

# DRAWING<sup>FROM</sup> LIFE

Memory and Subjectivity in Comic Art



Edited by Jane Tolmie

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Memory and Subjectivity in Comic Art

Edited by Jane Tolmie

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# Introduction

If a Body Meet a Body

—Jane Tolmie

What is at stake in comic memoir and semi-autobiography is embodiment. Remembering a scene with the intent of rendering it in sequential art requires nonlinear thinking and engagement with physicality. Who was in the room and where? What was worn? Who spoke first? What images dominated the encounter? Did anybody smile? Unhinged from the summary paragraph, the artist must confront the fact of—to quote Bruce Willis in *The Fifth Element*—the meat popsicle. Accordingly, work on autobiography is increasingly turning to the question, in Judith Butler’s words, of the “bodily condition of one’s narrative account of oneself” (Butler 2005: 39). Graphic memoirs, or what Gillian Whitlock has categorized as “autographics,” offer valuable insights into the various layered processes of memory and self-representation through “the specific conjunctions of visual and verbal text in . . . autobiography” (Whitlock 2006: 966).

Virginia Woolf was premature in speculating that the “impulse towards autobiography may be spent” (Woolf 1975: 79). Autobiography has seen enormous expansions and challenges over the past twenty to thirty years (Rak 2005: 2). One of these expansions has been in the area of comics, and it certainly is an expansion that calls into question any postmodern notion of the death of the author. Accordingly, this collection focuses on relationships between artist/writer and artistic product, or rather, on artistic self-representation in comics. Negotiations between artist/writer/body and drawn/written/text raise the question of whether and how “stories . . . capture the body to which they refer” (Butler 2005: 38). Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven argue that graphic narrative’s “fundamental



syntactical operation is the representation of time as space on the page,” but it is also key to analyze the body on the page (Chute and DeKoven 2006: 769).

In the course of a discussion of the need for “more advanced visual and cultural literacies to interpret the intersections of various modes and media and the complex embodiments of avatar, autobiographer,” Whitlock and Anna Poletti describe the “confronting bodies that recur under the sign of autographics”; this collection attempts to offer valuable contributions in the area of visual and cultural literacies (Whitlock and Poletti 2008: vi). *Drawing from Life: Memory and Subjectivity in Comic Art* examines autobiography, semi-autobiography, fictionalized autobiography, memory, and self-narration in sequential art. Contributors come from a range of academic backgrounds including English, American Studies, Comparative Literature, Gender Studies, Art History, and Cultural Studies. The book engages with well-known figures such as Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi, Alison Bechdel, Neil Gaiman, Brian Fies, Lynda Barry, Chris Ware, Phoebe Gloeckner, Julie Doucet, Gene Luen Yang and Kim Deitch; with cult-status figures such as Martin Vaughn-James; and with lesser-known works by people such as Frédéric Boilet.

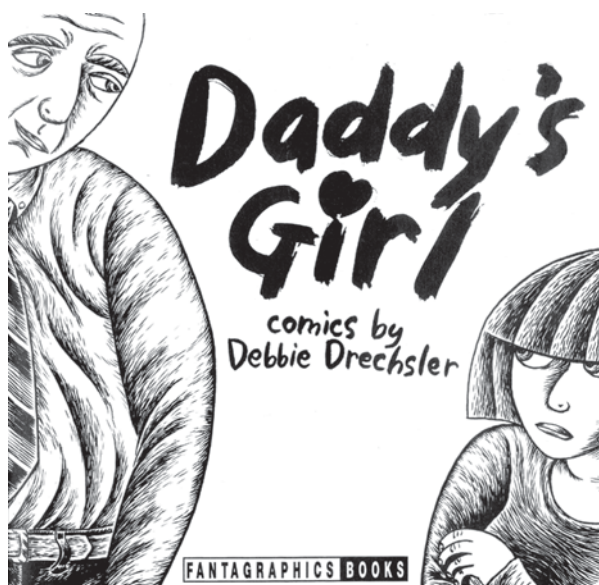
Academic publishing on comics is a rapidly growing field, and this collection aims to make a contribution in the broad area of autobiography studies in sequential art. The international focus of the collection is one of its strengths, thus making it a complement to such publications as Michael Chaney’s edited collection *Graphic Subjects* (Wisconsin, 2010), Hillary Chute’s *Graphic Women* (Columbia UP, 2010), Bart Beaty’s *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* (U of Toronto P, 2007), Charles Hatfield’s *Alternative Comics* (UP of Mississippi, 2005), as well as influential volumes such as Joseph Witek’s *Comic Books as History* (UP of Mississippi, 1989). A particular strength of this volume is its thematic focus on memory and subjectivity without a strict definition of autobiographical form, so that the collection includes many allusive—and elusive—types of relationships between artists/writers/subjects. A unifying focus on memory/the construction of the subject encourages readers to work through some of the complicated effects of mixing text and embodiment while remaining sensitive to the need to avoid simple models for truthfulness.

My own recent work on sexual trauma in comics centers on issues of memory and self-representation, so the work of other authors in this collection has been invaluable. Both Debbie Drechsler’s intensely creepy

*Daddy's Girl* and Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!* are routinely described as semi-autobiographical and have attracted excellent critical attention. Barry's own by-now-famous term for the status of her truth-telling is "autobiofictionalography"—and she drives her point home by asking, right at the start of her text, "Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?" (2002: 7). Similarly, Drechsler has said, "I realized that if I wrote straight autobiography the stories would suffer, so I began to take things that had happened and expand upon them, and mold them into stories that worked better than the 'honest truth' could" (Verstappen: online). While in the original 1992 publication of "Visitors in the Night" in *Drawn and Quarterly*, the abused girl's name is Debbie, in the 1996 *Fantagraphics* publication it has become Lily, which Drechsler relates in her interview in the *Comics Journal* (82).

