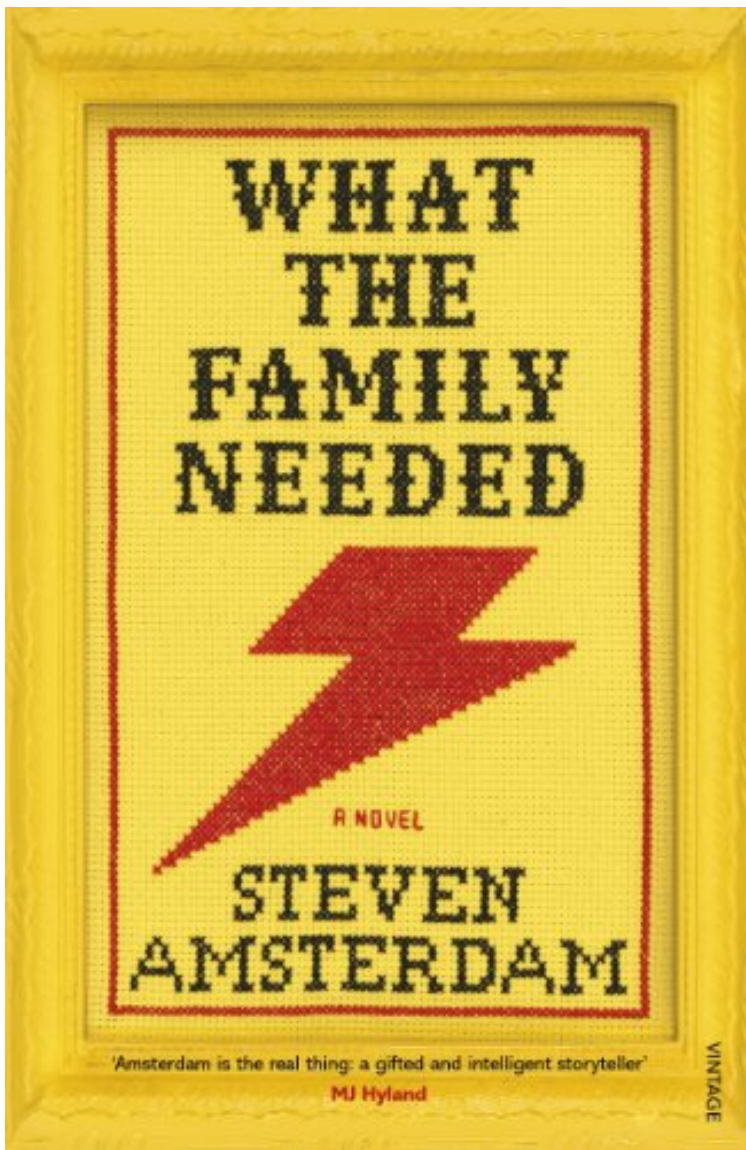


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What the Family Needed



*Par Steven Amsterdam
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur'Okay, tell me which do you want: to be able to fly or to be invisible?' This question leads to thirty years of discoveries, extraordinary strengths and closely guarded secrets. 'To tell you the narrative concens a family whose members have superpowers is only to graze the surface of a moving and beautifully realised meditation on what it is to be an ordinary human being'Australian 'A wonderful novel: imaginative, intelligent, empathetic... Like a cross between The Corrections and The Slap' Sydney Morning Herald SHORTLISTED FOR THE 2012 ENCORE AWARDExtraitGiordanaIAAt last, they were arriving in the land of normalcy: streetlamps,parked cars, and hedges. And there was Alek, holding a fullglass of milk and spinning circles in the middle of a moonlitlawn.Giordana had to at least be thankful her mother

