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An Interview with Alison Bechdel

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Dykes to Watch Out For

HT: Can you explain who your readership is, and the changes it has undergone over the years?

AB: I feel like I have less and less of a sense of who's reading the strip. In the beginning, my audience was pretty clearly other lesbians of around my same age and socioeconomic standing. But now it seems like a lot of heterosexuals follow it, and younger people. They're probably still in the same socioeconomic ballpark as me (sorry, am I using too much American?) but there's a wider range of people now. Even some self-identified straight, white, conservative Republican males.

HT: What publications does and did *DTWOF* appear in?

AB: Unfortunately, the number of print publications has been dwindling for a while. I hit a high of around 70 maybe 5 or 6 years ago. But the assimilation of LGBT culture into the mainstream, along with the general demise of print media, have really contracted the number of these papers. One thing I'm pleased about, though, is that the strip runs in more non-gay, general interest papers than it used to.

HT: You say you were never politically active, but in *Dykes & other Carbon-Based Life-Forms To Watch Out For* (# 10) you look back on 20 years of *DTWOF* and you mention the "radical women" you hung out with in the 1980s. Can you tell us more about your experiences in those days? About lesbian and feminist activism?

AB: I was always attracted to women who were activists because they seemed to embody something I was incapable of. They would do civil disobedience and get put in jail, travel to Central America, put on one-woman guerilla theatre shows. I admired the way they were able to put their money where their mouth is, as we say. To really live out the things they believed in. I, on the other hand, was not brave

enough to do this and often felt an uncomfortable sense of complicity with the status quo. I gave that trait to my character Mo.

HT: The way you represent and include the politics of your characters is often hilarious, even when it is very serious, and it is clear that a lot of it is funny for you. Can you elucidate your attitude to some of their positions (Mo's, Clarice's, Sparrow's, for instance)?

AB: I guess I do critique their various positions, but only because I also share them to a certain extent. All the characters are aspects of myself. Mo is my liberal guilt-ridden self. Clarice is my practical, work-for-change-within-the-system self. Sparrow is my flaky spiritual side—though I think both of us have gotten less flaky and more hard-nosed over the years. Stuart, Raffi, Cynthia... they're all me.

HT: I love the microcosm / macrocosm interplay in *DTWOF*, the way you draw parallels between the characters' lives and the current political situation—it's very funny, but it must be incredibly complicated. Why is it important for you to do that? How do your readers react to this? Are they more interested in the "soap opera" or the "current affairs" parts of the strip? And which is predominant for you? My impression is that, to some extent, the interpersonal relationships of the characters are very often organized around, and sometimes subsumed into, their political activism or concerns.

AB: Politics and current events are a kind of chaos I'm compelled to try and create order from, and my comic strip is a tool that helps me to do that. Sometimes I just explore the different characters' opinions on something that's going on in the world. But what I find most effective is when I can use the characters as metaphors to explore larger-scale human activities. It helps me to understand something about foreign policy, for example, when I transpose the dynamics to the smaller stage of our intimate domestic lives and see how things play out there.

HT: Marriage equality has been a recurrent theme in the series, and as you said in your presentation, you're basically on Mo's side on this issue; yet, you also mentioned that you had gotten married yourself. Can you say a bit more about this, and perhaps try to explain the apparent contradiction?

AB: The best way I can explain it is to quote my character Sydney when she proposes to Mo. "Will you do me the honor of paradoxically reinscribing *and* destabilizing hegemonic discourse with me?" Same-sex marriage does both of these things at the same time. I got married for the destabilizing aspect, but I was very aware of and discomfited by the reinscribing aspect.

HT: A number of your characters have been having children over the years; is that something you take from people you know? To broaden that question: to what extent does *DTWOF* reflect the world (or parts of it) and its evolution, and to what extent does it enable you to represent things as you would like them to be?

