



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 12 | Issue 4

Article 18

Jul-2011

Book Review: Just a Dropped Stitch

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Recommended Citation

Osuri, Stafford Osuri (2011). Book Review: Just a Dropped Stitch. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 12(4), 187-190.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol12/iss4/18>

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***Just a Dropped Stitch*. 2011. Laurie Levinger. Resource Publications, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers 219 pp. ISBN 978-1-60899-067-2 \$26 (Paperback).**

Reviewed by Stafford Osuri Osuri¹

The narrator in the book, Jesse, is a lesbian and relates her experiences from childhood. This is marred by an incidence of molestation; how hard it is for lesbians to be accepted into society and integrate with the local community. Her daughter, Sophie, is also molested as a child and she goes on to highlight the major challenges facing single mothers: more so, lesbians. She is involved in a couple of relationships and often has to compromise her principles to keep her partner, as it were. This she later regrets and vows to always be there for her children.

She breaks up with her first partner, Ruth, after getting pregnant with her first child, Noah. He is got through John, a sperm donor. Jesse's mother, Gloria, is diagnosed with breast cancer and the author and her father have to look after her in her dying moments. She introduces the reader to her three brothers: Ben, Jon and Isaac. She describes close family ties: "... how close we were, in spite of our differences." [5]. The pain her mother is going through climaxes in her asking her son, Ben, to assist her take her own life. This he declines.

The difficulties she endures as a Jew and being a lesbian are explored in the book. The discrimination she faces both from her religious group and the community she lives in is also discussed. Her mother, from a Jewish family, acknowledges she never had any affection for the religion. She becomes an active Quaker later. She's been a Visiting Nurse before she is diagnosed with cancer. She passes on despite the fact that she undergoes surgery, followed by a year of chemotherapy with her cancer seemingly having gone into remission.

Noah's custody is shared between the two parents: Jesse and Ruth, despite their separation, a decision they'd made while Jesse was still pregnant. Jesse's father is a professor and her mother a nurse. She treasures a couple of jewelry she is given by her mother before she passes away. These are later on stolen by a neighbor who breaks into her house. Reggie, the alleged thief, is later charged with molestation of children and he's openly an anti-gay activist. She describes him thus:

"Every once in a while I wonder what it would be like to live with beliefs as absolute and unassailable as Reggie's. Maybe that makes it easier to live in a world where people aren't who they appear to be, where things happen that don't make any sense." [30].

After her mother's death, she opens her own private practice as a psychotherapist. She immerses herself in Buddhism and learns to meditate. She falls pregnant again with her second child, Sophie. She starts a women's group with thirteen members initially, reducing to just over five in fifteen years. The striking feature of the women in the group is that they all knit, except the author.

Jesse falls in love with her second partner, Brenda, who moves in with her. She comes with her seven-year-old son, Thomas, having fled a disastrous marriage. She

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finally finds solace and hopes it shall be well, but this is not to be. Though she does her best to keep her, Thomas molests Sophie and they depart (Brenda and Thomas) leaving her alone again. She says:

“And I was alone, living with the reality that I’d sacrificed a precious moment with my own child to try to keep a lover; a lover who couldn’t be kept. I let misplaced desire and insecurity blind me.” [127-128].

The title of the book, *Just a Dropped Stitch* is drawn thus:

“Last month, during our meeting one of the knitters ran into a technical problem and, right in the middle of whatever she was telling us, she interrupted herself to ask the others for help. I didn’t understand the problem, but I could see the solution, because it was enacted right there in front of me. She began to unravel an almost-finished deep teal sleeve. I didn’t mean to, but I couldn’t stop myself, ‘Why are you doing that?’ The unraveler glanced up at me, reacting to my alarm more than the task at hand. ‘It’s okay,’ she said, ‘it’s just a dropped stitch.’ [37].

“Just? Like it’s that easy to re-do, make it right? My dropped stitches haven’t been that easy.” [38].

The author's family has a history of business left to them by their grandfather, Sam. Jesse sees a therapist who encourages her to hone her writing skills. It reaches a time when the author admits: “Because now, I could not not write.” [48]. The author admits that she had a boyish name and did not want to name her daughter likewise and so chooses the name Sophie for her.

