

**Fun Home: An American Tragicomic**  
by Alison Bechdel

Bechdel...has been a careful archivist of her own life and kept a journal since she was ten. She grew up in rural Pennsylvania, and after graduating from Oberlin College moved to New York City, where she began drawing *Dykes to Watch Out For* in 1983 — “one of the preeminent oeuvres in the comic genre, period” (Ms.). The strip is syndicated in fifty newspapers, translated into several languages, and collected in a book series with a quarter of a million copies in print. *Utne* magazine has listed DTWOF as “one of the greatest hits of the twentieth century.” ... In *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* Alison Bechdel is finally telling her own story. —courtesy of Houghton Mifflin



**Conversation with Alison Bechdel** (January 2009, Montpelier, VT)

**by Nickole Brown**, a poet and fiction writer who has served as Director of Marketing and Development for the nonprofit literary press, Sarabande Books, for the last ten years. A 2003 graduate of the M.F.A. Program for Creative Writing at Vermont College of Fine Arts, she has received grants from the Kentucky Foundation for Women, the Kentucky Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Her debut collection of poetry, *Sister*, was published by Red Hen Press in September 2007. Her work has been featured in *The Writer's Chronicle*, *Poets & Writers*, and *Another Chicago Magazine*, and most recently in the Starcherone Press anthology *PP / FF*, *Florida Review*, and *Chautauqua Literary Journal*.

**Nickole Brown: Some have remarked that this memoir reads as a love letter to your father. Do you agree?**

**Alison Bechdel:** Totally. I like it when people recognize that, because I do love my father a lot. I wanted to write a book that was not all negative or all positive. Some readers seem to err on the side of critical and negative, so I am happy people see that.

**NB: So what do you think he would say if he read it?**

**AB:** People ask me that, and my mind just goes blank. If he existed, he would never be able to read it, because it's all about his death.

**NB: What about your mom?**

**AB:** My mother has read it and is not very happy about it. It makes me think of a guy who reviewed my book and cited that William Faulkner quote, “The writer’s only responsibility is to his art. . . . If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ is worth any number of old ladies.” The reviewer added, “rarely are the old ladies asked how they felt about it.” My mom was pleased by that, glad that someone recognized that the book had been written somewhat at her expense.

But at the same time, she has said to me, “family be damned, the story must be told.” That’s quoting someone else, I’m not sure who. But I find that pretty amazing, that in spite of the personal cost to her, she understands my responsibility as a writer. It doesn’t mean she’s really happy about it. She is kind of pissed off, frankly.

**NB: What would your advice be to writers who want to do the same thing—to tell their own truth?**

**AB:** I feel like I’ve been able to do it because my family is kind of fucked up and thus I don’t have the same sense of loyalty or decency that perhaps a person with a more nurturing or close knit family might have.

Wait until at least somebody dies. That's a good guideline.

Or just accept that people are going to be angry with you.

**NB: About your process. Could you talk a little about visual storytelling?**

**AB:** In terms of my visual storytelling technique, I sort of made it up as I went along. That's why it took me seven years to write *Fun Home*, because I didn't know what I was doing. Even now, I'm continuing to figure stuff out, like all the different ways the text and drawings can interact. I ask myself, "How much do they have to correspond? How much latitude do I have to play with the space between the words and the image?"

**NB: So, what comes first—the words or the images?**

**AB:** That's very difficult to answer. . . . I don't have a clear methodology. I just sort of sit down and start mucking around. But eventually, I do have to think about my work as *two-dimensional*, as opposed to working in a word-processing program, which is *one-dimensional*, where there's a line of text that continues forever and does not really exist in space. . . . Sometimes the words drive the narrative, and other times, it's the images.

**NB: So the image is what sort of pushes you along until you have an idea of what you want to draw next and then you. . . and then you actually draw it?**

**AB:** Sometimes. It is hard to explain. I don't have my computer with me, otherwise I could show you how I do it. I write in a drawing program, Adobe Illustrator, which enables me to write in a more visual way.

