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Tangles:

An interview with Sarah Leavitt

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Sarah Leavitt is a cartoonist and writer, and a member of the Creative Writing Department at the University of British Columbia. Her comics and prose works have appeared in magazines, newspapers and anthologies in Canada, the US and the UK. *Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer's, My Mother and Me* (2010) is her first book. The following interview was conducted by Skype on 19 May 2015. It discusses the book, its making, reception and translation.

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HB: The focus of this special issue is on comics by Jewish women, and I want to begin by asking how Jewishness figures in your life and work?

SL: I definitely consider myself strongly Jewish, but I don't know if that necessarily makes me a Jewish cartoonist. For instance, I'm not sure if the project I am working on at the moment [a graphic novel set in mid-nineteenth-century British Columbia] can be described as a Jewish project. I would say that *Tangles* was definitely informed by Judaism – or rather, perhaps, by Jewishness as a cultural thing. My mother was strongly Jewish, not religiously so, but culturally, and this was a very big part of our identity. It was also a big part of feeling that I didn't necessarily fit in with other kids. I grew up in small towns in the eastern United States where there weren't many Jewish people. So being Jewish meant being different. For me this sense of difference also fits in with being a cartoonist, or being a writer: with being on the outside looking in.

HB: Tangles concludes with you saying Kaddish after your mother's death. Would you say that religious practice, rather than necessarily belief, helped you deal with your mother's illness?

SL: Yes, the sense of being outside of the Jewish community changed when my mom got sick and I started to go to synagogue. I've stopped going again, so I feel like one of those Jews who only turn to Judaism when they need it. However, Judaism had a really strong pull for me when my mom was sick. Just being in the synagogue, singing and chanting, was a comfort. It meant a lot to me to be able to say Kaddish. There is nothing else like it. I remember looking up the meaning

of the prayer. The words are just about praising god, but there is something special for me about the ritual and how it allowed me to remember my mother in a particularly Jewish way. I'm sure my mom would have appreciated being remembered, although I'm not sure that she would have cared if I said Kaddish for her or not.

HB: Tangles is a book about you, your mother and her illness. But it is also about other members of your family: your dad, your sister, your aunts. Can you tell me if – and how – the presence of your family influenced the process of making Tangles?

SL: Right after my mom died I did a zine that included cut-and-pasted bits from my journals and sketchbooks. I think now that I must have decided at that point that I was going to do a graphic novel, but I didn't think of the zine in those terms at the time. It was very raw. It included the drawings that are now at the end of *Tangles*, which show my mother on her deathbed. I drew them when she was dying. One of the pictures is of my mom and my aunt Sukey, because Sukey was with my mom on her last night. I gave a copy of the zine to each of my mom's sisters. Debbie said: 'I can tell from the fact that you only drew Sukey at the end that you didn't think I was there for your mother'. This upset me. I sent Debbie a long email explaining how much I appreciated all that she had done for my mother, driving back and forth to see her. What I had drawn was simply what happened that last night. So my aunt's response to the zine was a first lesson for me in how people might react to being represented in my work.

HB: How did your family respond to the completed book?

SL: I showed parts of the book to my dad when they were done. He was very lovely about it, and very excited, and I asked him questions about things I didn't remember. After I finished *Tangles* I sent a copy to Debbie and her son, but they have never mentioned it to me. Sukey told my Dad that *Tangles* was painful, but she has not discussed it with me. I thought my sister would hate it but she actually really liked it. So you can't predict how people will react to the book.

HB: That's interesting because family roles tend to become quite fixed. Would you say your making of Tangles reflects your own role in the family?

SL: When my mom was sick, I was the one who insisted that we must talk to her and do something. Of course if I hadn't done this, someone else would have had to do it eventually. But this tends to be my role in the family: to speak out. I felt *Tangles* was part of this 'speaking out'. If my mom was still alive, she would probably be mad at me. She didn't believe in sharing personal information about our family in public. But all the same, she would not be surprised. She would expect me to do something like this. So she might like the book in some ways, but she would also think that you should not tell other people about difficult things that happen in the family.

