

Heroes are not born, they are created

Stitch



PÁDRAIG KENNY

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The Great Experiment

Thunder rumbles outside. It has been building in intensity all day, and Stitch can feel it pulsing through the very stones of the castle. It has brought with it an unnatural darkness even before sunset. The air feels sticky and heavy in the laboratory as Stitch helps Professor Hardacre with his equipment. Alice has gone to fetch Henry. The Hooded Man is watching from a gantry just above the machine. Stitch wonders why he is here, especially considering he seems to have done all that was asked of him. Professor Hardacre seems to have forgotten him.

Alice arrives. She is leading Henry by the hand.

Lightning flashes, illuminating everything in a harsh white glow for just a moment. Stitch sees Henry flinch. Alice whispers words of comfort to him.

Stitch notices the dial of the lightning detector bouncing back and forth with greater speed with each passing moment.

“Yes! Yes!” Professor Hardacre shouts with glee as the indicator almost becomes a blur. He scribbles one final note, then slaps his notebook down on his desk. He flicks some switches, throws two small levers.

The laboratory hums into life, great rotors turn and whirr, the walls and floor hum. Stitch can feel his stomach lurching. His hair feels like it is standing on end. He watches Henry gaping at the machinery. Above, on the gantry, the Hooded Man shuffles back and forth for a second, as if contemplating leaving.

Professor Hardacre gestures towards the table at the centre of the room, like a magician ushering his assistant towards a magical device. “Henry, if you would be so kind.”

Henry swallows, steps forward, then stops. He shakes his head vigorously.

“No thank you, Mr Professor’s Nephew. I’ve had some time to think about this, and I believe my most preferred option would be not to participate in this

no doubt very important scientificacious experiment
thank you very much indeed – and goodbye.”

Henry turns to go, but he is stopped in his tracks
by Professor Hardacre bellowing, “Henry!”

Henry looks at him. Professor Hardacre holds up
some notes. “Do you know what this is, Henry?”

Henry seems to gain some measure of bravery
from what sounds like a very simple question with a
very simple answer. He chuckles.

“I think I have the sense in me to recognize
pieces of paper when I observalize suchlike at close
proximity.”

Professor Hardacre’s smile makes Stitch feel
uneasy. He feels the sudden panicked urge to tell
Henry to stop talking.

“No, Henry. This is not just pieces of paper. This
is you.” Professor Hardacre starts to read a word
from each page, and as he reads he scrunches each
sheet up and throws it away. “Incomplete. Deficient.
Irregular. Flawed. Wrong.”

Henry frowns. His lips twitch, but he can’t seem
to utter words. Stitch notes that Alice looks angry.
She goes to speak, but Professor Hardacre holds

his hand up and snarls at her. “Oh no, not this time, Alice.”

Professor Hardacre steps towards Henry. He reads from the final sheet of paper.

“Defective.”

He crumples the paper up and throws it over his shoulder. Henry watches the flight of the scrap of paper with a mournful look on his face. Stitch feels a twisting in his gut.

“Look at you, a mishmash of things, a pile of odds and ends, a calamitous collection of parts that don’t fit together.”

Henry has tears in his eyes.

“Do you want to be defective, Henry?”

Henry shakes his head.

“Wouldn’t you prefer not to break things? Important things? Things like White Rabbit?”

Henry looks shocked, and Stitch feels just as shocked by the mention of White Rabbit. He looks at Alice, and for once she doesn’t seem to be able to look him in the eye.

“Don’t you want to be better?” asks Professor Hardacre, touching Henry’s arm.

Henry nods, avoiding Hardacre's gaze.

"Well then, it's settled."

He steps aside for Henry. Another lightning flash illuminates the laboratory. Alice exchanges a glance with Stitch. It is full of guilt. He knows this because she looks away again so quickly. Stitch is still reeling slightly from the fact that she told Professor Hardacre about White Rabbit. He feels as if too much is happening at once, and the world seems to be filled with a buzzing sound.

Henry moves towards the centre of the room like a condemned man.

Professor Hardacre gestures at Stitch. "It's time, Stitch."

For some reason Stitch can't seem to move his legs. The buzzing in his head is getting louder. He watches Henry lie down on the table. Professor Hardacre glares at Stitch.

"Stitch, come now. Do as I showed you."

Stitch goes to the table. He straps Henry's wrists and ankles, just as Professor Hardacre showed him. He places the metal skullcap on Henry's head, just as Professor Hardacre demonstrated. He does all of

this mechanically, while trying to ignore the fact that Henry's chest is going up and down rapidly while Henry's eyes move quickly from side to side.

"Mr Professor's Nephew, sir, if I may ask you a most pertinent question?" says Henry.

Professor Hardacre is checking some dials. "You may."

"Will I be different?" asks Henry.

"You will be better, Henry."

Henry looks at Stitch now, his eyes wide. He speaks in a low voice filled with fear, and it makes Stitch feel sick.

"Better is different, Stitch. I don't want to be different. I want to be me."

Stitch steps away from the table. His palms are sweating. Lightning flashes again. Stitch notices the indicator of the lightning detector is now a blur. He looks at Alice but Alice is avoiding his gaze.

"Stitch! To your post," Professor Hardacre shouts.

