

S H T U M.



*The most important things  
are the hardest to say.*

J E M  
L E S T E R

## **Shtum**

*Jem Lester*

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# Shtum

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**Shtum** Jem Lester

**'A book with true heart and soul'** Joanna Cannon, author of *The Trouble With Goats and Sheep*

**'Will make you laugh, make you cry, and make you think'** Graeme Simsion, author of *The Rosie Project*

**'Fiercely funny ... an unforgettable first novel'** *The Times*

Ten-year-old Jonah lives in a world of his own.

He likes colours and feathers and the feel of fresh air on his skin.

He dislikes sudden loud noises and any change to his daily routine.

Jonah has never spoken, yet somehow he communicates better than all of the adults in his life.

**Funny, heartbreaking and uplifting, SHTUM is a novel about three generations of a family learning how to get along.**

## Shtum Details

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Author : Jem Lester

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# From Reader Review *Shtum* for online ebook

## Imi says

Ben is the father of Jonah, a severely autistic 10-year-old boy, and is struggling to cope with both this huge responsibility as a newly single parent to his son and pretty much every other responsibility in his life. Above all this is a book about father/son relationships. Jonah is incapable of both communicating effectively or showing affection, while at the same time Ben has never felt truly loved by his own father, Georg.

I was really moved to read as these three characters grew to understand each other. Georg and Jonah in particular were wonderful characters. Ben is never particularly likeable and it's clear that he has made some very poor decisions due to his lack of self-esteem and motivation, but it's easy enough for the reader to empathise with him in this situation. My one complaint with the characterisation is that I felt that the female characters should have been a lot more involved in the plot. Emma, Ben's soon-to-be-ex, and Ben's mum (was she even named?) were portrayed as very one-dimensional in the few mentions we get of them, and I just don't believe that to be realistic in this situation or fair to these characters. I never really understood the relationship between Ben and Emma, and how it fell apart, because we are never really shown what they were like together early on or how they fit together as a couple. It makes it hard to sympathise with them when you don't really understand the hows and whys.

Overall, this was a simple, but very touching story on family life and the importance of communicating with one another.

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## Tonkica says

Interesanta, teška, obiteljska priča za koju sam imala osjećaj da je napisana zato jer je netko rekao da bi trebalo. Izostali su osjećaji, suosjećanje... Jako hladno, suho.. :-/

Pred kraj kao da je pripovjedač otpusio košnicu i dopustio sebi da se ipak neki osjećaji, iskreni osjećaji osjete. Žao mi je što se to nije desilo od početka.

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## Jules says

This is a heart breaking tale about a family trying to cope with having a son with severe autism. It covers the impact having a child with autism has on both parents, along with their struggle to get support from social services.

*Shtum* is told from the point of view of the father, Ben. This story is definitely dominated by male characters, as the most prominent characters are Ben, his autistic ten year old son, Jonah, and Ben's father, Georg. This made for a very interesting angle to the story. Jonah doesn't speak at all, and Ben and Georg don't seem to be the best of communicators. In a way this was good, in that their own lack of ability to communicate felt like it reflected Jonah's own inability to communicate with the world around him. On the other hand, I think it made the book less emotional for me.

My heart ached for all the main characters, although I did go through differing stages of irritation and

frustration at both parents throughout the story. Unlike some readers, although I felt very sad about certain situations, I never cried. I'm not sure if it was because I never felt like I truly knew either of the parents, plus, I sort of had the feeling of how could I get upset for a child who didn't seem to care? I'm not a mother, so I was unable to project my own personal feelings for a child of my own onto Jonah, so I could only take him in the way he was shown to me, and he seemed happy enough with his life.

I did really enjoy this story, and found it exceptionally hard to put down. It's one of those stories that just keeps on giving, and never provides you with a comfortable place to take a break. My only criticisms, are that I probably would have liked to have felt more connected to the parents, and I thought the very end part of the story which covered quite a different situation, felt somewhat disjointed from the rest of the story, almost as if I had begun to read another book, and that it was a whole different story of its own.

I suspect this book will be a huge success and I think it will provoke a lot of discussion after it is published next year. This is a good thing, if it increases the understanding of autism and the impact that it has on those involved.

I would like to thank the publisher, Orion Publishing Group, for allowing me a copy of this book via Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

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## **Tracy Fenton says**

SHTUM by Jem Lester

Ben Jewell has hit breaking point. His ten-year-old son Jonah has severe autism and Ben and his wife, Emma, are struggling to cope.

