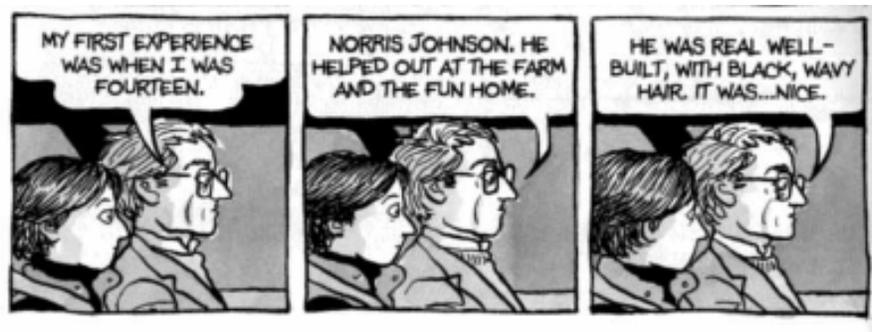


Acceptance versus Suppression: Homosexuality in the “Fun Home”

Author Alison Bechdel’s acceptance of her homosexual identity, as illustrated in *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, is a more fluid experience than her father’s similar realization. Their unique first experiences with their sexuality play a role in their definitions of homosexuality. Both also spend their emerging adulthood years in different settings: Alison in a college setting and Bruce in a small town. Literature is a common bond between the two throughout their relationship, but affects each in different ways, particularly in reference to understanding their sexuality. The immense distinctions in their encounters and experiences involving their homosexuality ultimately shaped their development: Alison into a woman accepting of her identity and Bruce into a man suppressing his.

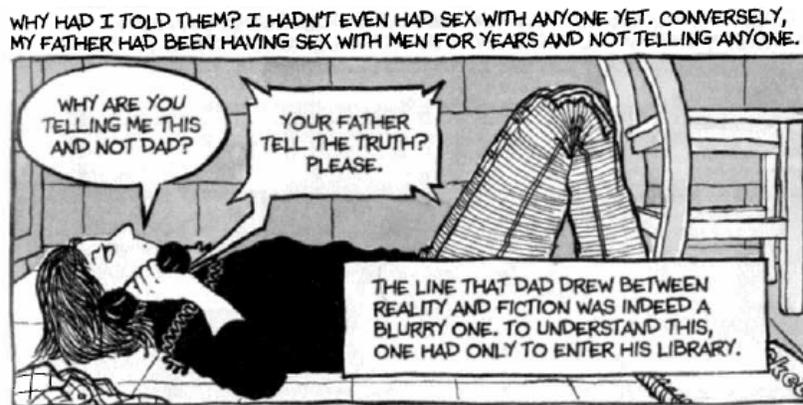
Each character’s first experience with homosexuality differed in everything from their age at the time to the type of person with whom it occurred. Bruce had his first encounter when he was young with a worker at his family farm. Here, he describes it as “nice”, rather than a traumatizing encounter (Bechdel 220).



Inspecting the drawings, his face tells a different story. Because of how casually he refers to it, he still seems unwilling to fully admit to his gratification of the experience, even if it was something he enjoyed. When Alison’s mother first informs Alison that her dad is also homosexual, she blames it on this experience (58).



Her mother stutters, showing her acknowledgement that her husband's encounter with the farm hand was not molestation, but something he wanted and most likely enjoyed. However, Bruce's life was based around lies: he may have instructed his wife to use this story. Her mother acknowledges that Bruce does not often tell the truth, which links to the cover-up of his homosexuality. He has had to suppress a main part of his identity for majority of his life, making it easier for him to lie about anything (59).

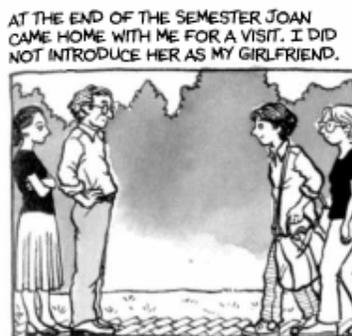


Alison, through her commentary above the image, draws an important contrast between her father and herself. Her mother scoffs when Alison asks why Bruce is not explaining this himself, but above the image, Alison poses the question, "Why had I told them...Conversely, my father had been having sex with men for years and not telling anyone" (Bechdel 58). Alison is doubting her decision to inform her parents of her discovery, but questioning this revelation alerts the

reader that Alison has the capability of acknowledging the truth that her father does not. Although she seems to regret opening up to her parents, she still did it – something her father would not. Part of this ability owes to her first homosexual encounter, during her college years, with a woman named Joan (80).



As these frames depict, Alison makes the choice to acknowledge her homosexuality, attend functions for homosexuals, and forms an infatuation with Joan. The two eventually live together and Alison brings Joan home to meet her parents, as in any other relationship. In bringing Joan home, she draws another line between herself and Bruce: she is not ashamed of her homosexuality enough to hide Joan from her family (225).



She does not introduce Joan as her girlfriend, but the act of bringing Joan to her family reveals Alison's gradual acceptance of her homosexuality. Bruce, on the other hand, creates cover stories for his homosexuality and refuses to directly acknowledge it. Without her positive and accepted experience with Joan, Alison may have had a suppressed sexuality as her father does. Instead, Alison is intrigued by this new part of herself because the society around her accepts it. Bruce wants only to hide that part of himself, at least for the current situation that he is in, living in a small town where his books are his only escape.

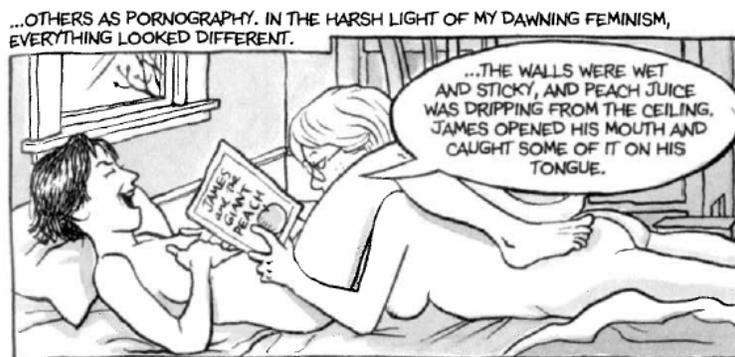
Literature plays a role in both characters' sexual experience. It feeds Bruce's desire to explore his own sexuality without making it a public statement. Bruce lends Alison the book *Colette's Autobiography*, a novel written about Paris in the 1920s that has a homosexual undertone to it, a little while after she has her "big lesbian epiphany", as she calls it (205).



The above frame references her "odyssey" and later frames bring a similar reference back within frames depicting Alison performing oral sex on Joan (214).



In these frames, she points out the close connections she makes between her sexual exploration and the literature to which she has been exposed. She states that “in the harsh light of [her] dawning feminism, everything looked different” (81). Alison revisits literature that she had never looked at in a sexual light and delights in her new discoveries.



Even literature from childhood, such as *James and the Giant Peach*, now possesses sexual connotations, though not always homosexual. She finds comfort and clarification of her new identity in literature and explores more straight-forward lesbian works as well (75).

THAT FIRST VOLUME LED QUICKLY TO OTHERS.



I FOUND A FOUR-FOOT TROVE IN THE STACKS WHICH I QUICKLY RAVISHED.



AND SOON I WAS TROLLING EVEN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY, HEADLESS OF THE RISKS.



It is a boom of literature in Alison's life; she cannot seem to read enough on this new piece of her identity. As she learns more, she settles into her changed identity and moves more toward acceptance. Bruce also finds comfort, but the literature he chooses is much more subtle than his daughter's blatant lesbian literature. Some of the work he worshiped had homosexual undertones, but literature was more of an overall escape from Bruce's own life (61).

THE LIBRARY WAS A FANTASY, BUT A FULLY OPERATIONAL ONE.

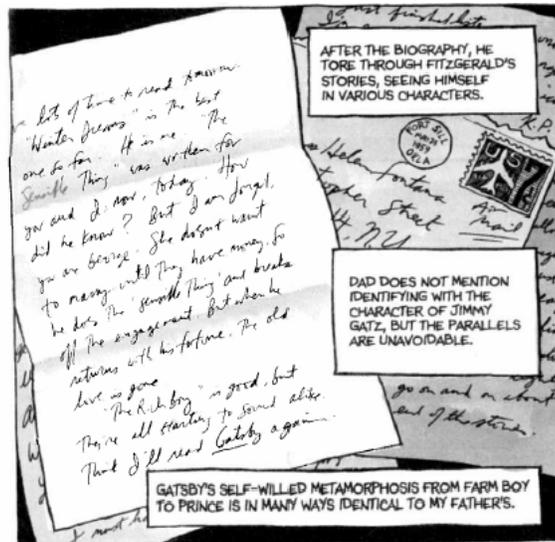


Alison captions his library as a fantasy, though "fully operational", alluding to the escape from his reality that her father found within the shelves. He also attempted, in Alison's eyes, to use his books as gateways to connect with homosexuality. In this image, he lends a novel to Roy, one of his male lovers as well as his children's babysitter (61).

THE PROMISE WAS VERY LIKELY SEXUAL IN SOME CASES, BUT WHATEVER ELSE MIGHT HAVE BEEN GOING ON, BOOKS WERE BEING READ.



