

## INTERVIEW

### Alison Bechdel

Continued from page 27

*I wanted to pursue this because I assume there are a large number of women across the country who experience "Cathy" as a feminist comic.*

Well, that's the dangerous part of it. It's kind of co-opting feminism. [Creator Cathy Guisewite] masquerades as a feminist, and every once in a while she will do some remotely political strip like about how secretaries should be valued more. That's about as political as she gets. It's safe feminism.

*Do you feel it's at all important for you to keep up with what's going on in that strip?*

Well, I love to hate her, you know.

*Of course, that's the way I feel about "Garfield."*

Yeah, me too.

*During your slide show you also expressed some concern about how you portray women of color and how you haven't dealt with issues of racism in your strip. How do you feel you could handle things differently?*

I think the big thing about being a white person, writing about [the lives of women of color], is what is my motivation? I was talking to a friend of mine, a black woman who is a writer, and she does a writing workshop about representing people of

them that I don't have on my own. A lot of what happens on the strip is stuff that I get from other people.

*And do you ever think that their perceptions are wrong?*

Sometimes I feel that they're off base about certain things, but other times they're way right on. Like, I was sort of toying with the idea of making Sparrow bisexual or making her have to deal with feeling attracted to a man or something. And some fan wrote to me and gave me all these really very compelling reasons why I shouldn't do that, and why maybe some other character should be the bisexual. I love that people know them.

*Don't you think what's happening is one of the most basic functions of art, where you create your work, put it out there, and others are free to interpret its meaning based on what they bring to it?*

Exactly.

*In your slide presentation, you shared with us your creative process. You mentioned there is a type of drawing style you admire that's reflected in the work of one of my favorite artists, Kris Kovick (author of What I Love About Lesbian Politics Is Arguing with People I Agree With). I found your sketches had a drawing style similar to Kris' work.*

Yeah. It's a different kind of drawing. It's much freer. It comes from some place in me that I filter



Cartoonists (left to right) Howard Cruise, Kris Kovick, Prof. I. B. Gittendowne and Alison Bechdel.

different races in writing. And she asks people about their motivation. As white women, why did they put a black character in their work. Is it just knee-jerk political correctness, or did they really care about that woman's life; do they have black friends; do they know what this woman's life would be like? And to tell you the truth, when I started my strip I think it was kind of a knee-jerk, PC reaction. It was like, "Oh, of course Mo is going to have to have a black friend." When I look back I feel really ashamed to look at how I really treated Clarice and Toni as, like, Mo's ethnic sidekicks, you know? But over the years, as I've gotten to know them, they've become much more than that to me.

I'm always learning about things I need to do. Like why is it that this black woman who runs a bookstore only hires white women? I have to think "Wow, that's ridiculous. That wouldn't happen." I'd like to show people interacting more within the African American community. I'm totally working on my own racism, using the strip. I guess it's kind of embarrassing sometimes, to see the mistakes that I make.

*I really enjoy hearing you admit that you are constantly discovering things about your characters. It's fascinating that your approach to your characters reflects the reality of the way human relationships are. There seems to be a lot that surprises you about your characters.*

Well, when I do talk to people about my characters they end up telling me the wildest things, and they give me these incredible insights into

out when I draw the comic strip. The strip is much more deliberate. "Filtered" is the word that I think of. I wish that I could tap into that more incredible, kind of insane place that Kris' work comes from. Kris' work is like id, and mine is ego.

*I once had someone ask me if I could create comics as pure humor, with no political overtones. I responded by saying the daily newspapers are full of comics that basically consist of sight gags and clever little one-liners. I feel as if I am driven to do a bit more. Is there any one thing you feel responsible to do within each comic strip you create?*

I feel a certain responsibility to just be funny, because I think that keeps people hooked into it. But that's so limiting. It's hard to just be funny. For me it's much easier to do more serious stuff, but then try to give it some funny little twist. I could write essays, or do lectures, but I feel no one would listen unless they found something funny about it. But I feel as if I never do serious stuff, like I mentioned I never touch the issue of racism. No one ever gets raped or queer-bashed in my strip. I don't avoid all serious subjects, but I do avoid the real serious ones. It's kind of like I keep this middle ground. I think it's the same kind of parameters as a lot of the really good TV sitcoms. They'll do a really serious episode every once in a while that's a more deeply emotional issue, or more controversial. Then they'll go back to silliness, and I think it's important to do that. People don't want to watch some big, searing, searching documentary for half an hour. They want to be entertained.



Wishing you  
Happy Holidays...



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...and all the  
best for the  
new year.