When Ben and Emma fake a separation - a strategic decision to further Jonah's case in an upcoming tribunal - Ben and Jonah move in with Georg, Ben's elderly father. In a small house in North London, three generations of men - one who can't talk; two who won't - are thrown together.

As Ben battles single fatherhood, a string of well-meaning social workers and his own demons, he learns some difficult home truths. Jonah, blissful in his innocence, becomes the prism through which all the complicated strands of personal identity, family history and misunderstanding are finally untangled.

Perfect for fans of David Nicholls, **THE SHOCK OF THE FALL** and **THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME**.

OMG, I have laughed and cried and cried whilst laughing and am writing this review with tears running down my face. Simply charming, beautiful and gut wrenching. This would appeal to anyone who is a parent or has a parent! Told from the point of view of Ben a 30-something father of a severely autistic boy, this book grabs your heart strings, pulls them sideways and then snaps them back! This will stay with me for a long time. **JUST STUNNING!**

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## Maxine (Booklover Catlady) says

**Oh wow. Speechless. Incredible book. Especially as a mother to an autistic son. Absolutely brilliant. Please just read this before you die.**

Some reviews are hard to do as you just can't find enough words to be expressed coherently. I have a million jumbled things to say about this book and need to narrow it down to what is important to the potential reader. This is one of the few books I have read featuring an autistic character that is very true-to-life. **Jem Lester really nailed the realism with this book. Any parent of an autistic child will both laugh and cry whilst reading this exceptional book.**

It's heartfelt and heartbreaking at the same time. It made me smile and it made me sad. It made me frustrated and angry at times along with the characters. I felt like I was in their home, their lives, their journey.

So what about the plot? One autistic's boys journey with his family to fight for the right to be himself and get the best support possible. The battle with the local authority for the right schooling, a battle I know so well (as do many parents of ASD kiddies). Boy, this book was emotional. **The characters are exceptional, so realistic you cringe at times at their mistakes and stuff-ups. Parenting is not perfect!** The book does not try to smooth over the hard bits of parenting an autistic child and it includes all the wonderful moments, the love, the breakthroughs and it's BALANCED. It's a darn good story!

It really went some places I did not expect it to go and it was a page-turning, cannot put down read. **This is just one of those books that must be read in your lifetime, for a million and one reasons.** Go on, open your heart and mind and grab Shtum to enjoy. Exceptional book that I am really not doing justice with my review. 5 whopping stars from this autism mama.

Thanks so much for reading my review! To follow more reviews, be alerted to awesome online author events and HUGE book giveaways and more come on over to: <https://www.facebook.com/BookloverCat...>

To follow me on Twitter: <https://www.twitter.com/promotethatbook>

To enquire about joining my VIP book reviewers team: <http://goo.gl/forms/GWMOvlofZg>

To enquire about my varied and affordable book publicity services: <http://goo.gl/forms/eVwa2HFKnK>

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## Nigel says

In brief - Gritty and emotional and funny

In full

Shtum is the story of Jonah, a severely autistic 10 year old, his father Ben, his mother Emma and Georg his grandfather. Dealing with Jonah has taken a toll on Ben and Emma's relationship. Trying to get Jonah into a suitable educational establishment is proving hard and his parents decide to separate to make him a priority case. It is obvious from the start that Jonah is at the severe end of the autistic spectrum. It is equally obvious

that all is not well in Ben's life generally.

I found the writing here often deceptively light. Without recourse to the author's notes you quickly realise that this is written by someone who has dealt with autism. The light writing style also managed to convey the emotions effectively for me. While it can be quite a dark read at times there is also humour here. I loved Georg as a character - he is very Jewish in that dry wit sense. While the story is primarily about Jonah's problems it does also concern other relationships. Ben gets to know his father far better and probably himself too. If you think Ben's life is troubled at the start there is more to come.

I enjoyed "A Boy Made of Blocks" which is a similar story in some senses. However, having read this, the other one feels a bit "sugar coated" while this one seems very gritty. There is a feeling that no punches are pulled here. I'd like to thank the author for the statements of both parents to the tribunal. They are some of the more moving writing I've read recently - thanks - and I imagine there will be damp eyes as people read this part and the book generally. I'd recommend this book to anyone who the idea appeals to. It's an easy enough read with plenty of power and some smiles in it too.

Note - I received an advance digital copy of this book from the publisher in exchange for a fair review

<http://viewson.org.uk/fiction/shtum-b...>

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## **David Reviews says**

Shtum is a terrific book; it's involving, very touching and an emotional story that is a delight to read. Some of it can be pretty painful, difficult reading and it may occasionally leave a tear in your eye, but there is humour too and in the end it leaves you satisfied and pleased you discovered it. A story touched with love, sacrifice and determination that is ultimately uplifting and thoroughly readable. This is one of those books that is easy to recommend and memorable once you've finished it.

