

## Press Release



# Fun Home

by Alison Bechdel

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"If David Sedaris could draw, and if *Bleak House* had been a little funnier, you'd have Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." — Amy Bloom, author of *A Blind Man Can See How Much I Love You*

"Alison Bechdel — she's one of the best, one to watch out for." — Harvey Pekar

## About the Book

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A year after her father died, when she was twenty years old, Alison Bechdel was looking through some old family photographs and found one of a young man in his underwear. She recognized him as a student of her father's and a family babysitter. She also came across a photo of her father as a young man, wearing a woman's bathing suit. There were also snapshots of her mother over the years, in which her expression transformed vividly from hopefulness to resignation to bitterness. Alison found her own childhood pictures, of a girl who looked like a boy. She knew that these snapshots conveyed much more information than she suspected, and there was a deeper story begging to be told, about a daughter who inadvertently "outs" her gay father, who meets a tragic end. But the painful circumstances that make her story so compelling also rendered her incapable of telling it for a long time. Alison was inhibited not just by the shock of her father's death, but by the impact of his life — his domination and deception, and the alternately encouraging and crushing influence that he had on her creativity. In her early twenties she attempted, in prose, to tell her part of the tale, but it eluded her. Instead, she turned her creative efforts to an entirely different project: drawing a comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For*. Years have passed, and Alison is now a comic artist with a cult following. Her strip is syndicated in fifty newspapers and she has a quarter of a million books in print. And she is finally ready to tell her own story. Through twenty years of social change, Alison's accomplished drawing skills, and her wizened emotional perspective comes *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Houghton Mifflin; June 8, 2006).

Meet Alison's father, a historic preservation expert, an obsessive restorer of the family's Victorian house, a third-generation funeral home director, a high school English teacher, an icily distant parent, and a closeted homosexual who, she finds out, is involved with male students and a family babysitter. Through a narrative that is alternately heartbreaking and fiercely funny, we are drawn into a daughter's complex yearning for her father.

And yet, apart from assigned stints dusting caskets at the family-owned "fun home," as Alison and her brothers called it, the relationship achieves its most intimate expression through the shared code of books, which Alison read at her father's insistence. A sort of intimacy, if only a literary one, sprang up between them.

Alison Bechdel has won numerous Lambda Literary Awards, was a Ferro-Grumley Award finalist, and has been nominated for the Will Eisner Comic Industry Award. *Fun Home* is a breakout book for this already established comic artist. It's a coming-of-age classic, marked by gothic twists, sexual angst, and great books, which portrays the parent-child relationship — and the complex longing therein — in moving and universal terms.

*Fun Home* is the first memoir by Alison Bechdel, who since 1983 has been chronicling the lives of various characters in her fictional *Dykes to Watch Out For* strip, "one of the preeminent oeuvres in the comic genre, period" (*Ms.*). The strip is syndicated in fifty alternative 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." Bechdel lives in Vermont. She will be on tour this June and available for interviews.

## About the Author

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**Alison Bechdel**, a cult-favorite comic artist, has been a careful archivist of her own life and kept a journal since she was ten. Bechdel grew up in rural Pennsylvania. After graduating from Oberlin College, she 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." And *Comics Journal* says, "Bechdel's art distills the pleasures of *Friends* and *The Nation*; we recognize our world in it, with its sorrows and ironies." In *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* Alison Bechdel is finally telling her own story.

Bechdel's work has become a countercultural institution. "Hers are thinkers' comics," writes Harvey Pekar, "full of the stuff that classics like *Gasoline Alley* and *Doonesbury* are made of." Bechdel's work appeared, alongside Aaron McGruder's *Boondocks* and David Rees's *Get Your War On*, in *Attitude 2: The New Subversive Alternative Cartoonists* (2004). Four of her books have won Lambda Literary Awards for humor, and *The Indelible Alison Bechdel* won a Lambda Literary Award in the biography/autobiography category.

In addition to her comic strip, Bechdel has also done exclusive work for a slew of publications, including *Ms.*, *Slate*, the *Village Voice*, the *Advocate*, *Out*, and many other newspapers, Web sites, comic books, and zines. Her work has been widely anthologized and translated. She lives near Burlington, Vermont.