**NB: You mean you draw on the computer?**

**AB:** No, I can't really draw on the computer. I write on the computer, and lay the pages out, with empty panels. When I get a page written and laid out like that, I print it out and start

sketching right on the typing paper. There are several stages of sketches, culminating in a clean, clear pencil drawing which I then ink over.

**NB: I read as part of this process of drawing from images that you take pictures of yourself and draw from those as well.**

**AB:** Yes, I think that is becoming more and more not an unusual thing, especially with digital photography—it's so quick and easy and cheap to take reference shots of yourself. Or anyone who's handy.

**NB: What do you think that does to your imaginative process when you are telling a story? Often, you dress up for these photographs, posing yourself as different characters within your own story, no?**

**AB:** I didn't develop this posing technique in order to empathize with my characters. It's something I mostly do quickly, without a lot of thought or emotion, just to get a drawing reference. But a weird side effect of it is that I would find myself posing as my mother, arguing with my father. Then as my father, arguing with my mother. . . it was freaky to embody them like that, and I suspect it gave my drawings a little more emotional authenticity.

**NB: I saw an online feature of you during this process, posing as your father, and you were dressed the part, in a tie.**

**AB:** I don't always dress; that was unusual. I had to draw him from a very low angle and couldn't figure out how his lapels and necktie would look.

**NB: Is this why you've called yourself a "method" cartoonist?**

**AB:** Yeah, but that was not so much about impersonating my characters as just preferring to draw from life, or a reference of some kind, as opposed to drawing out of my head. It's hard for me to imagine stuff for some reason. I

have to see it.

**NB: Is it because you don't trust your own memory?**

**AB:** I think it has a lot to do with not trusting myself. Not trusting my drawing ability, not trusting my memory, not trusting my intellect. So in that way it's not good, but in the way it propels me into the work, it's good.

I couldn't have written this book before Google Image Search. That made it very easy for me to get reference shots of absolutely anything. But in a way, it made things more complicated, because you can get lost for hours swimming around on the internet, looking at all the visual possibilities.

**NB: Do you keep a journal?**

**AB:** I do. My journal writing has gone through lots of strange evolutions. What has happened most recently is that my journal is seeping into my daily work log. I write everything there. Originally, it was just a way to keep track of what I want to accomplish in a day, and where I'll pick up tomorrow. But somehow my personal life has seeped into it. I have a separate file for my journal, but it's too much—maintaining two documents—so everything goes into my work log. It's not a great plan. I lose the details of my work in the fight I had with my girlfriend last night.

Another great resource for me is my checkbook. This sounds off topic, but it's really not. Your checkbook register is an amazing archive. Every one of those transactions has a story attached to it. It was you at a particular time and place, running a particular errand. If you go back and look at your checkbook register, you'll be surprised what you can remember.

**NB: Do you keep track of anything else like that?**

**AB:** Almost everything.

Fortunately, a lot of it is digitized. . . all my photographs are on my computer now.

And I collect things that I feel a certain attachment to, that you know, have epitomized a moment in my life. A concert ticket, a grocery list. That kind of stuff.

I also have a box of my childhood drawings which I'm referring to a lot as I work on my new memoir. And it has struck me that these drawings constitute a chronological record of my development. I can tell roughly how old I was when I made each one, and I know what was going on in my life then, and in my parents' lives. So it's a curious record.

**NB: I see you think a lot not only about how you remember, but about how you think. . . .**

**AB:** I do. Yes, I do. I worry a lot about getting things wrong. You want to get at the truth, you want to be accurate, but it can completely paralyze you. If you can somehow manage to write, in spite of that compulsion to be accurate, that is a good sign.

**NB: But you're so good at that kind of accuracy. In your memoir, each chapter almost tells the exact same story, but from different angles. How did you organize that in your head?**

**AB:** When I get in a really tricky spot, I use index cards. I write ideas on them and move them around; try to put them in an order that make sense. I also have big pieces of Kraft paper that I can map things out on—like sort of an outline.

Mostly though I do this stuff on the computer. That's the great thing about working in Illustrator, because you have the same kind of flexibility as you would as putting things up on the wall. You can move anything anywhere.