Ben and his wife Emma struggle to bring up their autistic son Jonah. When they reach breaking point they decide that the only solution is full-time residential care for him. The local council disagree and want him at home with his family and a 'normal' special school. The council don't want the huge cost of the change either. Emma persuades Ben a fake separation will enhance their chances of defeating the council's view.

Ben and Jonah move in with his father and so begins an emotional ride as much about father and son as it is about Jonah. Ben misses Emma and puts everything into his fight with the council while dealing with his own demons and discovering the history of his family's past.

The financial and emotional drain on Ben is enormous and the author Jem Lester manages to involve the reader with all the mixed feelings of success and failure along the way. Ben's frustration with social workers, experts, specialists and teachers is palpable, but well written and interesting. The moments of humour and some touching scenes make the book complete and this is definitely worth a read. Certainly a book to look out for in 2016 and one I'm sure will be a big success. Thank you to the publisher for an advanced copy in return for an honest review.

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## **Susan says**

This is an extremely moving novel about Ben and Emma Jewell and their ten year old son, Jonah. When we meet the family they are, like so many parents, considering what secondary school would best meet Jonah's needs. However, their search for an education is more complicated than most parents, as Jonah is autistic. My nephew is also, like Jonah, severely autistic and so much of this novel resonated with me. Ben and Emma want Jonah to have a place at a residential school for children with autism and, when he is offered something local and which they consider totally unsuitable, they decide to take their case to a tribunal.

This novel really begins when Emma tells Ben that their case will be looked at more favourably if they pretend to split up. Ben moves in with his elderly father in Muswell Hill and Jonah goes with him. Oddly, this book is also set in a part of London I know well and so much about it spoke to me directly that it is almost difficult for me to review this dispassionately, but I will try.

The trio of characters that are Ben, his father and Jonah work brilliantly. Jonah does not speak and Ben has difficulty talking to his father. In fact, Ben has several problems. He is supposed to be running his father's business, hiring out catering equipment, but, it is soon apparent that he has a major drinking problem and tends to spend most of his working hours in the pub. He has financial issues, marital problems and a whole host of unresolved feelings about his son that he has not come to terms with.

Although this sounds like a rather depressing read, it is actually very funny in places. Much of the humour comes from Ben's elderly father, Georg, and his friend, Maurice. Jonah is touchingly written, as is his parents – and grandfather's - love for him. As the novel progresses, Ben has to come to terms with his feelings, he uncovers his father's past and decisions are made about Jonah's future. You really do get the sense how financially and emotionally draining it is to look after Jonah and yet how hard his family are trying to do the best for him. I really think this would be a wonderful choice for a reading group, with so much to discuss. Lastly, I received a copy of this book from the publisher, via NetGalley, for review.

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## **Mandy Radley says**

4.5 stars

I finished this book a few days ago and couldn't decide whether to give it 4 or 5 stars. Shtum is about JJ a 10 year old severely autistic boy, who doesn't speak, throws tantrums, is still in a nappy, needs to be dressed and bathed, and when not looking can trash a kitchen in minutes. The book is also about relationships, the effect JJ has had on Ben his dad and Emma his mum and also Georg his grandfather. It's funny, sad, annoying, at times you just want someone to shake JJ's parent, I enjoyed this more than I thought I was going to. Recommended.

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## **Tammy says**

I loved this book. This book reminds you how you can't judge people. You never really know what is going on. I didn't understand the mom's way of dealing until the end. I didn't understand the dad's way of drinking through everything until the end. This book makes you laugh and cry and I think it did that at different moments for each reader. Definitely one of my favorite books this year!

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## Petra says

Shtum = to keep quiet, dumb....to keep secrets inside; not to tell

What a lovely story! These flawed characters all crept into my heart. It's going to be awhile before I can let go of Jonah.

The author was masterful in taking a stressed family and showing the stories behind the people, what shaped them, what motivated them and, always, the inner selves that are kept shtum.

This story left me laughing, sad, worried for everyone, sad and sometimes frustrated. But slowly, I moved closer to the characters and, in the end, didn't want to leave them.

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## BookwormDH says

Thoroughly enjoyed this book. It has been recommended by so many people so when I got the opportunity to have a read, I grabbed it and was so pleasantly surprised.

