

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21L.421 Comedy  
Spring 2008

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.

# The Art of the Tragicomicbook

how Bechdel uses comics to her advantage in creating *Fun Home*

Emily Pittore  
21L.421  
5/15/08

In his famous metacomic *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud quotes Will Eisner to define comics as “sequential art” (5). To be a comic, McCloud says, means that you have a sequence of at least two images, between which something happens. The narrative of a comic book is carried along by the reader's interpretation of what happens in the “gutter” between these two images. Although certainly a comic, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* doesn't always seem to fit this definition. *Fun Home* is a memoir that is heavily dependent on the written word. Bechdel's narration provides her memories and reflections, while the comic panels usually serve to illustrate her point rather than move the story along. If a reader was given only the text, they would still get told the story of her father's death and her attempt to understand it. Why, then, does she expend so much time and effort drawing over 200 pages of pictures? And why use the medium of comics? Would Bechdel have been able to get the same effect using photographs from her childhood as illustrations to a novel rather than painstakingly drawing everything over again as sequential art? What do comics and cartooning bring to the memoir that photographs cannot? Douglas Wolk points out in *Reading Comics* that drawings in comics are subjective. Using as his example a panel by Will Eisner he says

you know that what you're seeing represents a tenement . . . and you believe on some level that it's real . . . but you also understand that you're not seeing an actual building or a building you could have seen unaided by the drawing. What you're looking at is a manifestation of Eisner's style, a personal interpretation of what that sort of building looks like (Wolk, 118).

Comics allow for cartooning, a drawing style that “indicates that . . . [the] stories are subjective interpretations of . . . observations” (121). Cartooning allows Bechdel to use her interpretation of events in her pictures as well as her words. The words provide her view of past events as she writes in the present, while the images show us what she thought of events at the time, how she remembers seeing them, and how the reader should interpret her words. The unique medium of comics produces a rich environment deeply personal to Bechdel, fusing past and present, and opening up the memoir to further interpretation

from the reader as no other medium could.

McCloud also introduces the idea that the iconographic nature of comics makes it easier for the reader to relate to them. He says that instead of maintaining a detailed sense of our own body, we merely have “a sense of shape . . . something as simple and as basic as a cartoon . . . when you enter the world of the cartoon – you see yourself” (McCloud 36). He proposes that one of the reasons comics are so effective in entertaining people is that they make it easy to see oneself as the hero, and therefore are easy to relate to. Bechdel's panels are drawn in a 'realistic' style in that they clearly and consistently portray her family and its surroundings. However the drawings are simplified. This is easy to see by contrasting her cartoon self with the much more realistic reproductions of photographs included in the story. The iconographic art allows the reader to bring themselves into the experience. The reader is invited to look at the pictures representing past events and relate to them. This audience interaction adds another layer of interpretation. First there is the Bechdel of the past whose interpretation of events is revealed in the way they appear in pictures. Then the Bechdel of the present describes her interpretation in words, and finally the audience moves through both of these, interpreting the mixture and adding their own meanings to the already rich memoir.

The entire memoir is overwritten with interpretation through the comic medium. Bechdel's words betray an ever changing interpretation of events as she offers different possible reasons for a given sequence of images. For example she repeatedly questions the motives behind her father's death. All she knows for sure is that he was hit by a semi while crossing the road, but each time she mentions her father's death the words and the pictures bring us to a different understanding of how she feels and thinks about the occurrence. The first time it is brought up, she mentions it in passing. Text over a sequence of panels showing a young Bechdel driving a lawnmower with her father in the passenger's seat says “It's true that he didn't kill himself until I was nearly twenty”, blithely asserting that his death was suicide (23). Four pages later she contradicts this, and against a montage of her own father's funereal, explains that “no one knew it wasn't an accident” (27). This could be interpreted two ways. It could be that she knows it was suicide, but nobody at the funeral knew, or it could be that it was an accident and they have no proof

of suicide. The vagueness of her words betrays her uncertainty about her father's death. Next, along with a painstaking illustration of a page of the novel, she says he was reading Camus's *A Happy Death*, but considering her father had recently read Proust she did not find this unusual. Finally she wonders "if I had not felt compelled to share my little sexual discovery, perhaps the semi would have passed without incident four months later" (59). The tenuous connection between her sexuality and her father's death is accompanied by a picture of her father carrying weeds from the house he was fixing as the semi, a Sunbeam Bread truck, passes safely behind him. While the words try to explain his death on a factual level, the illustrations show how she personally interprets his death. Her first reaction is as a child who loses her father. Her next interpretation makes his death nothing more than part of life, and therefore part of their business. The illustration of Camus's novel brings her back to seeing her father in a literary light, a man who would commit suicide as a scholar. Finally she tries to connect his death to herself. Here the cartoon reinforces the tenuousness of the connection. The illustration of her father crossing the street is doubly imagined, first because she does not know the exact nature of his death, and second because this is an imagined outcome where her father does not die. In all of these cases, the words and pictures play off each other to strengthen the feeling behind them.

