

Approaches to Teaching Bechdel's *Fun Home*

Edited by

Judith Kegan Gardiner

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Biographical and Historical Time Line for Alison Bechdel

Sarah Buchmeier

Relevant page numbers in *Fun Home* are indicated in parentheses.

- 26 July 1933 Helen Augusta Fontana is born in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, to Andrew and Rachel Fontana.
- 8 Apr. 1936 Bruce Allen Bechdel is born in Beech Creek, Pennsylvania, to Claude and Dorothy Bechdel. His siblings are Paul, Jane, and Eleanor (140).
- 1959 Bruce and Helen are married in Luzern, Switzerland (71).
- 10 Sept. 1960 Alison Bechdel is born in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, to Helen and Bruce Bechdel. Her siblings are Bruce (Christian) Bechdel II and John Bechdel.
- 28 June 1969 Demonstrations against police harassment of gay, lesbian, transgender, and cross-dressed patrons of New York City's Stonewall Inn ignite movement for gay liberation in the United States (104).
- 1970 Alison Bechdel develops an obsessive-compulsive disorder (135–39, 148).
- 1974 President Nixon resigns following the Watergate trial (54, 171, 181).
- 1977–81 Bechdel attends Oberlin College (46–47, 49, 200–03, 206–10, 224).
- 1980 Bechdel comes out as a lesbian to her parents (58–59, 76–77, 210).
- 2 July 1980 Bruce Bechdel dies when hit by a truck (27–30, 50–54, 81, 89, 116–17, 124–25, 226–27, 232).
- 1983 Bechdel's first work is published in *Womannews*.
- 1983–2008 *Dykes to Watch Out For* strips published by Firebrand Books.
- 1985 The so-called Bechdel test is published in *Dykes to Watch Out For*.
- 2006 *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* is published.
- 2008 *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* is published.
- 2012 *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* is published.
- 2012 Bechdel receives a Guggenheim Fellowship and other awards.
- 2013 The musical adaptation of *Fun Home* opens at the Public Theater in New York City.
- 2014 Bechdel is awarded a MacArthur Fellowship.
- 26 June 2015 The United States Supreme Court legalizes gay marriage.
- 2015 Bechdel marries Holly Rae Taylor.
- 2015 *Fun Home* debuts on Broadway and wins a Tony Award for Best Musical.

The Instructor's Library

Judith Kegan Gardiner

Texts and Interviews

There is one version of Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Bechdel keeps an active blog and listing of her publications, interviews, reviews, and events at her Web site (dykestowatchoutfor.com). The site's biographical section complements the time line in the present volume, which provides page numbers in *Fun Home* for personal and historical events mentioned in the text. This essay does not address the literary and theoretical sources of *Fun Home*, which are the focus of two following essays in this book. This essay briefly summarizes a number of resources that teachers may find helpful in a variety of courses: texts, interviews, and videos by Bechdel; books on teaching graphic novels; scholarship addressing comics as a genre and *Fun Home* in particular; resources for incorporating the musical adaptation of the graphic novel; and comments from instructors who have taught *Fun Home* in a variety of academic settings.

A useful text for teachers of *Fun Home* is the compilation of Bechdel's twenty-five years of cartooning, *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*, which follows members of an imagined lesbian community through its connections, celebrations, and breakups, all in the context of the characters' ambivalence toward United States culture as a whole. The volume includes most of Bechdel's eleven prior publications of her serial comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, with a continuing set of central characters, in particular Mo, the politically correct lesbian who voices some exaggerated versions of Bechdel's own opinions on contemporary American culture. The multicultural lesbian urban community portrayed in these comic strips contrasts with the more homogeneous semirural environment of *Fun Home*, and the single-page *Dykes* comics make good classroom comparisons with both the themes and the visual techniques of the memoir. Bechdel's Web site includes an archive of the comic strips and "cast biographies" of her characters. Bechdel's second memoir is titled *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*. Like *Dykes to Watch Out For*, it features relationships among women, and it also has an emphasis on psychoanalysis.

Many teachers use Bechdel's online interviews and talks to engage students. The Internet provides the classroom with rich possibilities to view scenes from the musical adaptation of *Fun Home*, to hear Bechdel's lectures, and to watch her drawing technique, which involves conducting historical research, reproducing family photographs and letters, and posing herself in the positions in which she wants to draw her characters. Particularly informative is the detailed demonstration of her quest for accuracy and her drawing technique in the five-minute

video “Alison Bechdel: Creating *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*.” Useful interviews with Bechdel include those with Terry Gross (Bechdel, “Lesbian Cartoonist”) and with Hillary L. Chute (Bechdel, Interview), published in Chute’s *Outside the Box*, which includes interviews with other graphic artists that instructors might compare with Bechdel, such as Lynda Barry, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Scott McCloud, Joe Sacco, Art Spiegelman, and Chris Ware. Bechdel’s hour-long keynote lecture at the 2015 Queers and Comics Conference is available online (Bechdel, “Queers”), as is the half-hour talk with Jeanine Tesori and Lisa Kron on *Theater Talk* (Bechdel et al.). A short video clip discusses Bechdel’s childhood experience with obsessive-compulsive disorder (Bechdel, “OCD”). In an interview with Adam R. Critchfield and Jack Pula, Bechdel focuses on her positive experiences with psychotherapy and her changing views about the origins of her homosexuality (Bechdel, “On Psychotherapy”). In an interview with Judith Thurman in *The New Yorker*, Bechdel shares her reactions to the musical version of *Fun Home* and her plans for a graphic book on contemporary fitness trends, including her own experiences with karate (Thurman, “Drawn”).

A rich scholarly source is the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College, which houses the Alison Bechdel papers, described by Susan Van Dyne in this volume.

Resources for Teaching Graphic Texts

Many teachers in English departments report their own and their students’ pleasure in discussing the visual aspects of *Fun Home*, but they may also feel unprepared to do justice to the richness and complexity of texts that are simultaneously visual and verbal. Instructors have found Scott McCloud’s books useful for basic information about comics. His graphic text, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, introduces the semiotics of the comic strip, explaining how flat and static sequential drawn art represents time, motion, and emotion as well as space. Assigned in whole or in part, this book can be used to shape classroom assignments around McCloud’s concepts, such as the function of the gutters and white spaces between cartoon cells. Some instructors prefer his more recent book, *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels*, for its detailed explication of the representation of characters and emotions in graphic texts. Its comparisons between Western comics and Japanese manga provide a cross-cultural perspective. Additionally, Will Eisner’s *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* provides rich examples of a wide range of graphic techniques. An essential text is Chute’s *Why Comics?*, which puts Bechdel’s work in the context of other “comics for grown-ups” (1) and devotes much of the chapter “Why Queer?” to Bechdel and to *Fun Home* (357–87). Chute describes Bechdel’s career trajectory, from a college-era graphic self-portrait to the musical version of *Fun Home*, with particular attention to the “seed for the book” in the discovery of the “aesthetically beautiful and

shocking” photograph of the nearly nude Roy, the Bechdels’ former babysitter, which Bechdel draws as the book’s “centerfold” (360, 361, 370–71).

A foundational work in the semiotics of comics is *The System of Comics* by the Belgian scholar Thierry Groensteen, who describes the “spatio-topical system” of comics through the organization of panels and white space on the page (24). Neil Cohn uses both semiotics and cognitive theory to explain the visual language of comics. Helpful books discussing the genre of graphic art are Michael Chaney’s edited volume *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*, which contains several essays in a section titled “Visualizing Women’s Life Writing.” Julia Watson’s essay “Autographic Disclosures” is placed in the context of essays about comparable works, including those by Marjane Satrapi and Phoebe Gloeckner. Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey’s *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* provides a broad historical context for graphic texts, such as those of Bechdel and Spiegelman, and describes the interplay of drawn images and verbal text in graphic narratives. Jared Gardner’s “A History of the Narrative Comic Strip” narrates a short summary of comics history that may be useful for the classroom. *Crossing Boundaries in Graphic Narrative: Essays on Forms, Series, and Genres*, edited by Jake Jakaitis and James F. Wurtz, connects sequential art with more traditional literary forms. Justin Hall’s anthology *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics* places Bechdel’s work in the context of other graphic narratives with queer themes and characters.

Collections of essays on teaching comics include Lan Dong’s *Teaching Comics and Graphic Narratives: Essays on Theory, Strategy, and Practice* and Matthew L. Miller’s *Class, Please Open Your Comics: Essays on Teaching with Graphic Narratives*. The title of Carrye Kay Syma and Robert G. Weiner’s *Graphic Novels and Comics in the Classroom: Essays on the Educational Power of Sequential Art* points to the proliferation of terminology in this growing field by using three terms—*graphic novels*, *comics*, and *sequential art*—variously favored by scholars in the field. Stephen Tabachnick’s *Teaching the Graphic Novel* includes Japanese and Franco-Belgian as well as American examples. Chute’s *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* is appropriate for courses with a gendered approach and contains a chapter on *Fun Home* that is particularly attentive to the “repetition and regeneration” displayed in Bechdel’s exactly detailed reproductions of “an archive of family documents,” including photographs, letters, diaries, and even police reports (175).

Many teachers now structure whole courses around graphic texts or include more than one graphic text in classes chiefly devoted to more conventional prose. One of the most popular texts taught alongside *Fun Home* is Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, which treats the trauma of the Holocaust as a cat-and-mouse beast fable that affects both the autobiographical American narrator and his father, a concentration camp survivor. This autobiography (of the narrator) combined with biography (of a parent) occurs in *Fun Home* as well. Another popular graphic text taught with *Fun Home* is Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* series, though some teachers find troubling the book’s negative depiction

of the Islamic revolution in Iran. In women's studies courses *Fun Home* is often taught with other women's graphic autobiographies, for example, those of Lynda Barry and Phoebe Gloeckner. Courses focused around young adult literature may choose other graphic texts for comparison with *Fun Home*: for instance, books with young male protagonists like Craig Thompson's *Blankets: A Graphic Novel*, a love story about a boy brought up in a strict, fundamentalist Christian family, and David Small's *Stitches: A Memoir*, in which an adolescent boy finding his identity also has to confront the traumas of having become gravely ill and mute.

Critical Commentary

Chute, a pioneer in the field of women's graphic literature, cotaught a course with Bechdel on comics and autobiography at the University of Chicago in 2012 and continues to publish scholarly works on the topic (*Graphic Women*; "Comics as Literature?"; "Comics Form"; *Disaster Drawn*; *Why Comics?*). Chute originally published her "Public Conversation" with Bechdel (Bechdel and Chute) in the prestigious academic journal *Critical Inquiry*; it was reprinted in Chute's *Outside the Box* (Bechdel, Interview). Scholarly commentaries on graphic texts are becoming more frequent, including in new journals like *Studies in Comics* and special sections of established periodicals like the forum "Comics and the Canon" in *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*.

At the time of this writing, the *MLA International Bibliography* finds sixty-seven results for "Alison Bechdel" in its subject search, including several dissertations. The results include German and French as well as anglophone scholarship. About one-fifth of the essays focus on discussion of the graphic narrative as a form; psychological exploration is the next-most-popular category, while several focus on the father-daughter bond or representations of childhood or the family in *Fun Home*. Several essays are in the traditions of source studies or narratology, and others are genre studies or ecological in emphasis. The *JSTOR* archive collections provide access to scholarly essays on Bechdel and *Fun Home*, many available as full-text PDFs. For more popular responses to *Fun Home* and its author, students may find resources in general humanities or newspaper databases. As of this writing the blog *Feministing* lists forty-two results in a search for "Bechdel," several referring to the so-called Bechdel test on women's participation in films; a search for "Fun Home" on *Feministing* produces other current topics, including fan appreciation and notes on censorship controversies involving the book.

Academic critics have responded favorably to *Fun Home* since its appearance, declaring its aesthetic importance and analyzing the book from sophisticated perspectives. Ann Cvetkovich, for example, praises *Fun Home* not only in the context of graphic memoirs like *Maus* and *Persepolis* but also in terms of its ability "to redefine the connections between memory and history, private

experience and public life, and individual loss and collective trauma" (126). Robyn Warhol similarly writes that *Fun Home* adds "unanticipated dimensions to currently circulating models of narrative poetics" (1). Chute champions the current "energy around comics" and claims that Bechdel's "archivally driven work . . . is innovating the field of comics and expanding the study of life narrative" ("Comics Form" 107, 116).

Publications on *Fun Home* and the inclusion of Bechdel in university literature curricula continue to increase. Monalesia Earle compares Bechdel with Toni Morrison to examine new ideas of the family in fiction, and Annette Fantasia situates Bechdel's memoir in the tradition of the Victorian bildungsroman, in which the artist's sensibilities are formed in relation to the visual and textual structures of his or her environment. Fiorenzo Iuliano sees Bechdel as rewriting Marcel Proust on love and memory, and Leah Anderst compares Bechdel's and Doris Lessing's uses of narrative empathy. Taking feminist and psychoanalytic approaches, Heike Bauer notes the importance of Bechdel's reading for the construction of her lesbian identity, while Rachel Dean-Ruzicka analyzes emotions in *Fun Home* through Freud's and Judith Butler's ideas of mourning and melancholia.

