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Intertextual Health:

Narrativization in the memoirs of Jeanette Winterson and Alison Bechdel

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Introduction

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) and Jeanette Winterson's *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2012) are highly literate memoirs. In terms of their eloquence and their many references to literature; but most importantly of all in terms of their tendency to read a life-story as just that – a story.

All autobiography, and indeed the act of remembering itself, involves narrativizing the chaotic. As humans, we have to omit, enhance and alter details in order to understand our memories, or tell a coherent story. Narration is how we create meaning from meaninglessness.

Bechdel and Winterson take this process to its logical extremes. They imagine themselves and their relatives into pre-existing stories, from Greek myths to children's books; they portray the imaginary with the same fidelity as

the “real”, such as when Winterson psychically splits from her inner child, or when Bechdel draws herself as an “Eisenhower-era butch” walking past her own parents before she was born (p. 108); most of all, they see symbols everywhere, and treat them as though they were deliberate plot devices employed by an unseen author. If narrativization creates meaning, these writers hyper-narrativize in a bid to solve the potentially unsolvable riddles of their parents: Winterson’s abusive, adoptive mother, Mrs W, and Bechdel’s distant and taciturn father, Bruce.

The role of narrative in managing trauma

Jeanette Winterson is best known for her debut novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), the story of an adopted girl growing up in an Evangelist community in Northern England in the 1960s. In the novel, the semi-fictional, semi-autobiographical “Jeanette” endures several traumatic experiences at the hands of members of the church and in particular her abusive, fanatic mother (Mrs Winterson/Mrs W).

Winterson has always used questions about the autobiographical content of *Oranges* as a springboard for discussion, asking how we can draw a clean line between fact and fiction in the first place. Even in *Why Be Happy*, which is as close to memoir as Winterson will allow, she rails against the idea of separating the real from the non-real in a “tick-box kind of way” (p. 6). Whatever the particulars, trauma is a recurring subject in Winterson’s work, as something she implies can be overcome or at least coped with through narrative.

In her book *The Limits of Autobiography* Leigh Gilmore engages with some of the contradictions that autobiographical writing about trauma presents.

Something of a consensus has already developed that takes trauma as the unrepresentable to assert that trauma is beyond language in that language fails in the face of trauma and that trauma mocks language and confronts it

with its insufficiency. Yet, at the same time language about trauma is theorized as an impossibility, language is pressed forward as that which can heal the survivor of trauma. (Gilmore, p. 6)

Winterson resolves this issue in *Oranges* and *Why Be Happy* by never approaching the trauma head-on. That is, she confronts trauma through stories, or describes the size of the trauma by writing around it. For example, when Jeanette is hospitalised for sudden-onset deafness in *Oranges*, she comforts herself with thoughts “of Jane Eyre, who faced many trials and was always brave” (p. 27). Though her mother neglects her, she is visited by Testifying Elsie, who tells her stories “to make me feel better. She said stories helped you to understand the world” (p. 29). Elsie is responsible for introducing Jeanette to a literary world beyond the Bible, including the poetry of Blake and Yeats.

The idea of stories as palliative, however, takes on a new dimension in *Why Be Happy*, when Winterson admits that, “There was no Elsie. There was no one like Elsie. Things were much lonelier than that” (p. 7). In explanation, she says:

I suppose that the saddest thing for me, thinking about the cover version that is *Oranges*, is that I wrote a story I could live with. The other one was too painful. (p. 6)

Although the reader understands that much of *Oranges* is fictionalised, the non-existence of a character as significant as Elsie almost feels like a loss – and in this way mirrors the depth of the absence in Winterson’s life.

Perhaps Winterson is a unique case because her trauma does not just defy language – it *is* lack of language. Winterson’s most traumatic memories, such as the “mute state of misery” after her exorcism (p. 84) or being shut in the coal-hole, are associated with the inability to talk to anyone. She strengthens this association by describing her adult depression as “the place before I had any language. The abandoned place” (p. 163). In the same way, language and literature are presented as the writer’s means of escape: poetry

is “the rope” that suspends her from suicide (p. 162); language the “string of guiding lights” that sustains her while her mother burns her stash of novels (p. 42); and the decision to study literature at Oxford is arguably what removes her once and for all from the stifled, hermetic world of Mrs W.

Whether through “connect[ing] across time to other lives and deeper sympathies” through the act of reading (p. 144) or writing a story one can live with, Winterson advocates the healing power of narrativizing one’s life. “Reading yourself as fiction as well as as a fact,” she says, “is the only way to keep the narrative open” (p. 119) – in other words, to create possibilities for rewriting your life-story. This seems to agree with the psychoanalytical assumption that, in recovering, from trauma, “telling is crucial”:

[Psychoanalyst Dori Laub] claims that trauma has not happened in the same ways to someone before and after she or he can organize the story in narrative terms and recount it successfully. (Gilmore, p. 31)

Winterson’s rewriting of trauma could be said to be so successful because her writing style mimics the act of remembering itself. The idea of *Oranges* and *Why Be Happy* as “cover versions” of reality is a useful one, here: it captures how a writer can reuse the same themes and even the same lines without truly repeating herself, instead capturing a different facet each time. The author recognizes, for example, how her work often appears to call out for her lost mother:

... a string of lines starts replaying in my head, lines from my own books – ‘I keep writing this so that one day she will read it.’ ‘Looking for you, looking for me, I guess I’ve been looking for us all my life. (2012, p. 160)

She also finds that texts that she has always fixated on and ended up “embed[ding] them in my work” (ibid), such as the Grail legend and Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale*, have always compelled her most in their themes of loss and abandonment. Winterson returns to themes episodically, repetitively, and elliptically, just how many of us return to memories. Memories

are recurring, ever-evolving, and even intertextual – in terms of how they can merge and interact with one another, but also in the more literal sense of how we sometimes integrate parts of other people’s stories, books or films into what we believe are our own memories.

While Bechdel’s *Fun Home* reveals a very different upbringing to Winterson’s – taking place in middle-class, rural Pennsylvania as opposed to a highly religious working-class community near Manchester – both authors try to make sense of fraught parent-child relationships and the traumatic experiences those entail. But Bechdel’s treatment of trauma necessarily departs from Winterson’s by telling the story in more than one language: the verbal and the pictorial.

Textual and visual portrayals of memory

The comics medium has a different relationship with memory than prose literature. One could even say the genre itself has long-term memory loss. Where its older ancestors, such as Japanese picture scrolls or the Bayeux Tapestry, are rarely acknowledged as relatives to the comic strip, its more recent history is marred by the widespread destruction of newspaper archives before the 1960s – during which hundreds of daily comic strips were lost forever. Long-form comic narratives like *Fun Home* – controversially referred to as “graphic novels” – are an even younger genre, emerging in the 1980s with the publication of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*. But between *Maus* and *Fun Home* is a rich seam of long-form autobiographical comics, many of which deal heavily with topics of trauma and memory. From Spiegelman’s *Auschwitz*, to Marjane Satrapi’s revolutionary Iran, to Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*, the most celebrated comics works of the last few decades have focused on giving traumatic memories a narrative – whether the trauma be personal, cultural, or both.

In *Maus*, Art Spiegelman performed two important functions of autobiography: it gave testimony – Gayatri Spivak’s “genre of the subaltern

giving witness to oppression” (Gilmore, p. 2) – to the cultural trauma of the Holocaust, while simultaneously relating the personal trauma of his father Vladek at the camps, and how the continual repercussions of the original trauma on the Spiegelman family. *Palestine* and Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, too, gave much-needed representation to subaltern memory through very personal stories. Gilmore argues that specific narratives of trauma have a paradoxical effect of “representativeness” (p. 19) – the inability to wholly contain a trauma such as bereavement in language means that the trauma could effectively be anyone’s. This radical power of autobiography – to expose mainstream audiences to minority suffering and actually create empathy – certainly lays part of the foundation for *Fun Home*’s success. It is still of no small significance when a book written by a homosexual woman tops the *New York Times* bestseller list.