In addition to multiple combinations of words and images, Bechdel also uses different text against a single sequence of panels to explore possibilities. When her father calls her into the prep room at the funeral home for the first time, the pictures show a continuous sequence of her father working on a cadaver and asking a young Bechdel for scissors. Bechdel's narration provides different possible reasons for his suddenly calling her into their business's "inner sanctum" (43). First she wonders if "this was the same offhanded way his own notoriously cold father had shown him **his** first cadaver", then "or maybe he . . . was hoping to elicit from me an expression of the natural horror he was no longer capable of. Or maybe he just needed the scissors" (44-45). Her pondering contrasts with the linearity of the comic narrative to show how she is constantly reinterpreting her own history, even when she does know what happened.

Bechdel emphasizes the idea of personal interpretation by reproducing everything by hand. From

the freehand panel borders and the crosshatched photographs, to typed letters and dictionary entries, everything that appears in the comic book has been meticulously copied by hand. Even the text of the narration contains small changes from letter to letter, evidence that she wrote it herself rather than typeset it. This is certainly not a necessity or a convenience. It takes a lot of time and is easily avoided using a computer, so the decision must have been a very conscious one on the part of Bechdel. Wolk suggests the “wobble” in her hand drawn lines is “a deliberate gesture to soften the hyper-controlled precision of her drawings, as well as a nod to her first influence, Robert Crumb” ( Wolk, 361). Earlier in his book Wolk mentions that artists such as Crumb went against the mainstream by “drawing their panel borders freehand, instead of with a straightedge . . . [as] a way of declaring that everything on the page was the work of their hand” (40). Bechdel uses this technique to imprint the book with her personal style. This would be impossible to do without a comic book. Unlike the cold, impersonal feel of a typeset novel or the stiff reality of snapshots, the comic book overflows with individuality. It gives Bechdel the creative freedom to create the version of events she believes in or wants the reader to see. Through the use of freehand cartooning, everything in *Fun Home* becomes Bechdel's, from the way she sees the dictionary to her parents' past.

The color she uses maintains the idea of personality and reinforces the idea that this memoir is Bechdel's personal view of the world by differentiating between reality and her own memories. While *Fun Home* is not really in color, it is not printed in black and white either. The panels are shaded with a gray-green wash that softens their impact. Compare a page of *Fun Home* to Art Spiegelman's comic book *Maus*. *Maus* is entirely drawn in harsh black and white ink, creating a huge impact on the reader and imparting the feeling of the black and white morality of the time. In contrast, *Fun Home* has a soft, nostalgic feel to it. The color wash makes the pages feel like old sepia-toned photographs, faded with time and overexposure. The grayness reflects her indecisions about events, both what she thought of them at the time and her opinions on them now. She doesn't have a black and white view of her past. She lives in a gray area, constantly rethinking and reevaluating her own life. Her indecisions in the past are revealed in her diary entries from when she was 10 years old. Within the gray entries, she begins to insert the words

"I think", that morph into a symbol representing her lack of commitment to her words. The inserted "i think"s are highlighted in white, and give way to thick black lines obscuring entire entries. The sharp contrast of black and white highlights that the only thing she is really sure about is her own insecurity, while even simple events like making popcorn are open for interpretation.

In some cases the images of the memoir are completely imagined. She illustrates her parents history from what she knows of their past. However aside from a few reproduced passport photographs, the images are all her own. She imagines the story of her parents meeting in a production of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Although the pictures are clear enough, her words are full of qualifiers. She says "I speculate on what attracted my father", "my parents must have found" and "they would probably have been appalled" (Bechdel 69,70). The lack of definite language makes it clear that the images are products of her own imagination, although taken alone they would look like the truth. This is her parents as she sees them, and perhaps not as they really were. In some cases, she admits outright to fallacy. Telling the story-within-a-story of her father as a small child getting stuck in the mud, she draws a milkman, and specifies that that's how she always pictured him, even though she knows it was a mailman. The contrast between the unsure text and the clear pictures emphasize that the memoir is her life as she remembers it, but not necessarily as it really happened.

