

# Images and Limited Text in Narrative Writing:

Using David Small's Nonfiction Graphic Novel *Stitches* to Teach Memoir

**"A**ll I know is that he used a belt to do it," Myra (pseudonym) answered after our guidance counselor asked how her brother died. With a shared and sympathetic glance, we knew what she meant. Myra was a typical 14-year-old student before her brother committed suicide. She had a stable group of girlfriends, tried out for the dance team, and made good grades in her classes. For several months after her brother's death, though, Myra kept to herself, and often asked to visit our school's media center during homeroom. She found solace in reading graphic novels, though she was not especially interested in books prior to the tragedy. Now she was constantly reading, totally engaged in the texts, and every now and again, I caught her smiling before she turned a page. It seemed that these texts provided her with a bit of relief from the strife she suffered. Watching her grief begin to settle—even if just for a moment—helped me see just how powerful reading could be.

## Reading: More Powerful Than I Knew

Getting adolescent students to become engaged enough to read a text in its entirety can be a daunting task for teachers (Lapp & Fisher, 2009). Many adolescent students are neither motivated nor engaged in reading, and thus fail to learn the content taught by their teachers. Readers who are engaged, on the other hand, show a great desire to learn content material and practice strategies to help them understand and interpret text (Guthrie & Alao, 1997). When students are engaged in reading, they are more likely to be

motivated and set goals, including "being committed to the subject matter, wanting to learn the content, believing in one's own ability, and wanting to share understandings from learning" (Guthrie & Alao, 1997, p. 438).

It is part of teachers' responsibilities to ensure their students have opportunities to become actively involved in classroom learning. Research has shown that graphic novels can be useful tools for engagement with adolescent students (Bucher & Manning, 2004; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Hughes, King, Perkins, & Fuke, 2011; Gorman & Eastman, 2010; Hall, 2011). In this article, I will explore how graphic novels can be useful in engaging high school students by specifically looking at author and illustrator David Small's autobiographical graphic novel *Stitches: A Memoir* (2009) and how his book can help get students more engaged in reading and writing. I will examine how reader response theory can be used with his novel and how secondary teachers can use his text as a scaffolding device to help students write memoirs.

## *Stitches*, Not Your Average Autobiography

Biographies and autobiographies are commonly written in standard chapter book or textbook form. Often, readers will see a full-page photograph of the book's subject on the front cover of the text. On the inside of the book, the biography of that person is found through pages and pages of carefully written words. David Small's autobiography, *Stitches*, goes against the grain of the conventional form of biographies and autobiographies by using a graphic novel format. In-

stead of using pages full of written text, Small makes his agonizing childhood and adolescence authentic for his readers by using limited text and only gray tones in his illustrations. The gloomy and ominous pictures contribute successfully to the emotional impact of Small's woeful story, making it deeply poignant and tender for readers and exemplifying the idea that visual modes of communication have the power to enhance meaning that words cannot always achieve on their own (Hughes et al., 2011). There is truth in the cliché, *a picture's worth a thousand words*.

In his autobiographical account, Small has a distant relationship with both of his parents and seems to have no friends of his own. Although his family occasionally eats dinner together, there is no love, happiness, or laughter in their home. At age 11, friends of his parents notice a growth on his neck. His parents have it surgically removed soon after, but three years later, Small finds a letter revealing that the growth was cancerous and that his parents chose to keep it from him. When he was 15, Small's dad admitted that the cancer was caused by being overexposed to radiation—the result of multiple X-rays his father performed on him in their basement when Small was still a young child. Small must also cope with his mother having an affair with another woman, psychiatric therapy sessions, and daunting recurring dreams.

The themes that occur in this text are for mature adolescents; therefore, this book would best be suited for 16–17-year-old high school students. Although much of the content in this novel is heavy with grim emotions, the images and plotline captivate readers and keep them turning pages to see how Small overcomes his melancholic childhood. This novel is the crux of my article because it touches on tough subjects that are real for students like Myra. Small's synthesis of image and text work together well to create a resonating and engaging effect on readers. In addition, research on graphic novels reveals promising outcomes for adolescent students in secondary classrooms.