The truth is not what I am interested in, and of course scholars invested in critical autobiography studies routinely point to the impossibility of direct transmission of lived experience. What I am interested in via Drechsler and Barry are the ways in which their texts and images negotiate private trauma in public, popular-culture formats, using an aesthetic process of reworking childhood events and emphasizing, in each case, a shared community formed from private pain and taboo knowledge. At the heart of each book is an episode or series of episodes of child sexual abuse. Neither artist intended an attractive coming-of-age story, but each makes radically different decisions about degrees of exposure and explicitness, developing two distinct approaches to the artistic representation of sexual trauma and memory. Both approaches, however, ultimately embody productive, empathic, and inclusive solutions to problems of isolation, invisibility, and shame. An image of abuse reaches out and makes—often coerces—emotional connections, forcing a public acknowledgement of private trauma, remaking a closed world of shame into an open book. There is an aesthetics of affect, not an inevitable or natural emotional side effect but a deliberate result of artistic decisions: the image of a forced encounter or an encounter grounded in power inequities is in turn thrust onto the audience.

My own approach to comics study is an intersectional, feminist one, invested in the many and various ways in which a large body of women's comics art makes a point of expressing interconnections between gender, race, class, nation, and sexuality. Both Drechsler and Barry have spoken about the ways in which their respective texts are sourced in painful lived experience, and have expressed the desire to use art both to raise social



I.1. Note the hunched shoulders and resentful upwards glare, the body language of the daughter cringing away from the father's seemingly benevolent gaze. Debbie Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*, Cover Art.

awareness and to forge connections with other survivors. Both Drechsler and Barry also make a point of connecting sexual abuse with other forms of abuse such as physical, verbal, and emotional abuse; abuse of animals; racism; poverty; and gender stereotyping. They thereby offer insights that connect dots between different kinds of lived experience rather than insisting on one isolated and isolating theme of female sexual victimization; Chute has similarly observed that the works of Aline Kominsky-Crumb and Phoebe Gloeckner resist simple models for female sexuality, insisting that it is “composed of both pleasure *and* degradation” (61).

The representation of sexual violence, especially violence directed at children or young girls, routinely raises questions of censorship in at least two ways. In the first sense, public anxiety about the display and dissemination of scenes of child rape or sex abuse often expresses itself in the terms of anxiety about pornography and voyeurism. See Chute on Kominsky-Crumb and Gloeckner, both of whom are frequently accused of producing pornography (56, 68–90). Public reaction against Gloeckner’s work, in part about lived experiences of child abuse (as well as substance abuse,

adolescent desire, and much more), has led to cancellation of speaking events to which she was initially invited. Her work has also been seized by British customs officials and banned from France.

In the second sense of censorship, there are those techniques of silencing and shaming that so key to rape culture and incest culture, the techniques of teaching the victim and people in the know to hide the knowledge and make it *unacknowledgeable*. This sense often aligns nicely with the discomfort experienced by a cultural elite that has the power to censor difficult materials and determine what is in good taste. This alignment, of course, leads disastrously to a an environment in which what Gloeckner labels the “laws of pornography” refuse visual space to victims of abuse with the same logics used to deny narratives of pleasure (quoted in Chute, 68). Such dovetailing of interests are painfully familiar to feminists, highlighting ways in which even opposed groups can cooperate in patriarchal projects of erasure. Comics do a particularly good job of addressing invisibility and silence, however, along with other cultural taboos. Even in non-explicit panels, the artistic decisions made in these comics—the representations of hunched bodies, sideways glances, turned backs, and averted eyes—force the viewer to “see” an often-invisible culture of shaming and silencing. Again, deliberate visual decisions force audience engagement with the dominating and destructive forces of the unspoken and unspeakable. Traumatic memory of something as intangible as being unable to speak can be made visible in the comics medium. The resulting conflation of terms and categories of speech/visibility/affect/bodily experience conveys a strong sense of the complexities of traumatic experience.

For the academic, one problem: how much revelation is *too much* revelation? The ethics of—possibly even forcing—someone to see something profoundly disturbing must be considered, as well as the political implications of making a “wrong” decision, a decision that leads someone or some formal body to identify a voyeuristic mentality or any mentality that is about consumption or even enjoyment of sexual abuse. How is the issue of consent negotiated between academic and audience? How is the issue of consent negotiated between comic artist and audience? They are not the same question because it is not my lived experience at stake—but are related questions. This set of issues is constantly in the minds of the creators of this sort of disturbing work. Barry says in interviews with Chute that she warns parents in particular when purchasing *One! Hundred! Demons!* that the book contains disturbing material about incest, suicide, and drugs (Chute, *Graphic Women* 54, 240 notes). And in an interview



1.2. In classic Barry style, what is remembered is simultaneously forgotten. Lynda Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!* p. 65.

with *comicsbulletin.com*, Drechsler expresses retrospective worry about maybe having “gone too far” with some of the images in *Daddy’s Girl* and acknowledges that even she herself finds them difficult to reread, adding that she found comics to be the ideal way to approach “hard topics” because they are “so much the bastard children of the arts that no one cares what lines get crossed” (<http://cotlzine.blogspot.ca/2008/07/debie-drechsler-interview.html>). That is not quite true, of course, though certainly marginal and alternative publications routinely do difficult cultural work in terms of raising awareness and pushing against boundaries, e.g., as in Jennifer Camper’s two edited volumes of *Juicy Mother*.

Comics about abuse offer a visual networking strategy for bringing together survivors in particular and those interested in raising awareness in general; they also extend the borders of autobiography about trauma to make us think about the implications of the image in debates about how prose autobiography forces the reader either to identify or dis-identify. Chute observes that the “disgust and pleasure that the visual carries is related to a bodily rhythm of reading, further underscored, and prompted, by the rhythm of the visual-verbal page, a rupturing alternation between affects” (Chute, *Graphic Women*, 71). In other words, the visual image of abuse is aesthetically and emotionally confrontational, even potentially coercive. Barry steps back from this coercion by leaving the main burdens of imagination to the reader: Only God gets to see what actually happened. Drechsler’s approach is totally different.