The epistemological questions posed by *Fun Home*, such as what can one know about another person's mind or motives, have evoked considerable scholarly discussion. Rebecca Scherr explores the ethics of "truth claims" in "autographic" works like *Fun Home*, asking, "do we 'buy' Bechdel's perspective because she has brought us so close to the text . . . and simultaneously 'touched' us on a deeply emotional level?" (141). Elisabeth El Refaie's monograph *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* discusses the "nature of the autobiographical self and its relationship with body awareness and body image" in the "embodied selves" pictorially depicted in European and North American comics (7). Commenting on Bechdel's practice of redrawing documents in her memoir, El Refaie suggests that "[b]y filtering photographs through her own unique vision, Alison Bechdel thus seems to be drawing attention to the complex relationship between photography and the 'truth'" (165). H el ene Tison, too, connects *Fun Home*'s visual style with its emotional effects, claiming that Bechdel's redrawing of photographs like the book's centerfold of Roy the babysitter forces the reader into a position of identification with Alison. Tison says that Bechdel's drawing style suggests a "cinematographic zooming-in effect" that unifies the disparate fragments of the author's memories. Thus, the book succeeds, she claims, "in graphically offering her dead father an identity and an integrity whose lack may have played a part in his suicide" (361).

K. W. Eveleth takes a deconstructive approach to *Fun Home*, emphasizing the interconnected "visuoverbal medium" of the graphic memoir and the undecidability of the text while also disputing the interpretations of prior scholars. Warning readers not to fall into simple psychological explanations of Alison's or Bruce's character, Eveleth stresses the text's contradictions: its binaries—bitch and nelly, truth and lies—blur into one another as the memoir proceeds, and

“conflicting modern and postmodern conceptions of truth (one interior and essential, the other exterior and differential) collide.” Eveleth continues, “the tension between what is ‘real’ and what is ‘artificial’ is both the major thematic concern of *Fun Home* and its predominant structural conceit” (103). For Eveleth, the book is “marked indelibly as a queer archive, an exploration of indeterminacy for its own sake” (105).

In discussing Bechdel’s childhood period of obsessive-compulsive disorder or the all-white environment of the author’s hometown, both of which are described in *Fun Home*, teachers may wish to incorporate the perspectives of disability studies (Connor et al.) or critical race theory (Twine and Warren) into their classes.

The Musical

The original cast recording of the award-winning musical based on *Fun Home* is available both on an audio compact disc (Tesori and Kron, *Fun Home: A New Broadway Musical*) and on *YouTube* as a compilation of twenty-seven recordings of the musical’s songs (Tesori and Kron, *Fun Home Full Soundtrack*). The libretto, by Jeanine Tesori and Lisa Kron, is available in an inexpensive print edition (Tesori and Kron, *Fun Home* [Samuel French]).

The recordings of the musical and its libretto are rich resources for the classroom, particularly for comparisons with the graphic text. Students can consider how the music and lyrics direct and alter their attitudes toward the characters. The musical form also raises questions about the genre of Bechdel’s memoir and highlights the unique qualities of the graphic text. Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori, respectively the librettist and composer of the musical, took part, with Bechdel, in Terry Gross’s 2015 interview (Bechdel, “Lesbian Cartoonist”).

For background on the history of the musical genre, helpful sources for teachers are Larry Stempel’s *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*, John Bush Jones’s *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre*, and the collection of essays in William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird’s *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*. The Web site *Musicals 101*, compiled by John Kenrick, makes much information about musicals readily accessible.

Literary Allusions in *Fun Home*

D. Quentin Miller

Fun Home insists, almost aggressively, on the primacy of literature at its core. Bechdel's narrator explains, "I employ these allusions to [Henry] James and [F. Scott] Fitzgerald not only as descriptive devices, but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms. And perhaps my cool aesthetic distance itself does more to convey the arctic climate of our family than any particular literary comparison" (67). These bits of wisdom are meant as aids to the reader trying to understand the proper way to approach this unusual work, but they also serve to destabilize meaning rather than to clarify it: if her parents are most real to her "in fictional terms," how is the reader supposed to understand the author's deep and meticulous search for truth that uses her own diary, photographs, and letters her parents wrote to each other, all drawn in her own hand, as evidence? The "perhaps" in the second sentence quoted above allows us to dismiss the enormous weight of allusions by suggesting that Alison's extreme bookishness is part of a distancing pattern that explains herself and her family. But perhaps not. Perhaps the allusions blur the line between fiction and reality in the same way that they blur the line between something called literature and something called graphic narrative. Bechdel's compilation in *Fun Home* of an almost impossible list of required reading stakes a claim for the importance of classic literature in the twenty-first century even as, according to a blurb at the front of the book, "the great writing of the twenty-first century may well be found in graphic novels and nonfiction" (ii).¹ *Fun Home* does not obscure its literary foundations; rather, it argues that graphic narratives have a profound obligation to showcase them. Those who teach *Fun Home* have a responsibility to point out the way the allusions deepen and enrich meaning, parallel to Alison's father's desire to communicate with her through recommending a growing list of challenging books.