But the radical power of *comics*, when combined with autobiography, is more impressive still. The combination of visual and verbal elements means, in essence, double the testimonial power: the written account and the “act of witness” represented by drawing (Cvetkovich, p. 120). Arguably, comics also engages with the reader in a more visceral way than prose autobiography. From the “underground comix” of Robert Crumb and his peers in the 1960s and ’70s, to the explosion of feminist comics by artists such as Phoebe Gloeckner, Diane Noomin and Trina Robbins in the ’80s, comics has long been used in countercultural movements because it is so provocative. Crumb’s generation arguably did so by exploiting the tension between cartoon characters and adult themes to disturbing effect – a technique that lives on in more contemporary alternative comics, like the body-horror and violence of Ivan Brunetti’s *Schizo*, or the portrayal of alcoholism and chronic illness in *Drinking At The Movies* by Julia Wertz.

At first glance, Bechdel does not appear to depend much on this kind of child-world/adult-world discord; her style is on the more “realistic” end of the spectrum, with detailed backgrounds and life-like proportions. At the same time, the many readers experiencing alternative comics for the first time through *Fun Home* may still be taken aback at such a dark and mature

storyline couched in a format they might normally associate with books from their childhood. Indeed, for these readers, *Fun Home* begins its complex interactions with human memory just by being a comic. For them the act of “reading” comics, taking in words and pictures together, forces a state of reminiscence and vulnerability ideal for identifying with the young Alison playing with her father in the first three panels (p. 3). In the third panel we even find ourselves behind Alison’s androgynous head, looking directly down at her father Bruce in the game of “Airplane” – which many of us will have played with our own fathers as children.

But the process of identification does not end here. Another feature of cartoon-style comics is what Scott McCloud calls “amplification through simplification” (1994, p. 30 – see Fig. 1): by reducing an image to its simplest recognisable features, we can capture the “essence” of the thing represented.

McCloud argues that this is what makes cartoons so compelling. While a realistic picture of a person only resembles one individual, a simplified picture can stand in for almost anyone – just as in Gilmore’s theory that one trauma, in its indescribability, can represent many. In this way, McCloud says, “the cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled” (p. 36). We could say that the ambiguous “I” of a prose memoir like Winterson’s partially achieves the same thing: though we know, technically, it is not us speaking, we still read that “I” in our heads as if it referred to us. The comics memoir, however, increases this confusion by letting us really, literally see the scenes described, as if to prompt the mental question: “If this is not my memory, how can I see it before me?”

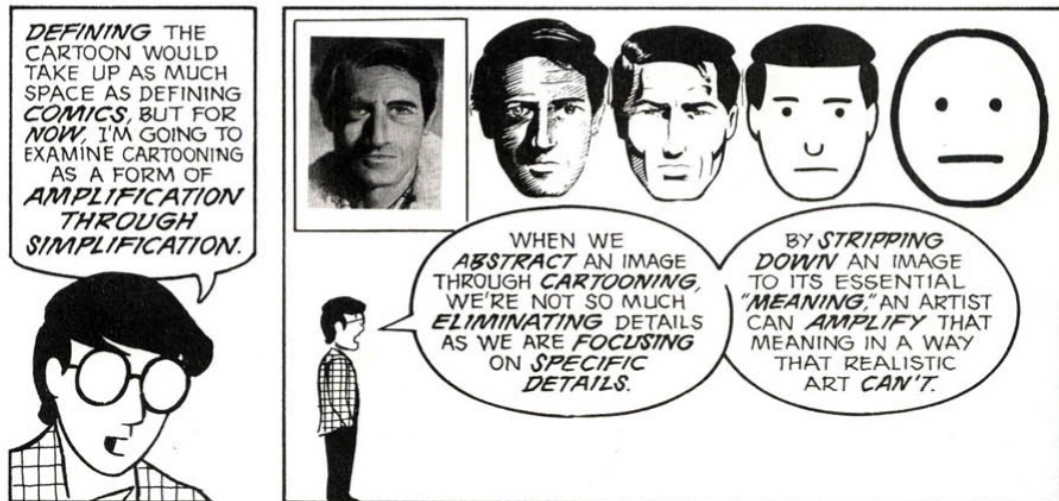


Figure 1: McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 30.

Bechdel's drawings, while more realistic than, say, the oversized heads and dot-eyes of Charles Schultz, are still very much cartoons. Hair, cloth, patterns and so on are defined, and bodily proportions are life-like, but Bechdel's faces are more or less interchangeable – enlarged circular eyes, thin lines denoting eyebrows and the curve of the nose, and often little more than a dot for the mouth. McCloud uses Hergé as an example of this background/character discrepancy, which, he says, “allows readers to mask themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating world” (p. 43). This is certainly the case in Figure 2, a portrayal of a dream that is absolutely dream-like – the trees leaning inwards to describe height and the feeling of being surrounded, the sunset so bright it obliterates the detail around it.

TWO NIGHTS BEFORE MY FATHER DIED, I DREAMED THAT I WAS OUT AT THE BULLPEN WITH HIM. THERE WAS A GLORIOUS SUNSET VISIBLE THROUGH THE TREES.



Figure 2: Bechdel, *Fun Home*, p. 123.

As Peter R. Sattler notes, McCloud's theory about cartoons and identification can also help us understand how comics interact with memory. The cartoon face is widely representative but it also bears a "mimetic similarity" to the "simplified afterimages" we retain of the human face in memory (p. 206). McCloud points out that we have only a vague awareness of what our face looks like from moment to moment – a "sense of general placement" (p. 46). But sometimes, as Sattler rejoins, our memories do not retain this viewpoint.

We frequently remember our past selves not as if we are inhabiting that earlier body, seeing through those younger eyes; instead, we often see ourselves as if from the outside, from a station we never could have occupied in the historical past ... Cognitive scientists have called such third-person

recollections *observer memories*, while those seen from the first-person perspective have been labeled *field memories*. (pp. 211-2)

Indeed, the majority of autobiographical comics take place in third-person perspective, with the occasional first-person panel – for example, when the focus is on another person, object or view rather than the whole moment. Most of the time, however, the narrator or subject is in-panel, as on the rightmost panel of Figure 3.



Figure 3: Ellerby, *Ellerbisms*, epilogue.

This is important to orient the reader and show what the narrator is actually doing, but it evokes, too, an observer memory, in which a cartoonish version of oneself – that vague piecing-together of where we were and what we might have looked like – records our place and actions within a more lucidly remembered context. So although intuition seems to dictate that a first-person POV panel would draw the reader in most, Sattler’s argument would imply that we actually identify more with the “virtual observer memory” created by a third-person panel (p. 212). It is worth noting, too, that scenes in *Fun Home* are contained within the rigid lines of panels, instead of engulfing our vision. Detail is reduced, colour lost, and our vision interrupted by other senses (such as the word balloon in Figure 2). As in memory, *Fun Home* gives us a vivid but only partial immersion into another time and place.

Visually, *Fun Home* uses a sort of third-person omniscient perspective, in that Bechdel often draws things she could not have witnessed herself. We

see, for example, multiple iterations of Bechdel's father crossing the road where he is killed by a truck – one, on p. 59, is actually a hypothetical imagining in which the truck passes behind him without incident. (Bechdel notes that she was “away at school” when she received the call about his death [p. 46].) Often in the book, Bechdel draws an event from which she is separated not just by space but also time – such as when her father, as a little boy, gets stuck in a field of mud and has to be pulled out by a passing mailman.

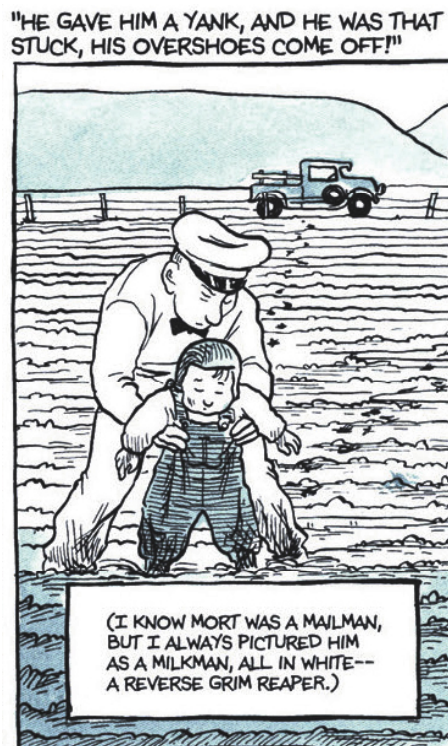


Figure 4: Bechdel, *Fun Home*, p. 41.