**NB: Without your index cards, how much of your work can you see on the computer at one given time?**

**AB:** I feel that you only need to see a page spread at a time.

**NB: So what is your process of revising text?**

**AB:** I don't have one. I revise constantly as I go along. You know, I'm unable to do the next panel before I finish the one I'm working on. I have to finish one sentence before I write the next sentence; it's crazy. . . . It's wrong and bad and I can't stop myself.

I'm always striving to not do that. I guess I work so much on the level of language that every syllable matters and can shift where the next sentence is going to go. I want to make sure I have it right. I'm trying to loosen up... I have to produce enough to earn a living, and you can't earn a living if it takes you seven years to write a book.

**NB: Do you type the words used within your art, or do you write them out by hand?**

**AB:** I had a font made out of my handwriting, and I type with it. . . . I actually have completely lost the use of my handwriting. It's really tragic.

**NB: And writing—did you ever take a writing course or study creative writing in a formal setting?**

**AB:** No.

**NB: Is there any graphic poetry out there?**

**AB:** There must be. Comics and poetry are similar in that it matters very much where things fall on the pages. The cartoonist Matt Madden talks about the similarities between poetry and comics and how cartoons are a kind of visual poetry.

**NB: In *Fun Home*, you talk about your father and being a “creative apprentice” to him. . . which reads as a suffocating and critical position for a young child.**

**AB:** Yes, I think that in spite and because of both of my parents, I learned how to be an

artist. The book I'm writing now is more about my mother and also the inhibiting influences that she had on creativity.

I'll make a confession, which is that I get bored by a lot of writing. So much stuff that I read feels self-indulgent. I feel like what I try to do in my graphic storytelling is take the reader a little further along. . . . I want to be understood and heard so much that I will seduce people into listening by giving them pictures, by filling in some of the hard parts so that they can enter into it more easily. Maybe I have a short attention span, but I often—and this is really arrogant to say this, I know—I often feel like writers take it too much for granted that readers are willing to spend their valuable time on them. I try to deliver something that's already partly chewed up. Like a mother bird.

**NB: Why did you decide on using the gray-green ink wash with your line art?**

**AB:** I was really resistant to using any color at all. There's a scene in the book where my dad is coloring in my coloring book—showing me how to color. It was quite traumatic, I know it's silly, but it was a traumatic moment, and I kind of swore off using color.

As an art major in college, I had to take color theory, but I always hated it, always felt incompetent. . . . That's another reason I became a cartoonist because I could work in only black and white. I felt like I was going to tell this story in black and white. My father was so *obsessed* with color, always going on about color. I wanted to prove that you could tell a story without color, but later, it became clear that we would add a layer of meaning to the story with that wash, so the art director and I chose a color that we thought would work.

**NB: There is a little wobble in the lines you draw. Tell me about it.**

**AB:** There is very little that's intentional about my drawings. I draw the only way I am able to draw. I don't have a style. . . well, obviously I have a style, but not a *deliberate* style. It is just that I draw in the best, most realistic way

I can, and I wish I could have a less intense style, something I could do quickly, but instead all my stuff is kind of like life drawings. You know, drawn from me as posing as these characters. So on a spectrum from iconic to cartoony, or realistic to natural, I am much more on the natural end, because I care a lot about expression and gestures, and I can't do that if I'm drawing cartoony characters.

**NB: Do you compare your work at all to any other artists?**

**AB:** I'm nowhere as good as R. Crumb, but I'm in that naturalistic, organic school. . . .

**NB: Do you think the internet has opened up audiences for graphic novels? Because people are now so accustomed to looking online all the time, and they are reading text and looking at images at the same time?**

**AB:** Oh, my God, I never thought about that, Nickole. I think reading skills are constantly evolving, so yeah, sure, the web could be a part of that.

I have a blog, and when I first started doing it, I would write what I was going to say in Microsoft Word and just upload it. I can't do that anymore. I can't make up blog posts unless I'm in the blogging software and able to drag images and movies in.

**NB: Finally, how do you feel like your work with *Dykes To Watch Out For* prepared you for your memoir?**

**AB:** Just cranking stuff out, working on a deadline. . . . *Fun Home* was a very labor intensive project. You know, you are hunched over a drawing board for hours and hours, days and weeks and months. You have to have a certain amount of stamina, and I built that up from doing the comic strips.

