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David M. Ball
*Dickinson College*

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Allusive Confessions
The Literary Lives of Alison Bechdel's Fun Home

—David M. Ball

With its rich and intertwined narratives of a family's history, a father's closeted sexuality, and an artist's coming of age and coming out, Alison Bechdel's 2006 graphic memoir Fun Home has quickly emerged as an essential text in the vanguard of contemporary graphic narrative. As scholars incorporate such comics into literary anthologies and course syllabi, this inclusion prompts as-yet-unrealized considerations of the ways in which comics do and do not alter the literary and art historical canons they have begun to enter.1 Bechdel's work thus proves to be a compelling test case for an integrative approach to the intersections of comics, art history, and literature. Fun Home also explicitly theorizes this process by drawing upon, citing from, and transforming genres as seemingly diverse as the coming-out memoir, the Künstlerroman, and the graphic novel. In doing so, however, Bechdel's myriad literary allusions perform a degree of the same self-censorship encountered in earlier twentieth-century queer forms of cultural and artistic expression, complicating the confessional frame within which her comics are conventionally appreciated. This singular conflation of the allusion and the confession in Fun Home both shields the memoir's revelations from forms of full disclosure while shaping Bechdel's role as craftsman of her own narrative. Fun Home thus negotiates its place in literary and art historical canons in a manner exemplified by queer artists and writers before Bechdel, representing an extension of those earlier strategies as much as a departure for lesbian graphic narrative.

Much of the scholarly attention paid to Fun Home focuses on the memoir's powerful mode of witnessing and regards Bechdel's meticulous and archival attention to her own life as the primary measure of the text's
critical import. The graphic memoir plumbs stark and often wrenching truths about Bechdel's ambivalence toward her father Bruce's closeted sexuality, his affairs with young boys, his presumed suicide, and the fractured family life this buried history produces. The parallel narrative of Alison's coming out is tightly imbricated within and mirrored by Bruce's tragedy, complementing and at times competing with her father's story for the center of the memoir's narrative attention. Bechdel's insistence within Fun Home upon a visible connection to her father maintains a relationship between her life and his in the memoir that she did not immediately feel during the strained years of their lived lives. Critics have rightly remarked upon the memoir's archival and confessional urges to maintain this tenuous familial bond: journal entries, correspondence, maps, court documents, and family photographs are painstakingly reproduced in Bechdel's panels. Bechdel herself has spoken about this confessional urge in a 20m Comics Journal interview with Trina Robbins: “I don’t know, maybe it’s because I was raised Catholic. Confession has always held a great appeal for me” (Robbins 82). Additionally, her first book-length autobiographical work is titled The Indelible Alison Bechdel: Confessions, Comix, and Miscellaneous Dykes to Watch Out For, which includes a strip labeled “True Confession” (51-54). In doing so, Bechdel participates in what Susannah Radstone has termed confession's “range of narrational strategies to evoke in the reader the experience of the confessant's inward quest for self-transformation” (36).
This confessional urge is exemplified by a panel (fig. 1.1) showing a cut-away image of Alison's adolescent body, a synecdochic scene for the myriad other moments in which Alison literally and figuratively bares her breast—often, as is the case here, while telling narratives of pain—disclosing everything from bedroom scenes to intimate family secrets (109). Read in this light, *Fun Home* unflinchingly participates in a tradition of contemporary lesbian memoir, one which extends an American literary confessional genealogy dating back to Puritan conversion and African-American captivity narratives (Diggs). *Fun Home*, in this account, also staunchly resists the overwhelming invisibility and, to quote Terry Castle, "murderous allegorizing," lesbian characters have been subjected to throughout the course of literary history (7). Among other scholars, Jennifer Lemberg writes admiringly of "the power of graphic narrative as witness" in *Fun Home*, figuring Bechdel as "consistently privileg[ing] drawing as a more direct mode of representation" (129, 133). Similarly, Ann Cvetkovich, while acknowledging the memoir's "power to provide forms of truth that are emotional rather than factual," nonetheless characterizes Bechdel's technique as an "archival mode of witness" ("Drawing" 114), extending her own arguments about the ways in which "lesbian and gay history demands a radical archive of emotion in order to document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism, all areas of experience that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive" (Archive 241).