1.3. When the father figure in *Daddy's Girl* enters the bedroom, holding his erect penis, he chirps with a happy smile and some musical notes showing in the air, "Daddy's got a big surprise for his little girl" in a grotesque abuse of the language of a caring parent bringing a present. And then you see his penis in her mouth and you realize that that phrase with its little musical notes is as obscene as anything else in the frames. Debbie Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*, p. 2.

I have included this explicit set of Drechsler's images of an erect male organ and direct sexual contact with a child for multiple reasons, all to do with confronting different kinds of censorship—and there are, of course, more than two kinds—despite my concerns about the very real dangers of traumatization through such visuals, always keeping in mind that the image can force a reaction in ways that perhaps the word cannot. If we are concerned about the line between what is scene/seen and what is obscene, we must also ask: Who gets to say when reality exceeds the representable? Why is it that so often those primarily concerned with censorship of self-narration are not the ones who have lived the negative realities at stake or



1.4. Lynda Barry. *One! Hundred! Demons!* p. 72.

in question? To what extent does censorship of these images participate in a culture of shaming and blaming? To what extent does said censorship work to obscure connections between individual and community in terms of both affect and shared experience? Perhaps we must think here of Freud and his desperate desire to deny the quotidian nature of father-daughter sex incest, as Judith Herman Lewis observes, “because of what it implied about the behaviour of respectable family men” (9, *Father-Daughter Incest*).

There is usually more buffering in the realm of words than in the world of images. An extensive vocabulary exists to describe incidents of sexual abuse/incest in distant and distancing terms—and no need even to use the word “penis,” given the range of available euphemisms: consider Jean Auel, who managed to write an entire series of soft porn using words like “organ” and “member.” The phrase “sex abuse” itself is non-specific and leaves the mind free to refuse to imagine in ways that the image does not.

In *One! Hundred! Demons!* Barry takes that indirect approach in any case, using an aesthetic approach of suggestion and inference—a *less is more* approach sharply in contrast to Drechsler’s vivid and explicit renderings. Note the speech bubble positioned directly over the genital



1.5. Debbie Drechsler. *Daddy's Girl*. p. 3.

area. Barry leaves the burden of imagination to the reader; Drechsler, like Kominsky-Crumb and Gloeckner, forces the reader to see what the abuse victim sees. Once again, what is remembered is also forgotten, in a frequent Barry trope that emphasizes memory as a series of choices as much as something that takes shape on its own (72). Memory, like subjectivity, is partial, constructed, and reconstructed. At one point Drechsler's Lily comments, "I never did remember the thing I forgot," even though the reader/viewer has just seen what it was, in all its atrocity (56). Here we see only the head of the father, having an orgasm, and then the sister turning away in denial of what she has witnessed. The sister does and says nothing—here we "see" the refusal of emotional connection, the refusal of acknowledgement, the refusal to confront the situation—the refusal to participate in the reconstruction of memory and subjectivity (3).

Confrontational is an apt word here, recalling Whitlock and Poletti on confronting bodies. It is important to avoid the impression, when



talking about affective outreach, that Drechsler's and Barry's visuals offer merely a sort of visual networking system for female victims. Far more profoundly, they offer cultural confrontation and the potential for change or healing through strategies of outreach and uncomfortable transparency. They make clear the value of what might be called feminist art activism, art that deliberately self-defines as a form of creative emancipation. Creative emancipatory work, in the context of the representation of child sex abuse, offers a venue both for the artistic self and for the receiving viewer/reader to do a range of affective and political things: to heal, to make transparent, to undo, and to redo. All of those artistic endeavors are highly politicized. Speaking of Gloeckner, Chute talks of the "urgency of representing trauma" (2010: 74); these comics are precisely about matters of essential cultural urgency at the everyday level. Unique events such as the collapse of the Twin Towers demand and produce acknowledgment of the effects of the extraordinary. These texts do precisely the opposite. They emphasize repeated and quotidian traumas, trauma of gender inequity, traumas set in the home and enacted and re-enacted every day. In a sense, these texts are about what is perfectly ordinary and one thing that is perfectly ordinary is that it is impossible to separate mind and body, word and image, emotion and politics.

The stakes here, unlike those in papers in this collection about the events surrounding 9/11, are precisely about *not* being in a state of exception; the ordinary world itself is dangerous, sexually violent, emotionally difficult, racist, unequal in terms of wealth and class, as the body of Drechsler's and Barry's work makes clearly and undeniably visible. Comics such as these are trouble at its best, destructive of some social norms and creative of new ones. I will not write here about the various ways in which the comics format itself troubles norms of art and of high and low culture, for reasons of space and also because so many comics critics have done such a good job of that already, e.g., troubling norms and comfort levels of art is also something Alisia Chase emphasizes in her essay for this collection, "*You Must Look at the Personal Clutter: Diaristic Indulgence, Female Adolescence, and Feminist Autobiography*." Chase offers a feminist art historian's perspective on women comic artists' deployment of the mess and pain of everyday lived experience to make profound connections that are at once, to use a phrase we all know well but often use tokenistically, personal and political. Barry and Drechsler use sequential art as critique (exposing rape-culture's strategies of shame, blame, and silencing); sequential art as vehicle for self-emancipation, at once political



I.6. The mother's turned back and averted gaze echo those of the sister in earlier frames. The viewer is invited into the scene, eyes following the gaze of the child to rest on the mother. Debbie Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*. p. 25.

and personal, and sequential art as *invitation* to participate in cultural production. By deploying these effectively activist techniques, Barry and Drechsler emphasize ways in which comics art can forge bonds between individual and community.

