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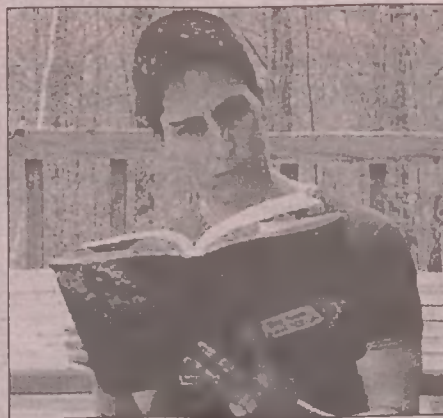
Lesbian cartoonist's memoir of adolescence chock full of comedic recollections

Author and illustrator of the acclaimed "Dykes to Watch Out For," Alison Bechdel, has taken a tried-and-true genre — the coming out story — and given it several novel twists. Presented as a graphic novel, Bechdel reveals that she wasn't the only queer member of the household.

While "Fun Home" primarily concerns Alison Bechdel's semi-dysfunctional childhood in rural Pennsylvania, a large portion of the narrative concerns her thorny relationship with her father. Bruce Bechdel was a full-time high school English teacher, their town's part-time mortician, a passionate antiques collector and meticulous restorer of their Gothic Revival home. "He was an alchemist of appearance, a savant of surface, a Daedalus of décor," his daughter writes. "He used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not. He appeared to be an ideal husband and father, for example. But would an ideal husband have sex with teenage boys?"

As it turns out, Bruce Bechdel was a closeted homosexual (or at the very least, bisexual) who channeled most of his energies into his passions of antiques and restoration; he was especially fond of obelisks and flower-shaped vases. Between his obsessions with appearance and his distant, often icy demeanor to his family in private, "it was like being raised not by Jimmy Stewart but by Martha Stewart," his daughter recalls. "I grew to resent the way my father treated his furniture like children and his children like furniture."

However, as Alison grew older and more interested in reading the many books her father had in his vast library, a tenuous bond began forming between them. Her coming out during college strengthened that connection, but it would prove to be short-lived. Not long afterward, her father was struck and killed by a truck; his family would always wonder if this truly was an accident, or a successful suicide.

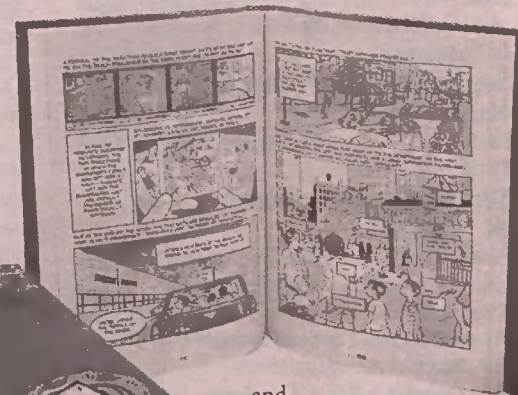


The captivating Alison Bechdel

Not surprisingly, Bechdel compares her kin to the Addams Family, noting how they lived in an old house festooned with ornate bric-a-brac and had a cavalier attitude toward death (working in the family-owned funeral home

will do that to you). Both she and her mother bore striking resemblances to Wednesday and Morticia, and occasionally, bats would wander into the living room on sultry summer nights.

Whether a deliberate nod to Charles Addams' celebrated, sfumato cartoons or not, the panels of "Fun Home" are tinged with a murky teal duotone effect which perfectly suits the book's bleak-yet-upbeat tone. Able to stretch beyond the cramped confines of a newspaper comic strip, Bechdel creates vistas



and tableaux of uncommon grace, her drawings bursting with activity in both foreground and background, like the multilayered works of Alan Moore.

In another similarity to Moore's works, "Fun Home" abounds with literary allusions, partly because Bechdel's parents were intellectuals, English teachers and voracious readers. Her father heavily identified with F. Scott Fitzgerald and "The Great Gatsby," while her mother concentrated on her master's thesis and community theatre productions like "The Importance of Being Earnest." "I employ these allusions... not only as descriptive devices, but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms," Bechdel explains. "Our home was like an artists' colony. We ate together, but otherwise were absorbed in our separate pursuits."

When Bechdel states, "I'd been upstaged, demoted from protagonist in my own drama to comic relief in my parents' tragedy" early in "Fun Home," this quickly becomes a recurring theme in her early life. Invariably, it seemed like important moments in her childhood would be relegated to the background by the consequences of the "elephant in the room" — her father's badly concealed sexual orientation and escapades.

Ultimately, "Fun Home" is a wry, cathartic journey that will likely retain a special place in its reader's heart. As Bechdel says in her dedication to her mother and brothers, "We did have a lot of fun, in spite of everything." This book will confirm to newcomers what longtime "Dykes" aficionados have known for years — that Alison Bechdel is a talent to watch out for. ▀

info:
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