Fun Home contains more literary allusions than T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. By my count, excluding works of criticism and theory discussed in Valerie Rohy's essay in this volume as well as clinical books such as those by William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, Dr. Benjamin Spock, and the collectively authored *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, *Fun Home* alludes to some sixty works of literature and mythology, and roughly half of those works are alluded to in multiple panels. Few undergraduates have read even a small fraction of the works Bechdel alludes to, and yet *Fun Home* cannot be fully appreciated if the allusions are disregarded, because Bechdel's inclusion of them is meticulous and precise.

When I show my students a list of the works of literature alluded to in *Fun Home*, they sheepishly admit that they have read relatively few of them. Our challenge is to cope with the list's demands while also understanding the different ways Bechdel uses allusion. In this regard *Fun Home* is a test case for the function of allusions, which can lead to an important discussion about literary

history in a book that some may not consider literary because of its emphasis on the visual. Bechdel saturates her work with literary allusions to demonstrate the way she communicated with her parents, to chronicle her intellectual growth alongside her coming-of-age and sexual awakening, to insist on the literary merit of her “tragicomic” by lending it the gravitas of literary history, to suggest a parallel between literary interpretation and the interpretation of unspoken codes that dominated Bechdel’s father’s life, and to provide the reader with food for thought about the nature of the literary canon by juxtaposing accepted classics with less canonical works that facilitated her understanding of her sexual identity.

This discussion leads to a deeper understanding of the many ways allusions operate in the memoir, but it does not solve the readerly challenge of deciding between the lazy, passive response to an allusion—to skip over it—and the more rigorous response to pursue the allusion, read the original work, and conduct research, which would not be practical for all the allusions in *Fun Home*. We begin by discussing some of the recurrent allusions, especially to works that my students may not have read (even if they know they should have). In terms of frequency and depth, the six most recurrent allusions are to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Colette’s *Earthly Paradise*, and Albert Camus’s *A Happy Death*.

Through intertextual allusion, Bechdel gives readers a list of suggested reading, just as her father did for her. She admits, “I ended up in his English class, a course called ‘Rites of Passage,’ and I found that I liked the books Dad wanted me to read” (198). She also likes being his student; he tells her, “You’re the only one in that class worth teaching,” and she responds, “It’s the only class I have worth taking” (199). Her hard-won admiration for her father comes partly from his passion for literature, and their literary discussions constitute some of their most earnest attempts at true communication. But in a telling panel Alison, at college, is on the phone with her father, who asks, “What are you reading? Anything good?” She warily eyes a stack of books she’s been reading about homosexuality and says, “Uh . . . not really” (76). With the exception of E. M. Forster’s *Maurice*, these books are not part of the literary canon. This panel highlights the division in *Fun Home* between works of undisputed literary merit, mostly by Western European or expatriate American men from the early twentieth century, and works largely outside the academic literary canon that speak to Alison’s sexual awakening. In her father’s question and her hesitant response there is an unarticulated distinction between literature that is good and literature that is important. Indeed, *Ulysses*, the work most frequently alluded to in *Fun Home*, seems to annoy her, and she fails to finish reading it during a college seminar devoted to it alone. At one point her character scowls at the book and utters, “What the fuck?” and in the next panel admits, “I had little patience for Joyce’s divagations when my own odyssey was calling so seductively” (207). In

the accompanying panel she is picking up *Lesbian Nation*, by Jill Johnston, from a stack of books.

Colette's *Earthly Paradise*, a compilation of autobiographical writings, is the hinge between good books and important books, which might be described as books for the mind and books for the body. As the work her father gave to her as a "guess" (220) about her sexuality, it is arguably the most significant recurrent allusion in the memoir, though *Ulysses* provides the most sustained series of allusions.

What follows is a list of briefly annotated literary allusions in *Fun Home*, which suggest some of the themes that are not immediately evident from the context in *Fun Home*, especially for the works to which Bechdel alludes multiple times. Parenthetical references indicate page numbers in *Fun Home*.

Albee, Edward. *The American Dream*. 1961 American play. Helen is reading it with a stranger, but Alison's observation that "this was acting" is ironic given the play's themes—the façade of the happy American family—and characters—domineering mother, emasculated father (131).

Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women*. 1869 American novel. Theme of a family surviving hardships, girls becoming women (172).

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. 1813 British novel. Bruce teaches it in a high school course, and Alison responds to a question about the protagonist and the protagonist's father: "they're, like, friends" (199).

Bannon, Ann. *Women in the Shadows*. 1959 American novel. Considered pulp. Alison admits fascination with this genre (107).

Beaton, Cecil. *Diaries*. British; ca. 1922–74. The chronicles of a bisexual photographer, fashion designer, and socialite (205).