Drechsler's visual rendering of trauma illustrates rape culture's and incest culture's politics of shame in ways that the word alone cannot, as recognition cannot be refused. The unspoken word does not mean the viewer/reader has not seen and understood. Forbidden things may continue to be unnamed, unspoken, but they are irrefutably there: image forces recognition, empathy, acknowledgement of shame and damage. The shunned or damaged body draws the gaze, and also makes the viewer uncomfortable and afraid of being voyeuristic and thus participating in a culture of dominance and harm.

Both authors have expressed the feeling in interviews that artistic production about the traumatic past is necessary for them, a form of essential performance and public acknowledgment of things the world so often wishes to keep private. Barry's title for the episode specifically about child



1.7. Note the emphasis on something that no one can take away. Lynda Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!* p. 177.

abuse is “Resilience.” It is acts of artistic reimagining that express this resilience for both Drechsler and Barry. There are scenes in each text in which a supportive art teacher makes a huge difference in enabling access to this form of self-expression. These scenes are tremendously important as they are themselves instructional—by reproducing them Drechsler and Barry are emphasizing the lesson itself: self-expression is something you can give to yourself continually and no one can take it away. Self-expression gives you power over your own memory—and over your own sense of self/subject.

By passing on the lessons that art is liberating should be encouraged and supported, both artists are issuing invitations to participate in artistic self-expression, passing on the emancipatory lessons offered to their child selves, emphasizing a transmission of transformative possibilities. Both Drechsler and Barry offer an aesthetic escape: the working through and rendering of trauma through visuals. However, this escape does not separate mind and body but instead invites the visualization of the body as a form of freeing mental expression. Drechsler says in her interview with *comicsbulletin*, “. . . there are people who know what’s what who are making change.” Making change, for both Drechsler and Barry, is about inviting others into self-expression; Drechsler has talked about the importance of reimagining the past as a way of moving forward. In a similar vein, Barry teaches writing and drawing classes and gives workshops on accessing the inner storyteller, often describing her work as being about writing



1.8. A lesson about empathy and support is passed on, together with an emphasis on having something valuable of one's own. Debbie Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*. p. 37.

the unthinkable. Barry has published books intended to draw readers into active artistic participation, *What It Is* and *Picture This*. In “paying forward” the lessons given to their child selves, both artists open up creative, political, and affective possibilities for re-connecting individual and community and moving away from isolation and shame. Ann Cvetkovich’s recent brilliant book, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, articulates ways in which the “encounter between feeling and politics is thus open for discussion of forms of activism that can address messy feelings rather than trying to banish them” (110). Such productive and nuanced reimagining of therapy is offered through the works of Barry and Drechsler alike.

Not all the creative writers/artists discussed in this collection are concerned primarily with rendering and confronting demons, of course, but





I.9. Here, for once, Barry is the more explicit. Lynda Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!* p. 13.

all are engaged in active attempts at self-rendering and the remaking and representation of memory. Barbara Christian's word "rememorying" is suggestive, as it implies the active and deliberate reconstruction of memory to void fixed categories (Christian 1990: 48). For indeed, comic rememorying is doing much to unfix, remake, and make us rethink boundaries through the production of "self-regarding art" (Whitlock and Poletti 2008: v). At a recent talk at Queen's University, Glenn Willmott and Bart Beaty talked about the need for comics scholarship to theorize both authorial/creative subject and viewer/audience, much as film theory has done, and it is my hope that the essays in this collection do some of that work.

David Ball and Yaël Schlick begin the analytic work of the collection with attention to self-representation in the comics of Alison Bechdel and Lynda Barry. Ball's work tracks the intertextuality of Bechdel's created self, focusing on the conflation of allusion and confession in *Fun Home*. Ball works with textual genres and canonicity, while Schlick, in a similar vein, approaches the fictionalization of the self in autobiography more broadly, contrasting Bechdel's deployment of the fictional with Barry's refusal to distinguish between fictional and real. While Bechdel's text is obsessively self-reflexive, Barry's work invites reader/viewer participation, reducing the distance between bodies and text.

Michael Chaney's attention is on the body in the text, specifically the animal body. What is it about comics, he asks, that summons the human in bestial form? It is a profound question as animal studies in the humanities is an emerging powerhouse, and one that has not yet engaged fully with comics criticism. Chaney produces a sophisticated analysis of the potential and the dangers of a discourse of animal-human hybridity. In another study of subjectivity located outside the bounds of human form, Jan Baetens offers an examination of Martin Vaughn-James, pointing out that all comic art carries some degree of subjectivity, and working his way through an extended and elegant reading of object-subject relations in *The Cage*. Baetens invites readers to refuse simple conceptualizations of "serious" art and to reject oppositional models for relations between subject/object and subject/abstract.

Benjamin Widiss explores a sort of dialogic subjectivity, in which Chris Ware's relationship(s) with Joseph Cornell inform and inspire Ware's distinctive aesthetic. Cultural dialogues are also at stake in Christopher Bush's analysis of a *nouvelle manga* aesthetic, which incorporates analysis of French and Japanese literary and comics forms, film theory, and literary criticism. Via the *nouvelle manga*, Bush queries connections made between autobiography, self-referentiality, and cultural authenticity. Isaac Cates, too, raises questions about cultural authenticity through his study of the faux memoir and interpretive uncertainty in the collaborations of Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean.

With Lopamudra Basu and Davida Pines, we move into the analysis of trauma, both public and private. These essays focus on autobiographical representations of the events and emotions surrounding 9/11, on acts of recovering, and exploration of pain, grief, and mourning. Focusing on Art Spiegelman, Basu positions comic art as a space of resistance against oppression; Pines, in a similar vein, demonstrates how bearing witness challenges public narratives of unity, triumph, and heroism, referencing Spiegelman, Alissa Torres, and Sungyoon Choi. In contrast, Alisia Chase turns from public to private and calls for a re-engagement with the personal, the messy, and the intimate. Chase works with Phoebe Gloeckner, Debbie Drechsler, and Julie Doucet to expose the importance of quotidian traumas and the emotional confusions of lived experience.