As her grandmother narrates the story, Bechdel even changes the mailman's uniform to that of a milkman, as she has “always pictured him” (p. 41). These are rare cases in which Bechdel is explicitly, visibly allowing imagination to interfere with reality in order to remind the reader that this *is* narrative, not fact – that there can be no pure “fact” in narrative. This trope is much more common in *Why Be Happy*, in which Winterson relates a far more personalized view of things, right down to offering up memories that could be

“true or untrue?” (p. 11) to emphasise that there is significance in all memories, false or not.

One way in which comics is uniquely well-suited to discuss and imitate the act of remembering, Sattler proposes, is how it can combine a series of images – evocative of our moment-to-moment, visual, “episodic memories” – with captions – representative of the “*narrative memory*, which gives our recollections shape and meaning” (p. 210).

In *Fun Home* Bechdel uses these two languages – verbal and pictorial, narrative and episodic – fluently. Despite the traditional literary bent of this book, which name-checks around eighty prose works as part of its narrative, it manages to celebrate and validate the comics medium on every page through its witty interactions of text and picture. I will discuss more of these interactions throughout this thesis, but most relevant here is how these two strands of memory are interwoven.

Winterson, with her modernist tendencies, certainly looks for ways to represent a multiplicity of beliefs, memories and other mental goings-on in her prose. There are plenty of dualities in *Why Be Happy*. In the ‘Coda’ at the end of the book Winterson expresses an inability to feel just-happy or just-sad about meeting her biological mother:

This isn't a head/heart split or a thinking/feeling split. It is an emotional matrix.
I can juggle different and opposing ideas and realities easily. But I hate
feeling more than one thing at once. (p. 228)

It is not easy to represent simultaneous or conflicting mental processes in prose without outright describing them as above, but Winterson tries, and pushes the limits of her medium in doing so. Though she cannot overlap memories, she does the closest possible thing, placing them in quick succession, such as when she relates a phone conversation with her mother right after *Oranges* was published:

The pips – more money in the slot – and I'm thinking, as her voice goes in and out like the sea, 'Why aren't you proud of me?'

The pips – more money in the slot – and I’m locked out and sitting on the doorstep again. It’s really cold and I’ve got a newspaper under my bum and I’m huddled in my duffel coat. (p. 4)

In the first line, Winterson shifts mid-sentence between a sensory experience – hearing the “pips” of the phonebox – and thought. She uses italics to denote the “outer” experience, plain text for the “inner” – a reversal of the tradition of using italics for “thought” narrative. In the second line, the refrain in italics mimics the repetitive “pips”, and the plain text transports us to a different place and time entirely. Winterson’s formatting aligns the “locked out” memory and the thought “Why aren’t you proud of me?” together as associations, acts of mental narrativization. And yet that these two events, the pips and the being locked out, happen within the same sentence (and present tense) gives the whole sequence a very brisk, natural, stream-of-consciousness pace to it. This is, perhaps, as mimetic of real memory as prose can get: it implies an imposed narrative without having to show it, linking episodic memories together with nothing more than an en-dash.

Healing the rupture

We return to the phone box again towards the end of the book, when Winterson’s biological mother tells her how proud she was to order *Oranges* from the library and say, “Jeanette Winterson is my daughter.” Winterson jolts us back to “Phone box 1985. Mrs Winterson in her headscarf in a rage,” to remind us what her adoptive mother had said:

The pips ... more money in the slot ... ‘It’s the first time I’ve had to order a book under a false name.’ (p. 225)

Again, here, narrativization is implied by juxtaposition. Winterson could have easily left this reminder out, leaving it to the reader to connect these two moments; but this would be untrue to the nature of *Why Be Happy*. This is

Winterson demonstrating what it is to “read yourself as a fiction as well as a fact” (p. 117) – to analyse one’s life as if it were already a text, with clues and patterns written in and waiting to be discovered.

Whether this incredible parallel actually existed in Winterson’s life, in these exact words, is besides the point. The chapter in which Winterson makes this connection is called ‘The Wound’; in it, she mentions the severance of the umbilical cord, the wounds of Odysseus, the disciple Thomas, Gulliver (of *Gulliver’s Travels*) and Oedipus, her own wounds and Mrs W’s. Once more, however, ‘The Wound’ of the title is only implied: it is the trauma that persists between pages 4 and 225 (most of the book), the 25-plus years between her adoptive and biological mother’s pronouncements about loaning *Oranges* from the library. The narrative connection between these two events works as a suture, slowly drawing the wound closed. We are reminded of another of Winterson’s metaphors in the book:

Fiction and poetry are doses, medicines. What they heal is the rupture reality makes on imagination. (p. 42)

Why Be Happy is punctuated by these short, vivid aphorisms. As Mrs W adorns the house with frightening Biblical quotations to keep the young Jeanette in God-fearing order, the author regularly interrupts her narrative to impress upon the reader an awe of narrative. The constant discussion of books, stories, writing and reading does make it difficult to “lose” oneself in *Why Be Happy* in a traditional sense – but there is a sense that this is intentional, if not protective. Narrative and language are, at various points in the book, “bridges” (p. 144), “guiding lights” (p. 42) and “rescue rope[s]” (p. 163), which Winterson has built over her trauma, that place without language. These are safety measures *against* losing oneself in trauma, and to allow the reader to do so would be to contradict everything *Why Be Happy* tries to teach.

Winterson does not shy away from psychoanalytical theory, and how it might interact with and inform this idea of a palliative function of storytelling:

she even praises Freud as “one of the grand masters of narrative” (p. 58). But these two frameworks – the literary and the psychoanalytic – seem more explicitly linked in Bechdel’s work, for whatever reason. On reading Chapter 5, in which Bechdel introduces her obsessive-compulsive disorder, it is difficult not to read compulsion into the preceding chapters retroactively. Suddenly the author’s detailed cross-analysis of her father’s life with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s in Chapter 3 – culminating in the idea that their living “the same number of months, the same number of weeks... but Fitzgerald lived three days longer” was perhaps not coincidental but planned (pp. 85-6) – seems like an obsessive, furtive search for meaning in a potentially meaningless death. So too her contemplation of her father reading *A Happy Death* by Albert Camus shortly before he dies (see Fig. 5). After some pages of debating the evidence, Bechdel admits that she and her mother may have chosen to believe her father had committed suicide because this made it “less painful. If he’d intended to die, there was a certain consolation in the fact that he’d succeeded with such aplomb” (p. 29).

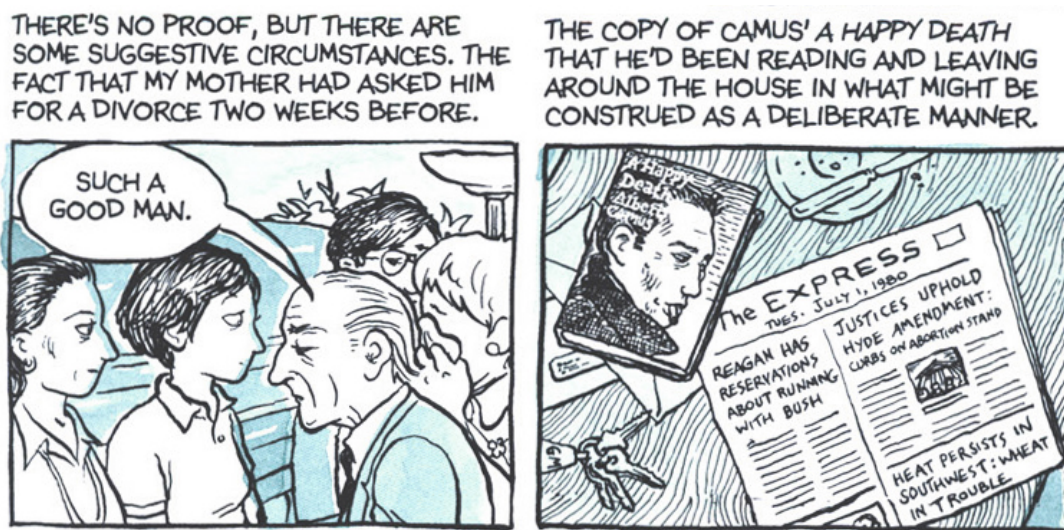


Figure 5: Bechdel, *Fun Home*, p. 27.