Given this powerful form of witnessing, however, it would be a simplification to read *Fun Home* as an unvarnished recording of a life history, a narrative unshaped by the literary aspirations and narrative demands of the author. Bechdel is keen to make her readers understand the long-held positions of memoir scholarship: the unreliability of memory, the gulf that invariably separates the speaker of the text from its author, and the multiple ways in which memoirs are ordered and construct narratives that complicate uncritical notions of facticity and testimony. My use of "Bechdel" and "Alison" throughout this essay to refer to the author and her avatar respectively mimics the very distinction Bechdel herself is at great pains to make throughout her memoir. Perhaps more so than any other graphic memoirist, Bechdel carefully draws her readers' attention to these complexities by illustrating imagined scenes to which she has no conceivable access (32, 65, 71), narrating her own "epistemological crisis" as a young diarist (142), willfully altering details small and large in her narrative (41, 185), and establishing an often dramatic distance between the narrative text and her panels' visual content throughout.
Take as a representative example of these disparities the archival "centerfold" of Roy (fig. 1.2), Alison's babysitter and her father's lover (100-101). Bechdel describes the discovery of this photograph as the germ of the entire memoir:

In many ways photographs really generated the book. In fact the whole story was spawned by a snapshot I found of our old babysitter lying on a hotel bed in his Jockey shorts. [...] It was a stunning glimpse into my father's hidden life, this life that was apparently running parallel to our regular everyday existence. And it was particularly compelling to me at the time because I was just coming out myself. I felt this sort of posthumous bond with my father, like I shared this thing with him, like we were comrades. I didn't start working on the book then, but over the years that picture persisted in my memory. It's literally the core of the book, the centerfold. (Chute, "Interview" 1,005-06)

Bechdel uses the language of sudden revelation here, this discovery representing an abiding act of witnessing her father's sexual truth. Likewise, Cvetkovich declares this moment the "visual and emotional kernel out of which the story emerges" (115), and Chute describes this composition as the center of the memoir's "circling, 'labyrinthine' structure [...] because it spirals in to the double-spread center of Roy [...] and then spirals out"
The Literary Lives of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (*Graphic Women* 183). This splash page is the only one of its kind in the entire memoir; no other single panel in the text even bleeds to the margins. It is also importantly located at the very center of the text, a direct figuration of the leitmotif of revelation and self-discovery striated throughout the memoir. Given all of this—the affective and confessional authority of the photograph, the representational power of Bechdel's art, as well as the central role of these pages in the text—it is easy to forget that images such as this one do not mimetically represent lived experience. For legal reasons such as the protection of the identities of many of the memoir's subjects, as well as a host of other considerations, "Roy" and his likeness are a pseudonym and an avatar respectively. "Roy" is not Roy, and the bodily representation of him reproduced in the text is not as he appears in Bechdel's private archive.

This should not come as a surprise to readers. Roy's careful composition, both in the photograph itself and its appearance within the memoir as a whole, draws upon artistic tropes of the art nude and the *nue couchée* evidenced throughout the text. Bechdel portrays Bruce reading Kenneth Clark's extensive study, *The Nude*, at several points (15, 99), and both he and Alison admire a fashion spread in *Esquire* magazine displaying a similarly recumbent semi-nude model on the page immediately before Roy's centerfold. While more revealing than this advertisement, which somewhat demurely cuts its subject off at the waist, the shadowing and page fold of Roy's spread nonetheless veil the viewer's gaze at the same moment that the body is exposed. The centerfold thus reveals the father's affair while concealing the lover's name and appearance; it is drawn from the family's archive, but registers distance in its conspicuous artfulness and engagement with longstanding artistic practices and archetypes; and it evidences an explicit and corporeal site of Bruce's passions while concealing that very body from our view.