Rachel Trousdale balances the personal and the public in her analysis of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, unpacking ways in which personal and public rebellions coincide and ways in which bearing witness both engages

with universal narratives and produces individuals/individualism. Sharon O'Brien, bringing the collection to an end, looks at ways in which bearing witness to the suffering and pain of others gives voice to bodies and, perhaps, souls, otherwise left out of language. Attentive to emerging work in the medical humanities with her analysis of Brian Fies' *Mom's Cancer*, O'Brien brings us back to the opening premise of this introduction: comics and engagement with embodiment. I chose to end this volume with O'Brien's powerful narrative about hope.

This book has been a labor of love extending over a long period, and it would have been impossible without the careful work and editorial attention given it by Sylvia Andrychuk and Kelly Quinn. I am lucky to have such devoted colleagues and friends. Many thanks to Walter Biggins and Anne Stascavage for their patience, and many thanks to Katie Keene and to all the others at University Press of Mississippi who worked hard on the volume. Thank you to anonymous reviewers. A special thank you to *Tangles* author Sarah Leavitt, who graciously donated her artwork for our cover. Flaws and remaining errors in the book are of course mine.

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# Drawing from Life

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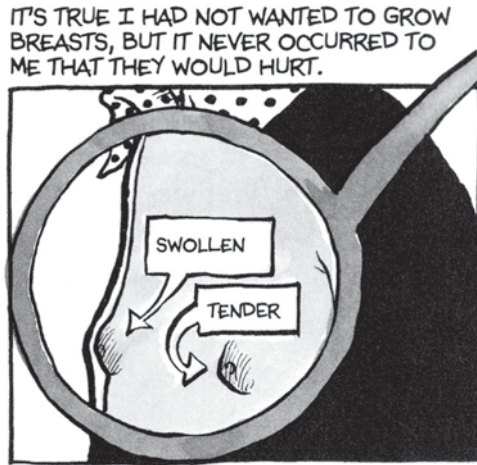
# Allusive Confessions

The Literary Lives of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*

—David M. Ball

With its rich and intertwined narratives of a family's history, a father's closeted sexuality, and an artist's coming of age and coming out, Alison Bechdel's 2006 graphic memoir *Fun Home* has quickly emerged as an essential text in the vanguard of contemporary graphic narrative. As scholars incorporate such comics into literary anthologies and course syllabi, this inclusion prompts as-yet-unrealized considerations of the ways in which comics do and do not alter the literary and art historical canons they have begun to enter.<sup>1</sup> Bechdel's work thus proves to be a compelling test case for an integrative approach to the intersections of comics, art history, and literature. *Fun Home* also explicitly theorizes this process by drawing upon, citing from, and transforming genres as seemingly diverse as the coming-out memoir, the *Künstlerroman*, and the graphic novel. In doing so, however, Bechdel's myriad literary allusions perform a degree of the same self-censorship encountered in earlier twentieth-century queer forms of cultural and artistic expression, complicating the confessional frame within which her comics are conventionally appreciated. This singular conflation of the allusion and the confession in *Fun Home* both shields the memoir's revelations from forms of full disclosure while shaping Bechdel's role as craftsman of her own narrative. *Fun Home* thus negotiates its place in literary and art historical canons in a manner exemplified by queer artists and writers before Bechdel, representing an extension of those earlier strategies as much as a departure for lesbian graphic narrative.

Much of the scholarly attention paid to *Fun Home* focuses on the memoir's powerful mode of witnessing and regards Bechdel's meticulous and archival attention to her own life as the primary measure of the text's

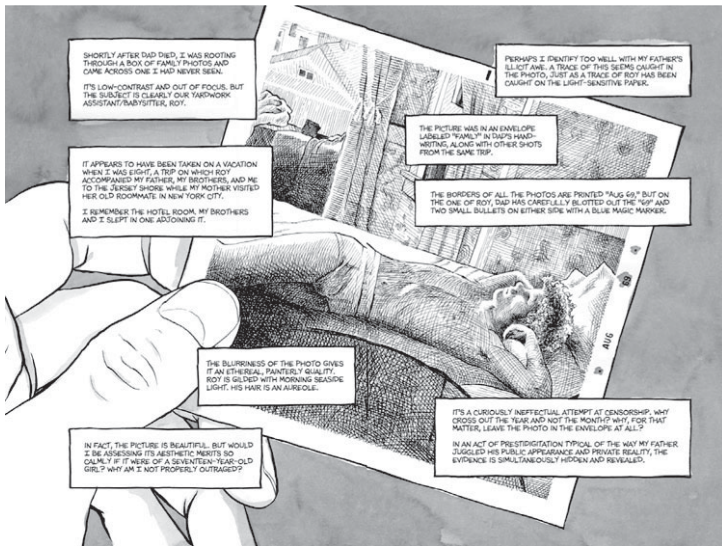


1.1. Alison Bechdel. *Fun Home*. p. 109.

critical import. The graphic memoir plumbs stark and often wrenching truths about Bechdel's ambivalence toward her father Bruce's closeted sexuality, his affairs with young boys, his presumed suicide, and the fractured family life this buried history produces. The parallel narrative of Alison's coming out is tightly imbricated within and mirrored by Bruce's tragedy, complementing and at times competing with her father's story for the center of the memoir's narrative attention. Bechdel's insistence within *Fun Home* upon a visible connection to her father maintains a relationship between her life and his in the memoir that she did not immediately feel during the strained years of their lived lives. Critics have rightly remarked upon the memoir's archival and confessional urges to maintain this tenuous familial bond: journal entries, correspondence, maps, court documents, and family photographs are painstakingly reproduced in Bechdel's panels. Bechdel herself has spoken about this confessional urge in a 2001 *Comics Journal* interview with Trina Robbins: "I don't know, maybe it's because I was raised Catholic. Confession has always held a great appeal for me" (Robbins 82). Additionally, her first book-length autobiographical work is titled *The Indelible Alison Bechdel: Confessions, Comix, and Miscellaneous Dykes to Watch Out For*, which includes a strip labeled "True Confession" (51–54). In doing so, Bechdel participates in what Susannah Radstone has termed confession's "range of narrational strategies to evoke in the reader the experience of the confessant's inward quest for self-transformation" (36).

