

books

Close to Home**Dykes to Watch Out For** creator turns the pen on herselfby **Kathy Belge**

After more than 20 years of chronicling the lesbian community in her *Dykes to Watch Out For* comic strip, Alison Bechdel has turned the pen on herself.

She has written a graphic memoir, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, about the relationship she had growing up with her father, a closeted gay man. Bechdel discovered his sexual orientation just as she was coming out herself and right before his death.

The dark and serious tale is quite a departure from her comic strip. We peek into Bechdel's early life with a controlling father and distant mother. It is at times brutally honest and intellectually challenging. Literature was a key way Bechdel and her father related, and the memoir is littered with

references to classics that might be intimidating to the average *DTWOF* fan. Camus, Fitzgerald and Proust are cited for the similarities to her father's life.

As for Bechdel, writing the memoir was both a blessing and a curse. She always felt it was a story that needed to be told, but the process took her seven years. First she started with writing the text.

"I just sat in my basement and worked at it," she says. The comic strip writer had to learn a whole new way to tell a story. "My comic strip is mostly dialogue and mostly silly. A lot of [*Fun Home*] is not dialogue but narration."

In addition to learning to write a new way, creating the book was a tedious process. For every panel in the book, Bechdel posed and took a digital picture to reference in her drawing. "My intention was not to

act out every scene, but I did pretty much do that. It was a side effect of my crazy compulsive drawing technique."

Another side effect was that Bechdel put herself in the position of acting out her parents' relationship. "An unintended consequence of this technique is that it immerses me in the world of my story. I'm embodying my parents having an argument," she says. "It gives me emotional access to the story."

Bechdel says she uses the same technique to create her

biweekly comic strip. She calls it her "barely harnessed obsessive-compulsive disorder."

"Part of what motivates me to draw is this urge to capture a little bit of real life in tiny black-and-white drawing. It calms me down," she says.

But she has to keep it in check. "If I were to start drawing something that I'm looking at right now, it could take me the rest of my life. There's that much detail. For me, the big challenge is knowing when to stop. If I'm drawing a bookshelf in the background, do I draw all the books? Do I include the title from the spine? Do I include logos of the publishers on the spine?"

Bechdel acknowledges that her attention to detail is one of the things that fans love about her work. "It's a delicate balance," she says. "If I put too much in there, it will be utterly illegible."

Although Bechdel loves writing her comic strip, she did find the process of writing a full-length book freeing. She says: "I have so many square inches in which to tell a complete story every two weeks. Suddenly I had 240 pages to fill. It was how I imagine it must feel to get out of prison after being in for a long time."

She is proud of her efforts. "I made a book," she says. "A novelist just writes down some words and sends it off. I actually made this book with my hands. I know intimately what fell on each square inch of each page."

The story is cyclical, spiraling back over the events of Bechdel's life. "I felt telling a simple chronological story wasn't going to work because it was too complicated," she says. "I ended up moving in a spiral. Instead of following a linear trajectory, the story goes like a labyrinth, spiraling into a central core and then back out again over the same turf."

One of the themes Bechdel explores in her memoir is the parallel lives she and her father were living. She was coming out just as she discovered her father was gay and probably having affairs with underage boys. "In some way, I feel like I've been trying to avenge his death," she says.

One way she did that was to immerse herself into the gay and lesbian community of the early 1980s. "The whole queer subculture that I discovered at that age right after he died was a huge

antidote to my pain," she says. "It was this great exciting party that I could join."

Yet, there were times where her father's controlling ways held her back. "When he died, there was no one to tell me what to do. At the time I thought it was really great. But when I look back, I realize I was really aimless."


"I don't think he would have a lot of respect for me and the choices I made," she continues. "He really valued a traditional establishment kind of career path."

Writing a lesbian comic strip is not a traditional career path, but it has earned Bechdel some level of fame and success. Since 1983 she has been churning out two *Dykes to Watch Out For* comic strips each month. Her characters have changed and evolved along with the lesbian community—dealing with the closure of women's bookstores, breast cancer, trans issues and current political events.

"I'm not a news junkie," Bechdel says. "But I do force myself to read the news. I have a regimen of media intake that I force myself to follow."

She also has an Excel spreadsheet to keep track of all the characters and their storylines. She doesn't have the storylines mapped out in advance, but she does have ideas of where she would like them to go. "I can't write too far ahead because I try to tie the story in to current events," she says.

Most people assume Bechdel most resembles Mo in her strip, but she disagrees. "I used to be more like Mo, but now I'm more Sydney," she says, referring to the materialistic dyke who runs up her credit cards on all the latest technology toys.

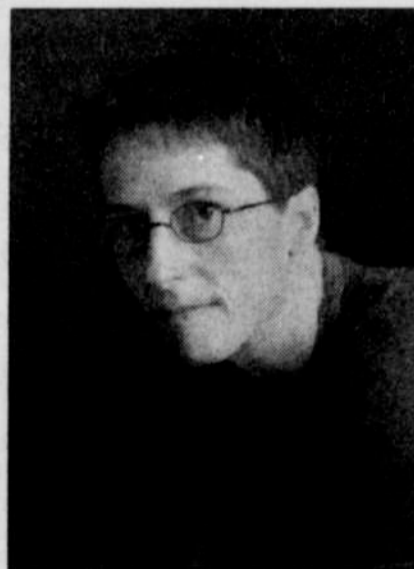
"I always give Sydney things in the strip a couple of years before I'm able to afford them," Bechdel says, "like a cell phone, a flat-screen TV. But I've also gotten very jaded like Sydney." 

ALISON BECHDEL reads from *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* 7:30 p.m. June 15 at Powell's, 1005 W. Burnside St.

Portland freelance writer KATHY BELGE dishes out queer advice and humor from a butch perspective for *Curve* magazine. Visit her online at www.lipstickdipstick.com.



Alison Bechdel spent seven years writing and drawing her memoir.



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