It's a heart-warming story and very funny, but the heart-breaking sadness of it all really grabbed me. It's sad in a nice way (if that makes sense) but you could feel the emotions all the way through the book. I felt as if I was walking next to Ben as I read. The amazing writing style of Jem Lester really draws you in and made this story so readable.

This book will stick with me for some time whilst the frog in my throat will disappear.

Full praise and recommendation. 5\*

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## PattyMacDotComma says

5★

I remember the Yiddish word “shtum” as meaning to keep quiet about something, as in to keep it secret, to yourself, not just to be silent. The U sounds like “put”, rather than like “mum”. \*\*

The author drops us smack in the middle of a family overwhelmed: a severely autistic boy of 10, Jonah, lives with Ben, his alcoholic (but not admitted to it yet) father, and Emma, his over-achieving lawyer mother. Ben seems to be the primary carer now.

They deal daily with cleaning poo off the walls or facing a kitchen that's been ransacked, with cereal and bread strewn across a floor covered with burst packets of chips and jam if they aren't quick enough to foresee his needs.

We're treated to a lot of those scenes, but that's the point. This is not an occasional tantrum, this is the family's daily life and Jonah's regular behaviour. Ben does a pretty good job of having apples and chips and bread always handy, but sometimes Jonah beats him to it, like a puppy let off a leash – but he's getting big,



and he bites and kicks and it's getting dangerous.

This child is happy in a park, chasing leaves, jumping around water features with toddlers, looking at rainbows and sparkly things. He is an unfiltered, uninhibited bundle of raw energy with many demands and some affection. He is loved, and we think he loves back – in his way.

Then it's a long evening routine of happy bubble baths, medicine, fish tank watching, and lots of vodka for dad, in the hopes of sleeping forever (not going to happen). It is relentless.

All of these people, every one of them, is keeping shtum about something. Ben seems to feel that somewhere in there, in Jonah's mind, are thoughts and dreams. Ben just wishes his son could share these with him, although he's never shared much with his own father.

Granddad Georg is devoted to Jonah and has a remarkably calming effect. He tells his grandson all kinds of stories about his past, things that Ben has never heard. Jonah seems to like the sound of his voice, and as long as he has something to eat or twiddle, he stays placid. Jonah lets Granddad stroke his hair and be close, which he doesn't always allow.

Jonah goes to a school which sends home a plastic bag of "steaming" soiled clothes every day – that's how much care he gets.

Emma says, let's separate and you take Jonah to live with your dad so the courts will look favourably on our case (broken family), and authorise Jonah to live at a wonderful special country residential centre / school for kids with autism. No more benevolent neglect by an under-resourced school, no more disruption for an autistic boy who needs continual, caring monitoring.

We meet other family friends who've known Ben and Emma and Jonah since the beginning, and we also hear a bit about Georg and his boyhood friend Maurice, who share a history going back to Nazi Germany, about which they have kept shtum.

At the end, we learn so much more than we could have expected or hoped for, and it is just wonderful! I absolutely love how we begin to understand some of the things people have kept to themselves and why.

The "autistic" part of the book is certainly real, and if you see a bit of the author's profile at the link below, you'll see he probably knows whereof he speaks. But the late discoveries of the novel are something else again. Terrific!

Thanks so much to NetGalley and Hachette Australia (and Jem Lester) for allowing me to read a copy of this for review.

Highly recommended!

<http://www.petersfraserdunlop.com/cli...>

\*\*\*"Shtum" (or "schtum"). I looked it up at the Oxford Dictionary online to check my memory, and if you click on the little sound/volume symbol, a nice man will say it for you.

<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/def...>

Just listened to this great podcast with the author (April 2, 2016)

## Paromjit says

Shtum is a story about family dynamics, relationships and the harrowing experience of raising a autistic child at the extreme end of the spectrum. It is guaranteed to make you laugh, cry and pull at your heartstrings. You will be outraged at a system that is more concerned about saving money, rather than meeting the needs of a vulnerable child. It explores how communication problems do not afflict sufferers of autism alone, but infects a marriage, and Ben's relationship with his own father. The author portrays autism so accurately that it must come from some level of personal experience.

