

A dyke for watching

Alison Bechdel captures, with kindness and accuracy, not only her characters' politics, but their haircuts, their gestures, their bumperstickers, the bean sprouts in their refrigerators

BY ANDEE HOCHMAN

For years Alison Bechdel drew only pictures of men: male generals in full military regalia, burly lumberjacks with knee-high boots, bearded hippies, superheroes. She displays a line drawing — the wiry technique sophisticated for a youngster, the subjects — once again: male.

Books

"These are bad guys," she explains.

The sketches surprise her audience, which has come to hear about life on the drawing boards of the much-loved lesbian cartoonist. This is, after all, Alison Bechdel, whose "Dykes to Watch Out For" live in the pages of two paperback books and 20 women's and gay newspapers around the country.

To Bechdel, the childhood sketchbooks full of male figures are no surprise — they just show how well she learned the patriarchy's lessons.

"I was drawing all these different kinds of characters, and none of them were women," she says. "In this culture, men are neutral, men are the standard. Women are viewed as the 'other.' All this cultural misogyny translates into how little kids learn to draw."

In college, Bechdel's imaginative sketches took second place to academic art — pastel drawings with perfect three-point perspective; intricate, abstract etchings. She came out as a lesbian in her junior year, and she finally learned to draw women — real, live women who modeled for her figure-drawing class.

The first "dyke to watch out for" sprung from the margins of a letter to one of Bechdel's friends. Five years ago, her first cartoon was published in *Womanews*, a New York paper. In it, a sleepy woman is sprawled in bed while another woman bounds into the room, orange juice held aloft. "Twyla is appalled to learn that Irene is a morning person," the caption reads.

Much as Gary Trudeau did with *Dooniesbury* in the early '70s, Bechdel's cartoons chronicle not so much events but a culture's ambience. She captures, with kindness and accuracy, not only her characters' politics, but their haircuts, their gestures, their bumper stickers, the bean sprouts in their refrigerators. Her strips are funny not because they exaggerate, but because they observe us as we are. Our laughter is the rueful laugh of recognition.

For artistic inspiration, Bechdel has drawn from an eclectic range of sources — *MAD* magazines, which she read avidly as a teenager;

children's book illustrators like Edward Gorey and Hilary Knight; Norman Rockwell's stylized realism.

"Of course, they're all men," she says with a rueful smile.

At first, Bechdel sketched single-panel cartoons with wry captions, then multi-panel strips with a large repertoire of characters. Now "Dykes to Watch Out For," which she draws in two installments per month, is more like a comic-strip serial, with recurring characters and a developing story line.

A central figure is Mo, the slim, bespectacled, "politically-correct-but-worried-about-it" lesbian whose haircut and manner bear a striking resemblance to her creator's. Mo is as earnest and articulate as her human counterpart; she is probably more neurotic.

"A friend of mine describes Mo as 'Everydyke,'" Bechdel says. Mo worries a lot — about her friends, about her social life, about the perils of the nuclear age. "Her anxiety taps into everyone's anxiety."

The strips begin with a story; Bechdel says she writes out the script first, then develops the pictures. Over the years, her drawing style has become more refined, more detailed, less freehand than the early sketches. The stories and dialogue continue to come from the rich resource of lesbian life.

"I use a lot of stuff that's just going on with my friends. I write things down," Bechdel says. "I have a whole pile of little scraps of paper, like Emily Dickinson."

It is these fragments of "real life" that make the strip both believable and funny — the therapist who wears dark socks with her Birkenstocks, the "lesbian urban professionals" in their \$700 leather jackets, the mother who comments, "I wish you girls would let your hair grow." When lesbians laugh at Bechdel's characters, they are laughing — gently — at themselves.

"I'm not a funny person in everyday life. What's funny is — I'm really obsessive about details and things. I think it's the little ways I'm accurate about how things are. It's a special brand of humor that's like a mirror — because what's there is really hilarious."

Even with the publication of two cartoon collections by Firebrand Books, "Dykes to Watch Out For" still doesn't pay all the bills. Bechdel works part time on the production staff of a Minneapolis lesbian and gay newspaper. She would love to see the cartoons in alternative weekly papers alongside the offbeat humor of Lynda Barry and Matt Groening.

"My goal is to show lesbians in everyday, real-life situations," she says. "Not so straight

people will say, 'Oh, isn't that cute; they're just like us,' but because lesbians have a lot to offer the world."

If putting women on the drawing board is a political act, then drawing lesbians is even more so. Bechdel makes lesbian life not only visible but highly accessible through the concise, punchy medium of cartoons. Still, the "Mo" in her mind worries sometimes. Mo might wring her hands and say, "Here we are in the age of nuclear holocaust, and you're drawing

pictures!"

Most of the time, Alison Bechdel has an answer.

"I've always been very guilty because I'm not a real political person," she says. "I've never done civil disobedience. I'm sort of finally getting to a point where I realize people have different ways that they do things. Not everyone is going to do civil disobedience. I'm starting to feel that doing cartoons is a legitimate outlet."



Book briefs

Robert Patrick, the dramatist-laureate of gay theater, has put together an assemblage of short plays titled *Untold Decades: Seven comedies of gay romance* (St. Martin's). Each play, with different characters, takes place in each of the past seven decades in American gay history, beginning with the 1920s.

Armistead Maupin said, "When you read them in one sitting — and you will, believe me — these remarkable plays constitute nothing less than a comic history of our tribe."

What the plays cry out for is a professional production in every city in this country. Several of Patrick's previous works have been successfully produced in Portland — people still talk of Storefront Actors' Theatre's electrifying production of *Kennedy's Children* in the late '70s, and of the independently produced *T-Shirts* a couple of years later.

Gay theater in Portland seems to have become moribund with the passing of Jerry West. Is there not someone whose theatrical aspirations could fill this void? Persons interested in producing Robert Patrick's plays can contact him c/o La Mama, 74-A East 4th St., New York, NY 10003.

Brooklyn, 1942. A hunky blond sailor who loves having sex with men is arrested in a male brothel. Military intelligence (yeah, that old oxymoron) and the FBI believe the brothel to be frequented by spies. The gullible hunk is coerced into working in the establishment until the spies are ferreted out.

Christopher Bram, author of *Hold Tight* (Donald I. Fine), said that a rumor led to his novel about male whores, spies, interracial love-hate and psychotic heterosexuals. We have little doubt that government types would be involved in such shenanigans and to even such disastrous ends. However, Bram's breathless style diminishes a neglected chapter of history. A whiz-bang climax in a Time Square porno theater winds up Bram's rambling epic without really tying up some of the loose ends.

Bridges of Respect: *Creating Support for Lesbian and Gay Youth*, written by Katherine Whitlock and edited by Rachael Kamel (American Friends Service Committee), should prove invaluable to educators, healthcare and social-service providers, and youth advocates who are concerned with the harmful effects of homophobia in our society.

Bridges of Respect is a resource guide that will increase understanding and awareness of homophobia and its destructive impact on youth. The guide encourages youth workers to create services and programs that offer acceptance and sensitivity to lesbian and gay youth.

With overt physical violence toward gays and lesbians increasing at an astounding rate, the need for institutionalized education against homophobia and its effects has reached the critical point.

Bridges of Respect may be obtained from the publisher, American Friends Service Committee, 1501 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102.

— Jay Brown

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