Broumas, Olga. *Beginning with O*. 1977 Greek American poetry. Erotic lesbian poetry (80).

Brown, Rita Mae. *Rubyfruit Jungle*. 1973 American novel. Groundbreaking in its explicit treatment of lesbian themes (205, 207).

Camus, Albert. *A Happy Death*. Written in the late 1930s, published in 1971, translated into English in 1972. The title of chapter 2 of *Fun Home*, this is the novel Bruce was reading when he died. Alison is as concerned with the parallels between Camus's early death in a car crash and her father's as she is with the themes of the novel, which address philosophical questions of obtaining personal happiness in one's life (25, 27, 28, 48, 54).

Colette. *Earthly Paradise*. 1966 French autobiography. A compilation of Colette's autobiographical writings translated into English. Arguably the most significant literary allusion in *Fun Home*, it is the book Bruce gives Alison as a way of opening up their discussion about sexuality. It also helps merge her intellectual and bodily literary interests, as she uses it to mas-

- turbate, connecting this practice—"good for a wank" (207)—to another allusion to Joyce's *Ulysses* (205, 207, 208, 220, 229).
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. 1899 British novel. A brief allusion demonstrates Alison's annoyance with literary interpretation in college courses (200).
- Dahl, Roald. *James and the Giant Peach*. 1961 British novel. Alison and her lover laugh at the unintended double entendre in the beloved children's book, but the allusion is also ironic in that the protagonist's parents died a premature, absurd death (81).
- Drabble, Margaret. *The Waterfall*. 1969 British novel. Helen is reading it when Alison announces her menstruation. The novel deals with a disaffected, dispassionate mother who regrets her choices and has an affair (185).
- Eddison, Eric. *The Worm Ouroboros*. 1922 British novel. Bruce is reading this fantasy novel after Alison and her brothers encounter a snake. The ouroboros figure is the snake that swallows its own tail, which in Alison's interpretation implies cyclicality. The figure also connotes self-destruction; Alison imagines that Bruce saw a snake when he jumped into the path of the truck (116).
- Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*. 1930 American novel. A text that Alison reads in college and that Bruce has passionate ideas about. Its central quest—Addie Bundren's desire to be buried in her hometown—resonates with Bruce's fate (200).
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925 American novel. Bruce calls it "the great American novel" and loans it to his pet students. Alison interprets it as a novel about reinventing the self and cloaking oneself with a beautiful façade to hide the less appealing aspects of one's reality. Unlike Jay Gatz, her father was a reader. Both Bruce and Fitzgerald's protagonist meet violent, premature ends when they fail to sustain their precariously divided worlds (61, 63, 64, 65, 84).
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *Stories*. Bruce's fascination with Fitzgerald leads Bruce to his stories. He rattles off a number of them in a letter to Helen, but singles out "Winter Dreams," saying "he is me." The "he" is a typical Fitzgerald protagonist who chases romantic visions to remake himself. After reading a few of the stories Bruce decides to return to *Gatsby* (63).
- Forbes, Esther. *Johnny Tremain*. 1943 historical novel. Helen reads this classic of children's literature to Alison to distract her from her compulsive behavior, but Alison is not able to concentrate on it (142).
- Forster, E. M. *Maurice*. British novel, written in 1913, published posthumously in 1971. The novel's handling of same-sex relationships was too frank for its time. It chronicles the failure of corrective treatment for homosexuality and projects a happy ending for its male lovers. It recurs in the stacks of books Alison is reading as she explores her own same-sex desires (76, 207).