We can detect some resonance here with Winterson, and *Oranges* as the story she “could live with” versus the “too painful” reality. When Bechdel depicts herself as a young girl “trying to manipulate the slightly leaky

bathroom faucet with my toe so that it would stop on an even number of drips” (p. 135), she shows us the soothing effects of narrativization in microcosm: randomness is manipulated into meaningful patterns to ward off the “dark fear of annihilation” (p. 139). Lest this seems a dubious comparison, Bechdel explicitly connects her OCD to her way of writing on page 144, when she writes in an otherwise empty panel: “Then there’s my own compulsive propensity to autobiography.” The lack of images in this panel directs us to look for no further illustration than the book in our hands.

An extra level of narrativization is made possible by this visual dimension. The demarcation of narrative and episodic memories is readily visible on every page of *Fun Home*. Thusly, the symbols, harbingers and referents Bechdel finds in her own life – her very pronounced way of reading herself as fiction – are perhaps more convincing in the comics format than they would be otherwise. For instance, on page 166, a section on her mother’s acting experience leads Bechdel onto the life of Oscar Wilde, and then seamlessly into the assertion that: “In *The Importance [Of Being Earnest]*, illicit desire is encoded as one character’s uncontrollable gluttony.” In the picture below, actors read lines from *The Importance* about cucumber sandwiches. On the next page, the caption reads: “Mom helped the prop mistress find a recipe for cucumber sandwiches. We ate them all summer.” In the picture, her father grabs for a plate of cucumber sandwiches while Alison protests, “Dad! You’re eating them faster than we can make them!” Along this zig-zag movement from text to picture, meaning is accumulated, or pieced together. So though Bechdel never overtly links her father to Wilde or homosexuality in this section, her careful juxtaposition of events and information lead the reader to make that connection.

This is not unlike what Winterson does with the phonebox scene mentioned above – making us experience a certain stream-of-consciousness in order to lead to a certain conclusion – but in comics this focus on the *implied* rather than the *stated* is yet more pronounced. Our comprehension of a series of images relies on what McCloud calls “closure”: the “phenomenon of seeing the parts but perceiving the whole.” We can only understand comics

by a process of “mental completion” – filling in the temporal, spatial and semantic gaps between word and image, not to mention between several images in sequence (p. 63). McCloud divides these gaps, or transitions, into six categories, ranging from those requiring the least closure – moment-to-moment transitions – to those requiring the most – non-sequitur transitions. McCloud notes that while over sixty percent of the transitions in the traditional superhero comic (here represented by the works of Jack Kirby) are action-to-action, experimental comics such as *Maus* tend to display a wider range of transitions (pp. 72-8). *Fun Home* bears this out, with many of its transitions taking the reader from “scene-to-scene” over distances of many years. We have to collaborate with Bechel in order to reorient ourselves, drawing on clues provided in the captions or what visual markers of time and location we can find. As McCloud points out, this forces a kind of reader complicity in what happens between panels (Fig. 6).

The psychology of the space between panels, or the “gutter”, is particularly pertinent when it comes to portrayals of trauma and memory. If trauma in prose is that which cannot be put into words – Winterson’s “place before ... language” – then trauma in comics is that which cannot be put into words or pictures. The unspeakable trauma, which “lies beyond the margin of the text” in prose (Winterson, 2012, p. 8) is contained in the equally blank white space of the gutter in comics.

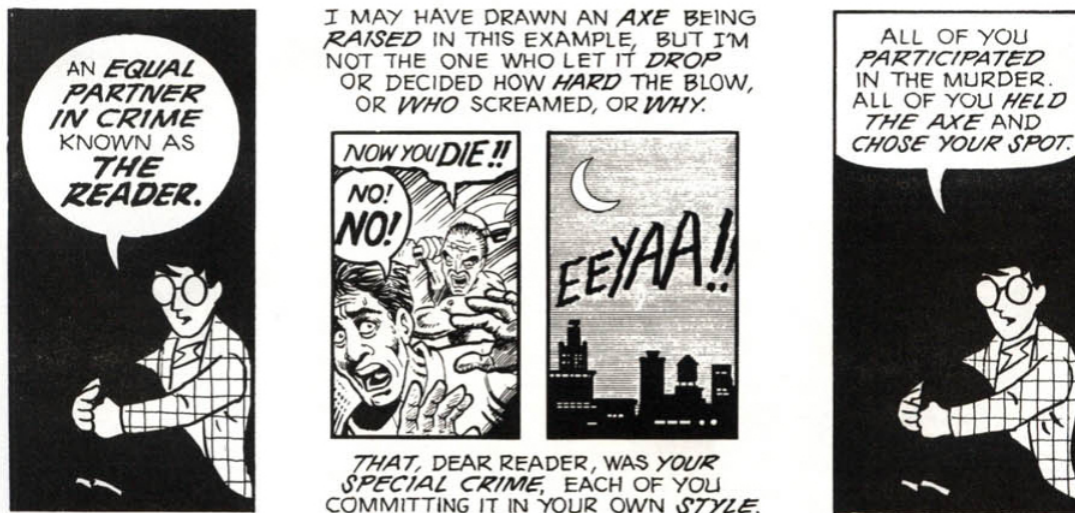


Figure 6: McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 68.

As noted, *Fun Home* depicts many events that the author did not, or could not, witness, including her father walking into the road where he is then killed. But the accident itself is never shown – only the moments immediately before or after, such as the driver desperately trying to swerve, or the chilling darkness of the roadside. It is not that Bechdel is afraid of morbidity. She plainly depicts corpses at the eponymous funeral home, including a man with a mutilated torso and a young boy, and draws several angles of her father’s body at his wake. Bechdel’s trauma is not tied up in the physical reality of death so much as the moment of death itself. Bechdel cannot narrativize her father’s moment of death because she can never know whether or not her father stepped back into the road on purpose or because “he saw a snake” (p. 89). The moment of death hangs in the balance between intentionality and chaos. The “incomprehensible” nature of Bruce’s death is layered, starting from this basic suicide/accident conundrum and proceeding outwards: through the “inherently absurd” notion of death, in which “one second a person is there, the next they’re not”; through Camus’s assertion of suicide as “illogical” and of death by car accident “*une morte imbécile*”; and through the irony of her father’s profession, of which Bechdel says, “Who embalms the undertaker when he dies? It was like Russell’s paradox” (pp. 47-51).

This language of incomprehensibility, absurdity and paradox positions Bruce's death as something completely ungraspable – and, in turn, inexpressible. The moment of death, left undrawn, takes place in the gutter, prompting the reader to imagine what is for the writer too painful to imagine. Similarly, though Bechdel can verbalize her father's death, the words themselves do not seem to contain the trauma:

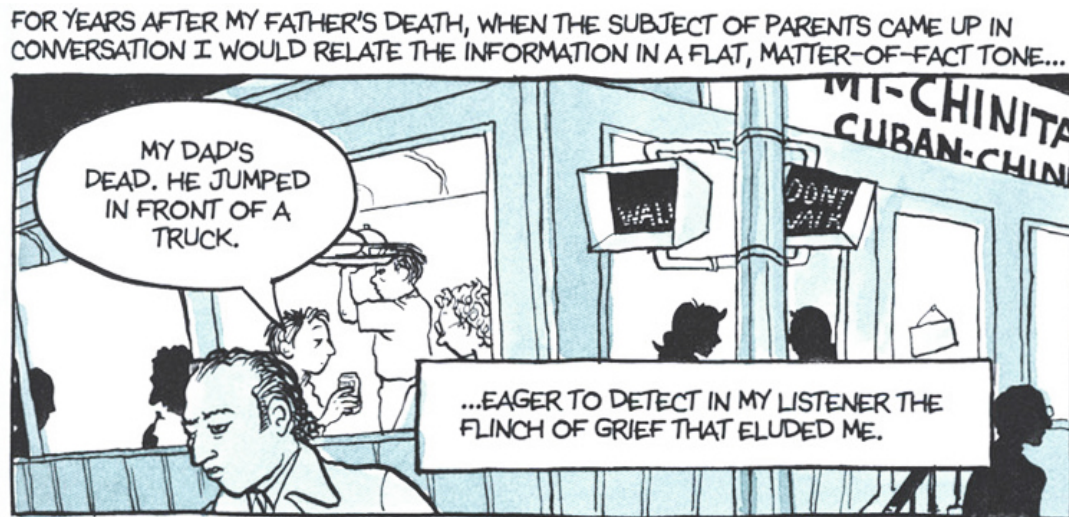


Figure 7: Bechdel, *Fun Home*, p. 45.

