

Bio: **Alison Bechdel** is an American Cartoonist most famous for her comic strip *Dykes To Watch Out For*, which has become a countercultural institution. The strip is syndicated in dozens of newspapers, translated into several languages and collected in a series of award-winning books. *Utne* magazine has listed DTWOF as “one of the greatest hits of the twentieth century.” And *Comics Journal* says, “Bechdel’s art distills the pleasures of *Friends* and *The Nation*; we recognize our world in it, with its sorrows and ironies.” In addition to her comic strip, Bechdel has also done exclusive work for a slew of publications, including *Ms.*, *Slate*, the *Advocate*, and many other newspapers, websites, comic books, and ‘zines.’ In 2006, Houghton Mifflin published her graphic memoir, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. The bestselling coming-of-age tale has been called a “mesmerizing feat of familial resurrection” and a “rare, prime example of why graphic novels have taken over the conversation about American literature.”



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An Interview with Alison Bechdel

Conducted by Leadership Scholar Mimi Zander, Class of 2011

Edited by Nicholas Salazer

**Mimi Zander: What motivates you to create your art?**

**Allison Bechdel:** Deep insecurity. What motivates me? I do think to some extent it is an incompleteness, insecurity, or a neurosis on my part. I think that’s why anyone pursues any avenue of creativity. It’s because they’re trying to get something that they’re missing, that they have missed, or [that] they’re trying to heal something. Creating art is an extraordinarily painful process. Why did you do that unless you’re driven on some deeper level to make yourself feel better? I know I also do it for more socially acceptable reasons like, yes, I want to share my experience with other people, [and] yes, in the case of my comic strip I wanted to make lesbians visible in the world. But really, the deeper reason was for my own sanity.

**MZ: Did you always feel a need to express yourself through comics?**

**AB:** I always drew. I think most children draw. I think if a child didn’t draw, that would be unusual, but I just never stopped. It wasn’t like I always consciously thought of that as expressing myself. It was just an activity. It was just something I did, and that I still do.

**MZ: As a young person, did you have any role models that you identified with?**

**AB:** At the time, I probably would have said no. But now, as I look back, yes, of course I had role models. I just might not have thought of them that way. My parents were great role models. I’ve only recently come to think of them as great role models. I had teachers, but I don’t feel like

I followed anyone's path.

One big role model for me was Howard Cruz, who is gay cartoonist. When I graduated from college in the early eighties, I discovered this comic book called *Gay Comics* that Howard was editing and drawing beautiful work for. Howard was very much a role model in that he was drawing out comics about being gay at a time when no one else was doing that. And it completely blazed this path for me. Oh, I can do that. I like to draw. I'd like to write about my life as a lesbian.

JEB, the photographer Joan Byron, was a big role model at that same time when I was in college. She had photographed photographs of lesbians. It was just really cool to see these images of dykes in the world, because I didn't see images of people who looked like me anywhere. I found that very empowering, and it was exciting. I wanted to capture the richness of this lesbian culture visually in the way that she did in her photographs.

I discovered JEB's photos when I was in my senior year of college. I discovered Howard's *Gay Comics* right after graduating. And a year after graduating from college, I was drawing proto-dykes to watch out for, little sketches just for myself and to show my friends.

**MZ: What were your first visions of women? How did you relate to them?**

**AB:** I grew up in the early sixties. I started noticing this incredibly sexist world where women were Beaver Cleaver's mother, an idiot, or on Thorazine, or both. And it was not something that I related to at all. In children's book illustrations, and comics I was seeing as a kid, the female characters were always somehow not generic. They weren't regular. They were always female people as opposed to people. I grew up feeling disturbed about all that and having nowhere to put it or having a real way of understanding it. It's hard for me to separate out my lesbian self. Trying to make sense of the world, make sense of this gendered world, versus just my female self. Seeing this incredible unfairness and disparity. I just [did not see] a lot of options, and certainly nothing that I wanted to embody myself. I admired things like the rifleman on TV. I loved that show, or Beaver. I like Beaver. Beaver's still kind of a role model. Somehow, being a pre-pubescent boy avoided a lot of problems.