- Grahame, Kenneth. *The Wind in the Willows*. 1908 Scottish novel. This children's classic provides the title for *Fun Home*'s chapter 5. Alison encounters it as a coloring book that her father appropriates, leaving her in awe of his superior artistic talents. She is particularly fascinated with the map in the book, which "bridges the symbolic and the real" (147). The chapter's correlation between beauty and death resonate with this allusion (121, 130, 146, 147).
- Grass, Günter. *The Tin Drum*. 1959 German novel. Bruce reads it when he and Helen are living abroad. Its mentally ill protagonist refuses conventional middle-class life (32).
- Hall, Radclyffe. *The Well of Loneliness*. 1928 British novel. A prominent lesbian novel, controversial in its time, that addresses questions of gender identification (75, 205).
- Hemingway, Ernest. *The Sun Also Rises*. 1926 American novel. Alison encounters this text, admired by Bruce, in college, and she turns to him when she finds her courses too pretentious. Bruce seems more interested in biographical details and Brett Ashley as the "new woman" than he is in the novel's themes of obsessive love, weakened belief, and the moral integrity of living well (61, 200, 201).
- Homer. *The Odyssey*. Ancient Greek epic poem (eighth century BCE). The Urtext for Joyce's *Ulysses*. Bechdel puns and makes metaphorical use of some of Homer's concepts, such as the odyssey itself as a metaphor for her sexual awakening (203, 213, 214, 215, 216, 221).
- James, Henry. *The Portrait of a Lady*. 1881 American novel. Bechdel interprets it as a parallel text for the early years of her parents' marriage, explaining the connections thoroughly (70, 71, 72).
- James, Henry. *Washington Square*. 1880 American novel. Bechdel reinforces the connection between her mother and this work, pointing out that her mother acted in an adaptation of it about a woman living with discontentment after a failed romance (66).
- Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. 1914 Irish short story collection. Presented in *Fun Home* by both Bruce and by Alison's professor as mere precursors to Joyce's novels, *Dubliners* is nonetheless important, especially, as Bruce highlights, the last paragraph of "The Dead," which brings together themes of death, desire, and failed communication inherent in his own story (203, 204).
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. 1916 Irish novel. As Alison is "suffocating" from her father's exuberant literary advice, he tells her of this novel, "You damn well better identify with every page" (201). She might resent this implication partly because she is not a young man and partly because of her resistance to Joyce's deliberate obfuscation while she is seeking clarity. The title of *Fun Home*'s chapter 1 is also an allusion

- to the novel, indicating that she both identifies with it and retains it. The myth of Daedalus and Icarus that frames *Fun Home* is also embedded in the name of Joyce's protagonist, Stephen Dedalus (1, 201, 202, 203).
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. 1922 Irish novel. Considered one of the masterpieces of modern literature, Joyce's novel provides Alison with a considerable challenge in college, yet it is an enduring blueprint for her interpretations of her relationship with her father. The protagonist is Leopold Bloom, who wanders around Dublin on a June day, enacting a personal mythology that parallels Homer's epic poem. Its secondary character is Stephen Dedalus from *Portrait*, and Bechdel draws frequent parallels between the novel and her relationship with Bruce, wondering "which of us was the father?" (221) after he unburdens himself of some of the secrets of his homosexual past (201, 202, 204, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 221, 222, 226, 228, 229, 230, 231).
- Kaufman, George S., and Moss Hart. *You Can't Take It with You*. 1937 American play. A comic play about a dysfunctional family. Helen stays home to act in it while Bruce takes the children to New York (189).
- Kipling, Rudyard. *Just So Stories*. 1902 British stories. Tales about the origin of animal characteristics. Bruce reads these stories to Alison in one of her early positive memories of him (21).
- Milford, Nancy. *Zelda*. 1970 biography. Bruce's obsession with Fitzgerald motivates him to seek out the story of Zelda, Fitzgerald's wife (84, 85).
- Millett, Kate. *Flying*. 1974 autobiography. Alison is "riveted" (218) by this courageous coming-out tale, describing its author as "a latter-day Colette" (217). Bruce reads it when Alison returns to college and is fascinated by the author's openness about her sexuality. It is the first and only book that Alison brings to him (217, 218, 219, 224).
- Milne, A. A. *The World of Pooh*. 1926 British children's literature. Part of Alison's revision of childhood classics (80).
- Mizener, Arthur. *The Far Side of Paradise*. 1951 biography of Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald's life fascinates Bruce as much as his books do. He identifies with Fitzgerald and models himself after the frail, famous author. Alison notes that they both die at forty-four, Fitzgerald exactly three days older than her father (62, 63, 65).
- Nin, Anaïs. *Delta of Venus*. 1977 American erotic stories. Nin's work provides Alison with a bridge between bodily and literary pleasures (76, 79).
- Osborn, Paul. *Morning's at Seven*. 1939 American play. Helen rehearses for a production of this play by reading it into a tape recorder. Like other plays she is in, it is about individual discontentment within a family context (132).
- Proust, Marcel. *À la recherche du temps perdu*. 1913–27 French novel sequence. Translated as *Remembrance of Things Past* and *In Search of Lost*

