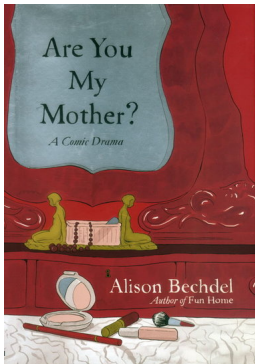


Cartoonist examines the serious side of childhood

Written by TERRY MATHEWS, Arts Editor
Tuesday, 22 May 2012 14:14



I don't like making predictions because they're almost always wrong, but I feel pretty good about saying that cartoonist Alison Bechdel's graphic novel, "Are You My Mother?" will land on most everyone's "Best Non-Fiction of 2012" list.

Bechdel's first book, "Fun Home," was released to critical acclaim in 2007, and focused on her childhood. The new book shines a sometimes harsh and unflattering light on her mother, an aspiring actress who left show business to raise a family.

Although Bechdel had a long-running career as a cartoonist ("Dykes to Watch Out For," first published in 1983, found a loyal following in gay/lesbian publications), insecurity, depression and other issues continue to plague her, sometimes to the point of paralyzation.

The Bechdel family dynamics were, at best, strained and, at worst, damaging.

Her father was consumed with restoring an old Victorian house in Lockhaven, Pa., using his three children (the author and her two brothers) as manual labor for his numerous projects and always encouraging his daughter to wear dresses and put fancy doo-dads in her hair.

The family owned and operated a funeral home (shortened by the kids to "fun home," the first book's title), where Bechdel and her two brothers spent a lot of their spare time.

Bechdel's mother favored her sons over her daughter, but explained it to Alison by saying, "I wasn't nearly as bad" her own mother believed boys were "more important than girls."

Cartoonist examines the serious side of childhood

Written by TERRY MATHEWS, Arts Editor
Tuesday, 22 May 2012 14:14

While she was in college, Bechdel came out to her parents. Just a few months later, her father was run over by a Sunbeam Bakery truck. Whether his death was an accident or suicide continues to haunt Bechdel, who discovered he, too, was gay.

In the new book, Bechdel tackles the complicated relationship between mothers and daughters.

Her mother quit kissing her good night when she was 7, pronouncing her “too old” for such stuff.

At one point in her childhood, Bechdel was so desperate for her mother’s attention that she pretended to be a paraplegic, lying on the kitchen floor, her mother playing along and tending to her every need.

When she turned 11, Bechdel’s neurosis began to interfere with her ability to write in her daily journal, so “for six weeks, whatever I said, she wrote down,” Bechdel recalls.

Included in the book are detailed panels of the author’s time in therapy. She relies heavily on the writings of British psychologist Donald Winnicott and Swiss child psychotherapist Alice Miller to explore her mother’s behavior and to explain her reaction to it.

She also refers to the writing of Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf, especially, “To The Lighthouse (1927).” [I had to refresh my knowledge of Woolf’s book, which contains little dialogue and spends a lot of time examining the impact childhood memories have on adult life.]



Cartoonist examines the serious side of childhood

Written by TERRY MATHEWS, Arts Editor
Tuesday, 22 May 2012 14:14

By sharing her journey, Bechdel offers a ray of hope for anyone who has questions about their childhood or who has struggled with ghosts of the past. While the psychological references might be too detailed for some, they feed Bechdel's fierce desire to figure out the impact her younger years had on her as she faces middle-age, still trying to find her place in the world.

"Fun Home" and "Are You My Mother" were my first graphic novels. Bechdel's obsessive compulsiveness serves her well on the graphics side of the book. Her panels are intricate, detailed and compelling.

The books left an indelible imprint. I'll be thinking about them for a long, long time.

Not recommended for e-readers, as much of the detail from each panel is lost due to the small screen.

Adult content, situations and language.

To read an interview with the publicity-shy author, click [here](#) .