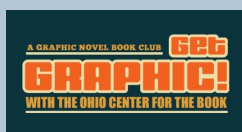
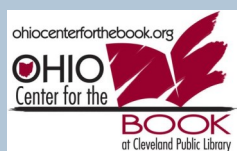


This toolkit is one of the many resources offered by *Get Graphic!* with the Ohio Center for the Book at Cleveland Public Library.

We aim to promote the study of comics in spaces from public libraries to academic institutions and all those outside and between.

Created by Ohio Center for the Book Scholar-in-Residence, Valentino L. Zullo, Ph.D.



Get Graphic! Toolkit

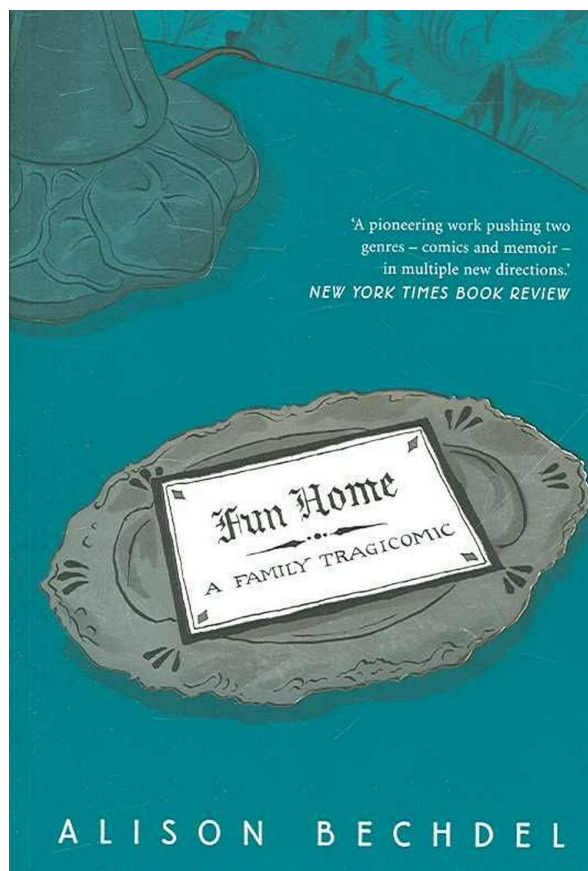
Fun Home by Alison Bechdel

About the Comic

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic draws upon the life story of Alison Bechdel growing up in rural Pennsylvania, her coming of age, and her coming out story. Running parallel to her story in the comic is that of her father (the man with whom she begins this story) who remained closeted during his lifetime and dies during Alison's young adulthood.

Both memoir of her experience and elegy for her father, the comic illustrates two variations of queer life in Midwestern America in the latter-half of the twentieth century. Bechdel reflects upon her family relations, her helping to run the funeral home (called by her family the "fun home"), her going off to college, and finally her coming to terms with her sexuality and the loss of her father.

While *Fun Home* is Bechdel's personal story, it also captures a distinct divide between growing up as a white queer person before and after the Stonewall Riots evidenced by the different lives Alison Bechdel and her father Bruce were able to lead, a monument to queer history in the United States. Her comic documents the pain hidden in domestic drama for many families and the silence that caused so much pain for LGBTQ individuals for decades.



Who is Alison Bechdel?

Alison Bechdel is one of the most celebrated cartoonists creating comics today. She gained a following with the success of her syndicated strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which ran from 1983 to 2008. She has returned to the characters on a few occasions but has otherwise left the strip behind. Her strip popularized the “Bechdel Test” or, as she wants it to be known, the “Bechdel-Wallace Test” which challenges us to identify films where there are two women who talk to one another about something other than a man.

Her two memoirs, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) and *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* (2012), catapulted Bechdel into the mainstream as they have garnered her praise for documenting the pain of domestic drama, creating her stunning art, and giving a voice to lesbian identity. Her first memoir, *Fun Home*, was turned into a musical in 2013, winning a Tony award in 2015 for “Best Musical” among other categories and is also scheduled to be a feature film.

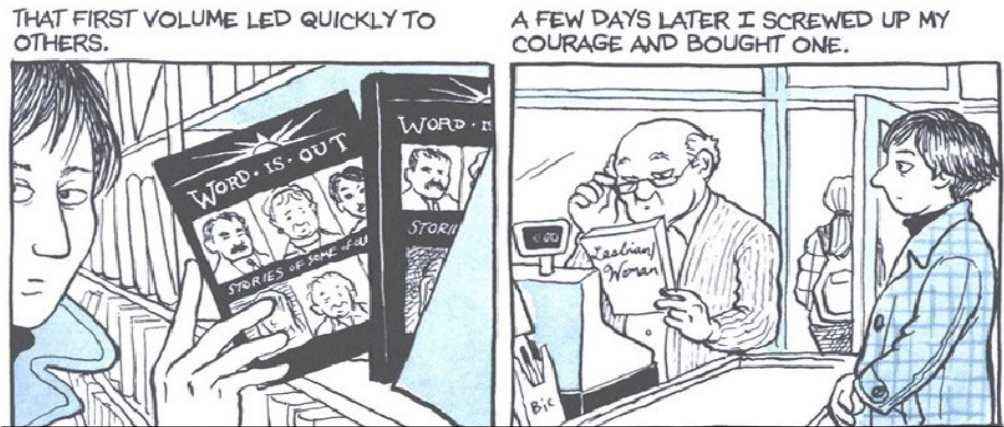


Figure 1 *Fun Home*, p. 75.

Context: LGBTQ Movement in U.S.

While Bechdel’s memoirs are not as politically conscious as her syndicated comic strip, the memoir remains a monument to the LGBTQ movement in the United States both in its success and in the story it tells. One of the key differences between the life that Alison is able to lead in her story and the one that her father led is the fact that one grew up before the Stonewall Riots and one lived after those events in New York City. Bruce Bechdel was closeted, and Alison Bechdel was an open political activist documenting the strivings and successes of a movement. Alison was able to live her life more freely; a life that Bruce Bechdel may never have imagined being possible.

The LGBTQ movement began in the United States with a riot when Marsha P. Johnson threw a brick at police during what is now known as the Stonewall Riots on June 28, 1969. For years, LGBTQ rights activists fought for legal acceptance of sexuality and gender identity, arguing for fair housing, protections from being terminated from employment based on prejudicial reasons, marriage equality, and more. During the 1980s to the present, activists have fought for treatment for HIV/AIDS which has disproportionately affected the LGBTQ community. While there is still much work to be done, the United States legalized gay marriage in 2015, a landmark event for LGBTQ activism marking a major win with much more work to be done before we all have equal rights.

Questions for Discussion

1. *Fun Home* is filled with allusions to other works of high and low art including Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, to more popular texts such as *The Haunt of Fear* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. How does Bechdel's inclusion of both high and low art draw our attention to the status of the comic we are reading? How should we as readers think about this medium that has been both derided by critics yet has remained more popular than other art forms?
2. Bechdel captures the presence and absence of her father, referring to him as both ever present and something like a phantom limb. How does Bechdel use the comics form to depict his presence and absence simultaneously? How does a form focused on depicting bodies in space captures absence?
3. Bechdel's ambivalent feelings toward her father are very clear as she stresses both the terror and tenderness of this man. How does her story capture the duality of her feelings, the ambivalence of both loving him and rejecting him? How are we to feel about Bruce Bechdel at the end of the book?
4. *Fun Home* includes numerous maps including those of Bechdel's hometown to the mapping of the family in their specific location in the home. How does Bechdel use comics and cartography in her story to illustrate her personal story? How does the comics form lend itself to and/or utilize similar methods resembling cartography?
5. Archiving and redrawing archives is an important part of *Fun Home*'s story as Bechdel includes re-creations of photographs, diaries, and other materials (Figs. 2 and 3). How does the re-creation of material in comics form give us a different experience with memoir, a genre often defined by personal experience and description of those events? How does the re-creation of archival material affect our perception of her story? What effect does it have that Bechdel redrew these artifacts rather than include photographs?
6. Helen Bechdel, Alison's mother, remains emotionally absent throughout much of the book as this story features Alison's relationship with Bruce Bechdel. Still, her mother, like her sibling, are depicted physically. How does Bechdel use the comics form to distance her mother from the reader and also capture her as physically present through most of the events of young Alison's life? How does the comics form give space to bodies?
7. Bechdel's story is situated within LGBTQ history in the United States. What does her story tell us about that evolving history? What has changed since the publication of this book? What type of work still needs to be accomplished?
8. Bechdel appears to begin to develop obsessive-compulsive tendencies during childhood as she depicts in her story (Fig. 2). How does her mother's relationship with her allow her to process the anxiety at the center of this defense mechanism?

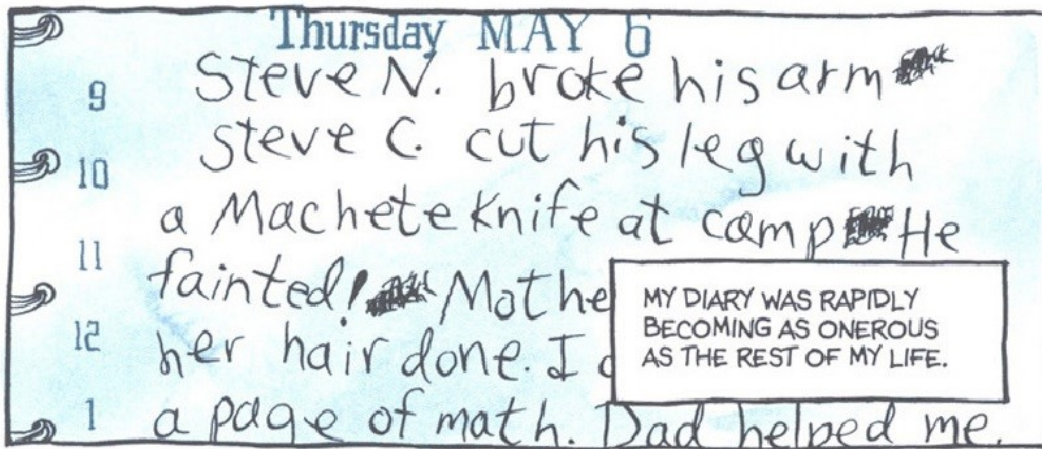
Interviews & Additional Questions

Below are recommended interviews with the creator and supplemental questions if you want to take your book discussion a step further.

- [“The Alison Bechdel Interview.”](http://www.tcj.com/the-alison-bechdel-interview/) *The Comics Journal*, April 2007.
<http://www.tcj.com/the-alison-bechdel-interview/>
 - In this interview, Bechdel reflects on her art, stating, “I always felt like there was something inherently autobiographical about cartooning, and that’s why there was so much of it. I still believe that. I haven’t exactly worked out my theory of why, but it does feel like it almost demands people to write autobiographies.”
 - Why might cartooning lends itself so well to autobiography? Is it the often hand-wrought quality of the work or the individuality of each person’s hand? What other connections are there between autobiography and cartooning?
- Nicole Georges, [“The Nib Interview Alison Bechdel,”](https://thenib.com/the-nib-interview-alison-bechdel/) *The Nib*, March 4, 2019.
<https://thenib.com/the-nib-interview-alison-bechdel/>
 - In conversation with Nicole Georges, Bechdel reveals part of the impetus for *Fun Home* as she reflects, “I had an idea when I was doing the book that it was going to heal my family.”
 - Why is there an association with healing and creating memoir? Healing may not be the goal of memoir, but what can the creation of memoir achieve?
- John Zuarino, [“An Interview with Alison Bechdel,”](http://www.bookslut.com/features/2007_03_010764.php) *Bookslut*, March 2007.
http://www.bookslut.com/features/2007_03_010764.php
 - In response to calls for her book to be banned from a library in Missouri, Bechdel responds, “I don’t know. There is one explicit sex scene in my book, but it’s a little crazy. It’s sort of exciting, too, in a way, because I feel it’s very much about this moment in the evolution of the graphic narrative form where people don’t know what to do with graphic novels, and there’s this assumption that because they’re illustrated, they’re going to draw children in. It’s just part of that whole adjustment to what to do with these books and starting to think of them as a category.”
 - While much time has passed since this interview, the medium of comics is still finding its status though it often remains associated with children. How do we define comics and how do we curate such works? How does the difficulty with categorizing comics lead to such skepticism and repudiation of the form?

MY I THINKS WERE GOSSAMER SUTURES IN THAT GAPING RIFT BETWEEN SIGNIFIER AND SIGNIFIED. TO FORTIFY THEM, I PERSEVERATED UNTIL THEY WERE BLOTS.

5



MY MOTHER APPARENTLY DECIDED THAT GIVING ME SOME ATTENTION MIGHT HELP, AND BEGAN READING TO ME WHILE I HAD MY BATH. BUT IT WAS TOO MUCH, TOO LATE.



MATTERS WORSENERD IN MY DIARY. TO SAVE TIME I CREATED A SHORTHAND VERSION OF I THINK, A CURVY CIRCUMFLEX.

SOON I BEGAN DRAWING IT RIGHT OVER NAMES AND PRONOUNS. IT BECAME A SORT OF AMULET, warding off evil FROM MY SUBJECTS.

SCHOOL. Tammi came down. We played casket with an old box. Dad wanted me to sweep the patio. He said I

Sun. JUNE 13
~~Mother~~ + I went to church. Molly came home with us. ~~We~~ went swimming. Dad + I brought up the cushions for the

Figure 2 *Fun Home*, p. 142.

Scholarship & Additional Questions

If you want to advance your discussion further, consider pairing the comic with one of following scholarly articles and supplemental questions.

- Robin Bernstein, "'I'm Very Happy to Be in the Reality-Based Community': Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Digital Photography, and George W. Bush," *American Literature* 89, no. 1 (2017): 121-54.
 - In her essay, Bernstein historicizes Bechdel in light of the Bush presidency and technological developments of the time, turning to Bechdel's use of the digital camera. Bechdel says she took nearly 4,000 pictures to create her memoir. Bernstein writes, "because posing for photographs is a form of performance...Through digital photography, Bechdel anchored her graphic memoir—itsself engaged with the nature of reality—in her full, performing body" (p. 126).
 - Memoir often falls into this slippery place of being both a mix of fact and fiction due to the fallibility of memory. How does Bechdel's use of the camera to depict reality so accurately then ask us to re-evaluate this divide?
- Meghan C. Fox, "Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*: Queer Futurity and the Metamodernist Memoir." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 65, no. 3 (2019): 511-37.
 - Fox considers Bechdel's work in the context of modernist fiction. Specifically, she considers how Bechdel queers modernist history as she argues, "When drawing on the work of straight male modernists, Bechdel queers their narratives; she self-consciously replaces Stephen and Bloom's status as exiles in *Ulysses* (1922) with her and her father's experiences of marginalization as queer artists" (p. 514).
 - How does Bechdel's queer use of these literary figures help us to understand the journey of Alison and her father?
- Christopher Pizzino, *Arresting Development: Comics at the Boundaries of Literature* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2016), 106-33.
 - Christopher Pizzino considers the ways that comics in the United States have been identified as juvenile, which leads to identifying comics by their literariness including *Fun Home*. He retorts, though, "[t]o read *Fun Home* for the literary references ... is not unlike concealing a copy of *Playboy* behind more respectable reading material (or claiming that one reads it; for the articles." While the literary references drew many readers, "[t]o embrace the work as a comic, however, is to understand this glamour [the literariness] as merely one – and perhaps not the most compelling – of its distinct, often complicated pleasures" (pp.118, 133).
 - How does *Fun Home* situate itself within literary history but also remind readers consciously of its status as a comic?

IT COULD NOT HAVE ESCAPED MY FATHER'S NOTICE THAT DURING SCOTT'S OWN STINT IN THE ARMY HE WROTE HIS FIRST NOVEL AND BEGAN COURTING ZELDA.

DAD'S LETTERS TO MOM, WHICH HAD NOT BEEN PARTICULARLY DEMONSTRATIVE UP TO THIS POINT, BEGAN TO GROW LUSH WITH FITZGERALDESQUE SENTIMENT.

7



Do you know I love you. That made me feel so good I'll say it again. I love you I love you I love you, you crazy wonderful girl. I know what I need a drink. This would be our night to sit and drink and look at one another.