But the real way it helped me was that in order to tell the story, I needed to, I *had* to create a space for myself, for these stories that you weren't allowed to tell. *You were not allowed to tell them.* When I was young and

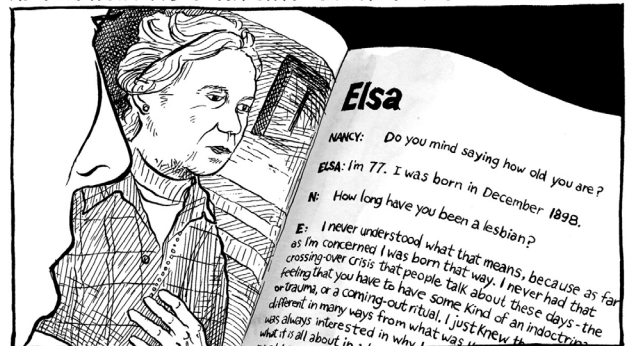
I was starting out, I just really felt my story didn't count. My story was too weird. It was a lesbian story, and therefore it was not a real story. You know, I sort of dedicated my whole life to demonstrating that a lesbian story *could* be told.



THAT IS IN FACT WHAT CAME TO PASS, BUT NOT IN THE WAY ANY OF US HAD EXPECTED.  
I'D BEEN HAVING QUALMS SINCE I WAS THIRTEEN... ...WHEN I FIRST LEARNED THE WORD DUE TO ITS ALARMING PROMINENCE IN MY DICTIONARY.



BUT NOW ANOTHER BOOK--A BOOK ABOUT PEOPLE WHO HAD COMPLETELY CAST ASIDE THEIR OWN QUALMS--ELABORATED ON THAT DEFINITION.



## Discussion Guide for Readers of Alison Bechdel's memoir, *Fun Home*

by Elizabeth Bradfield, author of *Interpretive Work* (Arktoi Books/Red Hen Press, 2008) and the forthcoming *Approaching Ice* (Persea, 2009). Bradfield is also founder and editor of *Broadsided* ([www.broadsidedpress.org](http://www.broadsidedpress.org)), a virtual, grassroots press that harnesses the tradition of the broadside to put literature and art on the streets. Bradfield's poems have been published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Poetry*, *The Believer*, *The Gay and Lesbian Review*, and elsewhere. Currently a Stegner Fellow, when not writing, she works as a naturalist.

1. The graphic novel form calls for a different interaction with the page by a reader—it creates a reading experience that doesn't go from left to right, but that leaps from text to picture and back; that takes in the whole page, then zeroes in on a particular frame. In each frame, there are visual clues to different stories being told: in the image, in the narrator's adult voice above the frame (sometimes within it); and in the conversation bubbles. Can you imagine the book as pure prose? What would be lost?
2. In many books, the drama comes from a surprising revelation after a suspenseful buildup. Bechdel, however, gives us big pieces of information early on in *Fun Home*. She tells us on page 17 that her father had "sex with teenage boys" and on page 23 that her father killed himself. Can you imagine how the memoir would feel different if it proceeded more chronologically? If we didn't get this information until we had traveled through Bechdel's childhood with her, witnessing her father's fastidiousness and violence but not knowing more about his inner life until we got to Bechdel's twenties?
3. Bechdel says that her father was like a character by Marcel Proust or James Joyce, that her mother was more like something from Henry James. The myth of Icarus and Daedalus opens and closes the book. There are references to Fitzgerald, to Camus, Wilde, Colette, Kate Millett. Would you think of your own family in these terms? If so, what books, authors, and myths would you set in counterpoint to your own? If not books and writers, what other external thing would you use to map your history? (geology, like Bechdel's mapping of the Allegheny Front and of highway 80? Historic figures? Architecture? Movies?)

