

***Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel (2006)**

Overview

Fun Home is a comic memoir of Alison Bechdel's family's in mid-century America. The non-linear story touches on themes including family, mental health, growing up, and homosexuality. The novel has received both popular and academic recognition since its publication receiving both praise and criticism for its depictions of sexuality, including Alison's coming out as a lesbian to her family and her father's affairs with younger men while married to Alison's mother. On this connection to her father, Bechdel told NPR in 2015: "In many ways my life, my professional career has been a reaction to my father's life, his life of secrecy. I threw myself into the gay community, into this life as a lesbian cartoonist, deciding I was going to be a professional lesbian. In a way, that was all my way of healing myself." The novel was adapted to an award-winning musical in 2013. Bechdel can often be found in her hometown Burlington, Vermont where she often draws cartoons for the weekly *Seven Days* newspaper.

Why was it banned?

According to the American Libraries Association, *Fun Home* was one of the top ten banned books of 2015 and has been banned from libraries and college campuses nationwide. Many cases cite depictions of graphic sexuality, nudity, and homosexuality. Bechdel has responded saying that it is an honor to have her book banned, that many parents assume comics are for children, and that the book may not have been banned if it did not include drawn images.¹

Discussion questions

1. *Fun Home* is part of a tradition of using comics to tell a memoir or autobiography. Other works in this tradition include Art Spiegelman's *Maus I and II* (1991), which tells the story of Spiegelman's father surviving the Holocaust, and Marjane Strapi's *Persepolis 1 and 2* (2004), which tells the story of young Marjane leaving Iran for France in the 1970s. Academics have also recognized comics as a form of storytelling which combines words and pictures, and not only cartoons or superhero comics often associated with children. What was your reaction to reading the text and looking at the images? What do the images add to the story and your perception of comics?
2. Before drawing *Fun Home*, Bechdel drew the long run comic strip *Dykes to Look Out For* which is known as the origin of "the Bechdel test" where a movie needs to feature two women characters who talk to each other about something other than a man. Alison's father, Bruce, was a gay or bisexual man but kept his sexuality a life-long secret to his family. Bruce also attempts to have Alison dress more feminine even when he has affairs with his high school students. What are your reactions to different characters' sexualities, coming out stories, and gender presentations? What role do you think gender and recent LGBT rights movements play in the stories of Alison and Bruce?

¹ <http://www.oif.ala.org/oif/?p=6733>

3. Literature and reading are reoccurring themes in the novel. Alison's parents met as actors in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. Young Alison recognizes her emerging sexuality through reading and her father's underlines in Camus' *A Happy Death* lead her to believe he committed suicide. What conclusions do you draw about the role of reading and different references to literature? What do the references to fiction add to this non-fiction account of Bechdel's life?
4. Mental health and obsessive compulsive disorder are other reoccurring themes. What do you think of *Fun Home's* representation of mental illness? How do you see mental illness intersecting with other themes including dysfunctional families, sexuality, and growing up?
5. Bechdel often refers to her father as cold and distant. Many novels also feature distant parents and dysfunctional families including Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Rebecca Wells' *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, and others. What do you make of the portrayal of Bruce and the Bechdel family? How does knowing Bruce's life-long struggles with his sexuality and his attempts to restore the family home inform your understanding? How does the Bechdel family compare to other dysfunctional families?

Similar works

Are You my Mother and *Dykes to Look Out For* by Alison Bechdel

Maus 1 and II by Art Spiegelman

Persepolis 1 and 2 by Marjane Strapi

Dairy of a Teenage Girl by Phoebe Gloeckner

Stone Butch Blues by Leslie Feinberg

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath

Recommendations for additional information

Bechdel NPR interview

<http://www.npr.org/2015/08/17/432569415/lesbian-cartoonist-alison-bechdel-counterred-dads-secrecy-by-being-out-and-open>

Fun Home musical

American Library Association web page on the history of banning *Fun Home*

<http://www.oif.ala.org/oif/?p=6733>