one after a diagnosis. Overall, *In-Between Days* is a phenomenal and powerful graphic memoir that may inspire anybody reading it, whether they are living with cancer or not.

Similar to *Stitches*, the illustrations within *In-Between Days* add a level of emotional communication that words simply could not. The format of Harrison's memoir is a little different

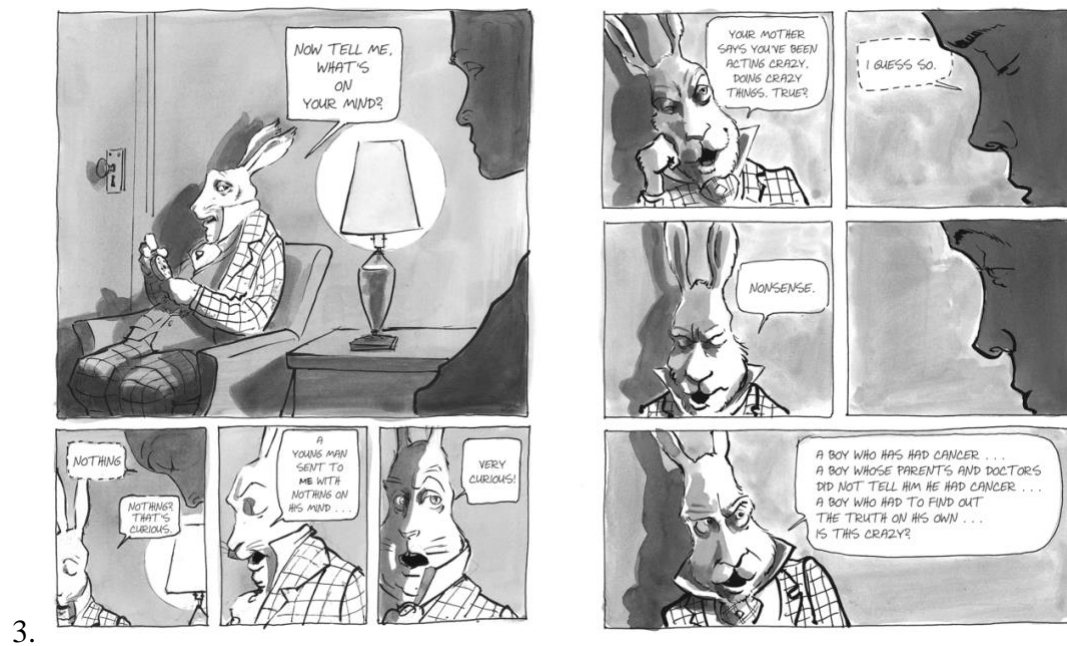
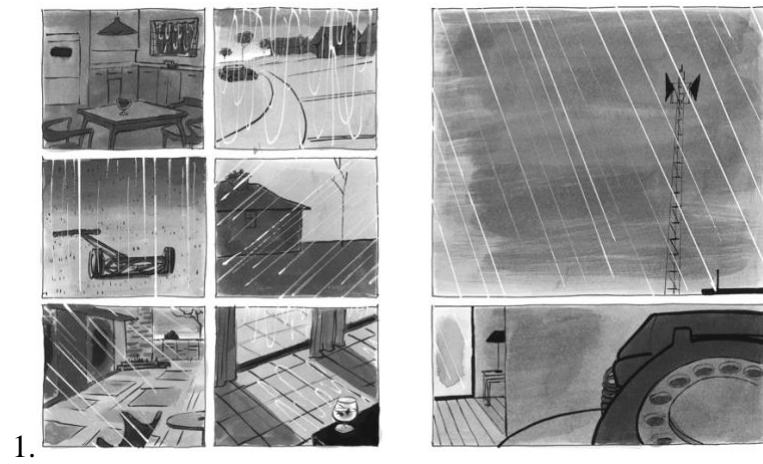
than most, as each chapter comes with multiple illustrations of different subjects related to cancer, followed by just a few short paragraphs related to the subjects. Some of these main themes found within the memoir include making the most out of life and benefitting from familial support. The theme of making the most out of life can be seen throughout the memoir but is especially strong within the last chapters. By the conclusion of the book Harrison has come to grips with her inevitable death, and takes an empowering approach to the issue; deciding to take full advantage of the time she has left: “What do I actually have to lose? This disease will kill me eventually, but it could be years and years and years. I have to count on that. And in the meantime – whatever that means – I really have nothing to lose. So I am going to say yes even more. Live like a tornado when I can. I’m going to suck the marrow out of life and see what I’ve been missing” (Harrison 156). Her illustration style plays a very strong role in communicating these themes to the audience. Like *Stitches*, all the illustrations are done in black and white (see image 5). As Scott McCloud says, this communicates the meaning behind the illustrations to the audience in a stronger manner, acting almost as feelings themselves. Harrison also uses many symbols in her illustrations, depicting herself how she feels at a certain moment. One example of this comes at the end of the book when she depicts herself as a bird flying high through the sky to symbolize her empowerment from accepting death (see image 6). Illustrations of her time with her husband also paint a better picture of their relationship than words could, as loving moments can be truly felt when reading the memoir (Image 4 and 5). Throughout the entirety of the memoir, these illustrations do a tremendous job of emphasizing the themes of making the most out of life and benefitting from family support, once again making the book worth the read.

The idea of medical patients using art to express their feelings in a way that words cannot is heavily discussed by Ian Williams in his article, “Comics and the Iconography of Illness.”

Williams is an English man who has both a history working as a doctor and a lifelike fascination with comics. After working as a doctor, he was seeking a way to combine these two passions, so he created a website called Graphic Medicine. According to him, this website changed his life. This website allowed him to meet many people interested in the same topics of he was, and they discussed the history and use of the “iconography of illness.” They said that the medium of comics was advantageous for both medical patients and for those around them, as it could act as a sort of therapy for the patients while simultaneously communicating their mental and physical feelings to those around them in a way that words could not. Williams includes some strong examples of this in his article in which patients draw themselves portrayed as things like monsters to symbolize feelings of almost self-hatred, or mickey mouse to symbolize feelings of unfamiliarity (images 7 and 8). These ideas that Williams is discussing in his article certainly apply to both *Stitches* and *In-Between Days*, legitimizing their importance for anybody to read. Both graphic memoirs communicate emotions and themes that traditional books cannot because of their graphic memoir style and the incredible illustrations found within them.

*Stitches* by David Small and *In-Between Days* by Teva Harrison are both incredibly powerful and moving graphic memoirs about authors who have dealt with cancer. Returning to the statistic that 1 in 3 people will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime according to the National Cancer Institute, these books should be read by everybody. They provide strong examples of how family members can help a cancer patient through treatment, and they communicate things about cancer treatment that most other books simply could not.

## Images





# Dancing With My Mister



4.

# Sometimes I Just Break



5.

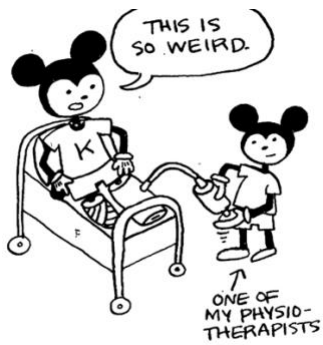
# Incurable



6.



7.



8.

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