

## Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* a Thoughtful Memoir

Alison Bechdel 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. In her new book, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Houghton Mifflin, June) Alison Bechdel is finally telling her own story.

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 women'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 personal part of the tale, but it eluded her. Instead, she turned her creative efforts to an entirely different project: drawing *Dykes to Watch Out For*. Years have passed, and she is finally ready to

tell her own story.

In *Fun Home*, you will 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.

*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, that portrays the parent-child relationship — and the complex longing therein — in moving and universal terms.

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

**A:** 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

I WAS SPARTAN TO MY FATHER'S ATHENIAN. MODERN TO HIS VICTORIAN.



BUTCH TO HIS NELLY.

UTILITARIAN TO HIS AESTHETE.



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 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.

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

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.

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

**A:** I did have a very visually stimulating upbringing, what with all the wallpaper patterns and scrollwork and gaudy Victorian bric-a-brac — not to

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