Stitch takes his position by the lever protruding from the floor. Professor Hardacre stands before the machine; he frantically turns a large metal wheel, and now the air is shrieking with the sound of the

laboratory's great mechanisms turning, the low dull moan of arcane machinery, and above it all the rumbling thunder, and the lightning now flashing with greater frequency. Stitch's forehead feels damp. He wipes it. He spies the Hooded Man leaning forward, his gloved hands tightening on the handrail.

"It's time!" Professor Hardacre bellows to the others. He runs towards a panel and throws a switch. Alice positions herself by another switch. There is a screeching sound from the machine.

"Now!" he shrieks.

Alice flicks the switch. Stitch pulls the lever towards him.

The table rises towards the ceiling. The windows open. Rain falls through, lightning crackles across the night sky. Stitch can no longer see Henry's face. He cannot take his eyes off the table as it rises. The buzzing in his head is impossibly loud now, but beneath it he can hear the echo of Henry's voice in his head.

"Will I be different?"

The windows in the ceiling part. The table continues its ascent towards the boiling black sky veined with lightning.

There is crack upon crack of thunder, as if the very walls of the castle are going to split open. Then lightning flashes, blazing with an insistent brightness Stitch has never witnessed before.

All it will take is one lightning bolt to hit the table. In his mind's eye Stitch can see it arcing towards Henry.

"I don't want to be different."

Stitch pushes the lever back. The table starts to descend, just as lightning races through the opening, filling up the space where the table had been moments before, twisting outwards looking for purchase and finding only the stone walls, spitting and arcing against it, throwing down a torrent of sparks and brick dust that showers down on Professor Hardacre.

"NO!" the Professor screams, his snarling face turned in Stitch's direction as he flaps at the sparks that fall upon him.

The table crashes back to earth. Stitch runs towards it. He starts to undo Henry's bonds.

Stitch manages to free one of Henry's enormous hands before Professor Hardacre barges into him,

sending him sprawling across the floor. Then the Professor looms over Stitch.

“How dare you! Do you know what you’ve done?”

Stitch stands up. “I think so. I think I may very well have stopped something that Henry didn’t want to be part of.”

There is a rumble of thunder, but it seems distant now. Professor Hardacre looks upwards, an expression of anguish on his face.

“The moment is gone!” he cries.

Henry is freed from the table thanks to Alice, who helps him while the Professor’s back is turned. He moves contritely towards the Professor.

“I must apologize, Mr Professor’s Nephew, but I felt that—”

Professor Hardacre slaps Henry across the face.

For a moment Hardacre looks as surprised as Henry, then he slaps him again. Henry cowers against the table as Hardacre rains down blow after blow.

One moment Stitch is watching all of this in disbelief. The next he is standing between Professor Hardacre and Henry without even knowing how he got there.

“You leave Henry alone!” he shouts.

Stitch has never shouted like this before, and his whole body feels suffused with a wild energy as if he might explode. Professor Hardacre looks slightly stunned, but then he draws his hand back, readying to slap Stitch.

Stitch raises himself up to his full height.

Professor Hardacre hesitates, then lowers his hand. He stumbles backwards as if in shock. Henry takes advantage of this distraction and bolts from the room. Stitch calls after him, but is met with silence.

Professor Hardacre is wandering around as if in a daze.

“This was to be my first step on the path to a scientific achievement that would change everything.” He wrings his hands in a very agitated manner. “My uncle has made mistakes, but I knew if I could fuse this oaf’s randomly selected constituent parts together that I could unlock so much more.”

“Life and death,” Stitch whispers.

From the corner, the Hooded Man makes an odd sound, like a low hoarse moan.

Professor Hardacre is now holding the locket and beating a steady rhythm against his chest with his fist. Stitch watches him. He feels as if there is something he does not understand; something that is just out of reach. He shakes his head and decides right now he has something more pressing to do than understand the Professor.

He must check on his friend.



About the Author

Pádraig Kenny is an Irish writer from County Kildare, now living in Limerick. Previously an arts journalist, a teacher and a librarian's assistant, he now writes full-time. His first novel *Tin* and recent *The Monsters of Rookhaven* were both Waterstones Books of the Month. He has twice won the Children's Books Ireland Honour Award for Fiction, has been nominated for the Carnegie Medal and shortlisted for the Irish Book Awards. This is his first book for Walker.

The background of the page is white and decorated with various elements. There are several four-pointed stars of varying sizes scattered across the top and sides. In the upper right corner, there is a silhouette of a bat in flight, with several leaves or fern fronds trailing behind it. Small 'x' marks and dots are also scattered throughout the background.

About the Illustrator

Steve McCarthy is an Irish designer and illustrator. His style is bold, colourful and inspired by humour and wit. Steve's first picture book, *The Wilderness*, won the Honour Award for Illustration at the Children's Books Ireland Awards. His poetry anthology with Sarah Webb, *A Sailor Went to Sea, Sea, Sea*, was the 2017 Children's Book of the Year at the Irish Book Awards.



We'd love to hear what you thought of

Stitch

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An electrifying new gothic adventure
about finding your place in the world

Stitch and his friend
Henry Oaf were brought to life
by the genius Professor Hardacre.
But when the Professor's wicked
nephew takes over the laboratory,
Stitch and Henry must escape –
and make their way in a world
that may only ever see
them as **monsters**.

"A thrilling adventure, brimming with heart."

Lucy Strange

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