HB: Thinking about your drawings, and the chapters and full-page images that make up Tangles, I'm curious to know your comics influences?

SL: There are many cartoonists I admire: Aline Kominsky-Crumb and all those eighties woman cartoonists who were doing rough, gritty autobiographical stuff. I also like famous works such as *Maus* and *Persepolis*, and I would love to be able to draw like the very gestural work of Jules Feiffer. But *Tangles* is maybe not that obviously influenced by certain cartoonists because I simply didn't know what I was doing when I was doing it. I just decided to make this into a comic book. Now I sometimes feel that if I had studied comics or been connected to other comics artists I would have probably done things differently. There're things I like about *Tangles* but others that I now can't believe I did. For instance, when I didn't feel like drawing someone's hand, I just didn't do it!

HB: You made a zine first, so perhaps the anarchic elements of that medium form are carried through to Tangles?

SL: The book is rooted in the sketches from my diaries, so there's a raw quality to it. The more I read autobiographical comics, the more I became interested in formal considerations. Once a woman came up to me and said that *Tangles* reminded her of *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person* by Miriam Engelbert. It is one of my favourite books. She made it when she was very ill, and the drawings are like a kid's. So when I was told that *Tangles* was like it, I had a split reaction: both pleased and offended.

HB: There's a sense of immediacy to Tangles. The drawings and words are visceral and unflinching, especially when you depict the physical care needs of your mother. Did you filter what can be told?

SL: I wrote about events directly after they happened, so when making *Tangles* I drew on my diary. If I hadn't had my diaries and journals it would have been a different story because I have a bad memory, but also because these are things that I don't really want to remember. I did filter what I included. There could have been much more about poop, for example. But I kept asking if I needed to include something or if it was gratuitous. A little goes a long way, I think. I was only caring for my mother when I visited. Not all the time. I'm proud of myself for doing this, but I'm really impressed by people who are full-time caregivers like my dad was.

HB: Talking about care, I noticed that medicine doesn't play a big role in Tangles.

Was this a conscious decision?

SL: Actually one reason is that I was not really there for a lot of the medical stuff. But you're right, there's not a lot that can be done about Alzheimer's. Mom took Aricept for a while, but there's no way of knowing if it works. So after a few years she stopped taking it. Towards the end of her life she was on other drugs including Zoloft to control her anxiety, and other stuff too. So there were drugs and early on, neurologist visits, but most of dealing with Alzheimer's is about personal care, making sure that the person is safe. I wanted *Tangles* to be a story most of all, a strong narrative. I didn't want it to be a 'how to' guide to what to do if your loved one has Alzheimer's.

HB: I was struck by the extent to which your mother's body starts to define your relationship with her as the illness progresses.

SL: Whenever I was caring for my mother all the bathroom stuff was constant. I remember talking to the Alzheimer's Society and they told me that the person starts wearing diapers as a protection, but that it is good to keep up their normal routine. So there's a lot of focus on bathroom and accidents. It is hard to manage even with diapers. It became this huge thing and I was never completely comfortable with it. At some point – this is bit blurry – when I visited I just wasn't doing as much anymore because there was always a worker to help. I really admire my dad who did such a lot of it, and mom's sisters. It's really painful. It's such a strong indicator that a person is losing their autonomy, even when it comes to the early signs. I remember being in a public washroom with her and she started unzipping her pants before she went into the bathroom stall and then she realised. But even that is such a powerful symbol.

HB: The panel where you and your sister decide to cut your mother's pubic hair stood out for me, not least because it connects your sexual identity to your mother's care. Here you say that you felt unable to trim your mother's pubic hair because you 'had touched women's bodies for sex... and sometimes feared being accused of perversion because of it' (p.111). But of course a daughter cutting her mother's pubic hair is also more generally taboo. Can you say something about this panel?

SL: I thought a lot about this drawing and purposely made it 'religious' looking. Now I just think I can't believe we did that! But at the time it was so hard to get

her clean, and we thought this might help. I don't remember if it was my idea or my sister's, but afterwards we told my dad and Donimo [Leavitt's partner] and they just asked us why we would do this. It's weird. But I guess it's desperate: how do we make this situation better? I was aware afterwards of how angry my mother would have been about this. So there's a fair amount of shame about having done this. In a way queerness isn't really part of it but it is always in the back of my head.

HB: Your lesbian identity doesn't seem to have been an issue for your mother, who is generally portrayed to have been a supportive presence. When she gets sick the tables are turned. For example, in the chapter 'Finally' you are shown holding hands with her while walking through the small town, Fredericton, where your parents live. Kids start yelling 'dykes' at you both, and you respond very angrily.

SL: I was just so furious, not just about the homophobia but also about someone daring to yell at my sick mother. Then I had this weird thought in my head: that I would confront them and have a reasonable talk with them about not yelling 'dyke'. Also I'm not butch so don't call me that. I was mad, but I thought I could turn it into a good educational experience for the boys. Of course it didn't work out that way.

HB: I taught Tangles on my MA option in contemporary feminist fiction. It was very popular. Most students focused on discussing the representation of Alzheimer's. But one student said that she liked seeing a lesbian character whose parents 'were just

really nice'. That this might seem remarkable tells us a lot about contemporary sexual politics.

SL: When I first wrote *Tangles* this was one of my worries: that readers might just ask 'what is this lesbian doing here?' I think it's a positive thing that people read about a lesbian character and they don't really care. But sometimes people just don't ask me about it.

HB: Tangles has been published in Canada, the US and the UK and it has also been translated into German and French. I noticed that where the English title alludes the 'entanglements' between you and Midge, the translations seem to stress the messiness of illness (Das große Durcheinander; Le Grand désordre). Can you tell us about the translations?

SL: The German was the first translation. I don't speak the language, but when I put the German title through Google translate I thought it sounded like a kids' book. In fact I found that there is a German kids' book of the same title. So when a German journalist contacted me to discuss the book, I raised these issues with him. He said that the title sounded like a kids' book but that the translation itself was very good. Another weird thing is that they put a glossary in the back with terms that Germans wouldn't know. One of them was Hanukkah, which is disturbing given the history. But the journalist said that he didn't know why Hanukkah was included in the glossary; he said people would know what it is.

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HB: For me the paradox of the German edition is the disjuncture between 'the great mess' of the title and the attempt to clear up the 'mess' by adding a glossary that 'resolves' potential difficulties.

SL: Yes. And another issue that came up was the font. I had made a font out of my handwriting for the English version of *Tangles*. For the German I had to redo the font to have German characters in it. There are also parts that are handwritten.. These they either replaced with font or in some places the designer used her own handwriting. She also used her handwriting to replace my mom's handwriting, which I had traced in the English version. This felt very weird. It was done partly to ease the production process but also because it was hard enough to fit the German – which tends to be longer – into the book. So in a way translation definitely changes the book.

HB: Do you feel differently about the book now that it has become so successful?

SL: I have recently sold the Korean rights to *Tangles*. So *Tangles* has spread in a way that I hadn't anticipated, but this hasn't always translated into book sales. In Korea they are printing 800 copies, which is barely any. My agent asked about it. They sent an email – which I quite like – in which they said that they can't print more than 800 copies because the book is about a lesbian daughter and Koreans are not used to talking about that. And also it's only black and white. I appreciate that they still want to publish it even if they think nobody will buy it! They're also the only publisher who actually mentioned the fact that there's a lesbian in it. Most people don't really talk about it.

So in some ways *Tangles* is very successful, but in other ways the success is fairly small.

HB: What is next for you?

SL: I am working on a couple of different projects related to *Tangles*. One is an animated version with an animation studio that wants to turn the book into a feature length film. (1) We're in the process of fund-raising for it, and I'm also working on an online interactive project, which is based on *Tangles*, but more concerned with the backstory to it.

HB: Thank you.

(1) You can watch the *Tangles* trailer here: <https://vimeo.com/129478129>