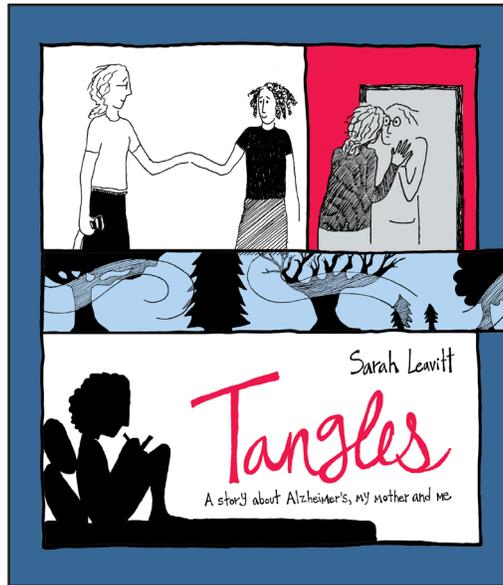




## READING GUIDE



### Tangles Sarah Leavitt

#### About the book:

What do you do when your outspoken, passionate, and quick-witted mother starts fading into a forgetful, fearful woman? In this powerful graphic memoir, Sarah Leavitt reveals how Alzheimer's disease transformed her mother Midge—and her family—forever.

In spare black and white drawings and clear, candid prose, Sarah shares her family's journey through a harrowing range of emotions—shock, denial, hope, anger, frustration—all the while learning to cope with a devastating diagnosis, and managing to find moments of happiness. *Tangles* provides a window on the complexity of Alzheimer's disease, and ultimately opens a knot of moments, memories, and dreams to reveal a bond between a mother and a daughter that will never come apart.

*“Sarah Leavitt uses the medium of comics to tell her story with more economy and power than either words or pictures could muster by themselves. She brings a good eye for the telling detail—the small observations that reveal larger truths—to her memoir of a family in crisis. Tangles is the work of a perceptive, creative, and honest storyteller.”*—Brian Fies, author of *Mom's Cancer*

### About the author:

Sarah Leavitt writes both prose and comics. Her writing has appeared in *Geist*, the *Globe and Mail*, *Vancouver Review*, the *Georgia Straight*, and *Xtra West*. Leavitt has written short documentaries for *Definitely Not the Opera* on CBC Radio, and her non-fiction has appeared in a number of anthologies, including *Nobody's Mother* (Heritage 2006) and *Beyond Forgetting: Poetry and Prose about Alzheimer's Disease* (Kent State University Press 2009). She has an MFA in Creative Writing from UBC. Visit Sarah online at [www.sarahleavitt.com](http://www.sarahleavitt.com).



Photo: Teri Snelgrove

### Strange Little Creatures: A Conversation With Sarah Leavitt

**Robyn Read (editor of *Tangles*):** How did you learn to draw? Who taught you to draw?

**Sarah Leavitt:** I remember watching my father and mother draw, especially my father. My mother doodled a lot, especially faces, and my father drew strange little creatures with random captions that had nothing to do with the picture and made no sense. These drawings annoyed me and captivated me at the same time.

I took art in high school, but it was mostly the sort of soul-crushing art class that Lynda Barry talks about—where you learn that you aren't that good a drawer because you can't do photographic realism. But I took other classes when I was a teenager. I particularly remember a summer workshop I took with New Brunswick artists Brigid Toole Grant and Molly Lamb Bobak. They used live models and taught me about capturing gesture, focusing on the energy of the pose more than the details of the anatomy.

I took classes here and there as an adult, but mostly just kept drawing on my own. Now, after having finished *Tangles*, I am about to take some other drawing classes—life drawing, pen and ink technique, comics composition—to help me gain more skills for my next project. I am really looking forward to it; I have more clarity than I have had in the past about what I want to learn.