This confessional urge is exemplified by a panel (fig. 1.1) showing a cut-away image of Alison's adolescent body, a synecdochic scene for the myriad other moments in which Alison literally and figuratively bares her breast—often, as is the case here, while telling narratives of pain—disclosing everything from bedroom scenes to intimate family secrets (109). Read in this light, *Fun Home* unflinchingly participates in a tradition of contemporary lesbian memoir, one which extends an American literary confessional genealogy dating back to Puritan conversion and African-American captivity narratives (Diggs). *Fun Home*, in this account, also staunchly resists the overwhelming invisibility and, to quote Terry Castle, “murderous allegorizing,” lesbian characters have been subjected to throughout the course of literary history (7). Among other scholars, Jennifer Lemberg writes admiringly of “the power of graphic narrative as witness” in *Fun Home*, figuring Bechdel as “consistently privileg[ing] drawing as a more direct mode of representation” (129, 133). Similarly, Ann Cvetkovich, while acknowledging the memoir's “power to provide forms of truth that are emotional rather than factual,” nonetheless characterizes Bechdel's technique as an “archival mode of witness” (“Drawing” 114), extending her own arguments about the ways in which “lesbian and gay history demands a radical archive of emotion in order to document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism, all areas of experience that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive” (*Archive* 241).

Given this powerful form of witnessing, however, it would be a simplification to read *Fun Home* as an unvarnished recording of a life history, a narrative unshaped by the literary aspirations and narrative demands of the author. Bechdel is keen to make her readers understand the long-held positions of memoir scholarship: the unreliability of memory, the gulf that invariably separates the speaker of the text from its author, and the multiple ways in which memoirs are ordered and construct narratives that complicate uncritical notions of facticity and testimony. My use of “Bechdel” and “Alison” throughout this essay to refer to the author and her avatar respectively mimics the very distinction Bechdel herself is at great pains to make throughout her memoir. Perhaps more so than any other graphic memoirist, Bechdel carefully draws her readers' attention to these complexities by illustrating imagined scenes to which she has no conceivable access (32, 65, 71), narrating her own “epistemological crisis” as a young diarist (142), willfully altering details small and large in her narrative (41, 185), and establishing an often dramatic distance between the narrative text and her panels' visual content throughout.



1.2. Alison Bechdel. *Fun Home*. p. 100–01.

Take as a representative example of these disparities the archival “centerfold” of Roy (fig. 1.2), Alison’s babysitter and her father’s lover (100–101). Bechdel describes the discovery of this photograph as the germ of the entire memoir:

In many ways photographs really generated the book. In fact the whole story was spawned by a snapshot I found of our old babysitter lying on a hotel bed in his Jockey shorts. [. . .] It was a stunning glimpse into my father’s hidden life, this life that was apparently running parallel to our regular everyday existence. And it was particularly compelling to me at the time because I was just coming out myself. I felt this sort of posthumous bond with my father, like I shared this thing with him, like we were comrades. I didn’t start working on the book then, but over the years that picture persisted in my memory. It’s literally the core of the book, the centerfold. (Chute, “Interview” 1,005–06)

Bechdel uses the language of sudden revelation here, this discovery representing an abiding act of witnessing her father’s sexual truth. Likewise, Cvetkovich declares this moment the “visual and emotional kernel out of which the story emerges” (115), and Chute describes this composition as the center of the memoir’s “circling, ‘labyrinthine’ structure [. . .] because it spirals in to the double-spread center of Roy [. . .] and then spirals out”

(*Graphic Women* 183). This splash page is the only one of its kind in the entire memoir; no other single panel in the text even bleeds to the margins. It is also importantly located at the very center of the text, a direct figuration of the leitmotif of revelation and self-discovery striated throughout the memoir. Given all of this—the affective and confessional authority of the photograph, the representational power of Bechdel's art, as well as the central role of these pages in the text—it is easy to forget that images such as this one do not mimetically represent lived experience. For legal reasons such as the protection of the identities of many of the memoir's subjects, as well as a host of other considerations, "Roy" and his likeness are a pseudonym and an avatar respectively. "Roy" is not Roy, and the bodily representation of him reproduced in the text is not as he appears in Bechdel's private archive.

This should not come as a surprise to readers. Roy's careful composition, both in the photograph itself and its appearance within the memoir as a whole, draws upon artistic tropes of the art nude and the *nue couchée* evidenced throughout the text. Bechdel portrays Bruce reading Kenneth Clark's extensive study, *The Nude*, at several points (15, 99), and both he and Alison admire a fashion spread in *Esquire* magazine displaying a similarly recumbent semi-nude model on the page immediately before Roy's centerfold. While more revealing than this advertisement, which somewhat demurely cuts its subject off at the waist, the shadowing and page fold of Roy's spread nonetheless veil the viewer's gaze at the same moment that the body is exposed. The centerfold thus reveals the father's affair while concealing the lover's name and appearance; it is drawn from the family's archive, but registers distance in its conspicuous artfulness and engagement with longstanding artistic practices and archetypes; and it evidences an explicit and corporeal site of Bruce's passions while concealing that very body from our view.