Is there a lesbian community anymore? I don't know that there is. You know, in my youth [we had] this drive and we had to dress identically so we knew who each other was. But I feel like there's nowhere near that kind of cohesive or coherent community. I went through a stage of bemoaning the dissolution of community, but I see that now as ultimately a good thing because we don't have to be that little isolated band anymore. But, if there is no community I cannot be a representative of it. Maybe at the very beginning I had some brief illusion that I tried to represent all lesbians in my comics, but it soon became clear that that was not going to happen. No one could do that.

**MZ: Can you talk a little bit about the beginning of DTWOF [*Dykes to Watch Out For*]?**

**AB:** One interesting thing about me is that even though I did always draw, I did not always draw women. I almost always drew people. They were always boys or men in my sketchbooks and my high school and college notebooks. And that started seeming kind of weird to me. After I came out as a lesbian, [I said to myself], “Why are you always drawing men, what’s that about?” There was some way that I just couldn’t draw women with the ease I could draw men. So I started examining that like, is this my internalized misogyny? Is this some kind of societal conditioning? I looked at comics out in the world and I would see things like Mini Mouse, [she’s] just Mickey Mouse with a bow on her head and a skirt. I started working up this feminist anger that women didn’t really get to be people. Women were just female people and I wanted to draw women who were people, who weren’t just a generic figure with a bow and eye lashes.

In some ways, I had never really learned how to represent women the way that you don’t really have to learn how to represent men. You just see them, but I do think there was something else going on. I don’t think it was just that feminist analysis. I do think I had some sort of gender confusion going on too, but I taught myself how to draw women. My first women looked a lot like men, but I got better at it. I finally realized I could draw a woman if I thought of her as a lesbian. This sounds so primitive now in this day and age when we’re not constrained in the same way that we were all those years ago. I found if I thought of these women as lesbians, I could draw them. Now I can draw [and] don’t need to do that. Somehow it was a necessary connection I needed to make at that time. Then I just couldn’t stop drawing lesbians. I drew lesbians forever after.

**MZ: What challenges did you experience in creating DTWOF (*Dykes to Watch Out For*) and publishing your book?**

**AB:** I don't know. I was also young and naïve and I didn't really know that I was doing something challenging. Some ways it wasn't challenging. I just was drawing cartoons. It was fun. But as I went along I would get more and more ambitious like yeah, I want to make money from this. Yeah, I want to have this running more than one newspaper, and so I would pursue each of those things as I went along. I started pedaling postcards of my cartoons to gay and lesbian bookstores, or in those days to gay bookstores and women's bookstores.

One big challenge was sneaking my lesbian cartoons into my office and making copies of them on the office Xerox machine. Then, they would get jammed sometimes and I would have people like the boss come in and have these erotic cartoons jamming up the machine, but that was probably my biggest challenge. Over the years, it was okay. Now I've started to make a living from this. How do I keep making a living from it? I would always have to be scanning around trying to find more newspapers, selling T-shirts and postcards and mouse pads and coffee mugs. For a long time, I did that. It was what I did instead of having to get a job. I remember a writer friend of mine once suggested that this was somewhat demeaning and I shouldn't be prostituting myself in this way, but because I was making money selling T-shirts I didn't have to go with it. Then, I guess there were aesthetic challenges, [such as] how do I keep making the work better?

How do I keep it fresh? How do I keep it relevant? How do I keep up with current event? There was always some challenge or other.

**MZ: Why did you choose to write such a deeply personal memoir?**

**AB:** Well I'm not sure I chose it. I wouldn't say that I chose it. I felt compelled to do it. I just felt like I had to tell that story. It seemed like kind of an amazing story and I almost had an obligation to tell the story.