In Figure 7, Alison attempts to experience her own grief vicariously, through relating her father's death to someone else – an attempt at the healing-through-telling process proposed by Laub. But at this point Alison's emotion seems "seem[s] to stay suppressed" (Bechdel, p. 45) – perhaps because this blunt account of "he jumped in front of a truck" is a failed narrative, one that does not capture the uncertainty and confusion at the heart of Alison's trauma. *Fun Home*, then, with its more accurate portrayal of what Sattler would call "felt experience" or "experiential memory", is a renewed attempt at containing and understanding this trauma (Sattler, pp. 208-10).

One phrase Gilmore uses to describe trauma feels especially relevant to autobiographical comics:

Remembering trauma entails contextualizing it within history. Insofar as trauma can be defined as that which breaks the frame, rebuilding a frame to contain it is as fraught with difficulty as it is necessary. (p. 30)

Though Gilmore is referring to a verbal “frame”, her statement is equally applicable to a visual frame. Trauma may “break the frame” in *Fun Home*, in that it cannot be drawn in a panel but it is simultaneously contained within a much larger frame-work, i.e. the structure of panels, captions and gutters that make up the comics page. Even if trauma is only implied in gutters and text/image interactions, these complex spaces-in-between, it has still been placed into a context.

And Bechdel does seem to make some sort of peace with her trauma by the end of her memoir. Winterson draws her book to a close with a vote of confidence by her biological mother that reflects and inverts her adoptive mother’s disavowal at the beginning. Bechdel’s final page mirrors her first, but along a different line of symmetry.



Figure 8: Bechdel, *Fun Home*, p. 232.

Where Winterson reflects events over 25 years apart, the Alisons of the first and last panels of *Fun Home* are about the same age. She is jumping into her father’s arms in the swimming pool, creating a similar tableau to the game of

“Airplane” on page 1, and having returned to the theme of Icarus and Daedalus. But where the first game concludes in Alison exclaiming “Uh-oh!” and falling, the last panel captures her in mid-jump, effectively holding her in a liminal moment of uncertainty forever (Fig. 8).

Remembering the written/unremembering the unwritten

So far I have talked about these two books in terms of vocalized or narrativized trauma – the processing of trauma through writing about it. Of course, this is not necessarily a common response to an upsetting event. Freud came up with a plethora of different “defence mechanisms” that a person might employ to deal with negative emotions – one of the most famous of which is *repression*. The Encyclopaedia Britannica’s definition of repression gives us a good jumping-off point to look at how it might be represented in these works:

In psychoanalytic theory, the exclusion of distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings from the conscious mind. Often involving sexual or aggressive urges or painful childhood memories, these unwanted mental contents are pushed into the unconscious mind. Repression is thought to give rise to anxiety and to neurotic symptoms, which begin when a forbidden drive or impulse threatens to enter the conscious mind. Psychoanalysis seeks to uncover repressed memories and feelings through free association as well as to examine the repressed wishes released in dreams.

Representing the unconscious mind is another context in which comics could be said to have a natural advantage. Because comics by definition has multiple codes of signification (words, font styles, symbols, pictures, etc.), it comes equipped with multiple channels that could be used to represent conscious and unconscious thought concurrently. Though Winterson’s prose rendering of thought, speech and action in the phonebox episode is

successful, it would be difficult to use her methods to represent simultaneous thought processes in a fluent or realistic way. Bechdel, however, is able to exploit these channels in order both to represent her past self's unconscious thoughts and, importantly, to interact with the reader's unconscious mind.

In the last section, I introduced the idea of comics captions as narrative memory with their corresponding pictures as episodic memory. This moves into the territory of repression when the captions seem to contradict the pictures, or ignore their true focal point. One of the best examples of this is on page 194, in which Alison, her father and brothers are on vacation in New York. For the third time in the chapter, Alison returns to the night the family are watching the bicentennial fireworks display from a rooftop. Some shirtless men sit off and to the side in all three panels, but are increasingly conspicuous in the frame. Bechdel's caption offhandedly describes their "obstructed view of the fireworks" – while her composition of this panel makes it clear that neither Alison nor her father are attempting to see the fireworks at all, instead openly staring at the man sitting open-legged in shorts to their left. In the preceding pages Bechdel mentions her obliviousness to her father's and her own homosexuality at this point – so while this caption/panel clash does not introduce the idea of repression, it illustrates how young Alison narrativized the event to herself, attempting to forget the images that had actually drawn her and her father's eyes. These discrepancies are frequently used to comic effect, such as on p. 76, when the author describes her investigative borrowings of queer literature from the university library; beneath the innocuous caption, "my researches were stimulating but solitary", Alison is masturbating to Anaïs Nin's *Delta of Venus* (making Bechdel's choice of words particularly amusing). Other jokes are rely on in-panel puns and juxtapositions, such as on p. 160, where Alison, playing Cops 'n' Robbers, shout "Spread 'em!" next to a naked portrait of family friend Dr. Gryglewicz with legs splayed; or on p. 193, where Alison's brother runs from a predatory man in the cruising district – right in front of a sign for "Fancy Fruits Dairy". The reader will not necessarily notice these clues on the first or even the second read, but their eyes will pass over them, and form conclusions

unconsciously – thus creating a deeper bond with the character of Alison, for whom so many desires and truths seem to be unconscious.

A more unsettling example of this is the loaves of Sunbeam bread Bechdel places throughout the book. The loaves are there, ostensibly, to foreshadow Bruce's death by Sunbeam truck – but they are such everyday, unremarkable objects that they do not readily register on a conscious level. A loaf first appears on p. 21, as Bechdel is describing her father's quick temper through a Minotaur analogy:

MY MOTHER, MY BROTHERS, AND I KNEW OUR WAY AROUND WELL ENOUGH, BUT IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO TELL IF THE MINOTAUR LAY BEYOND THE NEXT CORNER.



Figure 9: Bechdel, *Fun Home*, p. 21.

The composition of this panel draws attention to the movement of Bruce throwing the plate, a right-to-left downward trajectory. This explosive action practically ensures the reader will not notice the Sunbeam Ranch loaf open on the counter above the smashing plate. The loaves reappear on four occasions: in Alison's arms on p. 31, while an old friend is inviting Bruce to "get bombed" at camp; p. 57, as Alison asks her parents how they met and they have "no story" to tell her; on p. 112, just after Alison has inadvertently

seen a nude calendar and become “inexplicably ashamed, like Adam and Eve” (Bruce is caught mid-motion passing the loaf to his daughter); and on p. 217, when Alison returns from college to a house that her mother describes as a “tinderbox.” In this way the Sunbeam loaf takes on an ominous quality, subtly associating itself throughout the book with shame, temptation and family dysfunction – all the things that the Bechdel family never really acknowledges in words. Adrielle Mitchell relates this back to Thierry Groensteen’s comics theory, specifically how the reader, “below the threshold of conscious meaning-making, recognizes patterns, resonances, repetitions which bind distant panels together, in ... *iconic solidarity*” (Mitchell, para. 3). In other words, the reader upsets the already-jumbled order that Bechdel presents, retroactively connecting images and elements of the text even without realizing it. Mitchell underlines, too, that this is mimetic of how our own memories are formed and re-formed.

Bechdel confronts repression directly on pages 138-9, in which Alison is reading her mother’s copy of *Baby and Child Care* by child psychologist Dr Spock. As she reads about compulsion, and begins to identify this with her own symptoms, she comes upon the suggestion of “repressed hostility” which, Bechdel writes, “made no sense to me.” Bechdel draws herself completely absorbed in the book while, just behind her, her parents argue. In this same chapter, Bechdel introduces her compulsion to append the words “I think” to almost every statement in her diary, later converting this into a symbol that she can draw over whole entries.