Bechdel withholds information from her readers while concurrently extracting documents, however altered, from the archive of her family's past, even as Alison in the bottom right text box notes her father's "curiously ineffectual attempt at censorship." The panel thus engages, in an oblique fashion, with the very censorship that its text queries. At the very moment she describes her father's "act of prestidigitation [sic] typical of the way [he] juggled his public appearance and private reality, the evidence [...] simultaneously hidden and revealed," Bechdel's composition engages in precisely this unresolved dialectic of withholding and revelation, a preeminent act of mirroring between Bruce and herself that Alison
insists upon throughout the text. That Bechdel renders the photographic "evidence" held in her own hand simultaneously brings it to light and holds it at a distance from her readers. It is represented literally under her thumb and drawn, as are all of the memoir's documents, in the artist's hand, a register of the levels of mediation through which both Alison and her readers are dissociated from the events she attempts to narrate and envision on the page. The composition's emotional truth is only achieved through its willful artifice.

The means by which the centerfold of "Roy" embodies this dialectic of revelation and withholding is merely one exemplar of an oscillation that takes place throughout the memoir. This dynamic can be productively understood within a larger history of censorship and self-censorship in modern gay and lesbian visual culture in which Fun Home fitfully participates. In his groundbreaking work Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art, Richard Meyer argues that the "'negative' image of homosexuality—the image of crime or sin, of sickness or stereotype—has constituted an essential part of the pictorial language on which artists have drawn" (8). This "regulation of homosexuality," however, has "provoked unanticipated responses and counterrepresentations, unforeseen pictures of difference and self-conscious stagings of deviance" (10). These selfsame punitive regimes of enforced gay invisibility and compulsory heterosexuality have, according to Meyer, given gay artists the tools for upsetting those very structures of visibility and self-imagining. Meyer views such censorship as a generative device for queer artists, one which:

compels indirection and "ingenious disguise" on the part of the writer. Censorship produces as well as prohibits writing; it consigns the writer not to silence but to the strategic use of suggestion and metaphor, of submerged meanings and encoded messages [...] a dialectical concept of censorship [that] functions not simply to erase but also to enable representation; it generates limits but also reactions to those limits; it imposes silence even as it provokes responses to that silence. (15)

Gay and lesbian visual expression, in Meyer's reading, is thus paradoxically enabled by its very repression. Meyer claims that these forms of censorship and self-censorship are even more powerful in the case of lesbian artists, who have been "restricted from reaching [the] threshold of visibility within American culture" throughout the twentieth century (22).
If anything, we might expect such submerged meanings and encoded messages to have little bearing on a twenty-first-century memoir as "graphic," in every sense of that word, as Bechdel's. The cover of the paperback edition of *Fun Home* celebrates its "refreshingly open" approach to queer autobiography, and Bechdel herself made her early career in the explicitly political and often ribald comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*. Her 1993 “Coming Out Story” (fig. 13)1 which is in many respects the urtext of *Fun Home*, mocked reticence in the coming out story with faux horror film iconography (1). Despite one brief, perhaps even obligatory censorship controversy in Missouri, *Fun Home* has met with overwhelming praise rather than vitriol for its depictions of homosexuality.
Indeed, compared to figurations of lesbian relationships in many contemporary comics written for audiences outside a gay readership, Bechdel’s representations are pronouncedly direct. The panels included here, from Kiriko Nananan’s 1997 Blue (fig. 1.4a), June Kim’s 2006 12 Days (fig. 1.4b), and Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki’s 2008 Skim (fig. 1.4c) respectively, all draw their visual vocabulary from Japanese yuri, a sub-genre of manga that focuses on lesbian relationships, frequently between women of high school age. The dialectic that Meyer describes between self-censorship and counter-representation recurs here in the physical touching of lesbian bodies that also serves as an act of hiding. An image emerges of lesbian attachment that is both aesthetically and emotionally arresting as well as doomed to occlusion and curtailment, often in a violent fashion. In her nouvelle manga Blue, Nananan imagines the confession of one girl’s love for the other as a “convulsion,” with entire panels blacking out as if in a sort of shame reflex (67). When physical relationships between women
are figured, they are done so only in brief moments and often abstract forms, the moment of their love’s revelation also a simultaneous eclipse of their singularity. Not merely a distinction between American and Japanese comics, this pattern of literally refusing to show the face of lesbian love fully appears throughout a range of works inspired by yuri appearing in North America—*Skim* and *12 Days* being written and drawn by Canadian-born artists of Japanese heritage and a Korean-born New Yorker respectively—that adopt a similar course of dialectically revealing and withholding a full depiction of lesbian sexuality.

