

The Other Shoe Drops



Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama

By Alison Bechdel

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Reviewed by Audrey Bilger

Readers of Alison Bechdel's critically acclaimed, award-winning bestseller *Fun Home* were enthralled by the story of her closeted gay father, who channels his creative energy into restoring and furnishing their gothic revival house and whose day job is director of the family funeral home ("fun home" is the Bechdels' nickname for this establishment). In that book, her first graphic memoir, she grapples with her father's suicide, which occurs when she is nineteen years old, just four weeks after she comes out as a lesbian to her parents. The contiguity of the two events and her anger at the ways her father hides the truth about his sexuality and then commits the ultimate act of abandonment form the backdrop for the richly illustrated coming-of-age saga.

In *Fun Home*, Bechdel presents herself as a relentless seeker of meaning, an obsessive-compulsive child who imbues every element of her environment with metaphorical significance. At one point, she narrates the rituals she enacts in undressing at night. She has to take her clothes off in a certain order, and, she says, "It took several painstaking minutes to line up my shoes exactly, so as to show neither one preference." In the panel that portrays this act, we see Bechdel's two hands arranging the shoes, and each shoe bears a caption:

(The left one was my father.)
(The right one was my mother.)

Having delivered one book that focused on her father, it makes sense, then, that Bechdel wants to give her mother her due. The other shoe has to drop.

Bechdel's new graphic narrative, *Are You My Mother?*, is less ornate in its illustrations than what she calls "the dad book," whose dominant color scheme is green. This memoir about her mother is

tinted in shades of red, with the people presented, for the most part, in sharper focus than the backgrounds, a style that makes the imagery simultaneously less specific and more archetypal than that of its predecessor. Its epigraph comes from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*—"For nothing was simply one thing"—and multiple meanings swirl around this emphatically nonlinear narrative. The images layer elements from various points in time and space, incorporating dreams, memories, archival photographs, pages from letters and diaries, stories from the mother's girlhood and youth, and excerpts from the writings of Woolf, the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, and Alice Miller, the author of *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (1979). The book's structuring theme can best be described as a daughter's boundless and largely unsatisfied desire for her mother's approval.

In the opening scene, Bechdel depicts herself driving on the highway, rehearsing a conversation she wants to have with her mother about the book that will become *Fun Home*. She imagines how her plan to tell the truth about her father will be a problem and what her mother will say. But when she actually gets up the nerve to introduce the subject, her mother responds by shutting down communication: "I can't help you. You're on your own."

The problem is, Bechdel never is on her own. As she works on the memoir about her father, she frets

about what her mother will think; about the fact that, as she says, "my mother considers memoir a suspect genre"; and about the way her knowledge of her mother's point of view "adds a confusing observer effect to the whole process." In turn, the reader observes Bechdel's images, which depict her sense of being observed by her mother, and so is cast in that observer/mother position. Eventually, it becomes clear that motherhood is a multifaceted metaphor for just about everything, but especially for authorship and creativity. As Bechdel talks with her mother on the phone, which she says she does almost every day, she transcribes her mother's words, so that even though she describes these conversations as mostly one-sided—her mother talks; she listens—she claims a kind of authorial agency. Doubting that she has her mother's attention, she captures the words on her computer screen and thereby takes ownership of them. In producing this book, she in effect creates her mother.

Hillary L. Chute, who writes about Bechdel in *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (2010), says that women's graphic tales often center on trauma. Whereas in *Fun Home*, as Chute notes, the father's suicide permeates every aspect of the book, in *Are You My Mother?* Bechdel's trauma is even more all encompassing. The psychoanalytic texts that Bechdel reads, and from which she meticulously reproduces passages, focus on the primal trauma of separation from the mother's body and the child's attempts to develop a sense of selfhood apart from the maternal universe. Replete with references to mothering, pregnancy, and the author's menopause (which arrives while she's writing this memoir), the book's red coloring inevitably comes across as female, even womb-like: the curving lines that surround the mirror in the book-jacket drawing resemble the undulating walls of a vagina. In session after session with therapists, who become stand-ins for her mother, Bechdel seeks to understand the sources of her depression and angst. These sessions return repeatedly to the mother and to the unresolved issues that continue to exert an influence on the daughter's life.



In a key episode, Bechdel's mother stops kissing her good night at age seven. The girl experiences this sudden withdrawal of affection as a traumatic event. "I felt almost as if she'd slapped me," she says, in the heading on the panel that illustrates the scene. In two additional panels that show the young Alison turning off her light and then lying alone in bed, the headings indicate just how seriously she takes this rejection:

[First panel] Sleep is like death, but it's also like being in the womb.

[Second panel] Our warm bed surrounds us. We curl up, lapse into unconsciousness.