This superstitious need to record the truth, and indicate any doubt, makes Alison’s actions in chapter 6 (‘The Ideal Husband’) even more remarkable. This chapter is all about secrets lingering just under the surface; Bechdel uses the analogy of locusts to encode her burgeoning sexuality, her father’s liaisons with young men, and the Watergate trial that plays out in the background to the family drama. (The theme of repression is so pervasive during this summer that Bechdel adds, “I’m glad I was taking notes. Otherwise I’d find the degree of synchronicity implausible” [p.154].) Again and again, Alison downplays or completely ignores significant life events in her diary,

especially those to do with puberty. When she first gets her period, she initially does not record it at all, and thereafter refers to menstruating as “Ning”, with the *n* borrowed from “the practice I’d learned in algebra of denoting complex or unknown quantities with letters” (p. 169). She later recycles the word to refer to masturbation, despite learning all sorts of new terminology in the dictionary:

The word [‘orgasm’] entered my vocabulary, but not my diary. A sin of omission? Perhaps. But if the thing omitted were itself a sin, it seemed to me ... that a canceling-out occurred. (p. 172)

Hints about Alison’s future gender expression are also minimised in the diary with “forced nonchalance” – like her experimentation with wearing men’s clothing, and budding interest in men’s fashion on pp. 183-184.

All of this indicates that Alison invests the written word with great authority. There is the sense throughout *Fun Home* that great truths can only be found in literature – hence the constant literary references, the sexual self-discovery via the library, and the precise renderings of dictionary definitions, documents and maps. So when the adolescent Alison does not record a traumatic event in her diary, or when she is too absorbed by reading about the repressed hostility to take heed of the hostility playing out behind her, it is as if these negatively-charged events never took place – they are cancelled out.

This is a point of divergence between these two writers. Bechdel is a compulsive archivist, who approaches her own history like a detective gathering evidence: circled passages in books, compromising photographs, letters and diary entries. Winterson, on the other hand, is “terminally uninterested in record-keeping”, to the extent of burning her works in progress and diaries (Winterson, 2012, p. 196). If we are reminded of Mrs. W burning Jeanette’s secret stash of books, this is no coincidence – rather, it is key to understanding Winterson’s relationship to literature in contrast with Bechdel’s. Winterson marks the book-burning as the point at which she began learning to “memorise text”, since “what is inside you is safe.” She makes a distinction between the “art form” of pre-modern, commemorative poetry to the modern

“act of administration” (pp. 41-2). It is perhaps not surprising that Bechdel – whose storytelling method is firmly rooted in the visual – would give the written word such precedence, while Winterson – the bastion of the oral tradition – is averse to the physical dimension of literature. One could argue that the book-burning incident is an example of Mrs W attempting to repress her daughter in the same way someone like Alison represses unwanted feelings and memories – by removing the physical evidence. This is certainly supported by p. 102, where Mrs. Winterson alters the ending of *Jane Eyre* as she reads it aloud to Jeanette so that Jane marries the minister and becomes a missionary; the book then “disappear(s)” when Jeanette gets older, as though Mrs W “didn’t want me to read it for myself.” There is, too, the matter of Winterson’s adoption papers on p. 159, which she finds hidden in a locked chest with some names “violently crossed out” and others torn away. On trying to investigate this so-called “Baby MOT”, Winterson is only drawn deeper into a world of bureaucracy, all “in the dead and distant language of the law” (pp. 179-184). These cases demonstrate how much importance Mrs W, legal workers and the world in general seem to place on the physical reality of words on paper. For them, and perhaps for Bechdel, written/printed words are conductors of the real, and if those words are destroyed, hidden or lost, their referents can no longer be trusted as real or true. Meanwhile Winterson emphasises the limitations of the written word even while depending on it; for her, truth exists “beyond the margin of the text” (p. 8), in “the part of silence that can be spoken”, and “between the lines” (p. 223).

This is not to say that Bechdel sets herself against the oral tradition – plenty of the “literariness” of *Fun Home* is in the ancient myths, parables and fables through which she understands her life. But there is nevertheless a reverence in *Fun Home* for visual information that is absent, even slightly sacrilegious, in *Why Be Happy*.

To begin with, there are the actual books mentioned and/or pictured in the narrative – which number around eighty across 232 pages. These books, predominantly novels, serve an array of functions in *Fun Home*: they contain frameworks through which Bechdel and her family understand their lives, but

also serve at various points in the narrative as clues, messages, and “currency” (Bechdel, 2006, p. 200). Immediately we might think of the Camus book Bruce leaves around the house shortly before his death, prompting Alison to wonder later if this was his way of signalling his intention to commit suicide (see Fig. 5). A variety of book-messages might be found in Chapter 3, for instance when Bruce is shown lending books to his more “more promising high school students”. Bechdel notes that “the promise was very likely sexual” as Bruce hands his student *The Great Gatsby* (p. 61). Though there is some suggestion of sexuality in this exchange – the homoerotic undertones some see in *Gatsby*, for example – the book also seems to represent the message Mr Bechdel wants to send about himself. A friend asks, “So, Bruce, have you read all those?” – casting us back to the scene in *Gatsby* in which a party guest (nicknamed Owl-Eyes) is astonished to find that Gatsby’s books are real rather than cardboard dummies, exclaiming “What thoroughness! What realism!” (Fitzgerald, p. 42). We are led to believe that Bruce’s fine bookcase is not merely practical but a projection of his scholarly persona.

But the most compelling examples of books as messages in *Fun Home* are in the exchanges between Alison and her father. The rare moments of closeness and affection Bruce and Alison experience together are always conducted through the exchange or discussion of books, beginning with Bruce’s stint as an English teacher at Alison’s high school. Drawing herself answering a question about Lizzy and her father in *Pride and Prejudice* – “They have this neat relationship. They’re, like, friends” – Bechdel notes in her caption that “The sense of intimacy was novel” (p. 199). Bechdel’s choice of words here is characteristically and deliberately ambiguous: though the idea of a new intimacy founded on a shared love of books seems thrilling and hopeful, it gains a melancholic tinge when we consider that the intimacy *is* novel – it *is* the book, a feeling both created and contained in literature.

When Bechdel studies literature at college, she again basks in her father’s attention as he recommends her works by Joyce. Perhaps the most significant exchange, however, takes place on p. 205, when Mr Bechdel gives Alison a copy of *Earthly Paradise* by Colette, who wrote openly about her

affairs with both men and women. This event takes place before Alison's "big lesbian epiphany" and over time takes on the aspect of a pre-emptive nod of recognition from father to daughter (p. 205). It catalyses an "intertextual progression" into lesbian literature that seems to play a large part in Alison's understanding of her sexuality (p. 207). After learning about her father's affairs with men, Alison never quite manages to talk openly with her father about homosexuality, finding instead that "like Stephen [Dedalus] and [Leopold] Bloom, our paths crossed but they did not meet"; her father instead moves elliptically around the fact, writing to her as if "assuming that I already knew" (p. 211). A little later, Alison leaves Kate Millet's *Flying* for her father to return to the library – an "eloquent unconscious gesture" that responds to his "Trojan horse gift of Colette" (p. 224). Bruce's enthusiastic response to *Flying* – "God, what guts" – is as close as Bruce and Alison ever come to a positive, open discussion of their sexualities. Coming after the excruciatingly sad, elongated moment on pages 220-221 – in which Bruce briefly opens up to his daughter before going silent once more – the Colette/Millet exchange makes it clear that Bruce and Alison's relationship will only ever exist "on paper".

The other facet of Bechdel's preference for visual, physical literatures takes us back to the idea of record-keeping. Bechdel reproduces all the documents she uses – "public and private photographs; her own diary entries; numerous maps; newspapers; many different kinds of books ... childhood and adolescent drawings; poems; old cartoons; passports; police records; court orders; course catalogs; typed letters from her father and mother, and handwritten letters *between* her parents" – to an incredible degree of accuracy (Chute, p. 185). As Hillary L. Chute points out, this performs an interesting transformation on these documents, especially those that are textual. Through the act of "drawing" words, Bechdel both elevates them to an aesthetic level and somewhat lowers them, too, by reminding the reader that words *are* pictures. (A valuable statement for a comics artist to make.) Thirdly, tiny fluctuations of line and style remind us that these *are* reproductions by the author's hand – realities "refracted through Bechdel's experience and her body." We might best understand Bechdel's reverence for the visual through

the “pathos that itself underwrites the project of painstakingly learning to copy a dead father’s handwriting” (Chute, p. 186), which Bechdel undertook in reproducing Bruce’s letters.

