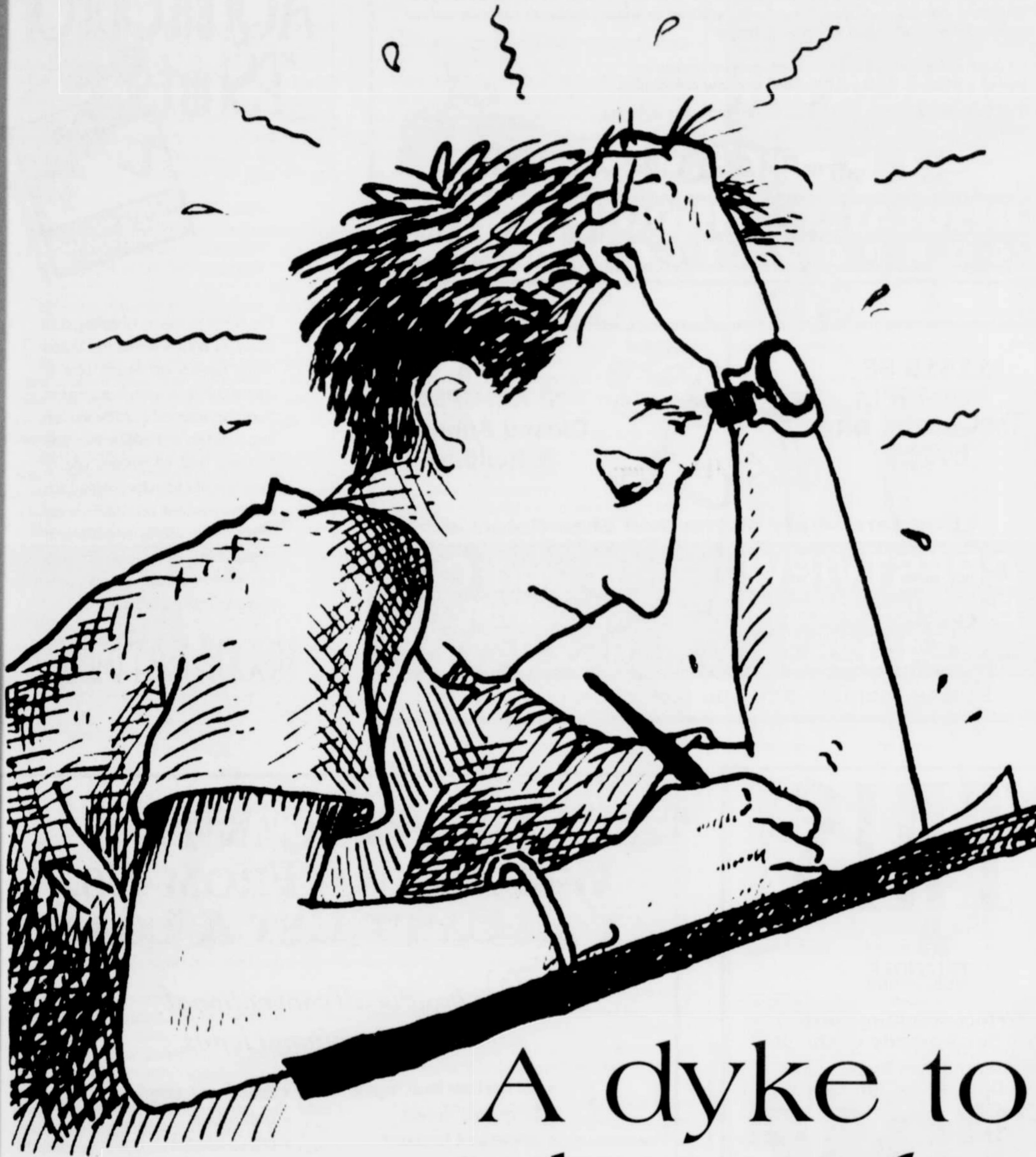


## INTERVIEW



# A dyke to watch out for

*Alison Bechdel gets serious about giving seriousness a funny twist*

by Prof. I. B. Gittendowne

**A**s a total die-hard fan of the nationally syndicated comic strip "Dykes to Watch Out For," I found myself in total ecstasy when I had the opportunity to attend an innovative and revealing slide presentation of Alison Bechdel's work a while back, in the Bay Area. Her fans were treated to some of her earliest drawings, sketches and doodlings, accompanied by her wry, witty commentary. Collections of Bechdel's work, along with her yearly calendars, are constant best-sellers around the country. She, along with Howard Cruise, is considered to be one of the pioneers of lesbian and gay cartoonists. I was honored to have a chance to sit down with her and discuss her work.

*What inspired you to present your work in the form of a slide presentation?*

When I came out with my first book, I wanted to go around like authors who would do book signings. They would do a reading and sign books for people, but it's really dorky to read cartoons out loud. It just doesn't work, you know. So I figured I needed something visual. I knew that Howard Cruise had done a slide show, so actually that's how I first met him. I wrote him a letter, asked him how he did it. He gave me some advice, and I put this slide show together.

*You mentioned Howard Cruise as part of your presentation. Do you feel you've been influenced by his work?*

Oh, yeah. When I first got out of college and moved to New York and was out in the world, I got ahold of *Gay Comics*, and I thought "What a great thing." I mean...there was my role model. Here were these people who were already doing this. I just have the greatest respect for Howard. I don't know that I would necessarily be doing this if I hadn't seen other people doing queer cartoons. So I feel as if he sort of broke the ground. And all those other people in those early books, too.

*You've stated that when you first started drawing, you only drew men. I related to that, in a way, because when I was younger and first started drawing cartoons, as an African American, I found that there was this whole period where I was only drawing white people.*

Really?

*Yes, so, I was wondering if you had any thoughts on how society influences the work of younger artists.*