AB: I actually don't have any close lesbian friends with kids. But clearly that's something vast numbers of gay men and lesbians are doing, so it was important to me to represent it. And also, maybe, a way of exploring a road I chose not to take. I think I do a combination of representing the world as I would like it to be, and representing it as it actually is. But I'm not sure about the precise extent to which I do either one. I think over the years the strip has become a little less utopian and a little more realistic. Partly because the world has caught up with the strip. And partly because the strip has caught up with the world in the sense that it's less... well, less cartoony, less silly than it used to be.

HT: I know you're going to hate that question... but here goes: have you seen *The L Word*? Did you have the impression that the series was influenced by *DTWOF* (I certainly did), and how did that make you feel?

AB: I have seen some of *The L Word*, some of the first and second season. No, I didn't feel like it was particularly influenced by my strip. I mean, beyond the fact that it's a soap opera about a bunch of lesbians.

HT: Can you comment on Lois's (retrospectively narrated) shift from anti- to pro-porn? Does it reflect the changes in the lesbian movement, or your own, or both?

AB: That was definitely a reflection of a shift in the cultural temperament. My own position on porn has always been extremely muddled and conflicted. It's a very confusing topic to me, kind of like marriage.

HT: Some of your characters express nostalgia about the good old days of the invisible lesbian subculture, others celebrate the (relative) mainstreaming. What's your position?

AB: This is yet another thing I have conflicting feelings about. Of course I'm pleased and grateful for the social progress that's been made over the years. And I think nostalgia is rather dangerous. But I also think it's important to acknowledge that while we've gained a lot, we've also lost something. I've always really prized the outsider perspective my sexual difference has given me. When you're outside, you can see things that people inside can't see, or don't notice. As gay people get more assimilated into the mainstream, I think that perspective can't help but be diminished, and that makes me sad.

HT: Your presentation of queer and transgender issues varies over the years, it is sometimes tongue-in-cheek, sometimes rather militant. Do you agree with that reading, and if so, why the hesitation?

AB: You keep pointing out paradoxes in my work. Maybe the deep-down core of what I'm writing about in my cartoons is the nature of paradox. I do think there's something fundamentally constitutive about paradox, that it's the basic schema

behind all experience—that tension between a thing and its opposite. I am fairly radical in my principles—but I think taking yourself and your ideology too seriously leads to trouble. So in my work I both express a radical viewpoint and poke fun at it.

Fun Home

HT: Having known your work for some time now, I was struck by the very different graphic style and atmosphere of *Fun Home*. For instance, there is an impression of fixity in many of the drawings; it's particularly striking at the very beginning, with the contrast between the panel on the title page (the reproduction of a photo of your father) and the beginning of the story proper. In fact, this first page seems to deal with this sort of thing, with the game of airplane (motion and immobility, constant awareness of the unavoidable fall). Was that deliberate?

AB: The drawings on the title page for each chapter are based on actual family photographs. I wanted them to be identifiable as photographs, so I drew them in a photographic style, different from the body of the book, as you pointed out. It was a way of continually grounding the story—reminding readers that it really happened, that the characters are real people.

HT: I was very amused by your reference to the Addams family; can you talk about that a little bit? Can you also explain the drawing of the young girl with a string in her mouth?

AB: There's an old visual gag about pulling a tooth by tying a string around it and attaching the other end to a doorknob—then slamming the door. I have no idea if people ever actually did this, but I remember seeing it in animated cartoons a lot when I was little. So the Addams version of this gag is to tie the tooth not to a regular door, but to a sinister trapdoor in the floor.

HT: In terms of the drawing process, I was intrigued by the “mixed genre” of drawn text, there's quite a lot of it in *Fun Home*: excerpts from books, newspaper articles, excerpts from your diary, letters (mainly your father's—are these actual letters?), the police report, etc. How did you do that? Why was it important to have the actual pages appear rather than just quote them in the captions?

AB: I love handwriting, ephemera, and printed matter of all kinds—any marks on paper. And I love words as images. Letterforms thrill me in a strange way. Also, it felt important to include documentary evidence in the story, so the reader could trust my narration more. It's true I didn't present the actual documents, but my drawn versions of them. But that felt important for the opposite reason—to acknowledge that this is all just my version of things, not necessarily the one true version.