While seemingly distant from these other contemporaneous portrayals of lesbian love, Bechdel in fact has been criticized as insufficiently radical (Dean, Martindale). While I agree with Cvetkovich that *Fun Home* compellingly complicates homonormative narratives, I am ultimately less interested in such debates about the sufficiency of Bechdel’s radicalism than I am in the question of whether Bechdel’s pronounced ambivalences in fact make room for the claims and representations she *is* able to draw throughout her work. Nonetheless, the discourse of homosexuality-as-pathology persists in her memoir through Bruce’s perceived disease and attempts at therapy, Alison’s figuration of her own obsessive-compulsive disorder, and her adoption of the Freudian discourse of “inversion” throughout the text. Indeed, Bechdel has expressed regret for how lesbian iconography has permeated popular culture, evincing a nostalgia for the lost coded language of the minority subculture, as described by Meyer, that generates exactly the “pictorial language” made possible in *Dykes to Watch Out For* and *Fun Home*. One early and particularly prescient example of this assimilation fear is a 1990 episode of “Servants to the Cause”—a monthly strip that ran in the *Advocate* and is reprinted in *The Indelible Alison Bechdel*—which describes gay and lesbian assimilation into mainstream culture as a threat to queer exceptionality and political relevance (191). Even the character who argues that gays and lesbians are fighting for “the right to be like everybody else” in this strip later opines: “Sometimes I miss the furtive, secretive, good old days” (“Coming Out” 36).

One of the most powerful and conspicuous means by which Bechdel negotiates this dialectic in *Fun Home* is through frequent and explicit allusions to other literary works of art, titling each of her chapters with a citation from another text and picturing other works of literature throughout her panels as key visual and narrative registers. These allusions simultaneously sharpen the confessional themes of the text—the concurrent thralls and perils of idealizing a love object, the dramatic and performative nature
of everyday life, the human costs of the artist’s endeavor—and offer narratives separate from the specifics of the Bechdel family’s drama. On the first page alone, Bechdel transforms the child’s game of airplane into a layered reference to the Icarus myth while placing a visible copy of Anna Karenina open beside her father, both allusions presaging Bruce’s suicide. In a supremely metafictional move, both resonances return on the narrative’s concluding page; Bruce lies prostrate beneath the Sunbeam bread truck that serves as the memoir’s Tolstoyan train, catching Alison in the final iteration of the text’s recursive and at times vertiginous allusions to the Icarian fall that cites Greek myth and James Joyce’s Ulysses alike. This proliferation of literary allusions is also exceedingly germane to Alisons lived life—both her parents were English teachers and she describes her
own coming out as a process of reading as much as one of felt experience, as specious as that divide becomes throughout the memoir—and a distancing technique from the often traumatic details of that life.

Taking a longer view, these allusive confessions marked Bechdel's earliest comics as much as her most recent work. “Coming Out Story,” first published in the periodical *Gay Comics* more than a decade before *Fun Home*, offers a prehistory and lays bare many of the more subtly refined themes of the finished memoir. On the third page of the short narrative (fig. 1.5) the reader sees Alison “browsing through books [. . .] to distract [herself] from a truth that was slowly but surely struggling to the surface of [her] sex-starved soul” (3). Books and reading here are initially presented as a means to avoid erotic truth, the conspicuous alliteration of the passage itself a distancing technique of the literary. Yet the words are themselves lushly sensuous, conflating the textual and the sexual in ways that will be manifest throughout her later memoirs. Textual study thus both defers self-revelation and prompts Alison's coming out.