Bechdel’s devoted, painful, monkish manual reproduction makes her record-keeping a far cry from the kind Winterson seems to refer to. In my opinion, the two author’s very disparate approaches to record-keeping can be traced to their cultural and personal contexts. Both of these texts deal with the loss of a parent, but in subtly different ways. Bechdel commemorates her father through a detailed patchwork of written facts and fictions because they are the realest parts of him that remain. Winterson, on the other hand, has no positive associations with written literature – only censorship (the redaction of her birth certificates and *Jane Eyre*), destruction (the book-burning), rejection (Mrs W’s refusal to acknowledge her daughter’s literary success) and fire and brimstone (the terrifying Bible texts framed on the walls). Winterson does not place much stock in her on-paper relationships with her biological or adoptive mothers, preferring the idea of a chosen family:

I grew up like in all those Dickens novels, where the real families are the pretend ones; the people who become your family through deep bonds of affection and the continuity of time. (p. 228)

Winterson’s preference for oral literature also stems from her cultural background. Growing up in poverty meant that the books Winterson grew up reading were overwhelmingly those she borrowed from the library – a way of reading that is divorced from the actual purchase, possession and display of books. Furthermore, After the book-burning incident, Winterson connects her ability to memorise texts with being forced to recite Bible passages, as well as a distinctly Northern, working-class oral tradition (which we will discuss further in the next section). In Winterson’s community, “books were few and stories were everywhere,” and everyday gossip is inflected with phrases from Shakespeare and “metaphysical poets like John Donne” that her elders would have learned by rote as children (pp. 28-30). It should come as no surprise, then, that so many of Winterson’s literary references in her novels are to fairy

tales, myths, epic poems and biblical stories – all examples of emblematic, widely-applicable and memorable narratives – as opposed to more modern and situation-specific literature. Winterson advocates for using these sorts of tales to understand ourselves, much as she has Jeanette do in the princess story in *Oranges* (Winterson, 2001, p. 9). In *Why Be Happy*, for example, she talks about dealing with emotions through the analogy of Sinbad trapping a genie in a bottle:

Jung, not Freud, liked fairy tales for what they tell us about human nature. Sometimes, often, a part of us is both volatile and powerful ... that threatens to overwhelm everything. We can't negotiate with that powerful but enraged part of us until we teach it better manners – which means getting it back in the bottle to show who is really in charge. This isn't about repression, but it is about finding a container. (p. 35)

She goes on to praise fairy tales for their magic environments in which characters and objects can disguise themselves, shape-shift, become huge or very small – all of which reads truer to our lived perceptions of life, she thinks, than a more realistic story might. She gives the example of her mother, who appears to grow gigantic and shrink again at different points in her memory.

Winterson's reality, then, is volatile, incorporeal, disembodied. And while Bechdel does use the elasticity of myth and magic extensively in writing about her past, her drawings are necessarily *embodied*: first, in the sense Chute mentions, in which information is processed through the body in the act of drawing; and second, considering that Bechdel “photographed herself for every frame,” essentially acting out the roles of her past selves and of her family members (Tolmie, p. 79). Both writers *are* essentially compelled towards record-keeping, but their disparity lies in the kinds of records they keep: where Winterson tells her life in broad, indefinite, expressionist strokes, Bechdel tells it in the minutest details – then stands back and looks for patterns.

Record-keeping as resistance

As I outlined in an earlier chapter, the ability to tell one's story lends power not only to the traumatised individual but also to the marginalised group as a whole, whose history is generally forgotten, destroyed and overwritten. Even though "the past is lost," it is imperative to tell and retell it because "the past is real in the sense that it is a shaping cultural force" (Tolmie, p. 86). The need to record one's cultural history is perhaps greatest in those racial and ethnic groups that have been victims of genocide, such as Native Americans, or whose literatures have been underrepresented globally (i.e. almost every culture outside Europe and Northern America). Written or otherwise disseminated histories are important for such groups to mourn, to keep their cultures alive, and to remain in control of their own identities in the face of whitewashing and racial stereotyping. The subjects of this thesis are white, but in recording their memories they do contribute to a variety of other marginalised cultural narratives, including narratives about gender, class and sexuality. And though they do not take on anything so widespread as genocide (like *Maus*) they nevertheless confront the "unspeakable" or "unrepresentable," in the sense that, as Ann Cvetkovich proposes, "the love that dare not speak its name" is an applicable term even in the era after Stonewall' (Cvetkovich, 113) – they still work with the vocalization of something usually kept silent. Their goals are not dissimilar to those of any other archivists of subordinate cultures: remembering – in terms of creating an authoritative account of the culture – as well as remembrance – grieving loss and celebrating cultural figures that might otherwise be forgotten. In queer communities, Valerie Rohy writes, "the remedy for repression is an ad hoc ethic of full disclosure" (p. 343).

Bechdel and Winterson both gained a following in the 1980s for work that dealt with their sexuality – Bechdel for her syndicated comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, and Winterson for *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* – and have since been regarded as key figures in LGBTQ literature, if not lesbian history as a whole. Their contributions to queer and feminist history cannot be

understated. Bechdel is praised particularly for her sense of humour, and how, in *Dykes*, she depicted characters of a variety of sexual orientations, gender expressions, family structures, and cultural backgrounds, all interacting in a realistic everyday setting and dealing with realistic everyday problems. Playing out in real-time and with a cast partly based on Bechdel and her acquaintances, *Dykes* is equal parts soap opera and documentary – making it an incredible addition to any real or imagined queer archive. It was also the origin of the so-called Bechdel Test, which examines the state of gender roles in a film through asking whether it features “(1) at least two women, (2) who talk to each other, (3) about something other than a man” (Tolmie, p. 88). Almost 30 years after these rules were suggested in a *Dykes* strip, the Bechdel Test has become a popular tool for feminist cultural theorists, particularly on the internet.

Perhaps the most significant way in which *Fun Home* builds on the contribution of *Dykes* is its form. The memoir still deals with Bechdel's sexuality and feminism, and is still, recognisably, comics. But it is presented as a complete story, as opposed to the ongoing, episodic and ever-evolving saga of *Dykes*. The book's cover affiliates it far more explicitly with the autobiographical genre than with comics; indeed, all that identifies it as a comic is Bechdel's own winking subtitle. The inset blurb refers to *Fun Home* as a “graphic memoir” by a “cult comic artist”, “pitch-perfectly illustrated with Bechdel's sweetly gothic drawings”. Meanwhile, testimonials on the back cover compare the author to David Sedaris, Charles Dickens, “Mary Karr, Tobias Wolff, and other contemporary memoirists”, and sticks to similar terminology of “graphic narrative” and “graphic novels”. Although the phrase ‘graphic novel’ is used by critics and comics artists alike, it has its detractors. Comics creators from Alan Moore to Seth have condemned the label as a marketing ploy, or a euphemism to make comics appear more sophisticated. In any case, the word ‘novel’ is historically loaded, framing comic books as an extension of a Western literary tradition. Further endorsements in the 2007 paperback edition are written in the tone of pleasant surprise, revealing expectations surpassed: critics call *Fun Home* a “graphic narrative of

uncommon richness”, “staggeringly literate”, “genre-busting” and an “astonishing advertisement for this emerging literary form.”

While not wishing to imply that this praise is at all undeserved, I do posit that *Fun Home* would not have reached such a large audience had its primary cultural referents been comics, “pulp”/popular fictions, or any art form generally perceived to be “lower” than canonical literature. It is true that the latter part of the book ventures into feminist literature, but the stories that seem to bind the Bechdel’s lives together are generally Greek/Roman myths or by established male authors like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Albert Camus, Henry James and James Joyce. By comparison, the only allusions to comics are a collection of Addams Family cartoons (p. 34), a *Wind in the Willows* colouring book (p. 130) and a soldier reading a comic book called *The Haunt of Fear* in the background of a scene about Bruce reading Fitzgerald (p. 62). Through anchoring herself to the canon, Bechdel has made a queer feminist graphic memoir that is appealing to a crowd unfamiliar with (or even slightly hostile towards) homosexuality, feminism, comics and autobiography. I do not read this literariness as a concession to conservative, elitist male readership – it is simply the truth, the real orbits of Alison and Bruce’s lives and interests. But there is the opposite hope that through reading *Fun Home*, and empathizing with those cartoon faces, such readers will broaden their own approaches to sexuality, gender, and art.