## A Conversation with Alison Bechdel

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### **What motivated you to tell the story of your relationship with your father at this particular time?**

I've been wanting to tell this story since I was twenty, a year after my father died. As soon as I had the slightest bit of perspective on what had happened, I could see that it was just a really good story. And I realized eventually that what the book was really about was not his suicide, or our shared homosexuality, or the books we read. It was about my creative apprenticeship to my father. It was about becoming an artist.

But I didn't have the skills to tell it when I was twenty — emotional, creative, or technical. Also, I couldn't imagine revealing the big family secret, that my father was gay. That was a major obstacle. Nor was I thinking of it back then as a graphic story — that was still pre-*Maus*, and comics hadn't become a medium for serious storytelling yet.

I finally sat down to write the book when I was almost forty, right at that weird midpoint in my life where my father had been dead for the same number of years that he'd been alive. I knew that this project would have to be more ambitious and revealing, more literary, than what I'd been doing in my comic strip. That meant confronting my father's artist fixation head-on. I had to dismantle his inhibiting critical power over me before I could tell the story. But telling the story was the only way to do the dismantling. It was like trying to vacuum under a rug while you're still standing on it.

### **In researching *Fun Home*, you read the books that your father loved. What other research did you do?**

I did a *lot* of reading. A big part of the book is taken up with my father's relationship with various books and authors. So I had to read or reread all the books and plays that I cite in the text — though I confess to selectively skimming *In Search of Lost Time*. I also read a lot of biographies — Proust, Wilde, both Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, James Joyce, Camus.

Then there were my own archives — my childhood diaries and drawings, my father's letters. Old datebooks and calendars. And of course our family photograph albums. Those photos were really my primary source for the book. Poring over them, recreating them painstakingly in pen and ink, trying to discern their hidden messages.

I took thousands of new reference photos — of me posing as virtually all the characters in the book. I got very dependent on my digital camera throughout this process. I'm kind of a method cartoonist. In one of my more vivid research efforts, I stood beside the road at the spot where my dad died, photographing trucks as they approached and passed. It seemed important not just to know what that looked like, but what it felt like.

## **Most memoirs are written in prose. Why is *Fun Home* a graphic story?**

I did have a very visually stimulating upbringing, what with all the wallpaper patterns and scrollwork and gaudy Victorian bric-a-brac — not to mention the dead bodies at the funeral home. But I don't think it's any particular imagery that makes this a graphic story. I would hope I could tell a story about *anything* visually. You can do things in graphic storytelling that you can't do with words alone. There's a whole different syntax at work.

I can say two or three things at once, like following the main story and a footnote at the same time. I can use the words and pictures in unison, to say the same thing, or in counterpoint, harmonizing the two separate strands into a third level of meaning. And if I hit a wall with the text, the visuals would bail me out by presenting an unusual association or segue. *Fun Home* is a labyrinthine story that jumps around a lot chronologically. I don't think I could have told it coherently using just words.

## **After writing and drawing *Dykes to Watch Out For* for more than twenty years, was it difficult to work on something that was much more explicitly personal? How did your family react?**

I think my mother wishes I'd stuck to *Dykes to Watch Out For*, although when I first started drawing *Dykes*, she wasn't too keen on that either. My mom is decidedly not a member of the "me" generation, and she's very skeptical of my impulse to tell all.

I do have a strange compulsion to confess — I suspect it's some kind of lingering Catholic damage — so I really enjoyed writing autobiographically. But it was still difficult and at times wrenching to exhume my father like this, to interrogate my own life so closely, and then to negotiate the results with my mom and brothers. Not that they tried to stop me from doing anything — they've been great — but obviously it's a painful subject.

I look back now at the genesis of *Dykes*, and I see it very much as a reaction to what happened with my father. I felt that to a certain extent he killed himself because he couldn't come out, so I was determined to be utterly and completely out in my own life. I know I had the luxury of doing that because of the progress made by earlier generations of gay men and lesbians. And I've always been acutely conscious of that queer genealogy, because for me it's also a literal genealogy. My father made my life possible in more ways than one.