In other situations she points out a bit of truth. Her mother reads aloud a poem by Wallace Stevens saying ". . . and the green freedom of a cockatoo upon a rug" while behind her hangs a painting of a cockatoo alighting on a branch. Bechdel points out in a caption "Honest to God, we had a painting of a cockatoo in the library" (83). In another scene describing the possibility of the semi "pass[ing] without incident", her caption tells the reader "Yes, it really was a sunbeam bread truck" (59). These inserts of "honest to god" reality ground the story, but also remind us that the rest of it is not so clear cut. There are many details, but only some of them are definitely true. The variation between memory, possibility, lies and truths combine to run the full range of anyone's memories, half made up and half true. Cartoons allow her to draw the past with a combination of reality and imagination the way photographs or text alone wouldn't, and the vagueness of the gray shading reflects this indecisive mix of verity.

This concept of gray areas in memory is reinforced by Bechdel's rendering of photographs. Photographs appear as each chapter's title page, as well as within the story itself. Each one is rendered in strict black and white, with a much more realistic style than the rest of the comic. Comparing the 'photo' of Bechdel on page 120 to the photograph of the author on the back of the book shows a much more true to life likeness than the cartoony version of herself that populates the rest of the comic. The black and white rendering suggests that the photographs represent a known reality. It either exists or it doesn't. This contrasts with the gray-green, faded memories recorded in the cartoons, which may or may not be truthful.

Bechdel also uses the comic panels to provide contrast to her written words. In the first chapter she creates an extended metaphor comparing her father to Daedalus. Although she speaks of him as Daedalus, the looming shadow of her father in one panel suggests the minotaur more than its captor. This invites the reader to question her words and consider other aspects of her father that go unsaid in the text, but appear in the illustrations. She discusses her house as Daedalus's labyrinth, but while the text tells us that "escape was impossible" she is shown running out the front door (12). Again, the reader is invited to reinterpret her history, once from words and again in the pictures. Contrasting the words with the images suggests a deeper reading of the memoir than one or the other on its own.

Most importantly Bechdel's illustrations bring subtlety through allusions to literature and motifs. The drawings abound with appropriate literary references in the books and magazines Bechdel and her father read. Without being too obvious, the allusions in the pictures deepen the text by providing contextual references, most of which allude to father's hidden homosexuality. While explaining her father's library, Bechdel says "Part of dad's country squire routine involved edifying the villagers – his more promising high school students . . . The promise was very likely sexual in some cases, but whatever else might have been going on, books were being read" (61). To back up her point, she shows her father lending Roy *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Great Gatsby*. Both of these books contain homosexuality or homoerotic undertones. The literary allusions reinforce



her speculations as to the sexual nature of her father's relationship to some of his students. In discussing *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Bechdel proposes that within the play “illicit desire is encoded as one character's uncontrollable gluttony” (166). The next panel shows her father eating cucumber sandwiches being made to serve as props in the play “faster than [they] can make them” (167). The image of their father devouring the same food as *Earnest's* Algy with the same “uncontrollable gluttony” connects him to the play's unspoken theme of homosexuality. In the botanical themed chapter “In the shadow of young girls in flower”, her father is reading an issue of “Wayside Gardens”, which has a picture of a ladyslipper on the back cover. The ladyslipper is a member of the orchid family, and the Latin root of orchid (*orchis*) comes from the ancient Greek word for testicle, making the panel a subtle hint at her father's homosexuality similar to his “unabash[ed] fixation” on obelisks (OED, Bechdel 29). In the same chapter Bechdel uses the comic panels to carry on a motif of lilacs. She tells the reader “If my father had a favorite flower, it was the lilac” (92). Throughout the rest of the chapter, lilacs appear. They are shown in a painting her father holds, on the storefront of “LiLac Chocolates” near her mother's apartment, and in a vase in her father's bedroom (96, 105, 119).

The drawings also provide most of the memoir's subtle humor. As Bechdel was “comic relief in [her] parents' tragedy” the pictures provide comic relief to the weighty narration (58). Wolk describes her humor as “poker-faced hilarity”, a type of comedy which is well represented by her pictorial references to her father's death (Wolk, 361). After specifying that her father was hit by a “sunbeam bread truck”, sunbeam bread appears on a poster at the gas station, in their kitchen as her mother prepares dinner, and on the bread her father takes on their camping trip (Bechdel, 96, 67, 112). The cheery little girl on the logo provides an ironic contrast to the death it represents, resulting in a morbidly amusing reference to the event Bechdel spends so much of her memoir trying to understand. Bechdel also uses the comic to provide dual-media puns between the written words and the accompanying panels. Bechdel's description

of her reading about lesbianism and homosexuality in college is described as “stimulating but solitary” (76). The innocent, bland sentence is given a much funnier meaning by the accompanying visual double entendre, a panel of Bechdel masturbating to *Delta of Venus*. After describing a scene from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* where a girl sits “surrounded by jasmine, verbena, and pansies”, a caption over her father planting dogwoods puns on pansy saying “if there was ever a bigger pansy than my father, it was Marcel Proust” (93). Another visual double entendre happens when a young Bechdel and her brothers stay at the Gryglewicz's for two days. A Bechdel, playing a cop, yells “Spread 'em, punks!” while behind her hangs “one of Dr. Gryglewicz's many interesting paintings of Dr. Gryglewicz” spreading her legs (160).

