



Shtum

Jem Lester

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Shtum is a Yiddish word meaning noncommunicative or silent, and that's where Ben Jewell finds himself in British author Jem Lester's novel of the same name. Ben's world is comprised of his autistic son, a troubled marriage, an estranged relationship with his Holocaust-survivor father, a failing business, and his own entombed emotions. So often, the solution to life's problems is to talk about it, but what can Ben do when there seems to be no hope of breaking through the silence?

Ben's mornings start with his wife stationed in the kitchen while he cleans up his son, Jonah, "his reeking pajamas. The aromatic nappy and soiled wipes tied in a plastic bag ... she deals with what goes in and I deal with what comes out." And the day doesn't usually get better from there. That's because his ten-year-old son has complex Autism Spectrum Disorder, and with all his resources tapped, Ben's way forward seems less about making choices than scraping together what's left and facing the onslaught.

After a decade of caring for their son, Ben and his wife are realizing that life with Jonah will not get better. With his marriage on the rocks and his head in a bottle, Ben finds himself back in his father's home, trying to heal himself and care for his son. As things fall apart, Ben's world narrows to advocating for Jonah and learning to parse the nature of silence.

Lester renders a moving portrait of one parent's struggle to navigate the world on behalf of his child. As Ben shoulders the burdens his family carries, Lester shows how draining it can be to do the difficult work of accepting and loving each other. Ultimately, Ben discovers that, while some silences need to be broken, others must be accepted if he's to understand himself and those he loves.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (May/June 2017)

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