I wrote this memoir about my father's suicide. My father was a closeted gay or bisexual man who died mysteriously in a truck accident. We still weren't certain [if it] was a suicide, but my family strongly suspects that it was. That happened just a couple months after I came out to my family as a lesbian and found out about my father. I didn't know about my dad, until I told my parents I was a lesbian. So, it was this very confusing time. I was a senior in college and all this stuff was happening. One big thing after another, and each time another order of magnitude, until my father was dead. I could see, even at the time or very close to that time, that this was an amazing story about two gay people growing up in the in the same small Pennsylvania town, in different generations and having really different outcomes. My outcome was different because of who my father was. Things I learned from that, and things I refused to learn from, but it wasn't a story I felt I could tell the time. It took me twenty years before I could sit down and begin to tell it because it involved these family secrets. People that knew my dad was gay didn't know he killed himself. And eventually, I thought that I could reveal those things. The culture had changed so much in those twenty years. It wasn't as unspeakable to be gay, or it wasn't unspeakable to have a suicide in your family. People just talked more about things. That was part of it. I just felt like I was able finally to tell the story and to confront my family with the fact that I was going to be telling the story. I had enough internal structure and clarity about myself to be able to do that. It was hard. It was a hard thing to do.

I do try to make myself very vulnerable, but I feel like I'm not a normal person. I don't have the normal inhibitions or defenses against that, that most people would. Partly because of the family I grew up in. In a way, I make myself vulnerable because I'm looking for sympathy. I'm looking for connection. I want to win people over and I'm doing it in this kind of like pathetic way like showing you know my most intimate underbelly. I don't think it's necessarily a very seemly way to behave, but it's what I can do and I understand when other people say well I could never reveal stuff like that about myself or my family. I understand that, but I feel I don't have that inhibition for some reason.

**MZ: Can you talk about artistic choices in DTWOF from 2008?**

**AB:** With my comic strip, I would start out with, a story in motion. I knew what was going on in everyone's lives. I would keep a little spreadsheet, so I would decide, well who needs attention in this next episode? I guess we were wondering what was going on with Lois, Lois's domestic life, an update on that, and then I would look at what would happen in the news. I guess this was

happening during the election. There was a lot. There was this whole Hilary versus Obama thing going on. I put those things together, like in a Cuisinart, put the blender on, and I get a story about Lois's girlfriend and the girlfriend's daughter, and how they're fighting over who to vote for. I would do this all in writing first. I would write in a drawing program on my computer. I'm not just doing a word processing document. I have panels and boxes and blocks of text that I can move around on the page. Speech balloons I can draw and move depending on where I want them to be. I have this all mapped out in terms of the writing. Then, I print it out and do the drawings.

**MZ: What about the way your style changed from the early DTWOF to *Fun Home*?**

**AB:** All I have ever drawn was my comic strip for 15 to 20 years by the point I started writing *Fun Home*. My drawing has just gotten better over time. I never have intentionally had a style of any kind. I just draw in the best way I can manage. It has gotten technically better with practice over the years, which is not always the case with people. Often you can see the evolution in someone's work. If you look at early *Peanuts* cartoons, for example. Those don't look anything like they ultimately did or *Calvin and Hobbes*, they're still those little child hands like a kid drew them. I feel fortunate that I've been able to improve technically. I always worry that I am going to reach a peak and then decline, which I suppose is inevitable.

I think about Greek art. In classical Greece, there's this progression, people had just enough technical skills to produce really beautiful work; but when their skills got even better, the work got gaudy and overdone. I think a lot about something E. B. White said to James Thurber once. He did these wonderful silly New Yorker cartoons, very simple style, and E.B. White said to him, "You know, if you ever got any good, you'd be mediocre," and I always think that about my work. I don't want to get so good, that I'm mediocre.

**MZ: What has been your reaction to the public's response to *Fun Home*?**

**AB:** Well, it's very interesting. The book was very successful. Certainly more successful than I dreamed it would be, and I didn't even know what to expect. I've gotten so used to being this underdog. This person with kind of a chip on my shoulder [because] I feel like I am underestimated. I just have always been on the margins and when *Fun Home* came out it got a lot of attention. It got a lot of attention not just as a graphic novel, but as a book, which was a wonderful thing for me. [It] made me very happy. I'm so used to being, as I said marginalized, in this very tight little category my *Dykes to Watch Out* cartoons would always end up on the lesbian studies shelf of the bookstore and very rarely on the comics shelf. That's where their readers would look for them and so that was fine, but part of me has always bridled against being pigeonholed in anyway. So, it was really exciting when *Time Magazine* called [*Fun Home*], "The best book of the year," which was incredible. So it was weird. I'm still adjusting to the fact I wrote a successful book. It's been wonderful. Obviously, I made some money. It's given me opportunities to do other stuff. It's enabled me to continue writing another autobiographical project, but I feel like I haven't quite caught up to myself. I'm still working on that and to have to