This avowal is followed immediately in the next panel by the discovery of *Word is Out*, a 1978 volume that transcribes interviews from a documentary film of the same title. *Word is Out* as a text broadcasts its intent to celebrate gay and lesbian visibility and testimony, an irony heightened by Bechdel as she shows the volume being read in relative secrecy, while also returning to, publishing, and making visible that secret history of reading in her own comics. Indeed, this moment of the discovery of *Word is Out* was later redrawn multiples times in *Fun Home* (74–75, 203) and described as generating “[Alison’s] realization at nineteen that [she] was a lesbian [. . .] a revelation not of the flesh but of the mind” (74). The contiguous panels of “Coming Out Story” then show the act of reading to be both irremediably outside of the self and the royal road to that self-realization, both an obstacle to and the ultimate means of sexual awakening. Nonetheless, “Coming Out Story” hews to a stauncher notion of facticity that *Fun Home* eschews. The comic concludes (fig. 1.6) when Alison states: “I've told the true story. My own humble contribution to that epic tale of collective self-revelation that my sisters and brothers have been telling for generations” (12). The tone here is difficult to pin down—part triumphant, part mock-heroic—yet this seemingly bald statement also signals the end of the narrative as such, spoken as it is immediately before the speaker closes the door on her readers. The self is revealed, Bechdel shows us, at the moment the narrative is cut short.
While “Coming Out Story” begins to explore what queer theorists Valerie Rohy and Ann Cvetkovich both deem the “queer archive” in Bechdel’s comics, almost none of Fun Home’s layered allusions to the more conventional literary canon are present in the earlier text (Cvetkovich, Drawing, Rohy). With the exceptions of a brief aside comparing Alison’s cognitive leap of lesbian self-awareness to Athena springing fully formed from the head of Zeus and the briefest of cameos for James Joyce’s Ulysses, the most glaring difference between the early “Coming Out Story” and the later Fun Home is the relative density of such literary allusions. To chart such allusive confessions in the completed graphic memoir is a near-impossible task; the text is replete with them, from Joyce and Fitzgerald to Wilde and Proust—by my own slightly obsessive-compulsive count, allusions to
canonical literature appear on 129 of the memoir's 224 pages. In part we can read this increased reliance on the literary as a turn to the father's narrative, and Bechdel herself has spoken in interviews about her dawning revelation throughout the course of the book's composition that she could best explore the lacunae in her knowledge of her father's character by reading his beloved authors, authors about whom she herself was deeply ambivalent. Yet literary allusion enacts a distance from these events as well, an oblique form of the censorship Meyer sees as so central to the discourse of modern gay and lesbian visual culture. Bechdel's projection of the self invariably takes place on the screen of anterior literary archetypes, blending the fictional and the factual, literary and lived experience, throughout Fun Home.
Bechdel is most explicit about these stakes of the literary in her third chapter, “That Old Catastrophe,” and I would like to explore the implications of Bechdel’s allusive confessions through an analysis of this section. While all the chapters share the recursive and chronologically disjointed character of the memoir as a whole, Bechdel’s other chapters each hew relatively closely to the central allusion announced in their respective titles. “A Happy Death,” the second chapter, explores the absurdity of Bruce’s presumed suicide through parallels to Albert Camus’s novel of the same title. “In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower,” the fourth chapter, uses Proustian metaphors to explore Bruce’s suspect masculinity. By contrast, “That Old Catastrophe” far exceeds the frame provided by the chapter title’s reference to Wallace Stevens’s poem “Sunday Morning.” Allusions to Shakespeare, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Henry James proliferate in “That Old Catastrophe,” as readers are shown both Bruce’s library and Alison’s “queer archive” for the first time. In this profusion of allusions, I argue, the work of allusion itself is being negotiated, the structure and syntax of these references providing a model through which to understand the memoir writ large.