Bechdel withholds information from her readers while concurrently extracting documents, however altered, from the archive of her family's past, even as Alison in the bottom right text box notes her father's "curiously ineffectual attempt at censorship." The panel thus engages, in an oblique fashion, with the very censorship that its text queries. At the very moment she describes her father's "act of prestidigitation [*sic*] typical of the way [he] juggled his public appearance and private reality, the evidence [. . .] simultaneously hidden and revealed," Bechdel's composition engages in precisely this unresolved dialectic of withholding and revelation, a preeminent act of mirroring between Bruce and herself that Alison



insists upon throughout the text. That Bechdel renders the photographic “evidence” held in her own hand simultaneously brings it to light and holds it at a distance from her readers. It is represented literally under her thumb and drawn, as are all of the memoir’s documents, in the artist’s hand, a register of the levels of mediation through which both Alison and her readers are dissociated from the events she attempts to narrate and envision on the page. The composition’s emotional truth is only achieved through its willful artifice.

The means by which the centerfold of “Roy” embodies this dialectic of revelation and withholding is merely one exemplar of an oscillation that takes place throughout the memoir.<sup>2</sup> This dynamic can be productively understood within a larger history of censorship and self-censorship in modern gay and lesbian visual culture in which *Fun Home* fitfully participates.<sup>3</sup> In his groundbreaking work *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*, Richard Meyer argues that the “‘negative’ image of homosexuality—the image of crime or sin, of sickness or stereotype—has constituted an essential part of the pictorial language on which artists have drawn” (8). This “regulation of homosexuality,” however, has “provoked unanticipated responses and counterrepresentations, unforeseen pictures of difference and self-conscious stagings of deviance” (10). These selfsame punitive regimes of enforced gay invisibility and compulsory heterosexuality have, according to Meyer, given gay artists the tools for upsetting those very structures of visibility and self-imagining. Meyer views such censorship as a generative device for queer artists, one which:

compels indirection and “ingenious disguise” on the part of the writer. Censorship produces as well as prohibits writing; it consigns the writer not to silence but to the strategic use of suggestion and metaphor, of submerged meanings and encoded messages [. . .] a dialectical concept of censorship [that] functions not simply to erase but also to enable representation; it generates limits but also reactions to those limits; it imposes silence even as it provokes responses to that silence. (15)

Gay and lesbian visual expression, in Meyer’s reading, is thus paradoxically enabled by its very repression. Meyer claims that these forms of censorship and self-censorship are even more powerful in the case of lesbian artists, who have been “restricted from reaching [the] threshold of visibility within American culture” throughout the twentieth century (22).

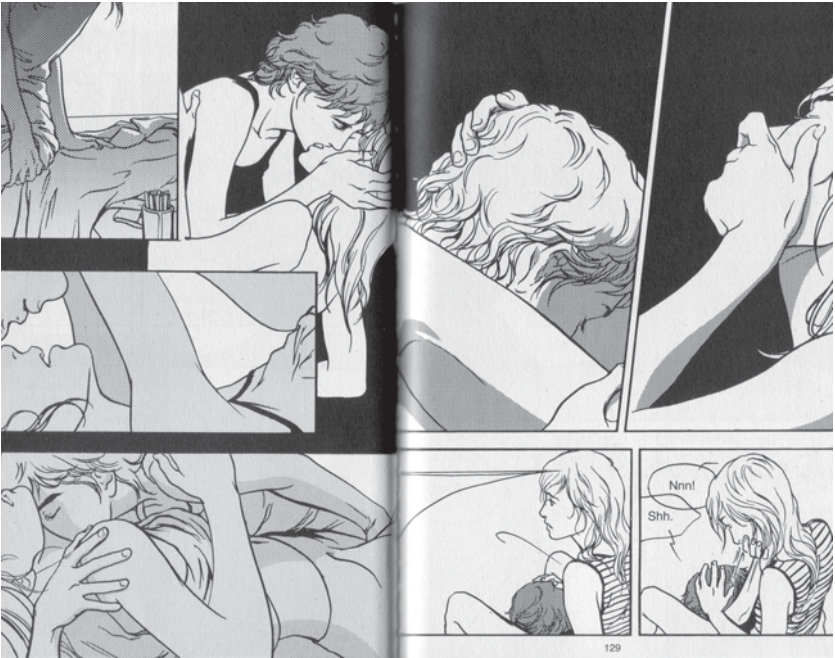


1.3. Alison Bechdel. "Coming Out Story." *Gay Comics* 19 (1993). p. 1.

If anything, we might expect such submerged meanings and encoded messages to have little bearing on a twenty-first-century memoir as "graphic," in every sense of that word, as Bechdel's. The cover of the paperback edition of *Fun Home* celebrates its "refreshingly open" approach to queer autobiography, and Bechdel herself made her early career in the explicitly political and often ribald comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*. Her 1993 "Coming Out Story" (fig. 1.3), which is in many respects the urtext of *Fun Home*, mocked reticence in the coming out story with faux horror film iconography (1). Despite one brief, perhaps even obligatory censorship controversy in Missouri, *Fun Home* has met with overwhelming praise rather than vitriol for its depictions of homosexuality.



1.4a. Kiriko Nananan. *Blue*. 1997.



1.4b. June Kim. *12 Days*. 2006.



1.4c. Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki. *Skim*. 2008.