Jesse’s third lover, Anna comes into her life later on and she falls in love with her. Her daughter, Sophie, initially finds it difficult to accept Anna as her mother’s partner. Eventually she even changes her name to acknowledge her. She declares: “From now on I’m going to be Sophie Glory Rosewood Silverman, because Anna is my other Mommy, and I’m part of her family.” The author embraces taking care of the environment by recycling paper and not buying plastic bags when she goes shopping.

Jesse is an organised lady and uses lists, outlines and flow charts in completing her daily tasks. She faces a major challenge in her life when she partially loses hearing in her left ear. She tries to ignore that she is facing a challenge and plays it down. But then she realises that she cannot relate well with her clients as she cannot hear them well. The hearing problem in her left ear forces her to close her practice. She then takes a bold step and avoids procrastination and attends to her hearing problem. She makes an appointment to see a doctor for either corrective surgery or using hearing aids.

The author then destroys the files from her practice by fire. This is after attending the funeral of one of her former clients. This prompts her to set alight the files she’d been storing in her garage not knowing what to do with them. She then visits a psychic in New York. The psychic tells her that her daughter Sophie will be a dancer, her son Noah a scientist and as for her he says: “You will write in spite of yourself.” [96].

The author emphasizes the challenge of being a full-time mother.

“As anyone who’s ever been a stay-at-home mother will tell you, taking care of home and children is a full-time job. Anyone who thinks it’s easy, not really work at all, hasn’t ever done it. Work without pay, job without status; it’s hard to say you’re a homemaker and feel proud.” [100].

Jesse is helped realise her writing career by Johanna, a former client. They meet at a lecture that Johanna is presenting on *Women and the Web*. She is introduced to Barbara who has started a new consulting business designed to help women develop their writing skills. Barbara is resolute on her cause:

“I’ve been married and divorced, two grown sons. I used to be chasing orgasms, but now I’m done with that. I’ve focused my energy on helping other people discover their creative selves.” [107].

Another lady, Miriam, offers constructive criticism and gives her positive feedback and suggestions on how to improve on her work. Miriam suggests a writing workshop, which they both attend. Jesse learns quite a lot and they help one another to improve on their pieces of written work.

Jesse comments on the unpredictability of life:

“Even though we like to believe that our lives are linear – starting here and ending there, with a beginning, middle, and an end – I’ve come to believe that the whole affair is more like a spiral. We pass one point, ‘deal with an issue,’ face it, and put it to rest. But, damn, there you are five or ten or twenty or twenty-five years later and there’s the same goddamn ‘issue’ waiting for you. [131].

The importance of communication in a relationship is emphasised. She writes a letter to Brenda and lets her feelings known. She also meets with her brother, who apologises for molesting her as a kid. She affirms: “And it helped to understand that what happened is not nothing, but it doesn’t have to be everything either.” Talking to Ben helped heal Jesse. Telling somebody helps. It could be a lover, mother or therapist.

Her relationship with Anna, a former client, forces her to close her practice. The two are joined in a civil union. This causes a stir when a journalist they allow to interview them so as to give their union a human face, reports subjectively in an article. This was very unlike what appeared in the newspapers: *Same-sex union divides small Vermont community*. Jesse fights for her rights when she goes to hospital for her routine breast examination. She cannot list her legal partner, Anna, as next of kin. She refuses to give any name if Anna’s name is not accepted. It’s ironical as it is the law, yet they’ve been legally unionised.

She gets an invitation to the synagogue. She thinks they do not know that she’s a lesbian, but on calling for confirmation, she’s told there’s no mistake. They have been invited together with her partner who is not Jewish. They are to attend Sophie’s performance at the synagogue. She connects with her children: goes shopping with her

daughter and hiking with her son, Noah. Noah's looking forward to meeting his 'father', John: the sperm donor, when he turns eighteen.

With the insistence of her children, she gets a job. She works in role play as a patient for medical student education. Later she works as a programme manager.

The book is good read for lesbians, single parents raising children on their own and for those advocating for the rights of children and women.