Having concluded the second chapter at the foot of Bruce’s grave, Bechdel begins the third chapter in his library with Alison looking up the word “queer” in the family’s “mammoth Webster,” its uncertain etymology of obstruction and obliquity a fitting masthead for the chapter as a whole (58). The following page (fig. 1.7) shows Alison at the moment of her coming out, typing the uncharacteristically direct and prosaic claim “I am a lesbian” in a letter to her parents, only to have the revelation of her father’s affairs leave her “upstaged, demoted from protagonist in [her] own drama to comic relief in [her] parents’ tragedy” (58). The explicitly theatrical and literary language of this claim, which marginalizes Alison and interrupts her own narrative of coming out, again demonstrates the ways in which allusion occludes as much as inaugurates the coming out story, overwriting the direct and declarative statement of her sexual identity at the top of the page. Alison is left in the fetal position following this revelation, an infantilizing image the memoir returns to insistently (59, 79, 211), her own trajectory forestalled by her father’s incursions into the narrative. These intrusions are almost entirely expressed through literature; the very next page begins a tour of her father’s library, a place where Bruce’s “affectation [was] so thoroughgoing, so authentic in its details, that it stops being pretense . . . and becomes, for all practical purposes, real” (60). Alison ostensibly speaks about her father’s projected persona
as a Victorian aristocrat and man of leisure here, but the patent subtext throughout the memoir is his suspect performance of heteronormative masculinity as well, as indicated by Roy’s introduction on the facing page. In rapid succession, Bechdel then offers an etymology of her and her father’s erotic truth and expresses her own in unequivocal terms, only to have her declaration co-opted as Bruce’s labyrinthine fictions about his own sexuality take center stage.

This chain of references sets off arguably the most complicated and interwoven sequence of literary allusions in the text, each one revealing new information about the Bechdel family while superimposing the family’s narrative onto a dizzying succession of fictional archetypes. Roy and Bruce exchange copies of *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Great Gatsby*—these texts’ queer registers and anxieties becoming an unspoken subtext of the sequence as a whole—while Bruce, in the following pages, assumes a heady mix of Fitzgerald’s favored themes of failed romance and class minstrelsy in his epistolary courtship of Bechdel’s mother, Helen. Helen here is Zelda to Bruce’s Scott, as she will subsequently be *Washington Square*’s Catherine Sloper to his Morris Townsend (Helen played the lead in Ruth and Augustus Goetz’s *The Heiress*, an adaptation of Henry James’s *Washington Square*), *The Taming of the Shrew*’s Katherina to his Petruchio (a production of the Shakespeare play was the occasion of Helen and Bruce’s first meeting), and *The Portrait of a Lady*’s Isabel Archer to his Gilbert Osmond (James’s novel serving as the template against which the dissolution of Helen’s early ideals of independence as well as the unfitness of her marriage takes place) (61–63, 66, 69–70, 70–72). Bechdel, true to form, interrupts this metatextual procession with her own self-conscious claim: “I employ these allusions to James and Fitzgerald not only as descriptive devices, but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms. And perhaps my cool aesthetic distance itself does more to convey the arctic climate of our family than any particular literary comparison” (67). If this direct, metacritical avowal is a way for Alison to exert control over her narrative, it bears mentioning the distance allusive claims like this one maintain from the bold declaration of her sexuality at the opening of the chapter. Bechdel’s legerdemain in these passages, her mature self-awareness of the rhetorical and literary devices of her own narrative, is a version of Bruce’s own artful fictions. This final reality is made manifest at the conclusion of this long sequence when Alison is shown literally carrying her father’s baggage (73), the mirroring between the two characters here as much a burden as it is a bond between them.
Bechdel then returns her readers to the scene of her earlier, occluded coming out, redrawing similar moments from those first countenanced in “Coming Out Story,” namely her dawning lesbian self-discovery through reading the queer archive. *Word is Out, The Well of Loneliness, Maurice,* and at least twenty-three other titles serve as a series of counterweights to the father’s library of allusions. At one point, Alison appears behind a wall of these books while on the phone with her parents (76) and she is first shown in bed with her lover Joan surrounded by books from this alternate canon, using their language play as an erotic game between lovers. However, this reimagined relationship to—or through—literature is short-lived. The recursive news of Bruce’s self-destruction and eventual death again interrupts the narrative arc of Alison coming into her own lesbian identity. Even Alison’s and Helen’s grief, what little of it is expressed throughout the memoir, is transacted through books as the interrupted bedroom scene gives way to yet another sequence of panels set in Bruce’s library, this time as Helen gives Joan a volume of the titular Wallace Stevens. Literature’s possibility for erotic expression is replaced here with its capacity as a register for grief and sacrifice—both the sacrifice of the poem’s subject of the crucifixion and Helen’s sacrifices throughout her marriage—serving at each instance to forestall Alison’s lesbian memoir with the family’s tragedy.