**RR: Your drawings, honest and compassionate, showcase a brave subtlety as black-and-white line illustrations. For those not familiar with the process of cartooning, can you speak to your particular style as well as the artists or cartoonists whose work has inspired you?**

**SL:** My style is quite simple and gestural. Although I definitely want to become more skilled and confident as an artist, I want to preserve this simplicity. I have a lot of different idols: Jules Feiffer and Quentin Blake for looseness and expressiveness, Aline Kominsky Crumb for the frank voice and rough drawing style in her autobiographical comics, Lynda Barry for her unique drawings and her incredible storytelling ability—the way she can capture a teenager’s voice, the way she can keep you turning the pages to find out what happens next. And of course, every time I reread *Maus*—or read anything by Spiegelman—I am reminded that he is a genius and that all cartoonists live in his shadow.

**RR: “Comic” and “Graphic Literature”: in your opinion, as a writer and cartoonist, is there a discernible and distinguished difference?**

**SL:** No, I think they’re just words. I mean, what is “graphic literature?” Is it a comic that’s book-length? A comic with a serious storyline? The more I study the history of comics, the more I understand that an apparently simple gag comic can actually be a sophisticated combination of text and image with multiple layers of meaning. I think that for discussing or studying comics, it’s more useful to distinguish between different genres, styles, or time periods, as one would with literature or film or art.

**RR: And that genre, for *Tangles*, would be memoir. Julian Barnes theorizes that all of our memories are fictions to a certain extent—albeit our fictions, of our creation. As the author of a memoir which pays such homage to your mother as a lover of words losing her grasp of language, how do you consider memories: stoic and dependable, or acquiescent to our imaginations?**

**SL:** I would never suggest that memories are dependable. There are so many times when I don’t remember something that everyone else does, or I remember something a certain way and then it turns out I’m totally off. That was my main motivation in taking notes and making sketches as my mother was dying—I knew that my memory was unreliable at the best of times, and that it would be even worse in this strange new world where my mother was behaving in inexplicable and unpredictable ways, saying and doing things that made no sense. And I was crazy with grief. There was no way I would remember it without documentation. I would have lost so many details. And I really wanted to remember this time. I guess that might seem odd. Why would I want to remember those years, my mother losing her ability to talk, to clean herself, to recognize me? Maybe I will never know all the reasons. I just know it was important for me to witness and record what the disease did—and it wasn’t only suffering, it was also intense love and little bright spots of laughter. And I

think it's also that she kept on being herself, the woman I loved, no matter how sick she was. And I wanted to remember all of her.

**RR: I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about the beginning of the book's creation—which you address a bit within *Tangles*, of course—when you were documenting your mother's illness. What was the balance between written notes and illustrations; sometimes, were the illustrations in and of themselves 'notes,' reminders, without need of written accompaniment?**

**SL:** I wrote in my diary a lot, and yes, I also made sketches. These sketches usually had some writing attached to them—like if it was a drawing of my mother in a particular situation, I would note what was happening at the time, my feelings about it, maybe what she was saying. Often I found there was a certain mood or facial expression that I could only capture with a quick sketch. I wouldn't have been able to craft an accurate description in prose—certainly not quickly! Even if the sketch was really rough, it was good shorthand for me to use so that I could create a more finished drawing later.

**RR: While I do accept their inherent slipperiness, some of my own coveted memories are from my childhood: weekend visits with my father to the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Grange. Do you have a favourite gallery in Vancouver? Where do you go to look at something that stimulates your own work?**

**SL:** Most often I am inspired by other cartoonists and books as opposed to gallery walls. The book I am working on now is set in the interior of British Columbia in the 1800s, and I have been inspired by my research—travelling to that part of the province and reading books about that time period, looking through old pictures. It's historical fiction, and I'm finding it to be a much different process from writing an intensely personal memoir. There are a lot more sources of inspiration—different paths I could follow in terms of content and style both. Although the topic is quite dark, so far my process feels more playful than it did with *Tangles*. I really can't wait for summer holidays, when I plan to be wandering through the woods of British Columbia with ink-stained hands and a head full of crazy characters and tricky plot twists.

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*Robyn Read was the editor of Tangles: a story about Alzheimer's, my mother, and me (Calgary: Freehand Books, Fall 2010), and Acquiring Editor for Freehand Books from 2009-2011.*