## Unique Features of Graphic Novels

### The Visual and Text Blend

Using graphic novels as supplementary texts in English language arts classrooms has had positive effects on reluctant and/or struggling readers, ELL students,

and adolescent students in general. Students gain refined skills at interpreting the author's message after being exposed to the blend of illustration and text together (Billman, 2002). As we have learned, such visual literacy is imperative for students to succeed (Seglem & Witte, 2009).

In their article on using visuals to teach metaphorical thinking in reading and writing, Krueger and Christel (2001) maintain

that students should examine visuals and be able to make critiques on these visuals to see how they affect meaning in a text (as cited by Gorman & Eastman, 2010). English teachers need to use imagery and visual metaphors together with literary texts and writing assignments

to steer students away from linear thinking and gear them toward symbolic and subjective thinking (Gorman & Eastman, 2010). This is vital because visual symbols require more complex thinking skills than the traditional left-to-right books students are most familiar with in school texts (Seglem & Witte, 2009). Being able to think symbolically and subjectively allows students to use higher-level thinking and critical analysis skills. By including graphic novels in their curriculum, teachers are enabling students to break out of the box of reading text as a routinely linear experience and into a way of learning that allows them to take ownership of how they read the text, making reading and the text more relatable to them as individuals.

### Reading as an Individual Experience

Louise Rosenblatt strongly believed that literary encounters should be individualized lived experiences. In her book, *Literature as Exploration* (1995), she explored literature in the classroom and encouraged teachers to treat students not as pupils in a classroom but as individual human beings. In another article about reading multimodal texts, Serafini (2010) elaborates on this idea of students as individuals when he describes that individuals' perceptions of multimodal texts—or texts that incorporate a mixture of visual images, design elements, and written language among other semiotic devices—are wrought with prior knowl-

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edge, personal experiences, and sociocultural and/or historical contexts. This means that every individual has unique personal experiences that influence his/her understanding and perceptions of images and language seen in multimodal texts like graphic novels. The images and text, the elements of design, and the structures of the images readers are exposed to in mul-

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timodal text are intended to carry out specific social actions and meanings (Serafini, 2010). To that end, Serafini encourages teachers to move outside of the literal meanings of images and texts by considering readers' various interpretations through perceptual, structural, and ideological frameworks.

Graphic novels support this idea of individualistic lived experiences, since students are able to read the story in a non-

fluid, nonlinear manner that is most comfortable for them. Being able to analyze these sequential, yet flexible blocks of information in graphic novels is essential for critical analyses (Hall, 2011). Students also individually interpret meaning from the illustrations and connect those interpretations with the text in their own ways. Rosenblatt (1995) once said that as teachers of literature, "our concern should be the relation between readers and text" (p. 268), since meaning is re-created from text when a student reads a literary piece.

### **Graphic Novels as Popular Culture**

There is value in examining the relationship between reader and text in graphic novels since readers are responsible for not only interpreting the *language*, but also the *images* incorporated throughout the text. The trend toward a visual culture is on the rise with the expansion of television, film, and Internet (Hasset & Schieble, 2007) into portable devices—iPads, tablets, mobile phones. Research has found that a great deal of current literacy instruction is still accomplished through traditional texts and alphabetic

writing (Hasset & Schieble, 2007), but their exclusive use discounts new technologies and visual modes of communication; students are more accustomed to seeing the combination of text and visuals in their world (Hasset & Schieble, 2007). The comic-style approach present in graphic novels fits students' needs and interests, since it takes advantage of the union between text and image that students are used to seeing on television, advertisements, cell phones, and even in actual comics they read leisurely (Hall, 2011). Graphic novels are also appropriate for the needs of struggling readers and writers because of the limited text (Frey & Fisher, 2004). In their graphic novel read-alouds to urban high school students, Frey and Fisher (2004) found that the illustrations within the graphic novels enhanced the story's meaning for students, supplying support for the idea that the image-text blend can help with comprehension.