The Great Gatsby is the featured book, referencing Bruce's special taste for Fitzgerald and *Gatsby* in particular and marking an attempt to share something personal with someone in whom he is interested. Bruce had "a particular reverence about Fitzgerald" (62), likely because of Bruce's desire for excitement like that which surrounded Fitzgerald. He also possessed a striking number of similarities to Fitzgerald's most well-known character, Jimmy Gatz – more commonly known as Jay Gatsby (63).



Bruce feels restricted by his lifestyle and setting, as Gatsby did by his own upbringing, though Bruce's restriction originates from his suppressed sexual identity. Money is Gatsby's escape, but literature is Bruce's. He is able to read about places he had never been and would never see, he

could put himself into the lives of characters with whom he most identified, and he could experience things a small town would never have to offer – all within the pages of books. It is another attempt for Bruce to repress his reality that ultimately leads to his apparent suicide. The divergence in use of literature for Bruce and Alison works with their first experiences as well as their setting to form their individual outcomes.

Part of both characters' comfort with their sexuality stems from where he or she lived during the most challenging years of accepting his or her identity. They were raised in the same town, but Alison's experience with her homosexuality changes as a result of her change of setting. When first discovering lesbian literature while away at college, she acknowledges that she "had been having qualms since [she] was thirteen...when [she] first learned the word due to its alarming prominence in [her] dictionary" (74), during the time while she still lived in her small hometown with her parents. However, she does not question her desire to be more masculine until she happens upon homosexual literature in her university library. This is due to the lack of conversation about and acceptance of homosexuality in her hometown. By escaping her small town and gaining exposure to a university atmosphere, where being different is not necessarily a bad thing, she accepts her identity more readily than her father could accept his. She begins with the literature but soon begins attending meetings for homosexual or lesbian students and eventually the dance where she meets Joan, her only lover mentioned in the book (76).

I WENT TO A MEETING OF SOMETHING CALLED THE "GAY UNION," WHICH I OBSERVED IN PETRIFIED SILENCE.



BUT MY MERE PRESENCE, I FELT, HAD AMOUNTED TO A PUBLIC DECLARATION. I LEFT EXHILARATED.



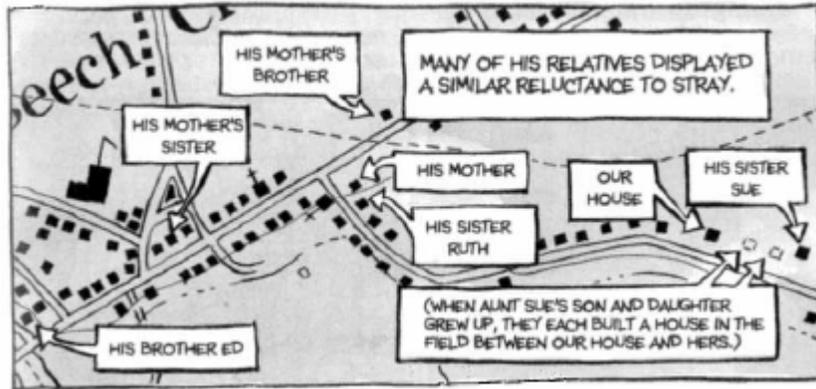
Had Alison remained in her hometown, her resources – from the literature to the exposure to Joan – would have been as limited as Bruce’s were for his lifetime. Bruce never has this opportunity for a change in setting. Alison, after the funeral, makes the comment that Bruce was trapped in their hometown of Beech Creek, and that she would “kill [herself] too if [she] had to live there” (125).

WHEN I THINK ABOUT HOW MY FATHER'S STORY MIGHT HAVE TURNED OUT DIFFERENTLY, A GEOGRAPHICAL RELOCATION IS USUALLY INVOLVED.