4. We know Bechdel is a writer. How does her own story of her early writings (particularly the "I thinks" and the uncertain ^ mark she developed) influence your ideas of her as a narrator? Does this make her more or less trustworthy?
5. "Fun Home," the title of the book, takes on different meanings throughout the memoir, the most notable moment when we realize that it's short for funeral home. By the end, what meaning is most vivid for you?
6. Historic moments, like the Stonewall Riots, the 1974 Energy Crisis, and the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, dovetail with the histories of the Bechdel family. What historic moments do you feel intersected with your own personal history in a meaningful and significant way?
7. One of the literary quotes Bechdel pulls out to our attention is "He discovered the cruel paradox by which we always deceive ourselves twice about the people we love—first to their advantage, then to their disadvantage." Bechdel's comment on this is "A fitting epitaph for my parents' marriage," but how does this reflect on *Fun Home* on Bechdel's own life?
8. The main relationship in *Fun Home* is, of course, between father and daughter, but Bechdel's mother and her brothers have presences as well. Do you have a sense that they'd tell the story here differently?
9. In addition to a personal story, *Fun Home* shows a larger cultural shift in what it means to grow up gay. Both Alison and her father grew up in the same town; both are gay. Yet while Bruce's sexuality was repressed, Alison's flourished. Do you think that would have been true if Alison had stayed in the small Pennsylvania town where she grew up? What portion of this difference do you think had to do with the personalities of Alison and Bruce? What in the differences stem not from time or personality but from the fact that Bruce is a man, Alison a woman? What's political? What's personal?
10. Bechdel uses her own life as a lens to see bigger social issues: the politics of coming out, abuse, sexual predation, repression, sexism, homophobia (both internalized and external). She re-examines her childhood through adult eyes. In reading the book, were you reminded of events in your own childhood that, upon looking at them with fresh eyes, fit into or illustrated larger social patterns?

## Writer's Craft Guide for Alison Bechdel's memoir, *Fun Home*

by **Judy Grahn, Ph.D.**, an internationally known poet and cultural theorist and early co-founder of Gay Women's Liberation. Her work helped fuel the second wave of cultural feminism, and the LGBT movements. She teaches and co-directs a Women's Spirituality Master's Program at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California, and teaches in Writing, Consciousness, and Creative Inquiry, an interdisciplinary MFA, at California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. Her latest collection of poetry is *love belongs to those who do the feeling*, from Red Hen Press, 2008.

1. *Fun Home* is a graphic novel. What kinds of details did you learn from the drawings that aren't included in the text?
2. What does the title "Fun Home" stand for? How did the father's occupation influence Al's childhood? How does she use the theme of death in her narrative?
3. Al has stacks of books in her room in college, books from the women's movement. She both tells and shows us titles with authors' names (she quotes from some of them also). Name six of these titles and their authors. Do you know these books? How would you describe each of them? What stacks of crucial, mind-altering books have been in your room? Did you ever read a book or selection of books that set you apart from your parents? Your friends? How have you reconciled the people in your life with your own evolving viewpoints?
4. Early in the story, the narrator tells us her father's secret, and shows her own attitude towards it. Later, what factors does she suggest drove him to secrecy and probable suicide?
5. The narrator describes her engagement with Lesbian separatism as an addiction—what does she mean by this? Have you ever experienced "group

think" as an escapist habit? How did you get out of this?

6. Of all the literature that father and daughter shared, why would the narrator highlight James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Homer's *Odyssey*? What sexual and life/death dynamics drive these two classics? What prejudices, dangers, and deceptions? In what ways are they all love stories?
7. How is the narrator's own life journey related to that of Odysseus? When she attends her first Gay meeting, she describes this as a "journey to the underworld". Why would she say that?
8. The snake in the water is allegorical—of what? Why is Al shocked when the man takes a pistol to go look for the snake? What are the various meanings given to snakes? Which meanings do you find meaningful, or "true"?
9. On the last page, the narrator says of her father that "he hurtled into the sea," drawing the story back to the myth of Icarus. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus' men disobey the sun—what happens as a consequence? What is the "sun" in Al's father's life?
10. This book contains several paradoxes, and twisting phrases, like "erotic truths," and "tricky reverse narration," and "sexual shame is a kind of death". What changes or "reverse narratives" surprised or challenged you as you read the book?

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