produce another book in the shadow of a successful book is an interesting challenge in itself. Some days I'll pick up *Fun Home* and say to myself, "How did I do that?" I can't remember how I did it. And I'm not doing it in this book. So it's very vexing.

**MZ: Do you want to talk about your new project?**

**AB:** Yeah sure. My new project, it's taken me a long time to realize this, but it's actually kind of a companion book to *Fun Home*. People would ask me, "Oh is it a sequel to *Fun Home*? Does it pickup where *Fun Home* left off?" I would resist that idea because it didn't feel exactly like a sequel to me. I really didn't know what this book was going to be about because I didn't have another story. I felt like the story about my dad was amazing. I don't have any more like those up my sleeve. So, I got this idea that this next book wouldn't be this big story, but a lot of little stories cobbled together. And I wanted it to be about the idea of relationship. Well, part of my problem was that I didn't know what the book was about. And I finally realize it's a book about my mother. I knew my mother was part of it all along, but my mother is alive unlike my father who was dead when I wrote *Fun Home*. It's very easy to write about dead people because they're not going to see it and they are not looking over your shoulder. I feel like my mother is very much looking over my shoulder right now even though she hasn't really seen what I'm doing. She doesn't want to and I'm afraid to show her, but it's turning out to be a memoir about my relationship with my mother. But it's more than that because I feel like our relationships with our mothers are a template not only for every subsequent relationship—you will have intimate [relationships and others,] but our relationship to the world—to the reality outside of ourselves and to the universe.

I'm telling not just my own story, but I'm looking at it through the lens of psychoanalysis. Through my own experience of doing therapy to repair some of the things I felt were wrong in my early life. And so I'm learning about psychoanalysis. I spent the last couple of years reading about a lot of the work of Donald Winnicott, a really amazing psychoanalyst who had a lot of amazing theories of child development. So, I'm learning about his work. I'm trying to explain his theories in and weave his theoretical material into my biographical material. And it's been a really interesting challenge.

**MZ: What do you hope readers will gain from reading your work?**

**AB:** When I read a book or film, I want to learn more about being human. How other people cope with the challenges of being a live human being. I would hope that people get something useful like that out of my story.

**MZ: What do you think leadership is?**

**AB:** Well, I can see that maybe part of my resistance to the word leadership is some kind of archaic outmoded defunct like female resistance to accepting any kind of authority. I have never considered myself a leader. I've never aspired to be a leader. I don't seek leaders. I don't feel like

I need a leader. I wish I knew why I find it challenging. I feel like it's a hollow word. I have derived so much of my identity from being a marginal person [that] the notion of leadership was like you don't want to be a leader because leaders are the jerks. I have this historic bias against the term. Probably from my old lesbian collective days when we didn't need leaders we wanted to be nonhierarchical.

As someone who felt that I did not really have women role models as a little kid, except my mother, my mother was definitely a role model, but a conflicted one, and a complicated one. I think girls need to see role models. We should have a woman president and women on the Supreme Court because then other girls know that they can do that.

**MZ: Do you have any advice for me as I set off on my journey beyond university life?**

**AB:** I feel like I was very fortunate to be able to kind of hew to my little path of integrity when I was young and starting out because I did not know any better. I did not know I should go to law school or I should be worried about my retirement. I didn't know those things and I think that was part of the era that I grew up in. It was a different economic scenario. I feel like young people don't have that same luxury. I didn't have that luxury. I just didn't know it.

I want to say do the thing that you love. That's the most important thing. Just pay attention to the thing that you love and do it. I wouldn't deal with something that you hate, but you might have to do something that you don't really like. But as long as you're also doing the thing that you love you should be okay.