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A deeply compassionate book all should read

"Unstitched: My Journey to Understand Opioid Addiction and How People and Communities Can Heal"

Brett Ann Stanciu
Steerforth Press, 2021

Brett Stanciu, writer, recently-divorced single mother of two girls, has taken a job as director of the one-room library in Woodbury, Vermont to supplement her meager income. One Monday morning, she opens the library's door and finds the room filled with cigarette smoke. Calling a library trustee, Stanciu learns that "everybody knows" Woodbury resident and rumored heroin addict John Baker has a history of breaking into the library, ignoring the "no trespass" served him by the school's lawyer. Alarmed, Stanciu calls the state police. Told that she needs proof

that Baker is the intruder, she borrows a game camera and gets his picture, but to no avail. One winter night, the library trustee sees the lights on in the library, bursts in on Baker, and shouts at him as he flees. He goes home and shoots himself.

Baker's suicide haunts Brett. In retrospect, she realizes her efforts to get him arrested have stemmed from fear—not just of Baker (whom she doesn't know) but of addiction itself. She remembers passing him one day as he sat on the church steps. Would it have helped if instead of looking away, she'd stopped and talked to him?

That question is followed by a larger one: what does she know about opioid addiction? Nothing.

The following spring, Stanciu attends a workshop given by the Department of Libraries to train librarians in the use of Narcan, the nasal spray that can save addicts who have overdosed. At that session, she hears a talk by a recovering alcoholic, who calls addiction a disease and mentions its genetic component. That speech starts her on a quest to understand addiction in small Vermont

towns like her own. In a series of chapters lovingly set in Woodbury and its environs, Stanciu describes her conversations with three addicts in recovery who

talk of their unspeakable pasts, their terror of arrest, and the guilt that has followed them into recovery. She portrays her diner lunch with a nurse at the Hardwick Health Center, who introduces her to the concept of MAT (medical assisted treatment) and the importance of treating

addiction as a disease, not a moral failing. She relates her discussion of Vermont's place in drug transfers with the Hardwick police chief.

Most movingly, she describes her meetings with a couple who are setting up a recovery center in the name of their beautiful daughter who overdosed after years of addiction.

At home by her wood fire, Stanciu studies the history of OxyContin, whose prescription sales grossed the Sackler family a billion dollars each year for 20 years, the CDC's 2016 crackdown on opioid prescriptions, and the heroin dealing that increased geometrically after OxyContin

was no longer easily available. And gradually, amid Stanciu's reflections on her past as she cooks delicious meals and swims with her kids, her own struggle with alcoholism emerges—one that she kept secret, feared, and overcame out of love for her two daughters.

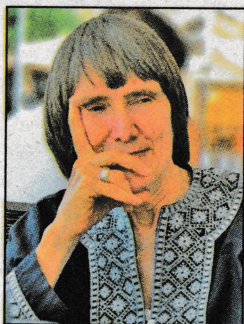
By the end of her quest, she has faced her fear and allowed herself to talk of her own addiction when she talks with other addicts in recovery and those who have helped them.

The book's title comes from the conversation between Stanciu and the father of the girl who overdosed. Looking at the church that will become a social center not just for those in recovery but for everybody in town, Stanciu remarks "Everyone's so busy working that no one seems to have time or energy to put into groups . . . that used to keep people connected."

He replies, "We've come unstitched. . . . We've got to stitch the darn thing back together."

The stitching, as they have both learned, involves depriving addiction of its social stigma, and realizing that inclusion, support, and understanding can help to cure what fear, the threat of prison, and social ostracism cannot.

This is a deeply compassionate and extremely important book. Every Vermonter should read it.



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson