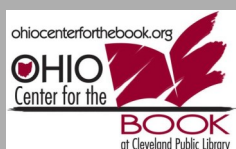


This toolkit is one of the many resources offered by Get Graphic! with the Ohio Center for the Book at Cleveland Public Library.

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

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



# Get Graphic! Toolkit

## *Are You My Mother?*

### by Alison Bechdel

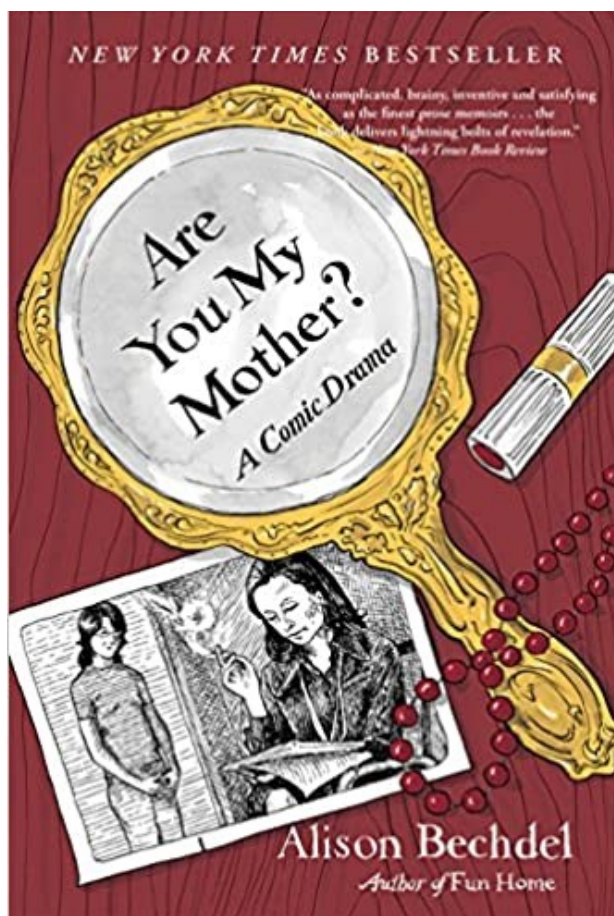
## About the Comic:

Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* is a sequel to her best-selling memoir *Fun Home*. While her previous memoir told the story of her relationship with her father, this second book relates the story of Alison and her relationship with her mother while also documenting her own psychoanalytic psychotherapy.

Informed by psychoanalysis, Bechdel begins each chapter with a dream, which illuminates the themes of the seven chapters organized by seven concepts from the theories of D. W. Winnicott, a British psychoanalyst. By organizing each chapter around a psychological concept, Bechdel gives the reader insight into her mind and her relationships and even offers a crash course in Winnicottian psychoanalysis.

As Bechdel reflects on her relationship with her mother throughout the comic, she comes to understand how this primary relationship defines every aspect of her identity including her capacity for creativity. While documenting the love between mother and daughter, Bechdel also captures the complexities of their relationship as she reflects on their history.

Bechdel documents the way in which our lives are not chronological but are rather moments continually inflected by our early attachments and histories. This stunning memoir demonstrates the power of comics to document personal struggle and the experience of mental health and treatment.



# 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 1983-2008. 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.” The test 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 her works have garnered her praise for documenting the pain of domestic drama, for her stunning art, and for giving a voice to lesbian identity. Her first memoir, *Fun Home*, was turned into a musical in 2013, won a Tony award for “Best Musical” and other categories in 2015, and is slated to be a feature film, too.



Figure 1. *Are You My Mother?*, p. 21.

## Context: Graphic Medicine

As both a genre of comics storytelling and a practice within health studies and health care, graphic medicine aims to better understand the experiences of health and illness. Many comics creators have used cartooned images to bear witness to the way bodies and minds exist in space and time. This attention to the experience of mind and body has led many creators to tell stories considered part of the genre now known as “graphic medicine,” stories which document experiences of personal, familial, and communal health and illness. In particular, graphic medicine proponents recognize that these stories can help in providing healthcare by doctors (as well as nurses, social workers, physician assistants, etc). These graphic narratives also help us to think about new ways to consider health and medicine as the creator’s personal point of view offers alternative vantage points from which to understand clinical experiences. The experience of symptoms and the diagnosis of them can then be understood from the perspective of the patient through their drawn vision. This method of storytelling allows for others to better understand the experience of illness and to create a shared experience for others that have also experienced a particular treatment or diagnosis. The *Graphic Medicine Manifesto* (Penn State University Press, 2015) is one example of a book-length collection of essays which explores the uses of comics in medicine based upon Rita Charon’s model of narrative medicine.

# Questions for Discussion

1. Bechdel begins each chapter with one of her dreams which, like comics, are often fragmented and condensed. How does the inclusion of a dream offer us insight into thinking about how comics work as a medium of expression? How does the comic illuminate our understanding of the interpretation of dreams? How might we further connect the parallels between dreams and the comics form?
2. Each chapter of the comic is thematically organized around one of the theories of D. W. Winnicott. How does the organization of the chapters through these theories affect the process of reading memoir, a story about one's personal life? After reading Bechdel's crash course in Winnicottian psychoanalysis, consider thinking about the other applications of these theories to other comics, films or novels.
3. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel follows her father's interest in literary history featuring F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce and other classical authors. She turns to Woolf and others briefly in her first memoir, but she heavily features those classical male authors. In this second memoir, Bechdel embraces an alternative literary history featuring the work of Woolf, Adrienne Rich, and others as central to her story. How does Bechdel create a new literary history in this book that we might follow? What do we learn in her rebellion against the male-centered canon?
4. The comic features Bechdel's personal psychotherapy/psychoanalysis, which she draws from different vantage points. How does the comics form allow the reader to inhabit the space of the treatment? How does the comics form grant us insight into the processes of therapy in ways that other forms might not be able to do so easily? What insights into the therapeutic process do we gain here?
5. As with *Fun Home*, Bechdel redraws archival materials, including photographs, diary entries and even transcriptions of her mother's conversations. How does Bechdel use archival material differently in this book? How does the redrawing of these materials ask the reader to re-consider and re-view these images in ways that would not have been possible if they were simply reprinted?
6. Historically mental health treatment has been a practice used against queer people. In her comic, though, Bechdel explores queer identity in this story through a theory of mental health offering something of a reparative gesture. In what ways does her book reclaim a space for queer identity in mental health? How does her book offer insight into the particulars of queer health?
7. Bechdel's takes the title of her comics memoir from P. D. Eastman's famous children's book of the same name. What insight does the children's book offer to our understanding of Bechdel's story?
8. Bechdel illustrates many scenes where her mother was caring including the scene where they sit next to one another on the bed as her mother writes in Alison's diary. This scene utilizes the grammar of comics by creating a small space between, which resembles a sort of comics gutter (p.69). How does the comics form perhaps serve as a useful form to explore the relationship which was conveyed through these quiet moments? How does Bechdel use the form itself to capture her love for her mother?

# Interviews & Additional Questions

- Peter Terzian, "Family Matters: Alison Bechdel on 'Are You My Mother?,'" *The Paris Review*, May 9 2012. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2012/05/09/alison-bechdel-on-%E2%80%9998are-you-my-mother%E2%80%9999/> (shortened url: <https://bit.ly/3rFe4Rk>)
  - Referring to the different uses of the text boxes above panels, Bechdel states: "I was really worried with this book that those connections were not going to happen. Even now I'll pick it up and start reading and it seems like a series of non sequiturs. But my hope is that somehow these different strands cohere. I love comics because of that built-in disjunction between the words and the pictures, even when they're explicitly complementary and illustrating one another. I like pushing that space and being able to have two or three ideas going at once."
  - How do the competing narratives affect the reading of this story? How do comics allow for competing narrative be told simultaneously?
- Ella Christoph, "Graphic Memory: Alison Bechdel asks, 'Are You My Mother?,'" *New City Lit*, April 27, 2012. <https://lit.newcity.com/2012/04/27/graphic-memory-alison-bechdel-asks-are-you-my-mother/> (Shortened url: <https://bit.ly/2Ocykvb>)
  - Bechdel discusses her choice of color in her books as she describes, "In both of my books I use the color often in a representational way, like the green is often foliage or clothing, the red is often bricks or leather chairs. If you wanted to do something more abstract, sure you could use anything, but for the kind of work I'm doing there weren't that many choices. I picked green for the Dad book because it just... seemed right. I associate green with flowers and flora and that's... my father. It was a grayish sort of sad tone of green that somehow captured the sad tone of the book. So when I was thinking about how to color "Are You My Mother?" I knew I wanted it to be different, I didn't want to do green again, I went with something in the red area, this brownish-red. There's something about the color of blood that I liked to indicate this physical connection to my mother, to all of our mothers."
  - How does the use of a single color affect our reading of the book? How does the red color in *Are You My Mother?* offer a distinct feel from the green of *Fun Home*?
- John Williams, "Alison Bechdel Talks About Drawing, Writing, Family and Shame," *ArtsBeat: New York Times Blog*, May 10, 2012. <https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/10/alison-bechdel-talks-about-drawing-writing-family-and-shame/> (Shortened url: <https://bit.ly/3rzS5ek>)
  - In reflecting on her influences, Bechdel states, "I would like to say I'm precisely equally influenced by authors and cartoonists. And I think that might actually be true. Edward Gorey, *Mad Magazine*, Art Spiegelman, R. Crumb, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Norman Rockwell ... all those people have informed my aesthetic sensibilities as much as the writers I admire."
  - In her memoir, Bechdel builds a family for herself out of the writers, artists and even psychoanalysts. How do those influences and these others she mentions inform the reading of the book? What other influences might be identified and how do they help us to understand Bechdel's work?