Later, in writing this book, the author associates the end of those goodnight kisses with her mother's reaction to one of her early drawings and wonders whether the two things were causally related. This drawing, the memory of which still deeply shames her, was of a "doctor examining a little girl.... Examining, in particular, her genitalia." Her mother found the drawing and made an attempt to discuss it, but Bechdel hid and avoided the confrontation. Even though Bechdel speculates that her mother might have stopped kissing her because of this drawing, she doesn't overtly consider whether her mother was trying to suppress her latent homosexuality. (In *Fun Home*, Bechdel reports that by age four or five, when she catches a glimpse of a "truck-driving bulldyke" making a delivery at a diner, she has an inkling that she will turn out to be a lesbian.) In the book, this event represents the mother's earliest negative critique of her daughter's art and, implicitly, of her sexual identity.

The mother's disapproval of Bechdel's lesbianism and work becomes explicit when Bechdel gives her mother the news of her first book deal, for a

collection of her *Dykes to Watch Out For* cartoon strips (which had already established Bechdel's reputation as the premiere lesbian cartoonist of her generation). Her mother shoots down the accomplishment: "I would love to see your name on a book, but not on a book of lesbian cartoons," she says. A few pages after reporting this comment, the author depicts herself at a typewriter, taking, as the caption tells us, "another stab at writing." In this "memoir fragment," she circles back to the early trauma: "My focus now was the time my mother stopped kissing me goodnight."

She sends this piece of writing to her mother, who returns it to her five months later, covered with comments in red ink. In the panel illustrating the returned essay, as with many of the archival elements in the book, Bechdel reproduces the document with near-photographic precision. Five caption rectangles obscure parts of the written page and communicate Bechdel's dashed hope for a "personal response." Her mother's comments, she says, "all of which are excellent—pertained strictly to matters of style." But because Bechdel so faithfully reproduces some of these comments, we can see that her interpretation is not exactly accurate. In the upper right-hand corner of the typed page is a note, decidedly *not* about style, that says, "Am I being too critical? I am probably jealous because you are writing and I am not." Bechdel does not comment on this revealing remark, but she does quote a sentence from the cover letter her mother sent when she returned the essay: "I remember thinking when you were little that if you got to be a famous concert pianist I would be insanely jealous." Her mother's jealousy—whether of a hypothetical artistic talent the daughter does not possess or of a literary one the daughter fears to claim—evidently took its toll. "I would not attempt to write about my own life again," Bechdel writes

in the final caption on this page, "until I began the book about my father seventeen years later."


In another depiction of a traumatic moment, Bechdel presents a conversation with her mother about Bechdel's plans to publish a book of her cartoons, in which her mother says, of Bechdel's lesbianism, "I don't want the relatives talking about you. What attitude am I supposed to take? Defend you? Laugh it off?"

Bechdel asks her directly, "Well ... how do you feel?"

"I'm not comfortable with it," says her mother. "You know I'm not."

In the captions over this scene, rendered from a variety of angles in fifteen panels over three pages, Bechdel explains that she could not respond to her mother's remark because she was crying. She had finally figured something out: "Whatever it was that I wanted from my mother was simply not there to be had. It was not her fault. And it was therefore not my fault that I was unable to elicit it." This insight from a few decades before the book's narrative present does not stay with her—she keeps looking for affirmation from her mother that she does not find—but she does say that "things got easier after that."

Bechdel has internalized her mother as a judge from whom she fights to free herself in the pages of this thought-tormented narrative; yet the portrait of her mother as a talented but failed artist is in some ways more poignant than the tale of her father's truncated life. For the author, the mother is an ongoing, living source of both guilt and anxiety. Of the mother's talents, we learn that she played piano, performed as an actor, sewed costumes, and writes for a newspaper. She indicates at various points that she wishes her life had been different. In reading other people's writing, she disparages personal stories. "I just don't know why everyone has to write about themselves," she says, during one conversation with her daughter. Bechdel puts her mother's responses to her memoir's progress into the book. Even though she detects a critical note in her mother's comment that "you must have a pretty good memory," she relishes the good things her mother says about the memoir: "Well, it coheres. There are clear themes.... It's a metabook."

Precisely because *Are You My Mother?* is a metabook—a book about books and the creative process—it pushes beyond the limits of the personal and invites us to think about women's art as linked to the mother-daughter psychodrama. The happy ending that makes this story a "comic drama," as its subtitle indicates, is not the resolution of the mother/daughter relationship; instead, the book is the author's own offspring, making its way in the world, inviting readers to play along and to see themselves in its pages. "Don't you think," Bechdel asks her mother, "that if you write minutely and rigorously enough about your own life ... you can, you know, transcend your particular self?" Her mother doesn't answer, but readers are likely to say yes. 

Audrey Bilger is the faculty director of the Center for Writing and Public Discourse, and professor of Literature at Claremont McKenna College. She is coeditor of the Seal Press anthology *Here Come the Brides! Reflections on Lesbian Love and Marriage* (2012) and the author of *Laughing Feminism* (2002).



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