It is at the close of “That Old Catastrophe,” however, that the tenor of Bechdel’s allusive confessions begins to waver. Stevens plays a much less powerful role than many comparable authors alluded to in *Fun Home*; aside from the coincidence of the poem and the father’s library sharing images of a cockatoo, the focus is much more on Helen’s anguish than it is on Stevens’s account of the crucifixion. Bechdel could even be said to flatten the complexity of the poem, opting instead to reproduce verses written by Joan that narrate this scene (fig. 1.8). The reproduced typescript of Joan’s poem becomes a visual echo of Alison’s opening confession: “I am a lesbian” (82). Images of women predominate here—this being one of the few pages in *Fun Home,* ironically, that passes the so-called “Bechdel test”—and the dense fabric of male literary allusions gives way, however briefly, to a narrative outside of the orbit of Bruce Bechdel and his library. To strictly oppose these lesbian and literary narratives runs the risk of reestablishing a binary distinction *Fun Home* works to complicate. Jane Tolmie rightly argues that “*Fun Home’s* negotiations of a modernist canon do not merely aim to set up a competing discourse of high culture comic books, but also trouble our reliance on
categories of high and low, included and excluded, straight and queer, textual and embodied" (79). In Bechdel’s hands canonical literature is in many respects incorporated into the queer archive given the privileged place she accords gay writers in her literary allusions. Yet, having negotiated this elaborate network of allusive confessions in “That Old Catastrophe,” we never once return to the father’s library in the more than 140 remaining pages of the memoir. Having traversed this dense network of literary allusions, Bechdel intimates a limit to the influence of her father’s archive over her narrative.

Rather, Bechdel concludes the chapter with an outside view of the library (fig. 19), Alison and Bruce separated by the shutters between twinned windows of the same room (86). She has just asked her father to buy her “some new MAD books,” and she is shown writing out a check for
his signature. While she does this, Bruce reads Nancy Milford’s *Zelda: A Biography*. In one sense, this is a record of debts owed; Bruce’s connection to Milford’s biography tacitly acknowledges the familial pain he (as a surrogate F. Scott Fitzgerald throughout the memoir) has caused, while Bechdel’s own art, in utero, draws on the funds bequeathed to her by her father. As is the case in several renderings of the house that Bruce built, architectural spaces here are shown to encase the separate pursuits of the same family. Though they occupy a shared space, Alison and Bruce are divided in their aims, joined only, in Bechdel’s words, by a “last, tenuous bond” she is “reluctant to let go of” (86). Importantly, he is left reading while she is writing, the incorporation of *MAD Magazines* antic comics, however briefly, into the otherwise conventional literary canon offering a rare intervention into the traditional literary archive. The canon makes
way for comics in this moment, much as the familial narrative makes way for the first stirrings of Bechdel’s lesbian memoir.