Bechdel practically forces the reader to this point of confrontation by showing how queer and canonical histories are intertwined. She takes *Ulysses* and *The Odyssey* and maps out her own odyssey of sexual discovery onto it precisely – finding the sirens in lesbian literature, the Cyclops in her glass-eyed girlfriend, and so on. But she also picks out the queer histories already imbedded in the canon – like the lesbian publishers of *Ulysses*, Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, and of course the life and writings of Oscar Wilde. *Fun Home* is also a queer archive unto itself, which “opens a private collection to public attention without ... presupposing whose history beyond the author’s it may represent” (Rohy, pp. 341-2). Overall, Bechdel is sending the simple message that people of any sexual identity have the potential to

find themselves in the same works of literature. One of Winterson's analogies about literature and empathy seems relevant here:

[Books] were bridges that led over to solid ground. ... Literature is common ground. (Winterson, 2012, p. 144)

Though not as widely read as *Fun Home*, *Why Be Happy* also offers the possibility of a "bridge" between different sorts of readers. Judging by her 1991 introduction to *Oranges*, this has been a very conscious endeavour by Winterson for since the beginning of her career:

[It] is a threatening novel. It exposes the sanctity of family life as something of a sham; it illustrates by example that what the church calls love is actually psychosis and it dares to suggest that what makes life difficult for homosexuals is not their perversity but other people's. Worse, it does these things with such humour and lightness that those disposed not to agree find that they do. (Winterson, 2001, p. xiii)

In this case, Winterson's record-keeping/truth-telling is politically as well as personally motivated. She is taking a lot on, here – the nuclear family, the church, and homophobia – all through relating her own experiences. In *Why Be Happy* she only grows more ambitious, and bolder about her aims. For one, she argues that "we need better stories for the stories around adoption" (p. 226) – stories like hers, which reflect the possibility of disappointment or conflicting feelings towards the birth parents.

More relevant to this discussion, however, is Winterson's impassioned arguments about literature in relation to class and gender. Winterson's working-class oral tradition is "not a bookish one, but ... from absorbing some of the classics in school – they all learned by rote – and by creatively using language to tell a good story" (p. 30). She returns to working-class literacy throughout her memoir: on pp. 39-40 describing how the poetry of T.S. Eliot helped her even as she was "upset about the straightforward practical problems of where to live, what to eat, and how to do my A-Levels" and

concluding that “when people say that poetry is a luxury, or for the educated middle classes ... I suspect that the people doing the saying have had things pretty easy.” This also returns us to the idea of the library, which not only “disembodies” literature but also makes it widely available to those with low incomes, not just the bourgeoisie. Despite her poverty, her father’s illiteracy and her mother’s policing, Jeanette the autodidact gets into Oxford University, “the most impossible thing I could do” (p. 131). It is here (and in this chapter, ‘This is the Road’) that she really begins to explore the politics behind how women and the working class are received by the literary world.

The male interviewer at Oxford asks her if she thinks women can be great writers, a question which had “never occurred” to her. Flailing for an answer, she mentions Jane Austen, the Brontës and George Eliot, to which the interviewer responds:

‘We study those writers of course. Virginia Woolf is not on the syllabus though you will find her interesting – but compared to James Joyce...’

It was a reasonable introduction to the prejudices and pleasures of an Oxford degree course. (p. 137)

Disappointed with the course’s “ignorance” towards women writers, Winterson soon forms an independent reading group, as part of which she reads “Doris Lessing and Toni Morrison, Kate Millett and Adrienne Rich” who become like “a new Bible” (p. 142). She discovers that the earliest recorded poem in English “was composed by a herdsman in Whitby around AD 680 (‘Caedmon’s Hymn’) when St Hilda was the abbess of Whitby Abbey” and is thrilled by the idea of “a woman in charge and an illiterate cowhand making a poem of such great beauty” (p. 143). Though Winterson may dislike record-keeping, she is certainly compelled in her writing to set the record straight – that is, to set the record queer, blue-collar, and female. *Why Be Happy* is not just about Jeanette Winterson, but also the contribution of the North, the working-class and women to literature and to Great Britain as a whole. Bechdel also offers some implicit criticism of the narrow scope of literary studies by showing how the feminist and queer books she does read “remain

sidelined in the traditional curriculum, offered, if at all, in specialist classes in women's and gender studies departments or in small upper-level seminars rather than in regular literature/ English classes" (Tolmie, p. 89).

In these examples, Bechdel and Winterson demonstrate an important tactic in reconstructing queer history and memory. Their intertextuality inscribes the possibility of queerness and womanhood back into classic and even ancient male-dominated, heterosexual stories – whether it's Bechdel as a lesbian Odysseus, or Winterson as Jude the Obscure (p. 134). By writing queer literature *on top of* the canon instead of against it, they arguably create something stronger and more durable, a kind of alloyed history. Additionally, just by telling their own stories they "make public space for lives whose very ordinariness makes them historically meaningful" (Cvetkovich, p. 111). So when Winterson instructs her reader to, "Read the hurt ... Rewrite the hurt" (p. 5) she also speaks to entire cultures of the empowerment to be gained from rewriting history from a subaltern perspective.

Conclusion – the space between

If there is a function to the overt intertextuality of these books, I believe it is to open a dialogue about connectedness.

To speak of intertextuality literally: Winterson problematizes received notions about the working class by revealing their ongoing engagement with "high" literature like Renaissance poetry and theatre. Bechdel and Winterson both prove that women's stories can be inscribed upon traditionally male stories.

But intertextuality is also used as a template for the lattice-like connections between other things. Their genders are intertextual – informed by both conventionally masculine and feminine traits. When Winterson finds out that she was adopted to replace a male baby, and would have been dressed in his clothes, she wonders if she essentially "began as a boy" (p. 202); she even identifies at one point as "a girl who's a boy who's a boy who's

a girl” (p. 168). Bechdel feels herself to be an “inversion” of her father – she as a young tomboy nicknamed “Butch” and “trying to compensate for something unmanly in him” while “he was trying to express something feminine” through a strictly girlish dress code for Alison (pp. 97-98). Bechdel also hints at some kind of hybrid gender identity during the first chapter, in which her father is figured as Daedalus; describing the original “half-bull, half-man monster” which inspired Daedalus’s minotaur, she draws her child self spot-lit before a silhouetted Bruce, implying that perhaps Bruce once saw her as a “half-man monster” of his own failed creation (p. 12). Neither writer restricts herself to only female analogies – their identities are in constant flux, adjusting to the shape of men, women and magical creatures at the whim of the narrative. Through their interrogation of gender roles in society they “seek to break down the apartheid type of difference between straight and queer” (Tolmie, p. 83).

Bechdel’s chosen form is intertextual in that it comes from two or three lines of heritage – the cartoon, the autobiography and the novel – and combines them into this new form of graphic memoir or “autography”. I agree with Robyn Warhol that the power of this format is in Bechdel’s exploitation of “the space between” words and images, comics and prose.¹

Even time and memory are intertextual, with various events in the writers’ lives shown to refer both back and forward in time to other events through foreshadowing, repetition and juxtaposition. This is a “queer temporality” in which the past, if it cannot be changed, can still be reframed and reconsidered for its value to the present; Bechdel tells Bruce’s story in order for it to be “incorporated into a more fully historicized present” while ensuring that its “unassimilability [will] be acknowledged in order to problematize the present” (Cvetkovich, 124).

Ultimately, I think the significance of these books can be explained through McCloud’s concept of the gutter, that white space in between comics panels. Just as a person achieves “closure” by filling in the narrative between

¹ R Warhol, ‘The Space Between: A Narrative Approach to Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*’ in *College Literature*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2011, p. 2.

two discrete moments, so does she diminish trauma by broaching an unspoken or unspeakable event in one's life with language, with storytelling. And she fills in the gaps in history by record-keeping, rewriting her culture back into the archive. In this way, *Fun Home* and *Why Be Happy* promote intertextuality not just in literature but as a way of life. The autobiographers expose themselves as the products of multiple overlapping and combining narratives – a truth that, for the reader, may well feel liberating.

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