

Multimodal Literacies and Graphic Memoir: Using Alison Bechdel in the Classroom

Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama, by Alison Bechdel. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. 304 pp.

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic, by Alison Bechdel. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006. 240 pp.

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In Dale Jacobs' *Graphic Encounters*, he discusses the importance of “[c]omplicating the view of comics so that they are not seen as simply an intermediary step to more complex word-based texts” (17). Jacobs writes that comics’ readers require use of the visual, gestural, and spatial elements displayed in the panels and gutter space on a page in order to truly understand a text (14). Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoirs *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* further complicate the literacies needed to understand comics as she layers her memoirs with archival, literary, and psychoanalytic figures and concepts. More than a book about her family, Bechdel’s memoirs look closely at sexuality, relationships, and self-realization within herself and others. As Jacobs’ work attests, graphic memoirs like Bechdel’s are both interesting reads and valuable pedagogical tools. Brought into the composition classroom, these memoirs provide entry points into discussions of literacy acquisition and the writing process, research and source material, and multimodal meaning-making practices.

Multiple composition theorists have argued the importance of incorporating multimodal composing into the composition classroom (e.g., Banks; Fleckenstein; Jacobs; Palmeri; Shipka). Patricia Dunn, for example, believes that we need to “take better advantage of multiple literacies, that we investigate and use whatever intellectual pathways we can to help writers generate, organize, re-conceptualize, and revise thoughts and texts” (1). Dunn challenges written texts as the primary means of communication and focuses instead on alternate ways of knowing that come from practices like sketching ideas or walking through a paper. As multimodal texts that highlight alternate ways of knowing, Bechdel’s memoirs serve as useful examples for students as they deal with complicated ideas and themes using visual, gestural, and spatial modes of meaning that go beyond the textual.

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Bechdel's *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* both center on her attempts to better understand her relationships with her parents. *Fun Home* describes the aftermath of her father's death, whereas *Are You My Mother?* focuses on Bechdel's relationship with her mother, set during the time when she was composing *Fun Home*. Both memoirs rely heavily on archival material from Bechdel's past: she recreates family photographs, drawings, letters, newspaper clippings, maps, and diary entries. Beyond the physical addition of material, the memoirs act as metatexts, offering commentary on literature, literary figures, and psychoanalytic theory. In different ways, each text becomes a collage of collected materials that ultimately allow Bechdel "to write a book about the problem of the self and the relationship with the other" (Bechdel and Chute 203). Bechdel's texts showcase the richness of the graphic memoir form and the materiality of memory as she examines issues of growth, reconciliation, self, past, and family.

Fun Home examines Bechdel's relationship with and the life of her deceased father Bruce, a high school teacher and funeral director. When she was nineteen, Bechdel's father was hit by a truck. Following his death, hidden elements of his life, such as sexual relationships with younger men, were revealed. Each chapter involves Bechdel piecing together past memories while constructing her own narrative of coming out and discovering her sexuality. In textboxes over two long panels showing first an empty road and then a young Bechdel and her father together in a car, she writes, "And in a way, you could say that my father's end was my beginning. Or more precisely, that the end of his lie coincided with the beginning of my truth" (117). Several months before her father's passing, Bechdel came out to her family. As Bechdel comes to acknowledge her own sexual truths, she also works to understand those of her father. The suspense in *Fun Home* comes from Bechdel's introspective examination of the past and the events going on around her. As she says in an interview with comics scholar Hillary Chute, "[t]here's really not much dramatic action. If you don't count the subplot of my own coming out story, the sole dramatic incident in the book is that my dad dies. Everything else is this extremely involuted introspection about it all" (Chute and Bechdel 1008).

Complementing the family narrative, each of the chapters in *Fun Home* center on a particular literary reference that comes to represent Bechdel's family, especially her father, in particular ways. Chapters revolve around the myth of Icarus, Albert Camus, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and Oscar Wilde, and within each chapter are multiple literary references and scenes from particular works and authors' lives. For example, chapter three, "That Old Catastrophe," examines the fantasy life created within her father's library, highlighting his love of books, particularly those by Fitzgerald. Bechdel draws parallels between Fitzgerald's biography and writing and Bruce's life and

disposition by showcasing how he adopted Fitzgerald's "sentimentality" in letters to his wife Helen (63). In this section, Bechdel reproduces her father's hand-written letters in panels that show the letters themselves alongside panels of him as a young man writing them in a bunker. The graphic form of the text allows Bechdel to overlay family scenes and events with literary comparisons and commentary in the gutter of the text. For instance, in this chapter, Bechdel writes in the gutters above three long panels featuring her family cooking in their kitchen, "I employ these allusions to James and 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). By distancing herself from her family, using literary figures in place of confession, Bechdel is able to capture the importance literature held to her growing up while maintaining the emotional distance that seems to run through her family.