The story is told from the perspective of Ben, a guilt ridden thirtysomething father, moving in with his father, Georg, with his autistic son JJ (Jonah) so that the local authority agrees to sending him to a more appropriate, more expensive school. Emma, his wife, states a single father is in a better position to attain the desired outcome of more support and the best school for JJ at a tribunal. The dynamics of three generations of jewish males and their everyday lives is a joy to behold in all its loving complications. It soon transpires that the pretend separation is real and the insecurities that Ben feels about his marriage are rooted in reality. Ben drinks, he drinks a lot whilst trying to cope with JJ. His day job is something that barely impinges on him, he works at his father's business hiring out catering equipment, but it is Valentine who does the work. He spends time at the pub where he is faking that he works in the construction industry! What he does have are incredible friends in Johnny, Amanda and their son, Tom, who was born at a similar time to JJ.

There is a lot of work entailed in preparing for the tribunal, and the love Ben has for his son spurs him on. This includes visits from social workers, visits to schools, acquiring legal representation, reports from experts etc.. Ben has to face the collapse of his dad's company due to his negligence. Emma tells him she is not in a position to contribute to costs and that he should look to his father for funds. This is awkward for Ben as he is not close to Georg. Ben and Georg's relationship is poignant and beautifully portrayed. Georg adores his grandson and tells him stuff he has never told Ben. It takes time for Georg to come round to agreeing what is best for Jonah and in the interim he is diagnosed with terminal cancer. Emma serves divorce papers to Ben. Georg is actually dying and rushed to a hospice whilst Ben is attending the tribunal amidst this emotional maelstrom. Nevertheless, Ben reads an account of life as Jonah which allows the panel an unprecedented insight into JJ's life to assess his needs.

At Georg's funeral, the errant Emma explains how she reached the point of marital breakdown to Ben, her addiction to certain drugs just so that she could manage. Her capacity to handle JJ deteriorated and there was no communication with Ben. Ben is astounded, he had absolutely no idea. We are given an insight into the history of alcoholism with Ben and its connection with his mother who abandoned him as a child. The tribunal results in JJ's placement in the desired Oxfordshire school. Ben goes to Hungary to explore his dad's heritage and the death of Jonatan, the autistic brother of his father he never knew about. He finds the burial site of Jonatan's body and where he died in the final throes of Nazi rule. The story ends with Ben at the crossroads of moving to a better place in his life.

I cannot put into words how much I loved this book. It has heart, warmth and a compelling narrative. It depicts a picture of a contemporary jewish family, more specifically the males, with all their flaws, foibles, idiosyncracies, love, despair and triumphs. The characters are extraordinary in their complexities and are so real that you believe in them. I adored the incomparable socialist Georg and JJ. Jem Lester has done a super job in his picture of JJ, we feel so empathetic towards him whilst at the same time understanding just what a

toll it takes in meeting his needs and caring for him. Many parents of autistic children will sigh with relief upon reading this novel, seeing that others also face similar burdens, battles and joys. He infuses humour and intelligence throughout the story whilst having a keen understanding of the nature of complex human relationships over time. I have no doubt that Shtum will be a highly successfully debut novel for Jem Lester, it is just waiting to be turned into a superb movie with the right director. Many grateful thanks to Orion for a copy of the book via netgalley.

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## Jason says

**Cheap liquor and soiled nappies - I would say that this is an unvarnished fiction about life as a caretaker to a severely Autistic child, but that would be lacking on two fronts: (1) *unvarnished seems wholly insufficient - perhaps gritty and chaffing (and poo smeared) gets the point across a bit better*, (2) *this isn't just about a man who is a caretaker, this father is an alcoholic, self-loathing man-child that is lost in life, the pressures of caring for an Autistic son just exacerbates his many problems.***

Ben Jewell is the father to Jonah, the aforementioned severely Autistic young man. Ben's life is in shambles; he drinks too much, he shirks responsibilities, his marriage is in doubt, and his relationship with his father is enigmatic. Being Jonah's caretaker would be difficult for any parent, he is mute (or shtum if you prefer), unpredictable, incontinent, and occasionally violent, but he is also a sweet boy and Ben loves him very much. Ben's love for his son is the basis for every positive characteristic we see of him and possibly the sole catalyst that can get him to straighten out.

Ben and Jonah go to live with Ben's father, Georg, who is oddly silent (or again shtum) about their familial past. Their relationship is fraught with unanswered questions, resentments, and insecurities, but Georg is wonderful when it comes to Jonah. The dynamics between the three-generations becomes the real heart of the novel.

To me it would appear that Lester set out to demonstrate the daily frustrations, the isolation, and the helplessness of dealing with a severely Autistic child, which he does exceedingly well. This book is sad, funny, and endearing in turns. I do feel like there are elements added onto the the primary story that while interesting in their own right were superfluous and ended up wrapping up the themes a little too tidily for my taste - this was largely a messy, but determined story line, it did not need to end with a neat bow.

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