Figure 2. *Are You My Mother?*, p. 26.

# Scholarship & Additional Questions

- Shoshana Magnet, “Are you my mother? Understanding feminist therapy with Alison Bechdel,” *Women & Therapy* 40, no. 1-2 (2017): 207-227.
  - Magnet looks to understand the parent-child dynamic between Alison and her mother as she writes, “Bechdel provides a complex and nuanced account of how systemic forms of discrimination might limit our parents’ abilities. In examining the wounding done by maternal neglect, Bechdel also offers an important alternative narrative as to why adults might suffer even if the wounds in their childhood came from negligence or the withholding of affection rather than the more fully analyzed traumas of sexual abuse and physical violence. ...Rather than being filled with profound insights and moments of exciting emotional discovery, Bechdel’s memoir shows how the process of therapy is often filled with the banal and petty details of one’s life, details that, when examined from multiple angles repetitively again and again, can reveal emotional truths” (217-218).
  - Bechdel succeeds in granting us insight into the pain of her mother, cultivating our empathy for her while also understanding how Alison herself felt in these moments. How does Bechdel’s comic allow us to better understand maternal relationships?
- Vera J. Camden, “‘Cartoonish lumps’: the surface appeal of Alison Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother?*,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 9, no. 1 (2018): 93-111.
  - Camden challenges comics’s association with the juvenile, which often limits us to their power as she asserts, “comics as a form is often called ‘childish’ – appealing to children in its primitive design. But it is perhaps more accurate to observe that comics are childlike in that even when their content is adult and profoundly disturbing, their images remain transfixing, even regressive in their magnetism, and drawn to the depiction of the child’s perspective and childhood memory. The failure to elaborate the illusion of depth allows for access to a different dimension of affect – the gaze of the spare figure whose very simplicity ends up amplifying Bechdel’s spiritual quest” (101).
  - In this article, Camden points to the cartoon’s affective power, much like that of Medieval Art. In doing so, Camden illuminates the power of comics to transcend. How does this connection with the transfixing Medievalist painting offer us insight into comics’s ability to depict trauma and other events that often fall outside of verbal language?
- Małgorzata Olsza, “Photography as a Mirror in Alison Bechdel’s Graphic Memoir *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama*,” *Image & Narrative* 20, no. 3 (2019): 38-50.
  - Querying the role of photography and the cartoon in their abilities to transmit information, Olsza argues that “While photography and the drawn image “may function together to impart truth, there nevertheless remains a “distance” between the photographed and the drawn image; the latter is usually seen as belonging to a “secondary order of reality.” Drawn photographs endow graphic memoir with an additional narrative and structural dimension: they point to the tensions between “the documentary” and “the aesthetic,” which graphic memoir may help negotiate” (40).
  - How should we understand the way these different visual registers function in offering us documentary evidence?





Figure 3. Are You My Mother?, p. 65.

# Further Supplemental Materials

**Additional resources to supplement this toolkit:**

- Wall Street Journal, **“Alison Bechdel, Author of 'Are You My Mother?' - WSJ Interview”**  
([https://youtu.be/HMr0-UWe\\_9o&t=4s](https://youtu.be/HMr0-UWe_9o&t=4s)).
- The Graduate Center, CUNY, **“Queers & Comics Keynote: Alison Bechdel”**  
(<https://youtu.be/kQrKPmnrZYw>).
- KQED, **“KQED's The Writers' Block: Alison Bechdel: Are You My Mother?”**  
(<https://youtu.be/-eMuW6yLBI4>).
- BAMOrg, **“Alison Bechdel on drawing narrative, parenting, updating the dictionary.”**  
(<https://youtu.be/soNekzBwYu0>).

## Further Reading

**If you are interested in other works by Alison Bechdel:**

- *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006)
- *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008)
- *The Secret of Superhuman Strength* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021)

**If you are interested in other works of graphic medicine:**

- *Epileptic* by David B (Pantheon, 2006)
- *Taking Turns: Stories from HIV/AIDS Care Unit 371* by MK Czerwiec (Penn State University Press, 2017)
- *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* by Roz Chast (Bloomsbury, 2014)

**If you are interested in other works documenting queer identity:**

- *Spinning* by Tillie Walden (First Second, 2017)
- *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* by Emil Ferris (Fantagraphics, 2017)
- *No Straight Lines* (Fantagraphics, 2013)