I think that's all that influences little kids, you know? I mean...it's gotten a lot better now, but when we were kids, God! White boys were the standard, and everyone else had to make all these huge leaps of identity to connect with them. That's what was going on for me, like all the heroes in stories were boys, and anyone who did anything was a boy.

*You also commented on how you feel the media presents women as "fetishes," and how a lot of the depictions of supposedly sexy women are degrading. Have you gotten a sense from your fans around the country that they find your women characters sexy? If so, how is your depiction different from the media's?*

Hmmm. I don't know. Every once in a while I'll get a letter saying people have crushes on Mo, but I don't know how sexy people find them. I think they're kind of sexy, but sexy in a more holistic kind of way. Sexy not only because of the way they look, but because of who they are, what they believe in, and what they do. I remember once I did this slide show and a woman asked me if I ever thought of doing stuff kind of like a lesbian *Tom of Finland*. [Laughs] And I was thinking, I can't even imagine what a lesbian version of *Tom of Finland* would look like. But that's not the kind of direction I'd go. I mean I do like to draw erotic stories, like drawing the characters having sex and stuff. I'd like to do it—I don't know how else to say it—in a holistic kind of way.

*How would you compare your strip to "Cathy," which is probably the most popular strip in the country written and drawn by a woman?*

Well, just the fact that I'm not doing mainstream stuff gives me so much more freedom, and I can talk about so much more than "Cathy" could ever talk about—or more than, I'm sure, she would even want to talk about. I can do much longer strips. Mainstream people get four panels and that's it.

*I'm actually more interested in what you feel your philosophical differences might be. Sometimes I look at the "Cathy" comics, and I feel that there's an obvious problem with it. I think of your strip as being everything that "Cathy" is not.*

Oh, definitely! I hate "Cathy." "Cathy" sucks. I think the only reason she's syndicated as widely as she is, is because she completely reinforces every horrible stereotype about women. It's safe. You don't see Nicole Hollander stuff in every daily paper across the country because it's got some substance to it. Oh, I think "Cathy" is a total sell-out.

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