

Second Reaction: Small Things

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

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Mel Tregonning's (2018) *Small Things* is a beautiful glimpse into one boy's self-reflection, discovery, and introspective journey. It is a beautifully illustrated graphic novel that delves deep into the protagonist's emotions. Through the use of visual imagery, the story allows readers to interpret and identify based on their own experiences. Themes of isolation, empathy, and resilience are discussed as transcending individual circumstances, inviting readers to connect with the story on a personal level. The impact of this graphic novel on my son and I are discussed, emphasizing its transformative nature and lasting emotional resonance.

I read this book with my eight-year-old son, a second-grade public elementary school student. He and I had different reactions to this book. For me, it brought back core memories of being a child and the loneliness of feeling that one's problems were the only problems in the world, and thinking that certainly no one else feels this way. I resonated with each frame of the beautifully illustrated graphic novel. Reading it with my eight-year-old son provided additional insight and perspective. He observed the actions of the characters in every frame, and made comments, typically at face value. For example, in the gymnasium, he first noted the jersey number on the character's back, and then he thought that the shadows rising from the floor after the character fell was grass. He tried to make sense of the shadows and called them things like fire and dragons. When the character begins to get overwhelmed by the shadows, my son expressed discomfort at the images, and decided to skip to the last few pages to see "how many pages were left." In this way, he identified with the main character's feelings of pressure and anxiety. I think wrestling with the discomfort of relating to a book character's sadness and anxiety is a new experience for him. He enjoys graphic novels, but typically the stories he reads are lighthearted and funny.

After he finished the story, my son reflected on the themes he noted. While I picked up on nuanced themes of insecurity and anxiety, my son described the main emotion as sadness. This is an appropriate summary for him because he does not typically struggle with anxiety. However, I have an older child who would most likely identify with the themes of anxiety and insecurity because he sometimes struggles with these issues. Even though he didn't identify the same way I did, he shared that it was good that the character noticed that everyone feels sad and that he can help others and talk to others to address these feelings. After we finished the book and reflected on our connections to the characters, we discussed anxiety, pressure, sadness, and

compassion. This discussion enriched our experience with the book and helped my son expand his understanding of others' feelings during the “small things” of everyday life.

I appreciate the genre of graphic novels and wordless journeys because it allows the viewer to interpret and identify based on their own experiences. I can relate to feeling left out, insecure, and anxious. My son can feel sad about falling and is encouraged by a friend's help. The character's interactions with family, friends, and people at school also invite many empathetic responses. The “small things” that impact a person in these small moments are truly universal, but the emotional responses vary based on personal experience. This graphic novel is beautifully illustrated and goes beyond mere storytelling, immersing readers in a whirlwind of emotions that will linger in their hearts and minds long after the final page is turned. It is not just a book, but a transformative experience that will leave an indelible mark on every reader. The themes of isolation, empathy, sadness, and resilience transcend individual circumstances, allowing readers to connect with the story on a personal level.

Though the story was often dark and sometimes uncomfortable for my son, he enjoyed relating to the characters. We were both moved and impressed by this beautiful book. Through simple yet powerful imagery and symbols, the book vividly portrays the protagonist's struggles, using shadowy figures symbolizing inner demons. The minimal backgrounds highlight feelings of isolation, while the character's facial expressions and body language give insight into their emotions. Symbolism, such as butterflies for transformation and the use of broken or fragmented imagery paints a vivid picture of the protagonist's inner struggles. These symbols add richness to the story, along with Tregonning's clever use of contrast and composition through the use of light and shadow. Overall, Tregonning's visual storytelling skillfully draws readers in, encouraging them to connect with the protagonist's mental health journey and perhaps even ponder their own

experiences. We were both deeply moved by the novel's powerful storytelling and emotional depth, making it a valuable addition to any reader's collection.

Work Cited

Tregonning, M. (2018). *Small things*. Pajama Press Inc.

About the Author

Dr. Erin West is a passionate advocate for children and education. She completed her doctorate in educational leadership at Appalachian State in 2022. She has served in many capacities in education, including K-12 school administration, and taught preschool, elementary, and college. Her research interests include educational policy, early care and education, curriculum, and educational leadership. She is a proud mother of two sons and lives with her family in North Carolina.