

# Alison Bechdel: A "Dyke to Watch Out For"

by C.A. Whittemore

On March 3, Alison Bechdel made one of her recent "forays into (the) Lesbian Nation" (press release) with a visit to Malaprop's Bookstore and Café in downtown Asheville. Bechdel's visit is another example of Malaprop's continued commitment to providing a space where readers can meet writers.

Bechdel's comic strips are appreciated by a wide range of audiences. Her best selling comic books: *Dykes To Watch Out For*, *More Dykes To Watch Out For*, and *New, Improved! Dykes To Watch Out For* have earned Bechdel much respect and notoriety, too, making her a popular guest.

Bechdel was enthusiastically and warmly received by approximately thirty-two lesbians, two gay men, and unidentified others, who didn't seem to mind at all that she was twenty minutes tardy. After making apologies for being late (she couldn't find the place), Bechdel explained she had not come to make a speech, but rather to answer questions about her work. At first the audience was timid and quiet, but Bechdel's open, friendly demeanor soon set the tone. Once at ease, the audience began to satisfy their curiosity about Alison Bechdel the person and the cartoonist.

Bechdel grew up in rural Pennsylvania. Ever since she could hold a crayon, Bechdel loved to draw. As a youngster, she found inspiration from *MAD* magazine, and considers it to have

been formative to her work as a cartoonist.

In 1979, while attending Oberlin College, Bechdel "came out." Soon after graduation, she moved to New York City. While there, Bechdel began to do volunteer work for *Womanews*. Then, in 1983, her first *Dykes To Watch Out For* was published in the Lesbian Pride issue of *Womanews*.

The main characters in Bechdel's comic strip series are Mo, the everydyke; Clarice, the ex-lover/law student; and Lois, Mo's non-monogamous colleague. Later Bechdel added Harriet, Sparrow and Toni. Bechdel does not base her characters on friends; instead, she considers her characters to be composites of different personality types. Bechdel approaches the creation of her characters as a sculptress: "I chip away until I can see who they are and what they are saying," she says.

Most of Bechdel's themes are based on current events and "slices of everyday lesbian life..." (press release). Although many of Bechdel's scenarios involve the young, same-cultured, "politically correct" urban lesbian, she also includes vignettes from a wide range of experiences in the lives of other lesbians.

Just as we are grateful for the many laughs and flashes of inspiration that Bechdel has shared with us in her works, she is grateful to the efforts of the past movements which have made a safe place for her expressions. "I'm not at all



Photo by Anahid Sarkissian

brave...so many people before me have created this space," says Bechdel. "I couldn't be doing what I am now ten years ago."

Presently, Bechdel is working on a new book which will be out next spring (yes, you can wait that long). She is also excited about having her work translated into German. As for the future, Bechdel hopes always to be involved in pushing forward to create more and more safe places for expressions.

Of all the questions the audience asked, only a couple remain to tease our curiosity. Now that Bechdel resides on an island in Vermont, will her characters move into rural settings? And will "Dykes To Watch Out For" remain a women-only space? Stay tuned! ▼

# Lillian Powell Elected to Board

On February 21, WNC activist Lillian Powell was elected to serve on the Board of Directors of the WNC Chapter of the North Carolina Civil Liberties Union. Powell is a charter member of the Southern Appalachian Lesbian and Gay Alliance (SALGA), which was founded in November, 1987. She also serves as head of the Coalition for Progressive Action, a group working for passage of a non-discrimination resolution in Asheville and Buncombe County which includes sexual orientation.

Powell's work with the Coalition brought her into contact with members of the local chapter of the NCCLU. The WNC Chapter is an endorser of the resolution and has been active in the Coalition. Their recognition of Powell's outstanding and tireless work as head of the Coalition led to her being nominated to the local NCCLU Board. ▼

# Joan Marshall's Ministry Featured

*Episcopal Life*, a national publication of the Episcopal Church, recently featured Joan Marshall, Deacon at All Souls Episcopal Church in Asheville. The article reported on Marshall's ministry to the gay and lesbian community of Asheville, and to people with AIDS. Warren Tonn, Randy W., Bill Allen, Bill Bednarek, Tom Amerson, and Cynthia Janes were mentioned in the article, too.

Thanks to Malaprop's sponsorship, *Community Connections* now has a six-month commitment to carrying Alison Bechdel's cartoon strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*. This makes *Community Connections* one of the 31 lesbian/gay, progressive and feminist publications in the U.S., Canada, and Scotland to carry Bechdel's work.



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# Dykes to Watch Out For

**ESCAPE From PLANET HELL**  
© 1991 BY ALISON BECHDEL

Panel 1: "HI, MO. HOW'S MARRIED LIFE?" "WE'RE NOT MARRIED. SINGERS! WE JUST MOVED IN TOGETHER! SHEESH!"

Panel 2: "SO HOW'S LIVING IN SIN?" "THERE'S NOT MUCH SINNING GOING ON EITHER, IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN. WE'VE BOTH BEEN SICK."

Panel 3: "I HEARD SOME THING'S GOING AROUND. CHILLS, NIGHTMARES, NAUSEA?" "YEAH. THE NEW WORLD ORDER FLU."

Panel 4: "TELL ME ABOUT IT. I HEARLY LOST MY LUNCH WHEN I HEARD BUJIN'S LATEST. HE SAYS THE HIGH NUMBER OF BLACK SOLDIERS WHO FOUGHT IN THE GULF JUST GOES TO SHOW THAT THE FEN-TAGON'S THE GREATEST EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER AROUND!"

Panel 5: "PLEASE. SINGERS? I'M STILL A LITTLE WOBBLY." "SORRY, ACTUALLY. I CAME IN HERE TO GET AWAY FROM IT ALL. GOT ANY GOOD BOOKS TO TAKE MY MIND OFF THE WORLD?"

Panel 6: "YOU MEAN SOMETHING LITERARY OR SOMETHING FUN?" "YOU KNOW THE KIND OF BOOK YOU DON'T WANT ANY ONE TO KNOW YOU ACTUALLY READ. SOMETHING TOTALLY ESCAPIST."

Panel 7: "HOW ABOUT 'AFTERNOON OF AN ARTICHOKER'? VERY STEAMY. IT'S ABOUT AN ORGY AT AN ALL-WOMEN'S ORGANIC FARMER'S MARKET." "MAYBE. WHAT ELSE YOU GOT?"

Panel 8: "THIS IS A BIG SELLER. 'GAD, YOUR NET HERE.' IT'S ABOUT HOW THE LADY'S CHIHUAHUA AND HUSBAND'S TERrier HELP HER SOLVE A MURDER." "FOR TWENTY BUCKS? ARE YOU INSANE?"

Panel 9: "OH, OH, OH! JUST TRYING TO DO MY JOB. THIS ISN'T A LENDING LIBRARY, YOU KNOW?" "WHAT'S THIS ABOUT?"

Panel 10: "OH, IT'S GREAT! THIS LESBIAN SPACE TRAVELLER GETS MARoonED ON A PLANET OF ANDROIDS WITH A SEVERE TESTOSTERONE IMBALANCE, AND SHE HAS TO ESCAPE BEFORE THEY BLOW UP THE ENTIRE GALAXY IN A FIT OF MACHO PRIDE!"

Panel 11: "...OR MAYBE SOMETHING IN A NICE ROMANCE NOVEL?"