



Bechdel, Alison (b. 1960)

by Robert Kellerman

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Cartoonist Alison Bechdel is best known for her long-running comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which has run in alternative gay and lesbian newspapers for nearly two decades.

Bechdel was born on September 10, 1960 in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, one of three children of high school English teachers. She grew up in rural Pennsylvania and graduated from Oberlin College in 1981, after which she moved to New York City.

Having been rejected by all the art schools to which she had applied for graduate study, Bechdel was working several publishing jobs when she included in a letter to a friend a drawing of a woman titled "Marianne, dissatisfied with the morning brew."

She labeled the drawing "Dykes to Watch Out For, plate no. 27," as if it were another installment of a long-running series. More sketches of increasing detail followed, and a friend encouraged her to send them to the feminist monthly newspaper *Womannews*. It published the first comic in 1983, and *Dykes To Watch Out For* began appearing in every issue.

The first four years of *Dykes To Watch Out For* consisted of single strips of unrelated plots and characters, published in *Womannews* and other newspapers. During this time, Nancy Boreano, founder of Firebrand Books, approached Bechdel about publishing a book of her strips. This first book, *Dykes To Watch Out For*, appeared in 1986, and nine others have since ensued. Three of the *Dykes To Watch Out For* books have won Lambda Literary Awards, as has Bechdel's memoir *The Indelible Alison Bechdel* (1998).

Following the publication of the first book, Bechdel made two important changes: first, she began drawing the strip biweekly and, second, in 1987 she introduced a regular cast of characters that continues from strip to strip.

Bechdel describes her strip as "half op-ed column and half endless, serialized Victorian novel." At its center is Mo (Monica), who embodies the values that Bechdel assumed were what being a lesbian meant when she came out. Mo is "an antiracist, anticlassist, anti-big business, anticonsumerist feminist socialist"; and much of the strip's humor is derived from her and her friends' struggles to live out their politics.

Other characters reflect the racial, ethnic, political, economic, and cultural diversity of a lesbian community: successful lawyer Clarice; her partner, accountant Toni, and their son Rafael; sex-positive Lois; New Age follower Sparrow; academics Ginger and Sydney; differently-abled artist Thea; Jezanna, who owns the bookstore where Mo, Thea, and Lois work; and many other major and minor recurring characters.

The strip's appeal lies in its reflection of both its characters' complex history and of the larger culture as well. Its characters have gone to the marches on Washington and to the Michigan Womyn's Festival, for example, and they have commented on a myriad of contemporary news events.



Alison Bechdel in 2006.
Photograph by Angela Brinskele.
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However, *Dykes To Watch Out For* particularly shines at dealing with an enormous number of lesbian issues: relationships, race and ethnicity, adoption and marriage, transgenderism, assimilation and separatism, bisexuality, coming out to family, women's health issues, and aging, among others.

For its passionately devoted readers, *Dykes To Watch Out For* is more real than actual life; Bechdel has thus made a lasting contribution to literature, popular culture, and social history.

In 2006, Bechdel published a "graphic memoir" entitled *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* in which she details the the pains and joys of growing up, coming out, and discovering that her father was also gay. Haunted by her father's apparent suicide after being accused of molesting a teenager, the book, Bechdel has said, is really "about my creative apprenticeship to my father; it [is] about becoming an artist."

Highly praised in the mainstream as well as the glbtq press, *Fun Home* is likely to bring Bechdel to a wider audience.

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www.dykestowatchoutfor.com.

About the Author

Robert Kellerman holds a doctorate in English literature from Michigan State University.