In the classroom, the literary figures that Bechdel draws on can serve as entryways to discussions on how source material and research inform composing practices. Even though Bechdel's memoirs are about her family, she frequently uses literary references and additional texts to inform her thoughts and feelings. This use of source material demonstrates to students that our work rarely exists in a vacuum and that it can be worthwhile to explore and acknowledge outside influences on our thinking. In the classroom, students could note how Bechdel uses source material, explore how literary allusions get intertwined with the family narrative, and discuss the significance of the comparisons Bechdel makes between the figures and family members. From a multimodal perspective, students might discuss the affordances of the graphic memoir for aligning literary references with moments from Bechdel's past. As an example, students might question which figures are chosen and why, how the source material is visually represented, what parts of the literary works get quoted, when and how those references appear, and how the visual representation of sources differs from source use in a predominantly textual form.

Beyond the literary references, one of the most fascinating things about *Fun Home* is the use of archival material from Bechdel's past, including letters, photographs, poetry, drawings, maps, diary entries, and newspaper clippings, which she "very painstakingly" reproduced by hand (Chute and Bechdel 1007). The memorabilia further enriches the text for readers, who with Bechdel's help, relive her memories. The archival material allows readers to recall physical reminders of their own pasts and brings to light the gestural and spatial components of memory. Within the text, the memorabilia helps anchor Bechdel in a particular time and place, reminding the reader that the events are real. The diary entries that feature prominently in chapter five, for instance, take her back in time, allowing access to what her younger self was thinking at a given

moment. The memorabilia further demonstrates the material importance of objects for triggering and bringing back memories since Bechdel uses them as evidence in the text to highlight what she felt or believed. The collage-like form of the memorabilia complements the textual and visual narrative and makes visible the tactility involved in our everyday understandings of the past.

Further demonstrating the richness and physicality of memory, Bechdel also represents sensory experiences from her past, which touch on the multi-modal affordances of comics that Jacobs describes above. Bechdel often brings in evidence of the senses to these texts, particularly the visual and olfactory. To represent smell, Bechdel juxtaposes panels that focus on her father gardening with ones of him adjusting floral arrangements in the funeral home, whereby “their quick, damp scent masked the odor of formaldehyde” (91). When describing a day out during her family trip to New York, Bechdel recreates a city scene in a large panel that takes up two thirds of the page. Overlaying the street corner within the panel are textboxes pointing out various smells of the city (including diesel, pastry, urine, electricity, shit, menthol, putrefaction, and Brut) along with the following written in the gutter: “In the hot August afternoon, the city was reduced, like a long-simmering demiglace, to a fragrance of stunning richness and complexity” (103). Although visually represented, the emphasis on various smells showcases the material role of the senses in triggering memories and demonstrates the affordances of the comics form for representing these senses. Even drawing itself, Bechdel says, “is a form of touch for me. When you are drawing a figure, you are touching them. You are creating this person’s body. You are outlining their face. Their limbs. Their clothes” (Bechdel and Chute 211). The reader, too, is involved in the touch of the comic as she handles the book and is drawn in to the re-creation of Bechdel’s memories and senses.

Both the use of archival material and visually recreated senses reinforce the complex and embodied nature of memory and literacy acquisition. Bechdel’s memories are triggered by the many literary texts her family members are often depicted handling, illustrating literacy learning as a lifelong process with multiple moments of significance. As she describes the important feminist and queer writers that she encountered in university who shaped her adult views of the world, the reader sees that formative literacy experiences are not limited to childhood reading and writing. Furthermore, Bechdel describes influential reading and writing experiences both at home and in educational domains, showing how each came to influence her views of the world. Because of the multiple literacy experiences described in *Fun Home*, this text provides a useful entry point for discussing with students how our literacy learning is a lifelong process.

Are You My Mother? chronicles Bechdel's struggles while writing *Fun Home*, both professionally and interpersonally, while offering a closer examination of her relationship with her mother. More conceptual than *Fun Home*, *Are You My Mother?* involves a "search for meaning in patterns" (*Are You My Mother?* 31), which Bechdel does while connecting dreams, memories, recorded moments, and psychoanalytic theories throughout the text. More focused in literary references than *Fun Home*, *Are You My Mother?* primarily uses Virginia Woolf's diaries and autobiographical writing and pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's theories as metatext underlying her work. While focusing on the writing of *Fun Home* and her mother's response to it, Bechdel weaves in past family and interpersonal memories, therapy sessions, and the biographies and works of Winnicott and Woolf to make meaning of the various patterns that she draws among identity, memory, womanhood, understanding, and creation. As Chute describes in an interview with Bechdel, more than an autobiography, the book "is about ideas [Bechdel] was excited about" rather than particular events (Bechdel and Chute 203). As such, this text effectively demonstrates what it is like to "work through" something—Bechdel works through dreams; relationships; the writing process; feelings of love, envy, and jealousy; as well as the past, again by collecting past materials and presenting analytic comments in the gutters overlaying illustrative panels. Along with illustrating Winnicott, Woolf, and pieces of their work, Bechdel once again brings in archival material like her grandparents' obituaries, newspaper clippings of her mother's career as an actress, telephone conversations that Bechdel transcribes, photographs, and selections from various books. These materials figure similarly to the way they do in *Fun Home*, bringing Bechdel back to a particular place and time. Instead of looking only at particular moments, Bechdel here richly offers multiple layers in the text to better understand the ideas she works through.