It is at such moments that we can see Bechdel articulating a place in the father’s library for the lesbian graphic memoir. These allusive confessions straddle the personal and the public, the lived and the literary; they recast the generic possibilities of graphic memoir and extend the medium’s claims in ways that place Bechdel at the center of our growing appreciation for the possibilities of graphic narrative. In this ambivalent and layered treatment of the literary, Bechdel revises the canon by frequently giving precedence to gay and lesbian writers while simultaneously demarcating a place for herself within that genealogy. This process appears to be both unfinished work and an ongoing project of Bechdel’s. In 2008, Bechdel published “Compulsory Reading” in Entertainment Weekly, a final, more forceful condemnation of the literature that her father foisted upon her as a child. Structured like a confessional—the first panel reads “Authors, bless me, for I have sinned”—the narrative’s lament for books unread quickly becomes a jeremiad against the “coercive paradigm” of her father’s expectations for his children’s reading (112). Allusions are not abandoned, however, as Alison is shown surrounded by books as various as *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and *The World of Pooh* while researching her next memoir. Nonetheless, the punch line comes when Alison has forsaken appropriately literary texts, and presumably the allusive confessions that come with them, turning instead to “*Harry Potter XXIV*” while averring “I’m just checking out these classical allusions” (113).

That memoir-in-progress was to be titled “Love Life: A Case Study,” an explicit treatment of the relationships occluded and interrupted in *Fun Home*. What emerged instead was 2012’s *Are You My Mother?*, the undertow of a pathologizing rhetoric in “Love Life’s” subtitle expanding out into a psychoanalytic portrait of Alison’s relationship with Helen. As in *Fun Home*, Alison’s negotiations of her familial relations (the largely literary allusions of *Fun Home* give way to a combination of psychoanalytic and literary citations in *Are You My Mother?*) at times eclipse her accounts of her romantic relations. On one particularly telling page, Bechdel charts the relationships in her life on a graph, including a line for romantic attachments only below lines for both her mother and her therapists (22). This graph is bracketed, like much of the memoir, by scenes in her therapist’s office, and the accompanying text centers on her reading of the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. As in *Fun Home*, Alison’s romantic attachments
appear throughout *Are You My Mother?* yet never wholly transfix its narrative attention. How these bonds can be more fully and directly imagined remains an open question, one Bechdel herself continues to negotiate in her ongoing exploration of the possibilities of graphic memoir.

Notes

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1. Given the recent publication date of *Fun Home*, the critical genealogy of the memoir is excitingly robust. Important critical assessments not treated directly in this chapter include: Gardner, Pearl, Watson, and Whitlock and Poletti.

2. At the risk of what Bechdel would no doubt dismiss as pretension, calling her a dialectical thinker is hardly a stretch. In her short 2008 composition “Compulsory Reading” for *Entertainment Weekly*, she is shown reading a copy of G. W. F. Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (alongside children’s literature and graphic narratives) as she researches her follow-up graphic memoir, *Are You My Mother?*, all the while dialectically chafing against the notion of compulsory reading so much at the heart of *Fun Home*.

3. In making such an argument about the connections between gay visual culture and Bechdel’s comics, I hope to address the disconnect Hillary Chute rightly discerns between comics studies and visual culture studies more generally (*Graphic Women* 221 n.18).

4. Such debates are typified by Rebecca Beirne’s trenchant response to Kathleen Martindale’s and Gabrielle Dean’s critiques of *Dykes to Watch Out For* (169 ff.).

5. To quote from Bechdel’s early *Dykes to Watch Out For* strip titled “The Rule,” a cultural text passes the test if: “One, it has to have at least two women in it . . . who, two, talk to each other about, three, something besides a man” (22–23).

6. Ariela Freedman makes an analogous point in her essay “Drawing on Modernism in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*: “From the beginning, then, Bechdel has juxtaposed the tragic and the comic, the literary and the personal, and established canonical ‘high modernist’ literature with the emerging graphic narrative. […] Bechdel is clearly staging the legitimacy of the graphic narrative as inheritor of the modernist tradition” (128, 130).

For a more detailed argument about contemporary graphic narratives as one afterlife of literary modernism, see my essay “Comics Against Themselves: Chris Ware’s Graphic Narratives as Literature.”


