

Fun Home Study Guide

Fun Home by Alison Bechdel

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Summary

“Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic” is a graphic memoir (a work of nonfiction told in pictures) by Alison Bechdel which recounts her coming out as a lesbian, her father’s repressed bisexuality, and the relationship between Bechdel and her father. As a child, Bechdel always sensed something was off about her father. While some things her father did were manly, such as restoring the old house in which they lived, other things were very effeminate, such as his love of floral patterns and lace curtains. As a child, Bechdel embraced traditionally male attitudes – such as wanting to wear sneakers to a wedding – to compensate for her father’s lack of manliness. Likewise, Bechdel was never that close to her father because he was very impatient, quick to punish, and always enlisted Bechdel and her siblings in house restoration work.

While fixing up the house was her father’s passion, Bechdel’s father worked as a high school English teacher full-time, as well as a mortician in the family funeral home whenever there was a death. Bechdel and her siblings spent a lot of time at the funeral home, which they dubbed the “Fun Home”, because they always enjoyed themselves there – a stark contrast to what the funeral home was intended for, and because they tended to have more fun there than at home. To the rest of the town, Bechdel’s father and family represented the ideal American family, but her father’s dark secret made that representation nothing more than a sham.

Bechdel later learned that her father was bisexual, but in his married life moved heavily toward the homosexual end. Just as Alison came out to her parents as a lesbian when she was 19, her mother and father revealed her father’s sexuality to her. Alison’s mother explained that her father was molested as a boy by an older man, and that her father went on to have numerous relationships and affairs with men and even boys. Among them were her father’s high school students and the family’s babysitter. These things were at first devastating to Bechdel, but she later came to sympathize with her father due to her own homosexuality.

Bechdel’s coming out four months before her father’s suicide allowed for a renewed relationship between them, established over their common sexuality and their love of books. Throughout the memoir, Bechdel makes frequent reference to, and takes direct quotes from, numerous literary works in order to contextualize and provide relevance for her own life and her father’s life. She considers that her father was like Gatsby, an invented persona hiding a deeper secret, and that her father was also like Icarus, who was burned and plummeted to the Earth from flying too close to the sun. For Bechdel’s father, his life nearly came undone when he had a set of affairs with two young brothers, one of which reported her father out of jealousy. The case was narrowly dismissed when Bechdel’s father agreed to see a psychiatrist, and when the brothers reversed their statements and refused to say anything at all about their relationship with Bechdel’s father.

Ultimately, Bechdel’s parents’ marriage frayed beyond repair. Her mother simply could not cope with her father’s lies anymore, so she considered leaving him. Bechdel later



came to believe that her mother asking for a divorce was the catalyst that led to her father's suicide, for two weeks later he walked out in front of a truck. In the present, Bechdel attempts to make sense of her father's death by comparing his life to her own through the course of her memoir. In the present, she also notes tragically that while her father was there to catch her in her plunge into homosexuality, no one was ever there to truly catch him.



Chapters 1 – 2

Summary

Chapter 1: Old Father, Old Artificer – Alison Bechdel compares her relationship with her father to Icarus, who, upon refusing to listen to his father's advice, flew too close to the sun and fell from the sky. Bechdel explains that in her case, it was her father who fell from the sky. She says that if her father was Icarus, he would also be Daedalus, father of Icarus, who first fashioned the wings Icarus used. Bechdel reveals she grew up in a big old house in Pennsylvania built with money from the 1867 lumber boom. Having fallen into disrepair by the time her father bought it, her father spent 18 years fixing it up. She says that her father, like Daedalus, was incredibly talented at doing such things.

Although Bechdel's father was an English teacher, his passion was restoration. He often made Bechdel and her siblings help out. Bechdel explains that her father was not a very personable man, was quick to punish, and did not always enjoy having a family. Bechdel, likewise, did not enjoy helping her father out. She felt as if he treated the furniture in the house like children, and his children like furniture. As a result, Bechdel explains she grew distant from her father and grew to hate elaborate décor, and that her father seemed “morally suspect” to her long before she knew he had a dark secret. She explains her father had a talent to make things appear as what they were not – such as being an ideal husband, father, and having an ideal family while he was having sex with teenage boys.

Bechdel explains her father was full of self-loathing, and that this was taken out on her and her family. She describes her father as a minotaur, never knowing around what corner the minotaur could be found, or what could set him off. She explains that as bad as the bad times were with her father, the good times were just as good. She also explains that she finds it difficult to be so hard on her father because he is dead and because the bar is set lower for fathers. She explains that her father didn't kill himself until she was almost 20, but that his loss still hurt her deeply.

Chapter 2: A Happy Death – Bechdel recalls that there is no proof that her father actually killed himself in 1980, but she can't believe otherwise. She believes it was due to her mother asking for a divorce two weeks before he died while he carried yard waste across the street, supposedly without seeing a truck coming on. She also reveals that her father had been reading Camus's first novel, “A Happy Death”, in which a line was highlighted about deceiving loved ones twice, first to their advantage, and then to their disadvantage. Bechdel describes this as a fitting epitaph for her parents' marriage. She explains her father's tombstone was an obelisk, a shape he was fixated on during life. She reveals her father had an obelisk collection, and that he never left the small town he grew up in despite how well-cultured he was. Bechdel cannot understand how her mother, educated in New York City, could stand to be in such a place, either.



Bechdel explains that, while her father was serving in the Army in Europe, her mother flew out to see him and marry him. Afterwards, they had children and were called home to help run the family funeral home, during which time Bechdel's father became a teacher and began work on the mansion. Bechdel recalls comparing her family to the Addams Family, from the big house to the family funeral business to Bechdel's own pale skin and dark hair. Bechdel and her siblings came to call the funeral home the "Fun House" due to all the fun they had there while their father and grandmother were working. They loved to hear the stories their grandmother had to tell, especially about their father as a child getting lost, getting stuck in the mud, and being found by the mailman.

Bechdel reveals she was five hours away at college when she learned of her father's death. Bechdel's girlfriend, Joan, drove home with her for the funeral. At home, Bechdel explains, she and her brother greeted each other with happy smiles over their father's death. Bechdel says that grinning is not necessarily an inappropriate response to death, which according to Camus, is absurd just as all life is absurd and meaningless. Suicide, Camus argued, is an illogical solution to the absurd. This is why Bechdel believes her father killed himself for reasons greater than existentialism. Bechdel wonders if working in such close proximity to death all the time caused her father to question why he should prolong the inevitable. The death of her father to Bechdel meant that he was stuck in the mud for good.

Analysis

"Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic" is a graphic memoir (told by illustrations as though a comic book) by Alison Bechdel which recounts her coming out as a lesbian, her father's repressed bisexuality, and the relationship between Bechdel and her father. The drawings used to tell the story are all shaded in hues of blue, reflecting the tragic aspect of the events being recalled. When the memoir begins, Bechdel makes the reader aware of several key facts in the first two chapters of the book as she weaves back and forth between different times in the past. The first is that she is a lesbian; the second is that her father was bisexual, with a strong move toward the homosexual in his married life; and the third is that she believes her father killed himself. These are critical things to be known as Bechdel unveils her story, because these so heavily determine her young life. Indeed, Bechdel makes the first of many literary allusions throughout the memoir (literary allusions will become a running motif).

Bechdel compares her father to both Icarus and Daedalus, destined for a dramatic fall. Herein, tragedies – both large and small – will become an important theme through Bechdel's memoir. This is largely in reference to her father's affairs with young men, and especially with older boys. The tragedy of Bechdel's coming out is that it occurs only a few months before her father commits suicide. The greater tragedy in this will be revealed at the end of the memoir. Additionally, there is the tragedy of appearances. Appearances themselves will become an important theme as Bechdel's memoir continues. Bechdel notes that, during his life her father was the master of appearances in outwardly seeming to the community that he was an upstanding father, husband, and



family man while he was secretly seducing boys. The reader should pay particular attention to the panel wherein Bechdel and her family are at illustrated at church, in which Bechdel reveals the hidden truth about her father - what is seen (the drawing) and what is true (what is written).

As a result, Bechdel's childhood home life is not typical of most Americans. The appearance of family replaces actually having a family full-time. Bechdel notes that there are good times, and says that while the good times are just as good as the bad times are bad, it is clear from her writing that the bad times overshadow the good in memory. As a result, Bechdel has not always felt close with her family – especially her father – and so she has grown distant and antagonistic toward them. As Bechdel later reflects through a literary allusion to Camus, her father's actions ultimately deceive her mother – and her family – twice about himself, and in the process, hurt them twice: once by making them think he is who he isn't, and once because they reach a point where they can no long avoid the consequences of the truth. As the reader will learn, Bechdel's mother is believed to be seeking a divorce at the time of Bechdel's father's death. The joy that Bechdel and her brother display at their father's death is clearly illustrated on pages 46 and 47, where they both wear merciless grins.

Alison makes a literary allusion by comparing herself to the Addams Family, both as a matter of physical similarities – pale skin and dark hair, essentially living part-time in a funeral home, spending so much time in cemeteries, and so on – and as a matter of irony, with the Addams Family being an inverted reflection of the traditional American family, and her own family being a warped version of the American family. It is only toward the end of her father's own life that Alison and her father finally reach common ground, but by then, it is too late.

Vocabulary

artificer, flouted, mythic, monomaniacal, restoration, demur, implication, legerdemain, alchemist, savant, libidinal, martyred, authenticity, curatorial, utilitarian, aesthete, impeccable, simulacrum, enumerating, suffusion, unabashedly, quibbles, aplomb, ironic, ambiance, mausoleum, repertoire, desiccated, studiously, dissonance, existentialism



Chapters 3 – 4

Summary

Chapter 3: That Old Catastrophe – Bechdel describes her father’s death as being queer in every sense of the word. She explains that four months before her father died, she came out as a lesbian to her parents. She realized she was a lesbian not from any personal encounter, but from learning about homosexuality academically. Bechdel’s coming out didn’t bother her father, but she received a mixed message of support and concern from her mother. Bechdel’s coming out also prompted a call from her mother in which her mother revealed that Bechdel’s father had been molested as a boy by a farmhand, after which her father had gone on to have affairs with men and boys, including Roy, the babysitter. Bechdel recalls feeling upstaged by this.

Bechdel recounts how her father had an obsession with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s life, and how Fitzgerald so closely put himself into his novels. Her father’s early letters to Bechdel’s mother, Bechdel reveals, were romantic and passionate – things which later vanished in their marriage. Bechdel likens her mother to Isabel Archer, a Henry James heroine, who gave up a life of promise for what seemed to be a better and more adventurous life, but in reality was not. Bechdel also reveals her mother and father first met in a college production of “Taming of the Shrew”. Bechdel considers that, like the Wallace Stevens poem, her father’s death was a catastrophe that had been unfolding for a long time.

Chapter 4: In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower – Bechdel recalls her father had an obsession with flowers and floral designs. Bechdel also recalls how, early on, her father did not fit the norms of masculinity. She also recounts how she and her father tried to compensate for what was lacking in the other – masculinity in him, femininity through her. For example, Bechdel shares a memory of being young and wanting to wear sneakers to a wedding while her father wanted her to wear a straw hat. Years later, rooting through her father’s old things, Bechdel found a photograph of 17-year-old Roy reclining on a hotel bed in his underwear during a family trip in which her mother did not come along. Bechdel says she was in awe of the picture, and wonders if she would have been properly outraged if the picture had been of a 17-year-old girl. She explains that she believes this is because she identifies with her father’s “illicit awe.”

Bechdel remembers not wanting to grow breasts, and how they hurt as they developed. Bechdel shares that she lived in Brooklyn after college and faced discrimination – such as being refused entry to a bar because she was a lesbian, and how she did not have the courage to approach other women. Bechdel recalls how her father took a new local kid, Bill, to help with yard work and to work as a babysitter. Bill was brought along on a camping trip to the Bullpen, the family’s deer camp in the forest of the Alleghany Plateau. Bill was very manly, which Bechdel found appealing.



Bechdel also recounts how so much of her father's life was a lie. Bechdel herself recalls lying for years, beginning at the age of four or five when she went with her father to Philadelphia on a business trip. There, in a luncheonette, she saw a delivery woman who dressed like a man. Her father asked Bechdel if she wanted to dress in such a way, to which Bechdel lied that she did not. Bechdel explains she later found more photos, including one of her father dressed in a bathing suit, and one of her father on the roof of his frat house with his wrists bent. She compares the photo to one taken by her own lover when she was in college, where Bechdel has bent wrists. She wonders if the photo of her father had been taken by his lover.

Analysis

Homosexuality continues to be an important theme in this section of the memoir. As Bechdel traces her childhood, she notes how her father continues shifting from bisexuality into total homosexuality. Bechdel also explains her own beginning to understanding her homosexuality; she discovers she is a lesbian through reading about it. Much of Bechdel's formative years, her lesbianism is something not entirely understood by her – but in reflection years after, everything makes sense to her.

Among these things, she now can see that her father's feminine penchants, such as enjoying floral patterns on everything in the house, as well as his desire to ensure Bechdel is dressed as femininely as possible, are symptomatic of his homosexuality. As a child, Bechdel believes her efforts to dress boyishly are to compensate for her father's lack of masculinity, but she later, as an adult, comes to understand this as a product of her own homosexuality. The reader should also note the child-Bechdel's fascination with a woman dressed as a man, and that adult-Bechdel tends to sympathize with her father rather than frowning upon his illicit activities, such as sleeping with underage boys. Scenes of disturbing interactions between Bruce and Roy, for example, can be found illustrated on 65 and 66, where Bruce gives Roy sherry and invites him along to pick up his son from cub scouts. The look on Bruce's face implies the ride is more than just about picking up his son.

Bechdel admits to the reader in the third chapter that her coming out as a lesbian is terrifying at first, but something she knows must happen. Interestingly, it is her mother who isn't exactly thrilled about Bechdel being a lesbian, but her father – with fathers being traditionally seen in literature as opposing whatever changes or revelations come to their children – is very accepting. This, of course, owes heavily to her father's own sexuality and her mother's decades-long frustrations with her husband's deception and lifestyle (more will be said on this by Bechdel in future chapters).

Literary allusions continue to be a dominant motif through Bechdel's exploration of her childhood and her father's sexuality and lifestyle. This is done especially through the writings of F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose character, Jay Gatsby, is a master of appearances. Bechdel compares Gatsby to her father primarily for this reason. Like Gatsby, her father pretends to be everything that he is not. Illustrations of both Bechdel's father and the Robert Redford version of Gatsby from the 1974 film



adaptation even show a similar appearance physically on page 64. Bechdel does not stop in drawing literary comparisons to her father. She also relates her mother to Henry James's Isabel Archer, who is expecting a good life of adventure, but gets the exact opposite instead. The appearance of Bechdel's father deceives Bechdel's mother.

Vocabulary

valent, inextricability, antagonism, luminous, convention, petrified, exhilarated, juxtaposition, redolent, efflorescence, lethargic, perennial, virtuosity, rapturous, prestidigitation, putrefaction, demiglace, mythologized, humectant, milieu, conflated, mortification, lexicographical, melancholy, abashed, vexingly, ambiguous, archetype



Chapter 5: The Canary-Colored Caravan of Death

Summary

Two nights before the death of her father, Bechdel recalls having dreamt of the two of them at the Bullpen, going up the mountain to see the sunset. But by the time her father arrived, the sunset had gone. Bechdel afterwards considered that the dream was a premonition of her father's death. Reflecting on the dream in the present, Bechdel wonders if her father's life might have turned out differently if he had lived somewhere else. She explains that the mountainous geography of the region in which they grew up, despite roads going around the mountains, kept the town isolated. Still, the area was beautiful, Bechdel remembers. She recalls how she dabbled in poetry and art as a child. She also remembers how her father bought her a "Wind in the Willows" coloring book in which he, rather than she, colored in Mr. Toad's gypsy caravan because she was making it blue instead of canary yellow.

Bechdel recalls being proud and amazed at all her mother's talents, from acting to singing to playing piano. However, Bechdel also remembers her mother devoting much time to these activities, sometimes at the expense of the family. Bechdel explains that, over time, every member of the family became artistic somehow, and withdrew into themselves. It was also in childhood that Bechdel explains she temporarily became obsessive-compulsive, from dressing and undressing in the right order to kissing each of her stuffed animals goodnight. It was during this time that her father encouraged her to begin keeping a journal. It was through describing and counting days in her journal, and through the use of a calendar that she abandoned all of her obsessive-compulsive activities.

Analysis

Bechdel reveals that she has a premonition of her father's death by way of a dream in which he is late to see the sunset, illustrated on page 123. Bechdel is illustrated racing up a winter mountain, with her father nowhere in sight until the very end after the sun has set. Both Bechdel and her father are then illustrated as being silhouettes against a darkened sky, illustrating the how "dark" their knowledge is of one another, and how "dark" their lives have been to one another. The dream has other important implications as well. While the disappearance of the light – with light often compared to life – means the end of the life of Bechdel's father, it also may be seen to signify other things as well, such as her father simply having been born too early and having arrived too late to open up about his homosexuality, or to change his life and to make things right with his family. Bechdel also wonders if the fact that her father was born out in rural, mountainous Pennsylvania, has anything to do with the way his life ultimately turns out. She realizes in reflection that, had her father not lived in Pennsylvania, she might not well exist. Yet,



she also considers that her small town, resistant to changes too quickly, does indeed have something to do with her father seeking to hide his homosexuality. These are all bits and pieces in the overall tragedy of her father's life.

Bechdel's own life is also best remembered by small tragedies – including how, as a child, her father seeks to force her to fit into the societal norms that he himself is suffocated by, and that Bechdel herself comes to be influenced by (recall Bechdel's conceptions of masculinity from earlier in the memoir, for example). The illustrated scene on page on pages 1310-131 where Bechdel's father tells her she is coloring in the canary-yellow caravan in the *Wind in the Willows* wrong is evidence of her father's desire to adhere to the rules. In the novel "*Wind in the Willows*", the caravan is yellow, so her father believes that in the coloring book the caravan must also be yellow. In everyday American society, females dress like females, and so therefore, Bechdel has to dress like a female. It seems that this, as well as her father's perfectionism in general, creates in Alison her temporary obsessive-compulsive disorder in childhood where she seeks reassurance from things done in exactly the same way each day. She superimposes her own expectations on herself as another layer of ordering life, beyond social convention and her father's laws. But this is a habit she slowly manages to break – the first of many steps on her way to coming out.

Vocabulary

premonitory, idolatrous, crepuscular, vigilance, noxious, proliferation, stopgap, solipsistic, epistemological, anonymity, elongated, deracination, belabored, gossamer



Chapter 6: The Ideal Husband

Summary

When Bechdel was 13, she remembers her father going to see a psychiatrist while her mother was away. She also remembers that time as being the summer of her first period, locusts, Watergate, and her mother acting in a local production of “The Importance of Being Earnest” by Oscar Wilde. Bechdel considers that summer the last of her innocent days, juxtaposed by Watergate. She remembers staying in town for a few days with her best friend, Beth Gryglewicz. Beth’s parents were both professors and very easygoing, Bechdel explains. It was during these few days that Bechdel’s father picked up a local boy, gave him beer, had sex with him, and was then reported by the boy’s older brother. Bechdel believes her father’s decision to see a psychiatrist was a preemptive choice encouraged by her father’s lawyer. It was also during this time that Bechdel began learning more about Oscar Wilde, including his trial for indecency based on his homosexual affairs.

Bechdel recounts learning to masturbate almost accidentally, by rocking on her chair at her desk while drawing until coming to orgasm. Bechdel never recorded this in her diary. She also remembers learning from her mother that the family might have to move as a result of her father’s indiscretion. At the time, the explanation only included the fact that he had purchased beer for a boy who wasn’t old enough to drink. In the present, Bechdel considers the exposing of Oscar Wilde’s homosexuality to be much like her father’s run-in with the law. It was during the time of her father’s troubles that a bad storm hit the area, taking down the family’s beautiful silver maple tree and narrowly missing the house. The brothers, both of whom were sexually involved with Bechdel’s father, refused to say anything in court beyond being that they were offered beer and refused it. The case was then dropped in exchange for six months of counseling on Bechdel’s father’s part. Two days later, Nixon resigned the presidency. Bechdel remembers how it was also during this summer that she began to become more interested in men’s fashion. It is also during the summer that large gaps of time went unrecorded in Bechdel’s diary.

Analysis

As Bechdel’s memoir continues, she recounts the summer she turns 14 as being the beginning of her father’s long fall as Icarus, and her own symbolic fall from innocence. It is during this summer – though Bechdel doesn’t actually learn all the details until much later in her life – that her father has gotten in trouble with the law over providing alcohol to a minor. As Bechdel comes to learn, her father has been having a sexual affair with two underage brothers, with one brother coming to report Bechdel’s father as a matter of jealousy. Only when both brothers refuse to speak openly in court about the truth of their relationship with Bechdel’s father, and only when Bechdel’s father consents to seeing a psychiatrist does he escape any serious legal punishment. Like their house in



the storm that symbolically narrowly misses being crushed by a tree, Bechdel's father narrowly misses going to jail in a storm of his own creation. Here again, Bechdel draws literary allusions to her father and Oscar Wilde, who was prosecuted (although for different underlying reasons) for his homosexuality, and Oscar Wilde's play "The Importance of Being Earnest" which seems to contain many references to homosexuality though homosexuality is never outwardly or explicitly revealed. A full page illustration is given to the tree narrowly missing the house on page 178, demonstrating just how significant the near-miss is with the storm and Bechdel's father's court case.

Bechdel's own life is not just a loss of innocence surrounding her opinion of her father, but her coming of age physically, mentally, and emotionally. Physically, Bechdel turns 14 and has her first period. Mentally and emotionally, she comes to realize that her father is not everything that she thought he once was; and mentally and emotionally, she realizes that there is real corruption and cruelty out in the world, such as in the case of the Watergate scandal. It is also during this time that Bechdel gains an interest in men's fashion, and begins to skip recording large periods of time in her journal. This is reflective, in some ways, of Bechdel's inability to truly be able to make sense of – or to want to record – the events occurring around her, especially with respect to her family. It also demonstrates her growing up, as keeping a journal has been something she did as a child. This is seen reflected on page 186 in the illustration of an empty diary page at a desk at which Bechdel is not sitting.

Vocabulary

abject, mien, synchronicity, implausible, juxtaposed, protracted, conjugal, veritable, sodomite, gluttony, qualifiers, encryption, nondescript, indecipherability, sanctimonious, facetious,



Chapter 7: The Antihero's Journey

Summary

In the summer of 1976, Bechdel remembers going to New York with her father for the Bicentennial when she was 15. It is during this visit that Bechdel recalls seeing cosmeticized masculinity, and examples of gayness everywhere. She recounts going to see the show "A Chorus Line", and considering all the possibilities of homosexuality. While wandering around alone, Bechdel's younger brother John was nearly picked up by a gay man. Only Christopher dashing back to the apartment where Bechdel and her family were staying saved him. Bechdel also remembers how her father went out each night to hit the gay scene. She wonders in the present if she would have lost him to AIDS years later if he hadn't committed suicide. Bechdel considers the narrative of her own life to be like that of her father's – one of sexual shame, injustice, and life considered expendable.

Bechdel then recalls being in her father's high school English class when she got older, and how she actually came to like the books he assigned. Books became a common ground for Bechdel and her father as a result. It was during college that she was exposed to the interpretations forced upon books by English professors. It was only with her father's help that Bechdel managed to handle college English. She ended up taking a class with Dr. Avery specifically about James Joyce and the book "Ulysses." Bechdel explains this coincided with when she truly understood she was a lesbian. In the present, she explains her coming to join the gay student union and her departure into the world of homosexuality was akin to Odysseus's great journey.

At home for break from college, Bechdel recalls how her mother was nearing the end of her rope with her father, talking about getting an apartment and being finished with her father's affairs, lies, shoplifting, speeding tickets, and so on. Bechdel and her father went to see the film "The Coal-Miner's Daughter." On the way to the movie, Bechdel's father explained his homosexual history beginning at the age of 14. After the movie, Bechdel reveals they tried to go to a gay bar but could not get in because Bechdel was only 19. Bechdel reveals leaving Kate Millet behind for her dad to read, which he loved. Bechdel goes on to say that sexual shame is a kind of death, that real paternity is more spiritual, and that her father was there to catch her when she leapt into her homosexuality.

Analysis

As Bechdel's memoir comes to end, she recounts her experiences in New York City in a time where homosexuality is becoming not only more openly practiced, but also accepted. Bechdel explains that during the 1976 visit, her father often goes out at night, clearly for homosexual encounters, something which did not happen so openly before. (The reader should note that a homosexual pedophile's blatant attempt in broad daylight



to pick up Bechdel's younger brother fails when her younger brother takes off running. This is illustrated in chilling detail on page 193, where an adult male begins attempting to get her brother to come and see his boat. She shudders to think what might have become of her brother.) Bechdel also shudders to think of what might have become of her father only a few years later when AIDS surfaced. Yet, it is during this time that Bechdel herself slowly, but steadily, comes of age as a lesbian. As a result, she does not face the opposition that homosexuality faced in her father's younger days. Her father himself notes this as well. This further explains why he is so accepting of Bechdel coming out as a lesbian.

As noted earlier, the tragedy of Bechdel's coming out is that it occurred only a few months before her father commits suicide. The greater tragedy in this is finally revealed at the end of the memoir. While her father is there to catch her during her jumping into homosexuality, no one is there to catch him or help him through his struggles. Ironically, it is only toward the end of her father's life that Bechdel comes to grow closer to her father, at long last finding common ground in the literature that they read and share, and in their shared homosexuality.

Yet, the reader should remember that despite the pressures Bechdel's father faced, he is still very much responsible for the terrors he put his own family through, including the lies and deceptions he commits against his own wife. Note that on page 197, Bechdel recalls that her earliest memories of her father are of him being a towering, imposing presence. The illustration of this suggests just as much, as Bechdel's father towers over the vantage point of the reader with a cruel look on his face. Yet, to Bechdel's father, appearances count for more than anything, even the truth of his life - both hidden and revealed. When her mother decides to leave, Bechdel's father won't have been able to account for the shattering of his carefully-constructed appearance without implicating himself. Likewise, to see how homosexuality has evolved since his own day, and realizing that so much of his own life has already passed him by, may also help to explain why Bechdel's father commits suicide – and why Bechdel seeks to make sense of his life by revealing her own.

Vocabulary

cosmeticized, uncharacteristically, orgiastic, epidemic, posthumously, malevolent, pall, preternaturally, contorted, withering, vicarious, episodic, abstracted, epiphany, aphrodisiac, reciprocal, catechism, descent, benign, trepidation, solemnity, libertine, derision, foray, predilection, mortified, renunciatory, fervently



Important People

Alison Bechdel

Alison Bechdel is both narrator, character, and writer of her own graphic memoir, "Fun House: A Family Tragicomedy." In the memoir, Bechdel ranges between a child and a 19-year-old woman, though she frequently writes asides in the present day and age in which she explains or reflects on past events. Bechdel's memoir is an account of her coming of age as a lesbian, her father's suppressed homosexuality, and the father-daughter relationship Bechdel has with her father during his lifetime, which is strained and cold for most of her life. When she is younger, Bechdel considers her father to be unmanly, but only later learns that this is because his femininity is reflective of his homosexuality.

Bechdel herself comes out when she is 19, having discovered through reading that she is a lesbian. She struggles with opposition to her homosexuality, but she manages to more confidently begin her journey as a lesbian with the compassion and encouragement of her father. Only too late in her relationship with her father does Bechdel truly begin to grow close to him as a result of their shared homosexuality and love of literature. Bechdel concludes that one of the greatest tragedies of her father's life is that there was really no one there to help him in his own homosexuality, while he was there to help her.

Bruce Bechdel

Bruce Allen Bechdel is the father of Alison, John, and Christian, and is the husband of Helen. Bruce is an Army veteran with a passion for house restoration and feminine things like lace curtains, but is seen as relatively cold and distant by Bechdel and her siblings. This is in large part due to Bruce's self-loathing and suppressed bisexuality.

Bruce models his home and family so that the rest of the world will consider his life ideal, while secretly, he has numerous sexual affairs with young men and boys. He is almost imprisoned for this at one point, but narrowly avoids jail. As Bruce ages, his bisexuality became full-fledged homosexuality. His lies and deceptions to cover this up distance his wife, who ultimately decides to leave him. At the age of 44, Bruce is killed when he is hit by a truck. Due to his life spiraling out of his control, Bechdel believes her father's death is actually a suicide.

John Bechdel

John Bechdel is the youngest brother of the author, and is the son of Bruce and Helen. John enjoys life with his brother and sister even though he fears his father. While in New York in 1976, John is very nearly picked up by a gay pedophile.



Christian Bechdel

Christian Bechdel is one of the author's brothers, and is the son of Bruce and Helen. Christian very much enjoys life with his brother and sister, even though he, like his siblings, fears his father. Christian seems to draw the wrath of his father like no others, begging his father not to hit him one night while accidentally dropping the Christmas tree he is trying to help his father set up.

Helen Bechdel

Helen Bechdel is the mother of Alison, John, and Christian, and is the wife of Bruce. Helen is an unwitting part of the elaborate ruse that Bruce has concocted to idealize his life and hide his sexuality, for early on, she is not aware of his tendencies. Helen marries Bruce out of the belief she will have an adventurous and exciting life with him, but the opposite ends up true. She fights hard to keep her marriage alive with Bruce, but ultimately, his lies, deceptions, and homosexuality cause her to realize she is not living the life she was promised. As a result, she decides to leave Bruce.

Roy

Roy is a 17-year-old local kid and babysitter for the Bechdels. Bruce comes to have a sexual affair with Roy, even going so far as bringing Roy along on a family vacation when Helen cannot attend. Years later, Bechdel finds a photo of Roy in his underwear, taken by her father, which she knows she should feel repulsed at but which she instead comes to sympathize with her father over.

Bill

Bill is a very masculine young man who becomes the babysitter of the Bechdels. The author and her father both find Bill's masculinity appealing but for different reasons - Bruce for sexual reasons, and Bechdel because masculinity is lacking in her father. Bill accompanies the family – except Helen, who has to stay behind – on a vacation to their hunting cabin during which time it is later surmised that Bruce and Bill carry on their sexual affair. Bill is only one of many young men and boys that Alison's father has sexual relations with.

Two underage brothers

Two underage brothers are seduced by Bechdel's father. When one of the brothers discovers the affair with the other brother, he reports Bruce to the police. This very nearly leads to Bechdel's father's downfall. When the court date rolls around, both brothers retract their stories and refuse to say anything beyond being given beer by Bechdel.



Joan

Joan is the first girl that Bechdel dates and gets into a relationship with. Joan is very kind and accompanies Bechdel home on visits. Joan also attends Bechdel's father's funeral with Bechdel, proving to be an important source of comfort and emotional support for Bechdel.

Grandma Bechdel

Grandma Bechdel is the grandmother of the author, John, and Christian, the mother of Bruce, and the mother-in-law of Helen. Until her husband dies, Grandma is one of the owners and operators of the family funeral home. When her husband dies, Bruce takes over day-to-day operations and embalming. Grandma often babysits her grandchildren, and has Bechdel and her siblings over for the night during which time she tells funny stories about Bruce as a youngster.



Objects/Places

Obelisks

Obelisks are pointed, tower-like architectural features of ancient Egypt that represent life. Bruce has a collection of obelisks in the memoir, and is later buried beneath an obelisk-shaped tombstone. As Bechdel explains, she does not realize until later that her father's obsession with obelisks has to do with their shape, resembling an erect human penis.

Sunbeam Bread Truck

A Sunbeam Bread truck hits and kills Bechdel's father when he is 44. The driver of the truck is stunned by the accident, saying that Bechdel's father jumped out in front of the truck. Bechdel now believes that her father did jump out in front of the Sunbeam truck deliberately in order to commit suicide but to make it appear as though it was an accident.

Coming out letter

Bechdel composes a coming out letter to her parents, in which she reveals herself as a lesbian. It is a courageous thing to do on Bechdel's part. She mails the letter, and a few days later receives a response from her mother that is not exactly accepting, but definitely not hateful either. Bechdel's letter caused her mother to reveal that her husband, Bechdel's father, is also gay, and causes Bechdel's father to call up to offer Bechdel his support and encouragement.

Sunset dream

Bechdel has a dream about a sunset in which she urges her father to race up the mountain with her to see the sight. Her father, however, arrives too late to see the sunset. Bechdel comes to believe this dream is a premonition of her father's death. While the disappearance of the light – with light often compared to life – means the end of the life of Bechdel's father, it also may be seen to signify other things, including that her father had simply been born too early and arrived too late to the times open up about his homosexuality, or to change his life and to make things right with his family.

"Wind in the Willows" coloring book

A "Wind in the Willows" coloring book is given to Bechdel by her father. Bechdel considers that the layout of her town is similar to the layout of the town in the book. The "Wind in the Willows" coloring book is also notable for her father's annoyance with



Bechdel for wanting to color the canary-yellow caravan blue instead of yellow. This demonstrates a moment of irony in that someone who knows how difficult it is to live by the norms of society should enforce such strict guidelines on his own daughter.

Photograph of Roy

A photograph of Roy at 17, and in only his underwear, is taken by Bruce while on vacation in 1969. Bechdel discovers the photos among her father's possessions years later after he died. Bechdel admits in the present that she knows she should be outraged at the photo, but that she is not. She wonders if she would feel differently if Roy had been a girl, yet can't help but feel anything other than sympathy for her father because she, too, knows the struggle of being homosexual.

Photographs of Bruce

Photographs of Bruce as a younger man are discovered by Bechdel after his death. One photograph is of Bruce in a girl's bathing suit and cap; and the other was a photograph of Bruce sunbathing on his fraternity's roof in college, where Bruce's wrists hang down. Both photos provide evidence attesting to Bruce's homosexuality, and cause Bechdel to sympathize with her father.

Silver Maple

A massive, silver maple tree grows outside of Bechdel's house in Beech Creek, Pennsylvania. Just before the bad storm hits, Bechdel notes that the leaves on the tree appear inside-out thanks to the strange weather conditions. This deviation from the norm gives Bechdel an uneasy feeling because it feels as if something else is wrong. That something soon proved to be Bechdel's father's court case. The maple tree is toppled during the storm, nearly missing the house. The tree comes to represent legal justice, while the house comes to symbolize Bechdel's father. The house's escape from the tree therefore symbolized Bechdel's father's narrow escape from the law.

Bad storm

A bad storm hits Beech Creek, Pennsylvania, nearly causing a maple tree to smash through Bechdel's house. The bad storm is heavily symbolic of the legal troubles that Bechdel's father creates for himself and his family by engaging in illegal sexual relationships with two underage brothers. The storm barely misses causing major damage to Bechdel's family's house, just as her father narrowly avoided his legal troubles.



Books

Books are read constantly by Bechdel's father throughout the memoir, and later by Bechdel. The mutual love of books that Bechdel and her father shared becomes a common ground on which they grow closer to one another. Bechdel's love of books ultimately comes to influence her narration, both in the high vocabulary that she uses and in her frequent literary allusions that she makes.

Beech Creek

Beech Creek is a small, rural town tucked into the Alleghany Mountain range of Pennsylvania. Beech Creek is where Bechdel and her family make their home in a large, old house only a few houses down from where her father grew up. Beech Creek is home to Bechdel's father's entire family, and is where they all live and work.

Despite the roads that connect it to the outside world, Beech Creek remains isolated and self-reliant. As a result, pressure on Bechdel's father to keep his bisexuality, and later ardent homosexuality, a secret, is immense. This resulted in Bechdel's father concocting the image of an ideal family to hide his deep secret. Bechdel often wonders what her father's life might have been like had he not been born and raised in Beech Creek. She comes to consider that she might not be alive as a result.

New York City

Bechdel and her family vacation in New York City a number of times over the years. The most notable visit is for the American Bicentennial in 1976, during which time Bechdel witnesses the emergence of the gay scene, with homosexuals appearing in public more freely and openly. Bechdel also knows that the movement has extremes, such as the gay New York pedophile who tries to pick up her little brother, John.

It is while the family is in New York that Bechdel's father goes out for numerous homosexual liaisons, which later cause her to be thankful that her father is not alive when AIDS breaks out.

Philadelphia

Philadelphia is a city to which Bechdel's father sometimes goes away to on business. On some of these trips, he brings Bechdel with him. On one such visit, while in a diner, Bechdel sees a delivery woman dressed just like a man. This intrigues her, inspiring her to want to dress similarly, but due to her father's disapproval, she does not do so for many years to come.



The Sea

Bechdel's family goes on vacation at the sea several times throughout her childhood. On one such trip, her mother cannot go along, so Roy goes in her stead. Bechdel's father and Roy stay in one hotel room, while all the kids stay in another. It is during this time that Bechdel's father and Roy engage in sex, and it is during this time that Bechdel's father takes a photograph of the nearly-nude Roy reclining on the hotel bed.

The Bullpen

The Bullpen is the Bechdel family's hunting cabin up in the forest of the Alleghany. It is where Bechdel and her family often vacation when she is younger. On one such vacation at the Bullpen, Bechdel's new babysitter, Bill, accompanies the family on the trip where he engages in sex with Bechdel's father.



Themes

Appearances

In Alison Bechdel's memoir "Fun House: A Tragicomic", appearances are used by Bechdel's father, Bruce, in relation to his bisexuality, and later his homosexuality. Appearances are essentially false fronts or concocted images designed to hide the truth of things.

Bechdel compares her father to Jay Gatsby from F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel "The Great Gatsby". Gatsby is a character who gives the appearance of being a wealthy, honest man, but in reality has illegally gained all of his money. Bechdel's father, Bruce, loves Gatsby for Gatsby's ability to construct an image around the truth of his life, based on what he wants his life to be, rather than what it really is. For Bruce, however, it is a question of deliberately hiding who he really is - or, putting on a false appearance.

Bechdel explains early on that her father is obsessed with appearances to this end. A bisexual who later becomes almost exclusively homosexual, Bruce uses his family and his daily life to hide his sexual liaisons with young men and underage boys. Bruce presents himself to the community as a model husband, father, and provider, always ensuring his family and his house are in good order. It is an image that everyone in town buys into.

In reality, apart from Bruce's homosexuality, his self-loathing and anger is taken out on the family away from the public eye. Bruce is quick to punish, hit, yell, scream, and berate his children for doing even the smallest things wrong. For example, he is prepared to hit Christian for accidentally dropping the Christmas tree. Bechdel explains that when her mother finally makes the decision to leave her father, the appearance of a normal family life will no longer be sustained, which is what Bechdel later believes is a major contributing factor to her father's decision to commit suicide.

Homosexuality

The author's own homosexuality, as well as her father's homosexuality, and how each individual deals with it is a major focus in the memoir "Fun House: A Tragicomic". In the memoir, Bechdel comes out as a lesbian while her father, Bruce, does his best to hide his being gay. As a result, her father has a far more difficult time with his homosexuality than does Bechdel.

In her childhood Bechdel can tell something is off about her father who enjoys floral patterns on furniture and lace curtains, though she does not understand until much later his effeminate ways are reflective of his homosexuality. As she comes to discover, her father is bisexual, ultimately becoming homosexual by the end of his life. Evidence of Bruce's homosexuality became evident as a child, after he was sexually abused by a local farmhand. Bruce grew up alternately indulging and fighting his homosexuality,



hoping to hide it by marrying Helen. However, his homosexuality doesn't stay hidden for long, and becomes a major source of friction and distance between him and his wife, and a major source of anger which he takes out on his family. It is why he constructs the ideal image of a family so that he might better fit in with the local socio-cultural norms of the area in which they live.

Bechdel herself recognizes that she had always been a lesbian. As a child, she wonders why her father is not more masculine, and she gravitates toward more masculine clothing and activities. Bechdel comes to recognize that she is a lesbian when she is 19 and learns about homosexuality in books. Bechdel's first lesbian experience comes soon after, when she joins the gay student union at her school, reads gay books, and begins dating Joan. Though Bechdel faces bigotry as a result of her homosexuality, she has a much easier time of things than her father. When Bechdel comes out as gay, it is her father, rather than her mother, who proves to be the more understanding. Despite this, however, Bruce ends up wrecking his ideal marriage with his lies, deception, and cruelty.

Bechdel considers that her father's life may have turned out differently had he been born and raised elsewhere. Yet Bechdel also considers the fact that, had this been so, she might not have been born. She also comes to feel badly for her father, for the time in which he is born, raised, and spends his adult life, is not as open to homosexuality as today's society. Yet, Bechdel is glad in a sense that her father – who clearly becomes more daring in his homosexuality over time – is not around during the time of the AIDS outbreak.

Bechdel also laments that, although her father is there to catch her when she jumps into her homosexuality, no one is there to catch him.

Family

Family proves to be tremendously influential in the memoir "Fun House: A Tragicomic" by Alison Bechdel, but not because of what a family is supposed to be, but what it is not.

Bechdel describes her family as essentially a sham concocted to shelter and hide her father's homosexuality. Although Bechdel explains that her family's good times are as good as her family's bad times are bad, she reflects much more negatively about her family life than she does positively about her family life. Her most distinct memories as a child are feeling second-place to her father's obsession with fixing up their house, and of being forced to participate in the house's restoration. She remembers her father being one who is quick to yell, hit, and punish, and is never very emotional beyond anger. She compares him to a minotaur who can be set off by the slightest turn of events.

Bechdel also notes that her father's lies and deceptions about his homosexuality ultimately come to ruin the marriage between him and his wife. Bechdel reveals that her father's behavior also very nearly breaks apart the family both physically and



emotionally, from her father's sexual affairs with underage boys which almost land him in jail, to his callousness and distance. Bechdel rarely ever feels loved by her father throughout his life, and feels more abandoned by him than anything else.

Only later in life does Bechdel finally come to have a spiritual father-daughter connection and relationship with her father through their shared love of books and homosexuality. When she is in high school, Bechdel has to take her father's English class. There, their common love of literature is established, and books become their common ground. This continues through college, where the bond grows stronger after Bechdel comes out as a lesbian.

While her father's later death is shocking and leads to some genuine sadness, Bechdel on the whole is not terribly bothered by her father's death, even grinning and laughing about it with her brother. This is demonstrative of the fact that she never really had a close, emotional bond with her father.

Literary Allusions

Author Alison Bechdel is well-read like her father, so she draws numerous literary comparisons and references throughout her memoir, "Fun House: A Tragicomic", to demonstrate both relevance and better context. A literary allusion is a comparison or reference in one book to another in some way, shape, or form.

Bechdel begins by describing her father as being a combination of Icarus, who flies too high, and Daedalus, who builds Icarus's wings. Like Icarus who flies too close to the sun and then plummets to Earth, her father ventures into too far a territory through his homosexuality that finally wrecks his marriage and ultimately results in his committing suicide. In order to hide his bisexuality (and later his flagrant homosexuality), Bechdel's father constructs the façade of a perfect family and perfect home. His reliance on appearances to mask the truth is to be compared to Jay Gatsby, Bechdel explains, because Gatsby does much the same thing.

Bechdel also describes her father as being like the ancient mythological Greek minotaur, who might be encountered around any corner. Her father, as brutal as a minotaur, can be provoked for even the slightest reason. Bechdel later compares her father to Oscar Wilde. While Wilde faces legal issues for his homosexuality, Bechdel's father faces legal issues for having sex with underage boys.

Bechdel also makes literary allusions to herself and her mother. She sees in her mother the Henry James character of Isabel Archer who embarks upon marriage because she believes the marriage will be lively and adventurous, and because she does not know the truth about the man whom she is marrying. The same is true of Bechdel's mother. Bechdel compares herself and her journey into lesbianism as mirroring the journey of Odysseus, but rather than leaving a cave to find truth, Bechdel enters a cave (the vagina of her girlfriend, Joan) to find such truth.



Tragedy

In the memoir “Fun House: A Tragicomic” by Alison Bechdel, it is primarily Bechdel’s father who is a tragic figure. In literature, tragedy occurs when there is a sad, traumatic, or terrible event or situation – most usually the downfall of an individual based on personal flaws, an all-powerful force, or a particular situation, such as societal pressure.

Bechdel’s father is a homosexual in an age when homosexuality is largely in disfavor. In many cases, homosexuals are blatantly discriminated against. As a result, her father feels he has to hide his sexuality with the pretense of a perfect family and a perfect home. Yet, Bechdel’s father does not attempt to focus on the heterosexual aspect of his bisexuality, but ultimately comes to indulge the homosexual aspect of his sexuality. Given the traditional, rural area in which he lives, and given the traditional social values of the time, combined with the fact that Bechdel’s father routinely seeks out sexual relationships with underage boys, it is only a matter of time before his homosexual practices nearly land him jail and lead to the breakup of his marriage.

Bechdel considers in the present that it is tragic that her father wasn’t born elsewhere, though that may have meant she herself would never have been born. Bechdel also considers it tragic that her father came of age in a time when homosexuality was not more widely accepted, and that by the time it is, he has already wrecked his life through his illicit relationships and behavior. Bechdel’s dream of her father missing the sunset can be seen as reflective of his coming onto the gay scene too late to have really been able to live freely as a homosexual. Yet, in a strange way, this also helped save her father from the AIDS crisis that later unfolds.

Bechdel’s own life, as well as that of her family members, can also be considered tragic. They are forced to grow up in the appearance of a life concocted by her father wholly suited to his own ends. Her mother is lured into the marriage expected something entirely other than what she gets, while Bechdel and her brothers never truly feel they have a home or family the way their friends and other relatives do. In a sense, they are tragically cheated out of these things by their controlling, domineering father who is interested more in appearances than in his children.

Styles

Structure

Alison Bechdel tells her memoir “Fun Home: A Tragicomic” in the first-person reflective narrative. Bechdel wrote the book in 2006, decades after the events of the memoir took place. Considering that the memoir is an autobiographical book, it is only natural that Bechdel should address the events of her own life in her own voice in the first-person. The fact that the memoir is told years after the events is indicative of the reflective tone of the narration. Indeed, Bechdel often steps into unfolding events to provide context based on information she learned much later, such as her father’s illicit sexual relationships with underage boys.

Perspective

Bechdel tells her memoir “Fun Home: A Tragicomic” in language that is dense and highly educated. Bechdel loves literature, so it is only natural that her intelligence, strong vocabulary, and literary references appear in her writing. This is especially true given the fact that the book is autobiographical. In writing about herself and her life, Bechdel ensures that the spoken words of her younger self match her level of education at the time, while the language she employs in the overall narration is reflective of her current age and level of education.

Tone

Bechdel tells her memoir “Fun Home: A Tragicomic” in the graphic style using written words, cartoon-style pictures, and speech balloons. The memoir is organized into seven numbered chapters (from one to seven). Each chapter is given a title relating to an important event or situation that occurs within that chapter. For example, Chapter Two is entitled “A Happy Death”, and deals with her father’s suicide. Within the chapters, there is no real organized form for how Bechdel tells her memoir. She leaps back and forth through time between her childhood, teenage years, and young adult years, all the while reflectively speaking about these events and drawing context from things she learned years later, such as about her father’s homosexuality.



Quotes

In our particular reenactment of this relationship, it was not me, but my father who was to plummet from the sky.

-- Alison Bechdel (Chapter 1 paragraph n/a)

Importance: Bechdel compares her relationship with her father to Icarus, who upon refusing to listen to his father's advice, flies too close to the sun and falls from the sky. Bechdel explains that in her case, it is her father who falls from the sky. In comparing her father to Icarus, Bechdel sets the stage for her memoir in which her father will fall from the sky. But the sky from which her father falls will not be literal, but figurative.

I grew to resent the way my father treated his furniture like children, and his children like furniture.

-- Alison Bechdel (Chapter 1 paragraph n/a)

Importance: As Bechdel grows up, and as her father continues to work on their Pennsylvania house, he always has his kids help him out. Bechdel comes to feel as if her father is more interested in the house than in his children. She explains that she also feels as if her father was more interested in furniture, and caring for furniture than his own children. This leaves a deep impression on Bechdel.

He used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear what they were not.

-- Alison Bechdel (Chapter 1 paragraph n/a)

Importance: Alison reveals that her father's greatest talent is to make things appear to be what they were not. For example, she considers that her childhood home is not really a home, but a museum. She also explains that her father has a very dark secret hidden by the guise of a perfect, happy, ideal family.

He appeared to be an ideal husband and father, for example. But would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?

-- Alison Bechdel (Chapter 1 paragraph n/a)

Importance: Nearly as quickly as Bechdel explains her father is morally suspect and hides a dark secret, Bechdel reveals what that dark secret is. She explains that her father has sex with teenage boys. This dark secret is what the elaborate home and ideal family is constructed around to hide.

My father had highlighted one line. 'He discovered the cruel paradox by which we always deceive ourselves twice about the people we love – first to their advantage, then to their disadvantage. A fitting epitaph for my parents' marriage.

-- Alison Bechdel (Chapter 2 paragraph n/a)

Importance: Prior to her father's suicide, Bechdel reveals that it is probable her mother



asked for a divorce. Bechdel reveals that her father had been reading Camus's first novel, "A Happy Death", before his own death. A single line had been highlighted with dealt with deception. In their marriage, her father deceives her mother about who he really is, allowing her to think he is her dream come true, but this deception later proves to be the undoing of their marriage and his life, and the ruining of her dreams.

My father's death was a queer business – queer in every sense of that multi-valent word.

-- Alison Bechdel (Chapter 3 paragraph n/a)

Importance: Following the death of her father, Bechdel remembers the situation as being queer in every sense of the word. She explains it is a deviation from normalcy, because her father had been alive and then died. She also explains it is a matter of homosexuality as well, for only four months before her father's death, she comes out to her parents as a lesbian and then receives a letter from her mother revealing that Bechdel's father had been molested as a boy by a farmhand, and that her father has gone on to have affairs with men.

While I was trying to compensate for something unmanly in him... he was attempting to express something feminine through me.

-- Alison Bechdel (Chapter 4 paragraph n/a)

Importance: As Bechdel grows up, she realizes that she and her father are opposites and use one another as compensation in different ways. Bechdel wishes her father would be more manly, which to some extent leads her to dressing and behaving boyishly. Meanwhile, her father, who cannot express his femininity through himself, expresses his femininity through Bechdel –evidence in each of their homosexuality.

And in a way, you could say that my father's end was me beginning. Or more precisely, that the end of his lie coincided with the beginning of my truth.

-- Alison Bechdel (Chapter 4 paragraph n/a)

Importance: As Bechdel grows and struggles to embrace her homosexuality, her father spends his life struggling to hide his. Just as Bechdel begins to come into her own homosexuality, her father cannot cope with his life any longer, and commits suicide. This, in turn, helps Bechdel to continue to embrace her homosexuality, and to not hide anything in her life.

Interestingly, my period entry continues with a rare mention of the political crisis, which had just reached a similar stage of undeniability.

-- Alison Bechdel (Chapter 6 paragraph n/a)

Importance: The summer that Bechdel turns 14, her life changes in unexpected ways. She relates the summer of being 13 to the end of her childhood innocence, much the way the country loses its innocence due to Watergate. Bechdel has her first period, learns to masturbate, and learns that her father is to appear in court for buying beer for an underage boy – which Alison later learns has to do with sex.



But there was something unusual about the way the stiff breeze inverted the leaves of the silver maples outside my bedroom.

-- Alison Bechdel (Chapter 6 paragraph n/a)

Importance: Bechdel explains how a bad storm hits her town and her house the summer she turns 14. The storm is symbolic of figurative storm hitting her family courtesy of her father's homosexual liaisons with boys (though she doesn't know this at the time), and Bechdel's own pubescent storm hitting her body, slowly transforming her from a girl to a woman. All of life seems upset by these occurrences, leading everything to seem inverted, like the maple tree leaves before the storm. As Bechdel explains, the storm is representative of narrowly missing danger, like the house narrowly missing danger in the storm and how growing up is not as horrible as Bechdel imagined.

Maybe I'm trying to render my senseless personal loss meaningful by linking it, however posthumously, to a more coherent narrative. A narrative of injustice, of sexual shame and fear, of life considered expendable. It's tempting to say that, in fact, this is my father's story.

-- Alison Bechdel (Chapter 7 paragraph n/a)

Importance: Bechdel juxtaposes her own journey of coming out as a lesbian with her father's repressed bisexuality, and the circumstances that required her father to keep his sexuality to himself. Although Bechdel's graphic memoir is intended to be about herself, in many ways, it has become a biographical account of her father's life as well, for he could not write his own story. Bechdel considers that this might be because she is trying to make her father's death seem more meaningful than it truly is to her, which would be made possible by using it in juxtaposition to her own life. Bechdel gives no definitive answer, leaving readers to decide on their own.

Sexual shame is in itself a kind of death.

-- Alison Blechdel (Chapter 7 paragraph n/a)

Importance: Bechdel explains here that being ashamed of oneself, including sexually, is a kind of death. As such, her father experienced two deaths. The most obvious is the literal death when he is hit by a truck. The figurative death he faces is by denying his true self. Not being able to be the person that he truly is undoubtedly helps lead to his suicide.



Topics for Discussion

1

Bechdel explains that her father harbors a dark secret. What is this secret? How does this affect Bechdel's family and family life for Bechdel in general?

2

In what ways does Bechdel consider her family to be like the Addams family? Why does she make this comparison at all? What other literary allusion does she make in her memoir? What does Bechdel's use of literary allusions say about her?

3

Why does Bechdel believe the line from Camus's "A Happy Death", about twice deceiving those one loves, to be fitting regarding the marriage of her parents? Could this line also be fitting with regards to Bechdel's family in general, and Bechdel's father in particular? Explain.

4

How does Bechdel compare her father to Gatsby? How does Bechdel compare her mother to Isabel Archer? What does this mean for Bechdel's parents in their marriage?

5

Bechdel explains that she feels upstaged by learning her father is gay just after she herself comes out. Why? Do you believe this is fair for Bechdel to feel? Why or why not?

6

While readers should be concerned about Bechdel's father's sexual affairs with underage boys, Bechdel does not feel such concern. Why is this so? Do you believe she is justified in feeling this way? Why or why not?

7

Why does Bechdel believe her dream of her father missing the sunset is a premonition of his death? What might this say about her father's life in general, as well as his death?



8

How does Bechdel consider that her father's life may have been different if he had grown up in a different place? Does she ultimately come to wish that he had? Why or why not?

9

As a child, Bechdel goes through an obsessive compulsive phase. Why does this seem to be so? How does this ultimately affect her later childhood, and her life as a young adult?

10

In what ways does Bechdel compare her father to Oscar Wilde in this section of her memoir? Do you believe this is a fair comparison? Why or why not?

11

Why does Bechdel seem to abandon her journal-keeping? What does this have to say, specifically, about the things going on in her life?

12

What so you believe Bechdel seems to suggest is the greatest tragedy of her father's life? Why?

13

Why does Bechdel try to make sense of her father's death in relation to her own life? What does she hope to accomplish?

14

Do you believe Bechdel's father committed suicide? Why or why not? If you believe he committed suicide, why do you believe he did? If you believe he did not commit suicide, what likely seems to explain his death? Why?



15

In what ways does Bechdel reveal the summer she turns 14 to be the beginning of the end of her innocence and her childhood? Why does she consider this summer to be so important?