As the primary illustrative references within the text beyond her family, Woolf and Winnicott themselves become important characters in the story, occasionally with their lives mirroring that of Bechdel's. Chapter three, "True and False Self," for instance, draws comparisons between Woolf and Winnicott's biographies from the 1920s. Although it is "doubtful they know one another" in actuality (26), Bechdel imagines their life trajectories overlapping in England, positioning them on re-created city maps. She uses the Woolf and Winnicott narratives to explore what it means to be a writer and to apply psychoanalytic concepts that reveal understandings of the self. To the former, Bechdel uses Woolf's ideas about authenticity in biography writing, arguing that the symbolism Woolf uses in her fiction allows her to achieve "a deeper truth than facts" (29). Truthful representations are a repeated concern for Bechdel,

as she justifies her choices in representing her father for her mother and herself. Bechdel also uses Winnicott, both his theories about early childhood relations and his biography, to further examine her own relationship with her mother and her adult romantic relationships. She weaves in her memories with illustrative case studies from Winnicott's texts, such as overlapping an argument between Bechdel and her mother in panels alongside Winnicott disciplining a young boy from an unnamed 1949 paper (174-78).

Because the graphic nature of the memoir allows Bechdel to juxtapose ideas about these figures and their lives with her own, she effectively creates a visual representation of how their ideas come to inform her own self-understanding. For students in the writing classroom, Bechdel's dealing with Woolf's writing and Winnicott's theories can offer an alternate approach to working with difficult concepts in the texts they read. Like Bechdel, students might visually represent ideas from theories or texts that they are currently grappling with in their own work. This approach to working with sources would allow students to draw on visual and spatial modes of meaning-making that go beyond the textual, encouraging them to consider the relevance of the sources to arguments they wish to forward.

What stands out thematically in *Are You're my Mother?* are ideas of composing. Not only is the text a composition in and of itself but also a reflection of the difficult process of writing and the challenges that accompany creative efforts. One of the narrative strands of the text involves Bechdel's professional troubles—the difficulty she has with writing *Fun Home* and staying financially afloat, the professional jealousy she feels towards other queer graphic artists, and anxieties about how her family will handle the content of her book. This line of thinking in the text is useful for new writers to gain insight into the writing process of a professional writer. While writing textbooks like Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs' *Writing About Writing* and selections like Anne Lamott's "Shitty First Drafts" also detail the struggle writers face, Bechdel explores the emotional and physical drains that come with composing in great detail. Students reading Bechdel might recognize their own struggles with writing; the memoir can begin conversations about the nature of feedback on writing, the fear of reception, and the anxieties that surface as we compose.

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Fun Home and *Are You My Mother?* offer a great deal to composition scholars with an interest in multimodal composition, literacy development, and research writing. Because both texts rely on the use of archival and source material in their composition, students mirroring Bechdel's form may begin noticing the material elements around them that come to explain and inform the writing

process. As Bechdel's memories are triggered by items like photographs or journal entries, so too can our students draw inspiration from objects around them in their own composing processes. In the classroom, students might look at Bechdel's memoirs and discuss the physicality and sensory nature of memory and consider how their current interests are shaped by past events. The archival material can further serve as a starting point for examining students' own literate practices. Bechdel's memoirs discuss her reading and writing experiences as a child and again upon entering college. In many ways, while about her family, her memoirs also serve as literacy narratives with Bechdel exploring the role that reading and writing played in her home life and educational development. Students reading these graphic novels are introduced to an exploration of literacy that moves away from a straightforward chronological or linear text.

Together these two memoirs demonstrate the difficulties associated with understanding identity and the past, using outside references, and the composing process itself. By using past events and literary references to highlight feelings and ideas, Bechdel draws her readers into a world where emotions of anxiety, concern, love, disappointment, hope, betrayal, and tenderness are all too common. It is through our engagement with these texts as readers that we get to experience Bechdel's past as well as make connections with our own. As Jacobs writes, "multimodal meanings are made as people engage with comics" (9), and it is through our engagement with Bechdel that readers are brought back to their own awkward teenage years, family dramas, and anxieties about acting as professionals. For our field, Bechdel offers examples of the richness the graphic novel form provides, allowing multimodal and multidimensional texts to come to life.

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