wasn't checking them into a motel this time. The blue hatchback swerved into the driveway, messing up the gravel and ending Aleks little dream. A pile of clothes and books that had divided the backseat between Giordana and her brother Ben finally fell across her lap. She watched Alek run across the grass, up the front steps, call inside, then race to the head of the driveway. Gleeful in their headlights, he hopped up and down in a welcome dance, miraculously never spilling the milk. He waved the glass over his head, toasting their arrival. Over the sound of her mother's last-minute instructions and her brother's resolute humming to his headphones, Giordana heard Alek call out, Greetings, cousins! He would make this bearable. His Superman underpants stuck out from his jeans. They're here! he shouted at the house. Giordana unpacked herself from the clothing and sheets and kitchen crap that jammed the car to capacity, and climbed out into the still, chirping, suburban air. When he was good and ready, Ben got out too. They watched their mother paw through the junk to see what she wanted to bring inside first. Giordana collected the facts. One: Her parents had had an argument. A shocker. Two: Once again, Dad was left in a cramped apartment on a street with trucks rolling by in the morning and rats creeping by at night. Three: The plan was that the family, minus Dad, was going to camp out at Aunt Natalie's until it all went away. Right. Giordana stayed close to the car. Aunt Natalie's was the kind of house you would draw with a crayon if you had just learned squares and triangles. It would be home for the next week or two. Ben was yawning as if nothing mattered. Since he'd turned seventeen and started staying out all night, she knew that if she didn't watch him every minute he could walk off and start living his life without them. A mere twenty months younger, she wasn't going to let herself be left behind. But anything was possible. After all, a woman had written a note to her husband and driven away with their kids. Tomorrow, Ben might decide it was his turn to make a sudden exit. Their mother might decide she didn't want to be a mother anymore. Anyone could leave anyone. Giordana couldn't think about it. Aunt Natalie and Uncle Peter finally came out to the front step and beckoned them toward the front door. Peter called, You can unpack later. Come. Giordana gave Ben's hair a tug to mobilize him. He said, Ow, loudly enough to draw attention to her, but she didn't care because she was the one being mature, trying to get him inside. Each of them was loaded up with a duffel bag and a pillow and pushed toward the house. The better memories of her father, which seemed to be taking up space in exactly nobody's mind but hers, would have to be put on ice for a while. Going up and saying hello was what the situation demanded. Giordana dragged Ben along. Giordana's mother had a successful double in life and it was Aunt Natalie. She was even more serene tonight than ever, as if she fed off her sister's disasters. She was all mellowness, wearing tan pants and an unwrinkled olive shirt, like she had been at the piano practicing Bach when they drove up. Beside her on the bench would have been chamomile tea in a flowered cup. Always just so. Natalie stood on the threshold and spread her arms wide for a hug. Oh Ruth, she said, pulling the three of them into the hall. I am sorry. It's rotten. It is. It really is, Giordana's mother said, stroking her children with pity that she mainly had for herself. Uncle Peter provided the male version of the same warm hug, patting everyone's back once or twice. He said, You know you're free to stay as long as you need, if not longer. For most of the three-hour runaway drive, Giordana had begged her mother to turn back. Now, she was glad they were all crushed together under the hallway light. Alek squirmed in and asked his mother, Can I take them on the tour? Natalie shushed. This is a difficult time. They don't feel like playing. Alek was still bouncing. Why not? We're all together. That's what's important, right? Please wait, said Natalie, not loosening her hold on the three of them. The embrace was a treatment and she hadn't finished applying it yet. Behind her, a corridor of framed family photos held out the promise of stability and happy memories in the future. Off in the front room, Giordana saw the whole TV corner. Picture it: A family sitting around, watching movies together. A quiet night with popcorn and no door slamming. See what the right father and a little money in the bank could produce? Uncle Peter said, Your choices are the study next to the boys room that has an old chaise longue, or there's the big pullout sofa downstairs. Who values privacy more than comfort? Me, said Ben, with firstborn authority. His decision was ratified without debate. So Giordana would cuddle up with her mother. To be expected. Alek wrapped his fingers around his cousin's wrists to pry them away from the huddle. Let me take you on the tour now! Ben told him, We took the tour last time. Remember? Then I'll change it! Sweetheart, Natalie said. Given the choice, Giordana would have preferred to stay with her mother and hear how she would tell the story of leaving. It would all be said differently if Giordana weren't in the room, though. How would Natalie and Peter react? Would her mother see their pity? The responsible thing to do was to go play with her cousins. Giordana fluttered her hand at her face like it was a royal fan and told Alek, A tour would be divine! Alek focused on her. Okay, tell me which you want: to be able to fly or be invisible? Is this part of the tour? Which do you want? Whatever pops into your head first. Just say it. Can I walk through things or do I