The main purpose of graphic novels is to advance students' visual literacy and "to engage them with artistically appealing and accessible material" (Hall, 2011, p. 40). Hall (2011) brings up the development of webcomics—graphic novel-type comics online—and how those can be useful materials in the classroom, since visual and verbal literacy become interactive. He cites *Teaching the Graphic Novel* author Stephen Tabachnick throughout his article and ends with a quote from him stating, ". . . graphic novels fit students' sensibilities at a deep cognitive level" (p. 43). Hall acknowledges that learning takes place when a student finds the content interesting and suggests "that is nowhere more apt to happen than with comics and graphic novels" (p. 43). Because they have a popular culture appeal, graphic novels "provide a unique way of enticing at-risk students into reading, writing, and developing multiliteracy skills" (Hughes et al., 2011, p. 602). Some researchers contend that adolescents intentionally seek out print media similar to the types of media they are used to seeing on television and in video games, making graphic novels an easy and popular choice for young adults (Bucher & Manning, 2004).

Because students should be encouraged to read what interests them, graphic novels should be in all schools and should be incorporated into the curriculum when appropriate (Bucher & Manning, 2004). Three factors are crucial when including graphic novels into the curriculum: 1) variety, 2) appropriate

content for the age of students, and 3) a good balance of text and art (Bucher & Manning, 2004). Researchers Bucher and Manning (2004) include many examples of graphic novels that they consider engaging for adolescents; they include Art Spiegelman's *Maus* collections as well as interpretations of classics such as David Wenzel's graphic novel version of Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Their article suggests that graphic novels can work for other content areas outside of English language arts. With the growing amount of research supporting the sense that graphic novels are prevalent in popular culture, it seems natural for graphic novels to engage adolescent students in reading; after all, students engage with multimodal literacies on a daily basis, so its familiarity makes it more approachable and thus more likely to be read.

It is a fact that text and visual blends are widespread in students' lives outside of school. Perhaps using these familiar blends in the classroom will help engage students and improve their skills as readers and writers. In his article on reader response to literature, Marshall (2000) explains that researchers

have developed categories that can be used to analyze readers' responses. One category codes responses for quality of thinking and/or depth of response; by determining students' levels of performance, teachers can better understand the nature, content, or quality of literary response (Marshall, 2000). Teachers should keep in mind the text being read, the reader, and the context in which the reading takes place when looking at student responses to literature (Marshall, 2000).

Rosenblatt's (1995) idea about aesthetic versus efferent reading plays a role in how readers respond to graphic novels. Aesthetic reading focuses on the reading as a lived and personal experience, while efferent reading focuses on information and facts provided by the text. Both types of reading are necessary and are intertwined with one another (Rosenblatt, 1995), so I will address both aesthetic and efferent reading here. Additionally, because more recent research on reader response involves looking at the process of reader response itself (Marshall, 2000), the remainder of this article will attempt to convey various ways adolescent readers respond to *Stitches* and how their responses could affect the way they write memoirs.

## Setting the Pedagogical Stage

### Reader Response Theory

Readers' responses to literature are widely varied but can be categorized into the text being read, the reader who is completing the reading, or the context in which the reading is occurring (Marshall, 2000). In *Stitches*, Small's illustrations present readers with dark undertones, Hitchcock-like angles, and stenciled images of wiry-framed characters (see Fig. 1). Readers who come across this text could interpret the illustrations and the texts differently depending on their personal experiences. How the teacher chooses to present Small's novel can also affect students' responses to the book and, therefore, responses to the way their memoirs are written. For instance, an individual reading of the text may carry a different message to readers than a whole-class reading of the text. Similarly, reading the text in a classroom environment as opposed to taking the text home to read could also affect the text's meaning for students. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to keep in mind the text, the reader, and the context of the reading when assessing students' literary responses.