- Time*. The novels were important to Bruce, and Alison reads in them a number of parallels to his life: closeted homosexuality, an affinity for gardening, the power of choice, and regrets about past events. Moreover, the novels, like those by Colette and Nin, serve as another link between the high literary and the bodily in Alison's literary journey. The second volume of Proust's sequence, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, which provides the title of the fourth chapter of *Fun Home*, dabbles with themes of female homoerotic desire. Bechdel plays with the notion of translation in her discussions of Proust (28, 87, 92, 93, 94, 97, 102, 105, 108, 109, 113, 119).
- Rich, Adrienne. *Dream of a Common Language*. 1978 American poetry. The first collection by the famous feminist poet after she came out as a lesbian, it connects Alison with her lover Joan, also a poet (80).
- Rule, Jane. *Desert of the Heart*. 1964 Canadian novel. One of the more literary novels about lesbian experiences that Alison reads. Perhaps not coincidentally the protagonist is a cartoonist (205).
- Salinger, J. D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. 1951 American novel. A classic coming-of-age text, Bruce teaches it to Alison in his high school class, helping to form their bond (198, 199).
- Sarton, May. *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*. 1965 American novel. Alison reads this early classic of the lesbian literary canon as part of her self-guided odyssey (207).
- Shakespeare, William. *The Taming of the Shrew*. 1592 British drama. Alison's parents met during a college production of this play, which Alison describes as "problematic" from a feminist perspective (70). It is about a domineering husband training his wife to be obedient and parallels the worst moments of Bruce and Helen's marriage (69, 70).
- Stevens, Wallace. "Sunday Morning." 1923 American poem. The title of *Fun Home*'s chapter 3 is a quotation from the poem: "that old catastrophe" refers to the crucifixion, which Bechdel bluntly states the poem is "about" (83). It is her mother's favorite poem, but there are pointed echoes of it in Bruce's life. It begins with a woman staying at home on a Sunday morning, worshipping the sensations of her domestic world while others go to church, and it ends with a contemplation about the solid logic behind worshipping the sun as a god that mingles with humanity. In another chapter a panel shows Alison and the rest of the family "off to church" while Bruce indulges in "idolatrous" sunbathing (129). The poem's famous line "death is the mother of beauty" has many valences; one is that Alison cannot see the beauty in her father's life until she has come to terms with his death (55, 82, 83, 129).
- Stevenson, Robert Louis. *A Child's Garden of Verses*. 1885 British poetry. Mentioned only briefly during a card game Alison plays with her brothers and

- friends, this allusion reinforces the importance of childhood play, especially in the poem “Good and Bad Children” (160).
- Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. 1886 novel. The novel, mentioned only briefly but significantly, describes a man who lives a double life, like Bruce (160).
- Styron, William. *Sophie’s Choice*. 1979 American novel. A seemingly random book on the shelf of a bookstore, the allusion intensifies Helen’s situation: Styron’s novel frames the story of a woman full of sorrow who once was forced to make an impossible choice, though Sophie’s choice is far more dramatic than Helen’s (74).
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. 1954 British novel. Alison escapes into Tolkien’s work of high fantasy to avoid the harsh reality of the book Bruce wants her to read, *The Catcher in the Rye* (198).
- Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina*. 1878 Russian novel. On the first page of *Fun Home*, Bruce has set aside *Anna Karenina* to play with Alison. In the novel Anna commits suicide by throwing herself into the path of a train, an act eerily similar to Bruce’s death. The novel’s first line—“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”—could be an epigraph for *Fun Home* (3).
- White, E. B. *The Trumpet of the Swan*. 1970 American novel. Alison mentions this children’s work in her first diary entry. It is about nonconformity and nurturing special talents, and it is fitting that Alison is wearing the tail from a Halloween costume when she reads it (140).
- Wilde, Oscar. *An Ideal Husband*. 1895 Irish play. The titular phrase is first employed ironically when Bechdel questions whether an ideal husband would “have sex with teenage boys.” It becomes the title of chapter 6, and Bechdel uses it to develop her comments on Wilde’s life: the play was popular when Wilde was being tried for indecency (17, 151, 166). (She erroneously refers to it as *The Ideal Husband* in the last two cases.)
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest*. 1895 Irish play. The most developed of the allusions to Wilde, this play contains plenty of double entendres about the author’s homosexuality, as Bechdel later realizes. Alison helps her mother rehearse for her role in it. Her mother’s performance is an unmitigated triumph, but her father’s arrest for his attempted seduction of a teenager recalls Wilde’s situation. Bechdel borrows from Wilde a fondness for puns and an appreciation for highbrow humor (154, 155, 157, 158, 163, 164, 165, 166, 168, 181, 186).
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. 1891 Irish novel. The work centers around the morality of self-indulgence, and Bechdel alludes to it to comment on the adolescent Alison’s discovery of masturbation (170).
- Woolf, Virginia. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*. British correspondence, published 1975–80. The posthumously published letters of an iconic feminist

thinker partially describe her same-sex relationship with Vita Sackville-West (209).

Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando*. 1928 British novel. One of the novels Alison reads while exploring her sexual identity in college. Its primary innovation is the way it breaks from traditional realism to explore androgyny and gender change without emotional baggage or psychological trauma (205).

NOTE

¹The blurb quotes Deidre Donahue in the 29 May 2006 edition of *USA Today*.

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