have to slip in and out of rooms when the door is open? Alek thought it over. No. Okay, yes, you can go through walls. But you can't steal stuff, like from the bank. That's all right. I'll restrain myself. Invisible. She gave Ben a glare to make him accompany them. Ben bent his elbows up and waved his hands sarcastically at his sides. In that case, I'll fly. Alek was satisfied. Good. Follow me. The tour led directly upstairs to the boys' bedroom, no surprise. Sasha was on the upper bunk, reading under a teal blanket. Sasha's going through a shy period, Alek announced. Sasha threw the covers back to shout, Am not! and went back to his book. Having the audience of real teenagers, it was easy for Alek to ignore his older brother. In the middle of the room, Alek stopped the tour to study Giordana's face. Giordana opened her mouth to ask why, but he silenced her. Impondering, he said. Inspiration came. From a dozen plastic animals and monsters marching across a dresser, he retrieved a Godzilla and put it in her hand. Here. With that formality out of the way, he got down to the business of pulling games off a shelf and spilling them onto the carpet. Giordana followed Ben's gaze out the window to the street below. A girl around Giordana's age was biking in bored figure eights in the middle of the intersection. No cars around, so why not? At night here, a boy could spin on a front lawn and a girl could bike in the street. This place was that safe. The rug had a rain-forest design on it and Alek spread out over the treetop-and-monkey part. The game boards were realigned so that their corners touched in a triangle. Alek began spouting made-up rules for a whole new game that no one could follow. You're going to get the pieces all mixed up, Sasha said, from a crack in his covers. Alek said, You're not playing. If anyone was going to rein Alek in, it would have been Giordana, but she was distracted by the sound of someone sliding a window open across the street. It was that quiet too. People liked the leafy streets for a reason, she was sure, but this wasn't her. This was not the summer she had planned. Until she was back with her friends, she would be marked absent from life. School had ended three days ago. She had lined up a part-time job scooping ice cream at Sprinkles four times a week. The job was totally lame, but it came with free ice cream whenever the manager was out. Furthermore, Thea's parents had left her alone for a week and their apartment was going to be a base of operations for sleepovers where no one would sleep, where the blender would be full of rum and fruit juice, and where the mornings would be dominated by fashion extravaganzas, exclusively sponsored by Thea's mother. These things were facts that no longer mattered. Because now, at the same time that all of her friends were together, Giordana was standing there in Alek and Sasha's bedroom. Total weakness. Invisibility would have been a relief. Not having to be seen by anyone as she limped through a dull week or two of suburban solitude. She could eavesdrop on her mother as she patched things up with her father and hear what new short-term fixes they were putting on their marriage. What was the bare minimum her father would have to say this time? She knew most of her parents' secrets because their conversations usually happened at top volume. But if she were out of sight, she could listen to other people too. What did a regular girl say to a regular boy? As she was thinking about walking in a park and overhearing some dreamy-dippy lovebirds cooing, Ben called her name. He looked around the room right at her, practically then stuck his head into the hallway and called out, Giordana, where the hell are you? He looked back into the room, at Alek. Where'd she go? Alek glanced up, but then went right on jumping pieces around the game boards. He didn't see her either. She looked down at her hand and saw nothing, only the floor beneath her. What Giordana didn't say was, I'm right here. Instead, in two backward steps, she withdrew from the center of the room, staying quiet and close to the wall. There was a creak or two, but nobody looked in her direction. Ben called her name again. Hanging on the far wall, there was a wooden boat with a triangle mirror in its sail. Giordana swiveled to look at herself and saw only the wall behind her. Her face flushed, but she couldn't see it. She was gone. From his bed, Sasha was watching the chaos Alek was making with disapproval. Giordana waved her arm in front of him. He didn't see her either. Ben shouted out into the hall, Oh great, you drag me up here and then leave me here with this nut. When he didn't get a response, he knelt down next to Alek, letting him know it was the biggest favor in the world. All right, kid, tell me how we play this game of yours. Giordana took an alley cat step into the corner of the room, between the bunk bed and the wall. She put the Godzilla model down on the dresser. As she let go of it, it became visible. When she picked it up again, it disappeared. She let it go and it appeared. All right then. Steering clear of Ben and Alek and all the game pieces, Giordana left the bedroom. In the hallway, she padded softly along the corners of the floorboards to keep them still. Wait: If her feet were causing the creaks on the floor, then she must have body mass. She stopped and tried pressing her forehead against the wall. Her head didn't proceed through it. A barrier. Stuck in this deadlock with the plaster, she stared at the wallpaper. Rose bushes and gardening tools, a sweet shorthand for a happy household. The reds were like fire engines. Uncle Peter probably dusted the walls twice a month. Giordana kept her breathing steady, concentrating and pushing her head harder. No matter how she focused, she couldn't

advance through. Her father's permanent sense of outrage surged inside, demanding she go back and make Alek tell her exactly how to walk through walls. If he gave you this goddamn ability, it had better work two hundred percent. But this wasn't a toaster you could throw at the woman at customer service. Besides, it wasn't Alek's trick. She had simply never tried before. With some practice, she would figure it out. Giordana went into the bathroom. There was enough light coming in from the moon. In the mirror over the sink, she saw the reflection of the shower curtain behind her. No Giordana. Invisible. What if this was forever? Life as she knew it, ended. She thought about her face, how her father had once told her she smiled with her eyes and should try doing it more often. She tried smiling consciously for the mirror. Her features, her body came into view. Thank you, whoever you are, she thought. As good as it would have been to disappear from surface life for a while, permanent invisibility would have created logistical problems. She imagined her own nothingness again and watched herself dissolve in the mirror. This was incredibly excellent.

Revue de presse "A gem of a book. hugely entertaining and also quite moving" (Thomas Quinn Big Issue) "Enjoyable" (Ben East Observer) "Wry, deeply moving and literally magical" (Chloe Hooper) "Amsterdam is consistently playful, witty and light of touch" (Times Literary Supplement) "A wonderful novel: imaginative, intelligent, empathetic...like a cross between *The Corrections* and *The Slap*" (Sydney Morning Herald)