Our two stories form a kind of longitudinal sociological study. He graduated from college a dozen years before Stonewall [the confrontations between demonstrators and police at the Stonewall Inn in New York in 1969, marking the beginning of the movement for gay liberation]. I graduated a dozen years after. In the book I try to sort out how much of the way his life turned out was his own responsibility and how much it was the result of larger forces beyond his control. I speculate on whether, had I come of age when he did, I would have been able to make different choices. I don't come up with any answers. But that interplay between the personal and the political is an enduring fixation of mine — it's also a primary concern of my comic strip.

**It's an interesting time for memoirs, in the wake of James Frey's amplifications, the JT Leroy hoax, and Augusten Burroughs being sued for defamation by his own family. Are you absolutely certain your story is true?**

No! But fortunately, in the book I frequently question the reliability of my own narration. I really don't know whether my dad killed himself or what he did with those teenage boys. When I was a kid, I had a phobia about not telling the truth — I was afraid that the things I was writing in my diary were somehow inaccurate. I'd write, "Mom and John went uptown." But how did I really know they went uptown? I got very anxious about the possibility that I was inadvertently lying.

I think that's probably a good model for memoir writing: acknowledging the inadequacy of your own methodology. And it's all inadequate, really, memory and documentary evidence alike. I went to the courthouse and dug up a police report about the time my dad got arrested. It goes into great detail about how he served a malt beverage to a minor but contains no mention whatsoever of his real offense. That was glaringly absent.

I do think my childhood diaries are a pretty accurate record, though. I can remember discrete events quite clearly — the time Dad almost went to jail, the summer Mom played Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Nixon's resignation, my first period, the plague of locusts that descended on us, the storm that blew all our trees down. But I was stunned to learn, upon consulting my diary, that all these things happened *at the same time*. You really can't make that stuff up.

## **Praise for *Fun Home***

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**"Hits notes that resemble Jeanette Winterson at her best . . . [A] story that's quiet, dignified, and not easy to put down."** — *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

**"Bechdel's memoir offers a graphic narrative of uncommon richness, depth, literary resonance, and psychological complexity . . . Though this will likely be stocked with graphic novels, it shares as much in spirit with the work of Mary Karr, Tobias Wolff, and other contemporary memoirists of considerable literary accomplishment."** — *Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

**"Stupendous.** Alison Bechdel's mesmerizing feat of familial resurrection is a rare, prime example of why graphic novels have taken over the conversation about American literature. The details — visual and verbal, emotional and elusive — are devastatingly captured by an artist in total control of her craft." — Chip Kidd, author of *The Cheese Monkeys*

**"Brave and forthright and insightful — exactly what Alison Bechdel does best."** — Dorothy Allison, author of *Bastard Out of Carolina*

**"The only cartoonist I know of to match [Garry] Trudeau's achievement is the brilliant Alison Bechdel."** — Chris Ekman, political cartoonist

## Video of Alison Bechdel

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Houghton Mifflin is thrilled to be publishing a graphic narrative—our first—that is as literary and as brilliantly told as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. A book Chip Kidd, author of *The Cheese Monkeys*, calls "Stupendous." Alison's creative process is another fascinating part of the story. In this video you will see the process of creating *Fun Home*—a frame-by-frame journey that includes archival research, historic and even emotional reenactments, and a staggering number of digital photos.

If you have RealAudio Player, use the following links:

- [RM High-Speed Modem](#) (300K DSL/Cable)
- [RM Dial-up Users](#) (56K)

For the best sound and picture quality, we suggest using Internet Explorer and [the latest RealAudio player](#) and a 28.8 Kbps or faster connection. If you are experiencing problems in listening to these audio excerpts, please refer to the [RealAudio help page](#).

If you have Windows Media Player, use the following links:

- [WMV High-Speed Modem](#) (300K DSL/Cable)
- [WMV Dial-up Users](#) (56K)

For the best sound and picture quality, we suggest using Internet Explorer and [the latest Windows Media player](#) and a 28.8 Kbps or faster connection. If you are experiencing problems in listening to these audio excerpts, please refer to the [Windows Media help page](#).

## Excerpts from *Fun Home*

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