**Figure 1.** Lonely image of Small immediately after discovering his growth was cancerous. Adapted from *Stitches: A Memoir* by David Small, p. 209. Copyright 2009 by W.W. Norton & Company. Reprinted with permission.

## Writing Memoirs

Memoirs are part of the nonfiction genre of writing. For students, this writing can get personal and emotional, so it is imperative that teachers present memoirs and memoir writing in a safe, open, and comfortable environment. As adolescents begin to explore their identities, it is important that teachers of English language arts create an outlet for them to analyze and reflect on their past experiences. First-person, subjective accounts of personal lives and personal ideas can be empowering for both the writer and the reader and can help students be contemplative about their own identities (Bradley, 2007). Teachers should reassure students that writing memoirs does not inevitably mean exposing embarrassing or shameful truths to peers. Rather, memoirs are about creating narratives based on memories and honest perceptions of the world and not necessarily about creating definitive realities (Bradley, 2007).

In his novel *Stitches*, David Small presents his childhood through his own perspective; he acknowledges in his final pages that maturity, reflection, and research on his family's history slightly changed his perception of his mother, and consequently of his memoir. Teachers should make students aware that it is okay for their perceptions on their memories to change as they are writing or even as they grow older. By crafting a balance between a personal reflection of a memory and presenting facts and information from the memory, the aesthetic and efferent balance Rosenblatt (1995) refers to can be achieved.

## Strategies to Teach *Stitches*

Because of the deep and complex issues Small writes about in his memoir, teachers must use some discretion for teaching and exposing this book to students. Though it is considered a young adult novel and has even been a finalist for the National Book Award Young Adult category, it is more appropriate for older students like juniors and/or seniors in high school. Visual literacy in this novel is compelling and important to its message. It is likely that older students may be more attuned to the purposive dark tones, close-ups, angled shots, shadows, and thin font Small incorporates throughout his text (see Figs 2 & 3) than would younger students. Older students may also have a better sense of visual knowledge, which gives

them greater potential “to gain a deeper sensitivity to the characters’ emotions and intentions, and greater insight into the issues and struggles portrayed” (Burke & Peterson, 2007, p. 74).

*Stitches* can be used in a number of ways when teaching high school students how to create narrative writing through memoirs. The following two lesson ideas assume that students have thoroughly read the novel. A review of the basic characteristics in a story (i.e. plot, setting, characters, and climax) may be necessary for students to understand how to create narrative memoirs.

### Lesson 1: Gallery Walk Graphoirs

Instead of introducing the writing assignment by stressing the traditional introduction, body, and conclusion paragraphs, teachers can select various excerpts directly from the novel and showcase them around the classroom as a way to introduce graphic novel memoirs, or *graphoirs*. Selection of the excerpts should purposefully exemplify emotion. Students can then examine the text and images more closely to understand meaning in a more analytical manner.



**Figure 2.** Hard angles and empty, white space parallel Small's relationship with his mother. Adapted from *Stitches: A Memoir* by David Small, p. 15. Copyright 2009 by W.W. Norton & Company. Reprinted with permission.



**Figure 3.** Small's choice to turn his back to the door may reflect his frustration toward his environment. His dark undertones and wiry images will elicit different reader reactions. Adapted from *Stitches: A Memoir* by David Small, p. 61. Copyright 2009 by W.W. Norton & Company. Reprinted with permission.

The teacher might direct students to move around the room, as if they are looking at artifacts or paintings in a museum or art gallery. Students could also be asked to observe the excerpted images and write responses about their views of what is taking place in each excerpt.

If the teacher chooses to formally assess responses, it is imperative to take into account the reader, the text, and the context for the reading into consideration (Marshall, 2000). Readers' responses involve individuals' prior knowledge and personal experiences, which can certainly diversify student responses (Rosenblatt, 1995; Serafini, 2010). One student's interpretation of text and image may be completely different than another's. In Figure 3, for example, one student may find Small to be a creative young child with an unusual imagination, able to create games with himself by constructing hats and creating drawings. Perhaps that student is an only child who can relate to the image.