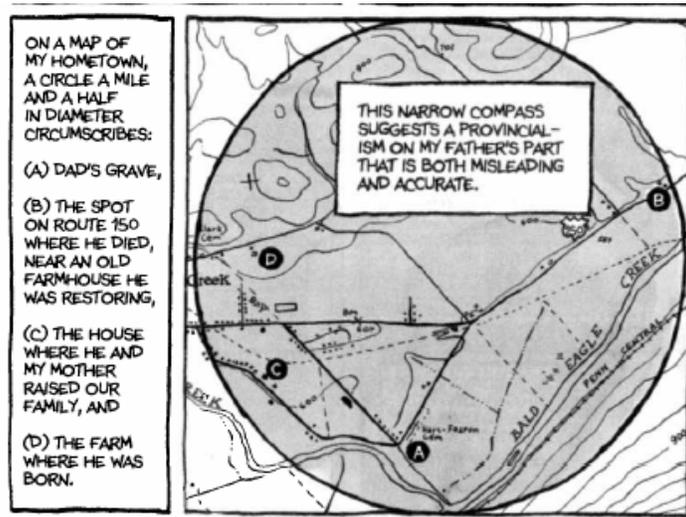
<p>BEECH CREEK — Bruce Bechdel, 44, of Maple Avenue, Beech Creek, well-known funeral director and high school teacher, died of multiple injuries suffered when he was struck by a tractor-trailer along Route 150, about two miles north of Beech Creek at 11:10 a.m. Wednesday.</p> <p>He was pronounced dead on arrival at Cook-Hansen Hospital</p>	<p>white standing on the berm, police said.</p> <p>Bechdel was born in Beech Creek on April 8, 1936 and was the son of Dorothy Bechdel Bechdel, who survives and lives in Beech Creek, and the late Claude H. Bechdel.</p> <p>He operated the Bruce A. Bechdel Funeral Home in Beech Creek and was also an English teacher at Bald Eagle-Nittany</p>	<p>Institute of Mortuary Science. He served in the U.S. Army in Germany.</p> <p>Bechdel was president of the Clinton County Historical Society and was instrumental in the restoration of the Heisley Museum after the 1972 flood and in 1978 he and his wife, the former Helen Fontana, received the annual Clinton County Historical Society preservation award for the work at their 10-room Victorian house in Beech Creek.</p> <p>He was a member of the Phi Kappa Psi Society of America, and of directors of the Nittany Playhouse, National Council of Teachers of English, Phi Kappa Psi fraternity and was a deacon at the Blanchard</p>
<p>IF ONLY HE'D BEEN ABLE TO ESCAPE THE GRAVITATIONAL TUG OF BEECH CREEK, I TELL MYSELF, HIS PARTICULAR SUN MIGHT NOT HAVE SET IN SO PRECIPITATE A MANNER.</p>		
<p>gardening and stepped onto the roadway. He was struck by the right front portion of the</p>	<p>degree from The Pennsylvania State University. He was also a graduate of the Pittsburgh</p>	<p></p>

She acknowledges that had he been able to leave the town, she believes that he would have had a different fate. She provides the readers with drawings of their town, equipped with approximate distance between Bruce’s home as an adult and the homes of the rest of his family members, including his mother’s home in which he grew up. Being so close in proximity to his family for his entire life, Bruce felt the need to fit the idea they had already formed of him. He would have to suppress his homosexual urges to keep up with their vision. He never had the opportunity to

escape, except for rare excursions to New York, and his sexuality became further suppressed (31).

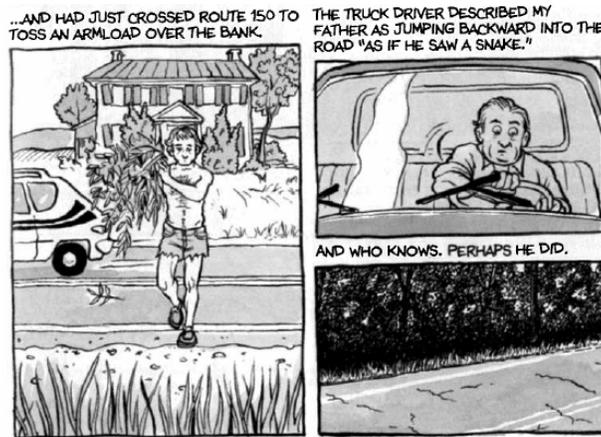


Another image draws the conclusion that all of Bruce's life happened within a mile and a half radius, supporting Alison's belief that the small town suppression drove her father to suicide (30).



He was born and raised in Beech Creek, and later raises his own family and dies in the same area. Within such a small setting, Bruce's opportunities to explore his sexuality are limited. He takes what he can find, whether it be a farmhand, his student, his children's babysitter, or a local boy. Because of these encounters, Bruce's sexuality needs to be kept under wraps to protect his

family and the others with whom he is involved. He is forced to suppress his homosexual desires continuously until he seemingly has had enough and meets his demise (89).



Alison's captions reveal her doubt that her father's death was an accident. Because of her experience away from home, she has the ability to differentiate between her setting and the freedom with which it provides her, and her father's limited space and the restriction under which it puts him.

Alison and Bruce Bechdel may have come from the same family, but their acceptance of their homosexual identities greatly differed. Each spent their emerging adulthood in different settings: Bruce in his hometown and Alison in a college town. They shared a bond over literature, but employed their resources uniquely. Alison was able to use it to enter into her sexuality and Bruce was able to escape his restrained reality. Their first experiences also helped each either accept or cover their homosexuality. The variation between Alison and her father, in terms of accepting their identity, reveal that their outcomes were largely dependent on the opportunities and experiences each was granted or denied. Alison's work exemplifies the universal idea that the upbringing and experiences in an individual's life – nurture, in other words – have the power to shape the direction in which he or she goes.

Works Cited

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006. Print.