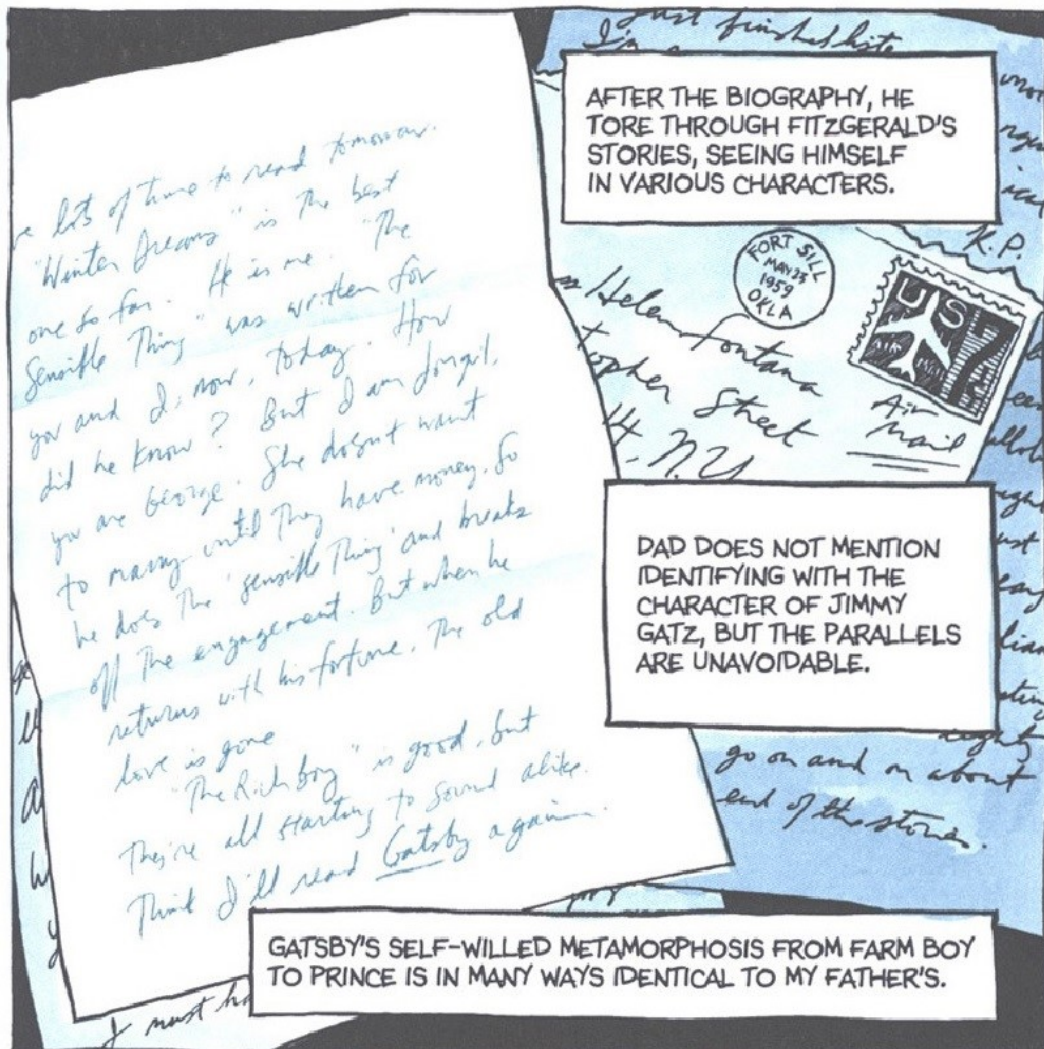


Figure 3 *Fun Home*, p. 63

Further Supplemental Materials

Additional resources to supplement this toolkit

- The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund offers a valuable [“case study”](http://cbldef.org/banned-challenged-comics/case-study-fun-home/) of *Fun Home*. (<http://cbldef.org/banned-challenged-comics/case-study-fun-home/>)
- IWL Rutgers, [“Inked / An Interview with Alison Bechdel.”](https://youtu.be/g7TWm2CPZCo) (<https://youtu.be/g7TWm2CPZCo>)
- Media Factory, [“Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*.”](https://youtu.be/P1PV2F-mRHw) (<https://youtu.be/P1PV2F-mRHw>)
- IOWA City UNESCO City of Literature, [“Writers on the Fly: Alison Bechdel.”](https://youtu.be/gT-JjXe8a4I) (<https://youtu.be/gT-JjXe8a4I>)
- Margaret Galvan, “The Lesbian Norman Rockwell’: Alison Bechdel and Queer Grassroots Networks,” *American Literature* 90, no. 2 (2018): 407-38.

Further Reading

If you are interested in other works by Alison Bechdel:

- *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).
- *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008).

If you are interested in reading stories about queer identity:

- *Stuck Rubber Baby* by Howard Cruse (1995, reprinted by First Second, 2020).
- *Nothing Lasts Forever* by Sina Grace (Image Comics, 2017).
- *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* by Emil Ferris (Fantagraphics, 2017).

If you are interested in stories documenting or reflecting political changes in the U.S.:

- *March* (Books One, Two, and Three) by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell (Top Shelf, 2013, 2015, 2016).
- *The Complete Wimmen's Comix* edited by Trina Robbins (Fantagraphics, 2016).
- *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio* by Derf Backderf (Abrams ComicsArt, 2020).