Another student may see Small as a lonely child without any sense of his world and nothing to draw about because he has no creative ideas. It is possible that student comes from a large family and has not had many experiences with being alone at that age. Applying reader response theory when assessing students' responses can benefit both teachers and students because responses are allowed to be subjective and flexible as long as meaning is derived from the text.

Once students have had the opportunity to look at and respond to the excerpts, the class can engage in a discussion about why Small chose to tell his story using images and limited text. The teacher can finish up the discussion by reiterating the idea that complex issues can sometimes be better expressed with fewer words and explanations and more visuals and illustrations. Classes can then generate a list of reasons why visuals and texts mixed together could be a valuable outlet to creating autobiographies. After compiling this list, students will be expected to create their own graphoires by using three to five meaningful life events. They should stay true to graphic novel text and image blocks, creating their own images by hand in order to personalize their work.

## Lesson 2: Scrapbook Memoirs

In this lesson, the teacher would again showcase excerpts from Small's text around the room so that students are able to view them closely. Instead of asking students to write a response to the excerpts, the teacher would ask students to generate a list of items that summarize David Small. Through careful analysis and exploration, students might come up with specific objects to represent Small's desire for freedom. For instance, in his memoir, Small describes a time where he removed his shoes and used his socks to slide up and down hallways to escape from limitations and taste freedom where he did not have to answer to his mother's rules (Small, 2009). Thus, shoes and socks might go on a student's list of meaningful items. After creating the list, students would then brainstorm objects that represent important moments in their own lives.

Students would then be asked to create representations of these objects to make a scrapbook memoir of three to five powerful life events. They would be able to use cutouts from magazines and newspapers, images from the Internet, and/or hand-drawn pictures

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## Graphoires and scrapbook memoirs can be used to get students engaged in the assignment before getting into formal writing.

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to create their stories. For each object they recreate, students would be expected to write a personal narrative about what the object represents in their lives. Students could use report folders to bind their scrapbooks together or, if possible, the teacher could spiral-bind students' work

to keep as permanent scrapbooks. The teacher would assess the memoirs by taking into account the individual reader, the content of the life events chosen, and the context for each reader's scrapbook memoir.

### Conclusion

Reading literature deals with experiences of human beings in personal and social relationships (Rosenblatt, 1995). It is imperative that educators are mindful of this fact. The tragic experience of my former student Myra helped me understand that literature, particularly graphic novels, can also help remedy hardships. At the end of the school year, when Myra was ready to open up again, I asked how she was doing. Her answer was simple, "I'm fine now. I can find him in the characters I read about, so I know he's okay." Her words illustrate the potential impact of reading and gives evidence to the fact that graphic novels can be powerful tools. The graphic novels in which Myra immersed herself ameliorated her mourning. I suspect David Small's *Stitches: A Memoir* may be useful for adolescent readers and, perhaps, even help some readers mend issues in their own lives.

In English language arts classes, students are expected to produce narratives in the form of memoirs and autobiographies (Common Core Appendix, 2011). To scaffold this writing technique, graphoires and scrapbook memoirs can be used to get students engaged in the assignment before getting into formal writing. Small's novel, *Stitches: A Memoir*, provides a great, personal example of how memoirs can be told creatively and deeply through images and limited text. This type of narrative writing would be especially beneficial for students who struggle with writing, because it would allow them to think of their ideas in a more concrete manner, since the images and objects

are tangible. The dissection of the concept of memoir and narrative writing can help students understand how serious life events can be transformed into effective, literary pieces. Reading Small's novel and taking part in the memoir lessons can help prepare secondary students for reading narrative memoirs like Pulitzer Prize-winning books *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960) and *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt (1999). By framing personal narrative and memoirs in a visual manner, teachers ease students' learning processes and tap into intelligences outside of written, textual language.

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