The depth that the comic book medium brings to *Fun Home* is best appreciated by thoroughly analyzing a single sequence. Take for example the three pages in which Bechdel attempts to connect herself to her father's death. She is trying to find a connection, however she knows that it is mostly wishful thinking. The lack of connection is betrayed in the following three page sequence. She starts the sequence by stating “The idea that I caused his death by telling my parents I was a lesbian is perhaps illogical. Causality implies connection, contact of some kind. And however convincing they might be, you can't lay hands on a fictional character” (84). This is accompanied by a panel of Bechdel at the library door calling “dad?” to her unseen father. The use of “fictional” to describe her obviously real father is jarring. It implies many things – that he led a fictional life as a heterosexual, that he faked his role in her life and in their family, and that he interacted with people best through novels. It could also be a self referential comment that her father is no longer alive except as a fictional character in her memoir or that her supposed connection to his death is fabricated. The image reinforces this. Her father is unseen, unable to be contacted in any way. Being unseen leaves him up to interpretation. While we have no confirmation on what he is doing, we can imagine whatever suits our purpose.

Throughout the rest of the three page sequence, Bechdel's narration compares her father to Fitzgerald. She explains the use of “fictional” saying “Gatsby's pristine books and my father's worn ones signify the same thing – the preference of a fiction to reality” (85). Her father, appropriately, is

preoccupied with a *Zelda*, a novel about Fitzgerald's wife. The setting is his library, another connection to fiction. Not only is it full of fictional novels, but as Bechdel says earlier in *Fun Home*, “the library was a fantasy”, a fabrication of her father (61). As the narration discusses her father's similarities to Fitzgerald and his death, young Bechdel and her father have a perfunctory conversation. Over five panels they exchange six sentences. Except for the last two sentences, each sentence is within its own panel and very short - four words or less. The separation of their lines creates a halting, staggered feeling in the dialog, creating a distance between the participants. The images also evoke noncommunication. Each time one of them speaks, the other person's back is to the reader. By only showing one of their faces at a time Bechdel enforces the idea that they can't connect with one another. In addition, although they are talking to each other, they never make eye contact. Bechdel's father remains absorbed in his book for the entire sequence. They can't connect visually or verbally. Finally Bechdel's narration rejects that her father “had timed his death with [Fitzgerald's] in mind” because “that would only confirm that his death was not [her] fault . . . and [she's] reluctant to let go of that last, tenuous bond” (86). The illustration once again reinforces the lack of connection. Looking into the library from the outside, Bechdel and her father are each visible in their own frame-within-a-frame created by two windows. Splitting the one panel into two in this way shows that although they live in the same house, there is a lack of emotional connection that they cannot overcome.

Bechdel's memoir is a very literary one. If you read only the words you would still get an idea of what happened and what she thought of it. But without the visual elements provided by the comic book you would be unable to experience it through Bechdel's eyes, appreciate the subtlety of the situation, or find the dual meanings she presents within her drawings. The graphic narrative is equally important as the written narrative, and they compliment each other to provide a rich, personal memoir that could not have been as effective any other way. As Bechdel herself says, her “feeble language skills could not bear the weight of such a laden experience” (143). Cartooning fills in where her language leaves off, and together they craft a rich, many layered

memoir.

### Works Cited

Bechdel, Alison. Fun Home. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics. New York: Harper Collins, 1993.

"orchis."Oxford English Dictionary. 2008.

Wolk, Douglas. Reading Comics. Da Capo, 2007.

### Works Referenced

Spiegelman, Art. Maus. New York: Random House, 1991.

### Acknowledgments

Wyn Kelley

Louise Harrison Lepera

Jennie Davidow

Author's note:

Unfortunately, the scanner I brought in from home on Tuesday failed to work with my laptop (I blame Vista), so I do not have any comic panels to include as reference. If I can get my scanner working within the next day or so, I will email you a copy that includes comic panels I found particularly relevant.