Indeed, compared to figurations of lesbian relationships in many contemporary comics written for audiences outside a gay readership, Bechdel's representations are pronouncedly direct. The panels included here, from Kiriko Nananan's 1997 *Blue* (fig. 1.4a), June Kim's 2006 *12 Days* (fig. 1.4b), and Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki's 2008 *Skim* (fig. 1.4c) respectively, all draw their visual vocabulary from Japanese *yuri*, a sub-genre of manga that focuses on lesbian relationships, frequently between women of high school age. The dialectic that Meyer describes between self-censorship and counter-representation recurs here in the physical touching of lesbian bodies that also serves as an act of hiding. An image emerges of lesbian attachment that is both aesthetically and emotionally arresting as well as doomed to occlusion and curtailment, often in a violent fashion. In her nouvelle manga *Blue*, Nananan imagines the confession of one girl's love for the other as a "convulsion," with entire panels blacking out as if in a sort of shame reflex (67). When physical relationships between women

are figured, they are done so only in brief moments and often abstract forms, the moment of their love's revelation also a simultaneous eclipse of their singularity. Not merely a distinction between American and Japanese comics, this pattern of literally refusing to show the face of lesbian love fully appears throughout a range of works inspired by *yuri* appearing in North America—*Skim* and *12 Days* being written and drawn by Canadian-born artists of Japanese heritage and a Korean-born New Yorker respectively—that adopt a similar course of dialectically revealing and withholding a full depiction of lesbian sexuality.

While seemingly distant from these other contemporaneous portrayals of lesbian love, Bechdel in fact has been criticized as insufficiently radical (Dean, Martindale). While I agree with Cvetkovich that *Fun Home* compellingly complicates homonormative narratives, I am ultimately less interested in such debates about the sufficiency of Bechdel's radicalism than I am in the question of whether Bechdel's pronounced ambivalences in fact make room for the claims and representations she *is* able to draw throughout her work.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the discourse of homosexuality-as-pathology persists in her memoir through Bruce's perceived disease and attempts at therapy, Alison's figuration of her own obsessive-compulsive disorder, and her adoption of the Freudian discourse of "inversion" throughout the text. Indeed, Bechdel has expressed regret for how lesbian iconography has permeated popular culture, evincing a nostalgia for the lost coded language of the minority subculture, as described by Meyer, that generates exactly the "pictorial language" made possible in *Dykes to Watch Out For* and *Fun Home*. One early and particularly prescient example of this assimilation fear is a 1990 episode of "Servants to the Cause"—a monthly strip that ran in the *Advocate* and is reprinted in *The Indelible Alison Bechdel*—which describes gay and lesbian assimilation into mainstream culture as a threat to queer exceptionality and political relevance (191). Even the character who argues that gays and lesbians are fighting for "the right to be like everybody else" in this strip later opines: "Sometimes I miss the furtive, secretive, good old days" ("Coming Out" 36).

One of the most powerful and conspicuous means by which Bechdel negotiates this dialectic in *Fun Home* is through frequent and explicit allusions to other literary works of art, titling each of her chapters with a citation from another text and picturing other works of literature throughout her panels as key visual and narrative registers. These allusions simultaneously sharpen the confessional themes of the text—the concurrent thralls and perils of idealizing a love object, the dramatic and performative nature





1.5. Alison Bechdel. "Coming Out Story." *Gay Comics* 19 (1993). p. 3.

of everyday life, the human costs of the artist's endeavor—and offer narratives separate from the specifics of the Bechdel family's drama. On the first page alone, Bechdel transforms the child's game of airplane into a layered reference to the Icarus myth while placing a visible copy of *Anna Karenina* open beside her father, both allusions presaging Bruce's suicide. In a supremely metafictional move, both resonances return on the narrative's concluding page; Bruce lies prostrate beneath the Sunbeam bread truck that serves as the memoir's Tolstoyan train, catching Alison in the final iteration of the text's recursive and at times vertiginous allusions to the Icarian fall that cites Greek myth and James Joyce's *Ulysses* alike. This proliferation of literary allusions is also exceedingly germane to Alison's lived life—both her parents were English teachers and she describes her

own coming out as a process of reading as much as one of felt experience, as specious as that divide becomes throughout the memoir—and a distancing technique from the often traumatic details of that life.

Taking a longer view, these allusive confessions marked Bechdel's earliest comics as much as her most recent work. "Coming Out Story," first published in the periodical *Gay Comics* more than a decade before *Fun Home*, offers a prehistory and lays bare many of the more subtly refined themes of the finished memoir. On the third page of the short narrative (fig. 1.5) the reader sees Alison "browsing through books [. . .] to distract [herself] from a truth that was slowly but surely struggling to the surface of [her] sex-starved soul" (3). Books and reading here are initially presented as a means to avoid erotic truth, the conspicuous alliteration of the passage itself a distancing technique of the literary. Yet the words are themselves lushly sensuous, conflating the textual and the sexual in ways that will be manifest throughout her later memoirs. Textual study thus both defers self-revelation and prompts Alison's coming out.

This avowal is followed immediately in the next panel by the discovery of *Word is Out*, a 1978 volume that transcribes interviews from a documentary film of the same title. *Word is Out* as a text broadcasts its intent to celebrate gay and lesbian visibility and testimony, an irony heightened by Bechdel as she shows the volume being read in relative secrecy, while also returning to, publishing, and making visible that secret history of reading in her own comics. Indeed, this moment of the discovery of *Word is Out* was later redrawn multiples times in *Fun Home* (74–75, 203) and described as generating "[Alison's] realization at nineteen that [she] was a lesbian [. . .] a revelation not of the flesh but of the mind" (74). The contiguous panels of "Coming Out Story" then show the act of reading to be both irremediably outside of the self and the royal road to that self-realization, both an obstacle to and the ultimate means of sexual awakening. Nonetheless, "Coming Out Story" hews to a stauncher notion of facticity that *Fun Home* eschews. The comic concludes (fig. 1.6) when Alison states: "I've told the true story. My own humble contribution to that epic tale of collective self-revelation that my sisters and brothers have been telling for generations" (12). The tone here is difficult to pin down—part triumphant, part mock-heroic—yet this seemingly bald statement also signals the end of the narrative as such, spoken as it is immediately before the speaker closes the door on her readers. The self is revealed, Bechdel shows us, at the moment the narrative is cut short.