HT: At the beginning of your *Fun Home* presentation, you said you shouldn't explain the writing process; so I feel both guilty and compelled to ask you a little bit about it.

It is a very complex narrative, whose “organizing principle” varies a lot; and the text/ image interplay is particularly fascinating and original. How did you work on the text? And was the writing combined with some sense of what would be in the panels?

AB: Yeah, as I wrote I usually had a sense of what the accompanying images would be. Sometimes I’d be writing and writing, and would get stuck – then I realized I was forgetting about the images. So I’d ask myself what the next image should be, and that would always open things up again and lead me out of my morass.

HT: Page 58, you learn that your father has had affairs with men; then your mother, by way of explanation, it appears, says “he was molested by a farm hand when he was young.” There is absolutely no comment on this statement; but what would you say it meant to your mother? To you? How did you expect readers to react to that? Also, were you expecting them to remember and make a link with Bruce’s very different explanation on page 220?

AB: Yes, I was expecting readers to link my mother’s version with my father’s version. Though I expect my mother got her version from my father – I imagine him explaining or rationalizing his homosexuality to her as being a result of the farm hand molesting him. But when he described the experience to me, he had very fond memories of this man. Again, paradox rears its two heads.

HT: *Fun Home* gives the impression that you were a very solitary child, in fact that your entire family (except for your mother perhaps) was very much closed in on itself. Was that the case? Or is it somehow amplified here?

AB: No, I think I presented my family pretty accurately in this regard.

HT: You also talk very little about the relationship with the people of Beech Creek; were you isolated from them physically, perhaps just emotionally? How did your father deal with being a teacher *and* a mortician in the same town?

AB: I did feel cut off from the people in my town growing up. In one way, I was very much a part of them – I was surrounded by dozens if not hundreds of relations. But many of them were farmers and hadn’t been to college, so there was a bit of a class and culture divide. But I don’t think there was any conflict for my father between being a teacher and a mortician.

HT: In the autobiographical stories in *The Indelible Alison Bechdel*, you don’t draw your family at all; your mother appears in one (“The Power of Prayer”), but you don’t show her face, and I don’t remember your father or brothers being anywhere. So, although you’ve always had a taste for autobiography, drawing your family appears to have been somewhat taboo. Can you talk about that, and can you describe what it was like to finally draw them? (By the way, your aunt Jane does appear, so I have to ask: does she actually exist?)

AB: Yeah, my Aunt Jane actually exists. She's a very nice lady. I didn't feel it was taboo to draw my family in earlier work—it was just hard. I'm not very good at drawing recognizable caricatures of actual people. And drawing your family is even harder, I think, because you know them so well. It took a lot of practice, a lot of trial and error, to be able to draw them consistently for *Fun Home*.

HT: In that same line of thought, in *Fun Home* you write "My parents are most real to me in fictional terms." How about drawing them? Was it a means of making them more real, or more fictional?

AB: Uh... both?

HT: In your mind, how are *DTWOF* and *Fun Home* connected?

AB: I feel like *DTWOF* made it possible for me to do *Fun Home*. In an emotional, personal way by helping me to develop the skills and confidence necessary to take on this bigger project. And to work out some of my own internalized homophobia—in many ways *DTWOF* was my demonstration to myself that being a lesbian was okay. And then in a political way, *DTWOF* has been part of a much larger cultural movement of queer people creating reflections of their lives that made it possible for these stories to eventually cross over to a broader audience.

HT: You say you know little about comics (because this was a genre mainly directed to teenage boys), but it seems extraordinary that you could be a secluded cartoonist for over 20 years. Are you your own subculture? Is it intentional, a necessary shielding from the influence of others?

AB: I know a lot about comics. I just don't know much about mainstream superhero stuff. I might have said I was never part of the comics world. My career as a cartoonist happened outside the comics industry, and inside the LGBT subculture. That was by necessity, really, not any kind of deliberate decision on my part.

HT: Do you share Mo and Sidney's Martha Stewart fetish?

AB: No. The thought of having sex with Martha Stewart makes my blood run cold.

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