

First Opinion: Rebuilding Resilience: A Child’s Journey Through “Small Things”

Tregonning, Mel. *Small Things*. Pajama Press, 2018.

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Mel Tregonning’s wordless graphic picturebook, *Small Things*, offers a rich tapestry of visual storytelling that evokes an emotional response as it delves into the complexities of mental health. The narrative unfolds as the protagonist in the story navigates challenges associated with sadness, anxiety, and depression. Using stark contrasts and negative space, the weight of the

young boy's emotional burden spills over the pages of the book, encouraging reflection and contemplation by the reader.

The book follows the storyline of a young boy who faces everyday challenges in his school and home life. Solely using black and white illustrations to convey the emotional journey, readers easily become fully immersed in the story. Alone with his worries, the tumultuous day-to-day experiences seem to get worse. His grades slip and he doesn't feel like he is fitting in at school. Tregonning captures the nuances of these childhood experiences through her use of vivid facial expressions and dynamic body language. The rich illustrations include images of tiny beings that look as if they are crowding around the young boy's body. To further encapsulate how overwhelming his worries become, the striking illustrations show how these tiny demons gnaw away at his body. At first, when loved ones offer the boy support, he is so overwhelmed with feelings that he lashes out. As his worries grow the tiny beings in the images also grow, showcasing for the reader the immense weight of the boy's despair. As he withdraws and becomes consumed with feelings of isolation and emotional vulnerability, a family member shows empathy and the boy begins to see he is not all alone in these feelings. The vivid illustrations notably change to become brighter and more lively as the boy recognizes he can overcome the obstacles. The subtle details across the panels focus the reader's attention on what happens in between the *small things*. Given the wordless nature of the book, the detailed images offer a powerful glimpse of what internal struggles look like in visual story form, making it relatable to any reader who grapples with feelings of anxiety and loneliness.

The story also transcends immediate themes of isolation and depression to address issues of social awareness that include empathy, compassion, and adversity. As the boy strives to cope with his overwhelming emotions, he learns to find comfort in recognizing that, as humans, we all

face similar challenges. This view of common humanity helps the boy see that everyone is affected by *small things*. Confronting struggles of anxiety and isolation using empathy and compassion becomes visible to the reader through Tregonning's visual depictions of the boy's inner landscape.

Dialogue about acceptance and mental health awareness is needed more now than ever before. These types of conversations are also paramount in fostering empathy and understanding, which can help cultivate resilience. The wordless format of this picturebook allows readers to interpret and discuss the story in personally meaningful ways. This can make it more accessible for readers who find it difficult to articulate their feelings. As a teacher educator, I see tremendous value in conducting interactive read-alouds using this book in the elementary classroom and beyond. Specifically, conversations about this book could also include how we develop coping strategies when managing difficult emotions, which could prove to be extremely beneficial in the early childhood classroom.

Readers will undoubtedly take away new meaning each time they read this emotionally moving story about the silent challenges people face and how common humanity reminds us that we are more alike than we are different. The power of human connection and the small acts of kindness depicted in the story reinforce the idea that we are not alone in our struggles and that reaching out for help is a sign of strength, not weakness. *Small Things* serves as a catalyst for fostering a sense of solidarity among readers by highlighting shared experiences of anxiety and isolation, while encouraging empathy, compassion, and support for one another.

About the Author

Dr. Amanda Deliman is an Assistant Professor in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership, based out of Utah State University-Salt Lake. She teaches courses in early childhood and elementary literacy education. With over 17 years of teaching experience from pre-K to the university level, Amanda seeks out opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations about using high-quality children's literature across grade levels. Her creative scholarly pursuits focus on the intersections of teacher learning and teacher education, children's literature and curriculum integration, and social-emotional learning.