Reading Guide

Alison Bechdel's Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic (2007)

N.B. Words in bold are literary critical or theoretical terms you should familiarise yourself with and use in your own criticism; see, e.g., Chris Baldicks’s Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms.

Bechdel’s memoir is a graphic novel (a long narrative told in the form of comics) and tells the tale of her attempt to understand and come to terms with her relationship with her father.

As a form, graphic memoir fits into the emerging subgenre of life writing. Relationships between parents and children, or between siblings, is a popular and recurring theme in memoirs, and popular and literary autobiographies. (If you liked Fun Home, you might like Art Spiegelman’s Maus and Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis.)

Ariela Freedman notes that not only does Bechdel ‘[position] her memoir at the intersection of image, narrative, autobiography and history [but she also] makes an additional play for high literary status by larding her book with the influence of canonical modernist literature, not only through frequent and explicit citation and reference but also by subtler, thematic and textual gestures. In telling her story, Bechdel explicitly places the graphic narrative in irreverent, iconoclastic dialogue with literary modernism. In repeatedly citing, revising and challenging writers including Joyce, Fitzgerald and Proust, she is inviting the reader to read her book alongside theirs and making a space for herself on the shelf of modernist literature’ (126).

Fun Home announces its interest in the relationship between Bechdel and her father on its opening page: ‘Like many fathers, mine could occasionally be prevailed upon for a spot of “airplane”’ (3). However, it also includes many visual motifs that are central to the story, such as: the place of literature (note the presence of a copy of Anna Karenina during the moment of ‘perfect balance’ between Alison and her father), the rarity of physical contact between father and daughter, and the house’s ornate interior decoration—‘embellishment in the worst sense’(16)—which is a source of tension throughout.

Examine each frame in the opening page. Reading graphic novels requires the reader to negotiate the relationship between text and image within each frame, and the relationship between frames. It is important to recognise that ‘[i]n comics, the images are not illustrative of the text, but comprise a separate narrative thread that moves forward in time in a different way than the prose text, which also moves the reader forward in time’ (Chute and DeKoven 769). It is the dynamic interaction between text and image that makes comics a particularly evocative form of life writing; however, it does require the reader to ‘slow down enough to make the connections between image and text and from panel to panel’ (770). Like all texts, graphic novels require the reader to be actively engaged in the making of meaning, but perhaps only comics require us to learn to read relationships between different modes of representation (text and image) in the telling of a story.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bechdel and her father sit side by side</td>
<td>Establishes the relationship between father and daughter</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bechdel's father reads a book</td>
<td>Visual motif of literature</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bechdel's father talks about planes</td>
<td>Metaphor of escape</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Bechdel's father walks away</td>
<td>Symbol of abandonment</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bechdel's father packs up</td>
<td>Last moments of contact</td>
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Points to consider for tutorial discussion and in-class presentations:

• Why does Bechdel juxtapose the child’s voice with the mature voice of the now-adult narrator?

• Have you read other texts that similarly juxtapose the perspective of the child and of the adult? Discuss the differences and/or similarities between one of these texts and Bechdel’s. (Jane Eyre is one example and Atonement is another.)

• If you haven’t read Anna Karenina, for the purposes of this exercise it’s okay to look up a plot summary of Tolstoy’s semi-autobiographical canonical nineteenth-century realist novel—try the Wikipedia entry. Discuss why Bechdel might have chosen it as an intertext.

• If you look up the myth of Icarus on Wikipedia, you will see how often it has been appropriated in modern art, including literature. Discuss why Bechdel might have chosen it as an intertext.

• Taking into account what you have read about comics in Chute and DeKoven, discuss the word play in the full title of Bechdel’s text: Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic.

• Think about how the graphic novel works on the page compared to the other texts we have read this semester. Take a page you find particularly interesting and be prepared to analyse its structure in terms of the relationship of one frame to another, the function of the gutter, etc.

• Discuss the role of memory in Fun Home.

Works cited:
