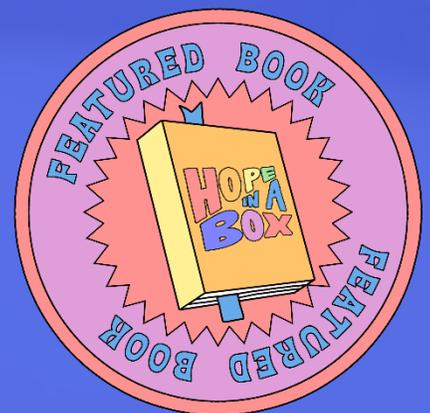




# Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic

*By Alison Bechdel*

A Hope in a Box curriculum guide





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## Acknowledgements

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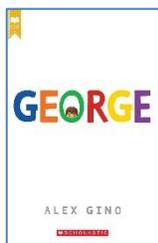
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### George

Alex Gino, grade 5-7

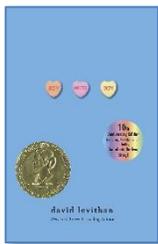
*"Deeply moving in its simplicity and joy... Warm, funny, and inspiring."*  
– Kirkus



### The Picture of Dorian Gray

Oscar Wilde, grade 10-12

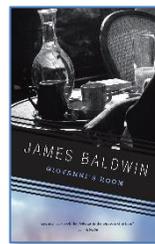
*"Brilliantly allusive moral tale of youth, beauty and corruption... wonderfully entertaining."* – The Guardian



### Boy Meets Boy

David Levithan, grade 6-9

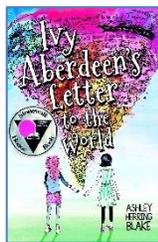
*"Those who enter Levithan's sweet new world will find a refreshing, offbeat romance"* – Publishers Weekly



### Giovanni's Room

James Baldwin, grade 11-12

*"One of the 100 most influential novels of the past 300 years."*  
– The BBC



### Ivy Aberdeen's Letter to the World

Ashley Herring Blake, grade 6-9

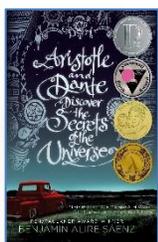
*"Captures the exhilaration of a first crush without shying away from Ivy's confusion and her worries about acceptance."* – NY Times



### Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic

Alison Bechdel, grade 11-12

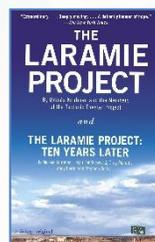
*"The most ingeniously compact, hyper-verbose example of autobiography to have been produced."* – NY Times



### Aristotle & Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe

Benjamin Alire Sáenz, grade 7-10

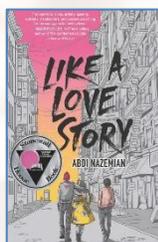
*"This book, in my eyes, was utter perfection."* – The Guardian



### The Laramie Project

Moisés Kaufman, grade 11-12

*"Promises to move the reader with its authentic portrayal of a small town facing a terrifying event."* – Publishers Weekly



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Abdi Nazemian, grade 10-12

*"At the height of the 1980s AIDS crisis, three teens grapple with love and friendship... Deeply moving."*  
– Kirkus



### Red at the Bone

Jacqueline Woodson, grade 11-12

*"In Woodson, at the height of her powers, readers hear the blues: 'beneath that joy, such a sadness.'"*  
– Kirkus

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Photo: Ian Thomas Jansen-Lonnquist for the Boston Globe, 2018

## Before Reading

### About the author: Alison Bechdel

Alison Bechdel is an acclaimed author and cartoonist most known for her long-running comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which explored queer female life and relationships over the span of three decades, from 1983 to 2008. *Fun Home*—her first novel—was a critically acclaimed best-seller that was adapted to the stage as a Tony Award-winning musical of the same name. She is also the author of a second graphic memoir *Are You My Mother?* (2012) and the recipient of a 2014 MacArthur “Genius” Award. She is also known as the originator of the “Bechdel test,” a measure of the representation of women in fiction.

## Synopsis

Cartoonist Alison Bechdel reflects on her childhood in rural Pennsylvania and her fraught relationship with her late father Bruce. Only after coming out of the closet in college did Alison learn that her own father might be gay, too. Soon after this revelation, Bruce dies, leaving many aspects of their relationship and possible connection unexplored. In this graphic memoir, Bechdel charts her relationship with her father across many years, weaving speculation with precisely recreated memories of her childhood growing up alongside her complicated, distant, and mysterious father Bruce.

## Themes

Parent-child relationships; coming-of-age; sexual identity and coming out; art and literature; death, loss, mourning; the past and its connection to the present; rural life; authenticity

## Critical Reception/Historical Importance

*Fun Home* was a critical and popular success, winning a number of awards and accolades. In 2009, the graphic memoir was adapted for the stage and was eventually produced on Broadway in 2015 for which it received twelve Tony Award nominations, winning five including Best Musical. *Fun Home* has also been the target of censorship in some schools and libraries for its depiction of sex. In January 2020, it was revealed that *Fun Home* would be made into a film starring Jake Gyllenhaal as Alison Bechdel's father, Bruce.

## Note to educators

Throughout this guide, Alison Bechdel the narrator is referred to as "Bechdel," while Alison Bechdel the character is referred to as "Alison."

# Chapter 1 (pp. 1-23)

## Discussion Questions

Use these questions to prompt students to consider, analyze, and discuss the text.

1. Look closely at the title image for Chapter 1— a re-creation of a photograph of Bruce.
  - What details stand out to you about this image?
  - Why do you think Bechdel may have chosen this to be the first image we see?
  - What does this image tell us about how Bechdel sees her father?
  - What mood is conveyed via this photograph? What specific details suggest that?
2. On page 7, Bechdel describes her father’s hobby of restoring their home as his “passion” and clarifies that she means “passion in every sense of the word. Libidinal. Manic. Martyred.”
  - What do these first few pages tell us about how Bechdel feels about her father? About his “passion”?
  - Examine the image accompanying this text on p. 7. What allusion is being made, and why do you think Bechdel makes this allusion? What is its significance? What does it convey about Bruce?<sup>1</sup>
3. On page 13, Bechdel considers her father’s relationship to his family, admitting that, “Sometimes, when things were going well, I think my father actually enjoyed having a family. Or at least, the air of authenticity we lent to his exhibit. A sort of still life with children.”
  - What do you think Bechdel means by this?
  - How would you characterize Alison’s feelings about her father? Why do you think she feels this way?
  - What does Bruce’s careful attention to the appearance of the house tell us about his feelings for his family?
4. Throughout this chapter, Bechdel alludes to a number of figures from Greek mythology— most prominently Daedalus and his son Icarus—to try and understand her father and their relationship. However, these allusions aren’t always perfect: on page 4, Bechdel explains that, “In our reenactment of this mythic relationship [between Daedalus and Icarus], it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky.”
  - What do these allusions to Daedalus and Icarus reveal about Alison, Bruce, and their relationship? About Bechdel’s understanding of that relationship?
  - According to Bechdel, how does her relationship with Bruce fail to adhere cleanly to the relationship between Daedalus and Icarus?
  - What does this failure tell us about Bechdel’s attempt to understand her father?

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<sup>1</sup> Note to educators: The allusion is to the crucifixion of Christ. If students have trouble identifying the allusion, you can proactively reveal it or provide a hint by telling students to think about the word “martyred.”

5. On page 16, Bechdel claims that she “developed a contempt for useless ornament” growing up, explaining that such ornamentations “were embellishments in the worst sense. They were lies.”
  - Bechdel uses two meanings of the word “embellishment.” What is she trying to say? Why might she feel that way?
  - How does Alison define herself in relation to her father as she grows up? Why do you think this is?
  - In what way is Bechdel’s professed rejection of ornamentation ironic considering the detail of her drawings in this memoir?
  
6. In this chapter, Bechdel reveals dramatic facts about her father. For example, she asks, “But would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?” (17). She also remarks, “Was he a good father?...It’s true that he didn’t kill himself until I was nearly twenty” (23).
  - Is there anything unusual about how Bechdel reveals these plot elements? Cite evidence from the text, considering sentence structure, tone, and chronology.
  - Why is this approach unusual? What impact does it have on you as a reader?

CCSS. RL. 11-12.1, 11-12.3, 11-12.4, 11-12.6

## Writing Prompts

*Use these prompts to allow students to think critically and creatively about the text.*

### 1. Draw from Memory

Draw a picture of a room from a place you lived as a child from memory. Make sure to include as many details as possible. Then, write a few paragraphs reflecting on what you drew, with a focus on which details you remembered clearly and which you didn’t. What do these details tell you about the significance of that space? How or why do you think certain objects or places take on significance in our memories?

### 2. Visual Rhetoric

Closely observe and analyze a self-portrait by a famous artist (for example, Van Gogh, Kahlo, Cezanne), writing about what you notice and which details stand out to you as particularly interesting, revealing, or strange. What emotions are captured and conveyed in these self-portraits, and what specific details in the paintings suggest this?<sup>2</sup>

CCSS. W.11-12.1, W.11-12.2, W.11-12.4

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<sup>2</sup> Note to educators: After students have written, you could present them with biographical information about the painter(s) during the time in which they painted these pieces, to help students understand visual rhetoric and how it can be used to convey meaning and emotion.

## Chapter 2 (pp. 24-54)

### Discussion Questions

Use these questions to prompt students to consider, analyze, and discuss the text.

1. Examine the panel on page 30 that shows the “narrow compass” in which Bruce lived the majority of his life.
  - Why does Bechdel believe this “provincialism . . . is both misleading and accurate?” (30)
  - In what ways do various characters feel out of place in the novel—Bruce, Helen, Alison herself?
2. On page 32, Bechdel reveals that her father was living in Europe when his father died of a heart attack, forcing Bruce “to go home and run the family business” (32).
  - How was Bruce’s life shaped by his family? Why does Bechdel bring up the fact that Bruce was living in Europe?
  - How does Bruce’s relationship with his family compare to Alison’s relationship with her family?
3. Read and analyze: “Wunst upon a time, when your daddy was a little boy, he wandered off. He was littler than you, John, no more than three. It was springtime. The fields was just plowed, and Bruce lit out acrost one. It was that wet, pretty soon he couldn’t lift his little legs out of the mud! But just then, along comes Mort DeHaas with the mail, and he sees Bruce a way out there, just a tiny speck. . . Mort commenced to walk out acrost the muddy field to where Bruce was. He gave him a yank, and he was that stuck, his overshoes come off! . . . He brung your daddy into the kitchen in his stocking feet, and I undressed him right there. . . . Then I wrapped him in a quilt and put him in the oven” (40-42).
  - Why is this story so compelling to Alison? What do you think it reveals to her about her father?
  - What might this recollection and its imagery symbolize about Bruce and his life?
4. Read through the scene on pp. 43-45 in which Bruce calls Alison into the embalming room and she witnesses her first cadaver.
  - Why does this memory stick with Bechdel?
  - How does it compare to the scene later in this chapter where she sees her own father embalmed at his funeral?
  - What does it suggest about Bruce’s relationship to Alison that he “was hoping to elicit from [her] an expression of the natural horror he was no longer capable of” (44)?
5. There are several moments in this chapter where characters have unexpected reactions or attitudes toward death: the children playing at the funeral home (37), Alison smiling at her

brother after her father's death (47), or even referring to the funeral home as the "fun home" itself (36).

- Why do you think Alison and her siblings have this "cavalier" (35) attitude toward death and dying?
  - How did this upbringing impact Alison's experience of her own father's death?<sup>3</sup>
  - What does Bechdel mean when she calls death "inherently absurd" (47)?
6. The final panel of this chapter depicts the graveyard in which Bruce is buried (54).
- In what way does Bruce's tombstone stand out? What might these differences symbolize?
  - What is significant about Alison's placement in the panel?

CCSS. RL. 11-12.1, 11-12.3, 11-12.4, 11-12.5, 11-12.6

## Writing Prompts

Use these prompts to allow students to think critically and creatively about the text.

### 1. Notice and Focus

Pick one panel from this chapter to look at in depth. On a sheet of paper, write down every single detail that stands out to you about that panel—no detail is too small or insignificant. Once you have a list of details, pick a couple that seem particularly important for whatever reason, because they're interesting, revealing, confusing, strange, etc.

Write about why these details stand out to you and their significance: How do they contribute meaning to the panel as a whole? To the page? How do these details interact with the text that accompanies your chosen panel?

### 2. Alternate History

Write a short story about what Bruce's life might have been like if he did not have to return home and take over his family's business. Would he have stayed in Europe? What might he have done for a career without the funeral home? How do you think this alternative life would compare to his actual life as Bechdel tells it?

CCSS. W.11-12.1, W.11-12.4

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<sup>3</sup> Note to educators: Students may point out that Alison reacted with relatively little emotion to her father's death. This doesn't mean, however, that Alison understood or easily came to terms with it: *"...all the years spent visiting gravediggers, joking with burial vault salesmen, and teasing my brothers with crushed vials of smelling salts only made my own father's death more incomprehensible"* (50).

## Chapter 3 (pp. 55-86)

### Discussion Questions

Use these questions to prompt students to consider, analyze, and discuss the text.

1. On page 57, Bechdel notes that her father's death "was a queer business—queer in every sense of that multi-valent word," and goes on to excerpt a page from the dictionary listing many definitions of the word except for "the one definition conspicuously missing from our mammoth Webster's."
  - In what ways is Bruce's life—and death—a "queer" business? Why is this a useful word to describe him?
  - What is the significance of the absence of any definition of "queer" related to sexuality from the dictionary?<sup>4</sup>
2. After she finally comes out to her parents in a letter, Alison's mother informs her that her father "has had affairs with other men," which leaves Alison feeling "upstaged, demoted from protagonist in my own drama to comic relief in my parents' tragedy" (58).
  - How does she react to this news about her father's affairs with men? Why do you think Alison feels "upstaged"? Do you think she is exaggerating?
  - Is Alison the protagonist of this story? Is Bruce the protagonist? Why?
  - Bechdel explains that she "had imagined [her] confession as an emancipation from [her] parents, but instead [she] was pulled back into their orbit" (59). What does she mean by this? In what way would coming out "emancipate" her from her parents, and why might she wish for such an emancipation?
  - How do the parallel "coming-out" moments for Alison and Bruce compare? What do they tell us about both characters and their relationship to the family?
3. On page 60, Bechdel notes about her father that "perhaps affectation can be so thoroughgoing, so authentic in its details, that it stops being pretense...and becomes, for all practical purposes, real."
  - What does Bechdel mean by this?
  - How does this describe Bruce? And how does it relate to his sexuality?
4. On page 67, Bechdel admits that "my parents are most real to me in fictional terms."
  - What do you think she means by this? What does this tell us about her relationship to her parents and vice versa?
  - To what extent are Bruce and Helen fictional characters in *Fun Home*, even though they are real people in Bechdel's life?

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<sup>4</sup> Note to educators: This may be a good place to introduce the concept of "queer" to students as it relates to identity, gender, and/or sexuality, if the concept has not been introduced already. A common definition of "queer" from Merriam-Webster is "of, relating to, or being a person whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual and/or whose gender identity is not cisgender." See "Queer," definition 2c, *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/queer>

5. On page 67, Bechdel wonders if her “cool aesthetic distance itself does more to convey the arctic climate of our family than any particular literary comparison.”
  - What do we learn about her parents’ relationship in this chapter?
  - What does this tell us about both Helen and Bruce?
  - What impact do you think their relationship had on Alison as she grew up?
6. On pages 71-73, Bechdel recounts her parents’ travels to Europe, juxtaposing her narration with drawn vignettes from the trips.
  - How do the scenes illustrated in the panels enhance, complicate, or complement Bechdel’s narration?
  - How would the memoir change if it were only written, rather than also drawn?
7. Bechdel credits literature with helping her to come to consciousness about her own lesbian identity, noting on page 74 that her “realization at nineteen that I was a lesbian” was “a revelation not of the flesh, but of the mind.”
  - In what ways is literature important to Alison’s coming to consciousness about her sexual identity? Why is it significant that she has this realization through literature?
  - How might literature and other forms of media be important to young queer people as they begin to understand who they are? To young people generally?
  - If Alison were in college now instead of in the late 70s/early 80s, to what extent do you think her engagement with stories about queer people would be different? Why?
8. At the end of this chapter, Bechdel wonders whether she somehow caused her father’s death. On page 84, she explains: “The idea that I caused his death by telling my parents I was a lesbian is perhaps illogical. Causality implies connection, contact of some kind. And however convincing they might be, you can’t lay hands on a fictional character.”
  - What do you think Alison means when she says that “you can’t lay hands on a fictional character?” What does this tell us about her relationship with her father?
  - Even though she admits that it is “illogical,” why might Alison want to believe that she is somehow responsible for her father’s death?
9. This chapter contains many instances where Bechdel has recreated Bruce’s handwritten notes—and even, in one case, her own journal entry—in addition to recreations of typed letters from her parents. Look, for instance, on pp. 62-63 and 77-78.
  - Why do you think Bechdel includes these very precisely drawn renditions of actual notes and letters rather than just tell us the contents in her narration?
  - How do these drawings compare to other kinds of drawing that Bechdel does throughout the memoir? Are their effects similar? Different? How?

CCSS. RL. 11-12.1, 11-12.3, 11-12.4, 11-12.5, 11-12.6

## Writing Prompts

Use these prompts to allow students to think critically and creatively about the text.

### 1. Alone Together

Look closely at the last two panels of the chapter on page 86, paying attention to the images rather than the text. Write a paragraph where you closely analyze these images. Which details about the images and their composition stand out to you as particularly interesting, revealing, strange, or significant? How does Bechdel capture the relationship between her and her father using just these images? What meaning do they convey about the two of them?

### 2. Gatsby

This chapter is organized around repeated allusions and references to F. Scott Fitzgerald and his seminal novel *The Great Gatsby*. What parallels does Bechdel draw between Bruce and Fitzgerald or the character of Jay Gatsby himself? What parallels do you notice yourself? What do these allusions and parallels reveal about Bruce and how Bechdel sees him? Why do you think Bechdel chooses to organize her chapter around a particular novel, especially *The Great Gatsby*?

CCSS. W.11-12.1, W.11-12.4, W.11-12.9

## Chapter 4 (pp. 87-120)

### Discussion Questions

Use these questions to prompt students to consider, analyze, and discuss the text.

1. At the beginning of this chapter, Bechdel finally explains the circumstances of her father's death.

- Why do you think Bechdel waits until chapter 4 to provide us with these details? What effect does this delayed information have on the reader and their understanding of Bruce?
- Why do you think Bechdel structures this memoir out of chronological order? How exactly is the book organized?

2. On page 95, Bechdel explains that *she* “had become a connoisseur of masculinity at an early age” after a long sequence about her father’s penchant for the stereotypically feminine hobby of gardening.

- How do Bruce and Alison rebel against the gendered expectations of masculinity and femininity?
- Why do you think Bruce discouraged Alison from her appreciation of masculinity and masculine dress/hobbies?
- To what extent are Bruce and Alison brought together by their relationship to gender norms?

3. In describing her relationship to her father, Bechdel writes that, “Not only were we inverts. We were inversions of one another” (98).

- What does she mean by this?
- To what extent is Bechdel’s relationship to gender norms related to her budding sexuality?<sup>5</sup>
- What does Bechdel mean when she says that, while she and her father shared a reverence for masculine beauty, “*the objects of our desire were quite different?*”

4. Pages 100-101 contain the only splash page in *Fun Home*.

- What is a splash page?
- Look closely at the image and the text that accompanies it. Why do you think Bechdel chooses to highlight this particular image by giving it a full spread?
- What fascinates Bechdel about this photo and, in particular, what it tells her about her father?

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<sup>5</sup> Note to educators: Be careful here not to suggest or reinforce the notion that there is a clear link between sexuality and gender (e.g., ‘all lesbian women are masculine’). Rather than asking broad questions, stay focused on the particulars of Bechdel’s and Bruce’s experiences.

- Why—according to Bechdel—is appreciating the beauty of the photograph so complicated? What does this complexity tell us about Bechdel’s appreciation of her father, by extension?
- What do you think Bechdel means when she wonders whether she “identif[ies] too well with [her] father’s illicit awe?”

5. Bechdel writes that, in Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, “the two directions in which the narrator’s family can opt for a walk—Swann’s Way and The Guermites Way—are initially presented as diametrically opposed. . . . But at the end of the novel, the two ways are revealed to converge—to have always converged—through a vast ‘network of transversals’” (102).

- In what ways are Proust’s two directions a metaphor for Alison and her father’s experiences? To what extent do you think Alison and Bruce “converge,” at least as Bechdel understands it?

6. In this chapter, Bechdel recounts her fear at encountering a large snake as a young child and connects that snake to the one that could have possibly played a part in her father’s death. Musing on the symbolism of the snake, she explains that, “it’s obviously a phallus, yet a more ancient and universal symbol of the feminine principle would be hard to come by. Perhaps this undifferentiation, this nonduality, is the point. Maybe that’s what’s so unsettling about snakes. They also imply cyclicity, life from death, creation from destruction. And in a way, you could say that my father’s end was my beginning. Or more precisely, that the end of his lie coincided with the beginning of my truth” (116-7).

- Why is the snake a particularly significant symbol for Bechdel?
- What exactly does the snake symbolize in this narrative—Alison, Bruce, their relationship?
- What does this passage imply about the nature of Alison’s relationship to her father?

7. On page 118, Bechdel recalls a memory from her youth when she witness a butch female truckdriver—“the truck-driving bulldyke”—at a diner with her father (119). She describes this encounter by likening it to being “a traveler in a foreign country who runs into someone from home—someone they’ve never spoken to but know by sight—I recognized her with a surge of joy” (118).

- Why is this such a significant experience for young Alison? What was so thrilling and important to her about witnessing this woman?
- What does she mean that she “recognized” the truck driver even though they had never met?
- Why do you think Bechdel believes that this encounter “haunted [her] father” (119)?

CCSS. RL. 11-12.1, 11-12.3, 11-12.4, 11-12.5

## Writing Prompts

Use these prompts to allow students to think critically and creatively about the text.

### 1. In Search of Lost Time

This chapter is structured around sustained allusions and references to Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. On the last two pages, Bechdel explains that the new translation of the title—*In Search of Lost Time*—“doesn’t quite capture the full resonance of *perdu*. This means not just lost but ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, and spoiled. What’s lost in translation is the complexity of loss itself” (119-120). Write a paragraph in which you discuss what exactly Bechdel means by the “complexity of loss.” How does this meditation on the translation of *perdu* reveal how Bechdel feels about the loss of her own father? What makes her loss so complex?

### 2. Picturing the Past

Inspired by Bechdel’s examination of her father’s old photographs at the end of this chapter, locate an old photograph of a parent, guardian, or relative from when they were close to your own age. Write a creative piece in which you detail what their life might have been like at the time when the picture was taken. How do their thoughts and life compare with your own, today? What are some similarities and differences?

CCSS. W.11-12.1, W.11-12.3, W.11-12.4

## Chapter 5 (pp. 121-150)

### Discussion Questions

Use these questions to prompt students to consider, analyze, and discuss the text.

1. In the wake of her father's death, Bechdel admits that she felt "irritable" about "the mealy-mouthed mourning," and wonders "what would happen if we spoke the truth?" (125).

- To what extent is this memoir Bechdel's attempt to "speak the truth"? What does "speaking the truth" look like for Bechdel?
- Why is speaking the truth about Bechdel's father—and the dead more generally—so difficult?

2. On page 129, Bechdel reflects on a creek near their house that "was crystal clear precisely because it was polluted. Mine runoff had left the water too acidic to support life of any kind. Wading in the fishless creek and swooning at the salmon sky, I learned firsthand that most elemental of all ironies. That, as Wallace Stevens put it in my mom's favorite poem, 'Death is the mother of beauty.'"

- In what way is this "the most elemental of all ironies"? How is it an example of irony?
- What do you think Stevens means when he writes that "death is the mother of beauty"?
- What is the significance of this irony and/or the imagery of the clear, polluted river to Bechdel's memoir?

3. Bechdel describes her childhood home as "an artists' colony" in which they "ate together, but otherwise were absorbed in our separate pursuits" (134).

- What do you think this upbringing was like for Alison? How do you think it impacted her?
- How does the accompanying panel enhance Bechdel's narration?
- How does this understanding of art-as-isolation compare to the function of Bechdel's art as seen in *Fun Home*?

4. In this chapter, Bechdel begins describing the onset of her obsessive-compulsive disorder at age ten, describing the series of rituals that dictated her days. On pages 138-139, she wonders about the possible origins of her disorder. Look closely at the text on these pages and the illustrations that Bechdel chooses to accompany them.

- How do these panels interact with Bechdel's narration?
- Why do you think she juxtaposes images of her parents fighting with this narration?

5. Bechdel writes that, as a child, she began to insert "the minutely-lettered phrase I think" between sentences in her diary. She calls this habit "a sort of epistemological crisis. How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true. My simple, declarative sentences began to strike me as hubristic at best, utter lies at worst. All I could speak for was my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those" (141).

- Why does Alison begin to insert these asides into her diary, and what does it tell us about her and her childhood?

- How is this question about truth relevant to her larger memoir, especially as it relates to Bruce?
- Is it possible for Bechdel to ever arrive at the “truth” of her childhood or her father’s life as an adult looking back on it? What makes this difficult?

6. Near the end of the chapter, Bechdel describes a particular diary entry that was rendered almost illegible because of her marks of uncertainty, from a day when a “distant cousin...a boy exactly [Alison’s] age” was brought to the funeral home (148-9).

- What do you think was the significance of this event for Alison?
- Why was her diary so illegible on that particular day?
- Why do you think this event also precipitated the beginning of the end of her compulsive behavior?

CCSS. RL. 11-12.1, 11-12.3, 11-12.4, 11-12.5, 11-12.6

## Writing Prompts

*Use these prompts to allow students to think critically and creatively about the text.*

### 1. Alison’s Diary

Pick an event from Alison’s childhood so far in the memoir for which we do not see a diary entry. Then, write a diary entry about this event from her perspective. What do you think she would have remarked on or noticed? Try to imitate what you think her authorial voice would have been like for her diary as a child.

### 2. Bruce’s Diary

Pick an event from Alison’s childhood that involves her father. Then, write a diary entry about this event from Bruce’s perspective. Imagine how Bruce might have experienced this event similarly to or differently from Alison. What would he have noticed or remarked upon? How would he have talked about Alison? Try to imitate what you think his authorial voice would have been like in one of his hypothetical diary entries.

CCSS. W.11-12.3, W.11-12.4

## Chapter 6 (pp. 151-186)

### Discussion Questions

Use these questions to prompt students to consider, analyze, and discuss the text.

1. On the title page for chapter 6, Bechdel recreates a photograph of her mother applying makeup backstage during a theater production.

- Why do you think Bechdel chooses this image to represent Helen? What does it suggest about her as a character?
- How does depicting Helen as an actress resonate or connect with some of the larger themes in the memoir thus far?
- Consider the chapter's title, "The Ideal Husband," which appears below the image on page 151. What does this title convey or suggest to the reader? Has the phrase "ideal husband" appeared before in the novel?<sup>6</sup>

2. In this chapter, Bechdel recounts the onset of her period as a 13-year-old, describing that summer as "the last days of childhood" that just so happen to coincide with "the end of that larger, national innocence" as a result of Watergate and her father's visit to a psychiatrist (155).

- Why does Bechdel find the juxtaposition of these events almost "implausible" (154)? What is the significance of their concurrence?
- In what ways does Bruce's visit to the psychiatrist and his admission to Alison that he is "bad. Not good like you" (153) also represent a kind of loss of innocence for Alison? To what extent does growing up involve a loss of innocence about our ideas of our parents?

3. Bechdel reminisces about how she hid the onset of her period from her mother, explaining that "there was no hurry to tell her" and admitting that she kept her sanitary pads "hidden in the furthest recess of my closet" (158).

- Why do you think Alison chooses to keep this information from her mother and fails to mention it in her diary?
- What does Alison's secrecy tell us about her relationship with her mother? Or about the Bechdel family more generally?
- How does the image of Alison hiding her sanitary pads "in the furthest recess of my closet" speak to larger themes in the book?<sup>7</sup>

4. When describing her appreciation for the production of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* in which her mother acted, Bechdel notes that her enjoyment "was unencumbered by any

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<sup>6</sup> Note to educators: On page 17, Bechdel twice uses this phrase: "He appeared to be an *ideal husband* and father, for example. But would an *ideal husband* and father have sex with teenage boys?" (italics used for emphasis). These references on page 17 appear to foreshadow the accusations against Bruce in chapter 6.

<sup>7</sup> Note to educators: This question gets at the ideas of repression, secrecy, and shame more generally rather than the specific queer metaphor of "hiding in the closet," though Bechdel almost certainly knew that the more specific metaphor is also evoked here.

knowledge of Wilde’s martyrology. I took the play at face value, as perhaps Queen Victoria had. The covert references to homosexuality eluded me” (165-6).

- In what way does Bechdel’s rumination on her adolescent enjoyment of this play reflect larger thematic concerns of the novel?
- Why do you think Bechdel pairs this plotline about *Earnest* with the plot about her father’s court summons? Do you see similarities between the events in Wilde’s life and those in Bruce Bechdel’s?
- What do these references to *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Oscar Wilde illuminate about Bechdel’s experiences with her family?

5. We learn in this chapter about Bruce’s court summons for “furnishing a malt beverage to a minor,” although as Bechdel notes, “the real accusation dared not speak its name” (175).

- What are we supposed to think is the “real accusation;” why do you think it isn’t named?
- What does this silence tell us about Bechdel’s hometown?
- Bechdel notes that she can “only speculate on the exact nature of his relations with the brothers in the next valley” (175). How does speculation and conjecture characterize her understanding of her father more broadly? Why is this?
- To what extent is this memoir itself merely a speculation? Is it possible to arrive at the “truth” of who one’s parents are or to understand their behavior?

6. On pages 175-179, Bechdel describes a sudden summer storm that ruined her mother’s thesis and tore down the two maple trees in the family’s backyard: “The maples had sheltered the west side of our house for over a hundred years, and left, as fallen trees do, a void so absolute you couldn’t possibly have imagined it beforehand. . . Yet the house itself had escaped harm, as had the garage and cars. Even the cat sauntered home not just unscathed, but dry. In this light, the ring of downed trees conveys a theme less of destruction than of narrow escape” (178-9).

- In what ways is this storm an appropriate symbol for the events of this chapter?
- What do you think Bechdel means when she explains that the downed trees conveyed a theme “less of destruction than of narrow escape?” How does this phrase touch on other events in the chapter?

7. When describing her diary entries on page 184, Bechdel admits that her “narration had by this point become altogether unreliable.” At the end of the chapter, she explains that “by the end of November, my earnest daily [diary] entries had given way to the implicit lie of the blank page, and weeks at a time are left unrecorded” (186).

- Look closely at the last image in the chapter. What’s on the desk? Why is it significant?<sup>8</sup>
- To what extent is Bechdel a reliable narrator in *Fun Home*?
- Can a person ever be a reliable narrator of their own life?

CCSS. RL. 11-12.1, 11-12.3, 11-12.4, 11-12.5, 11-12.6

<sup>8</sup> Note to educators: Students should point out the irony of a blank diary sitting next to a copy of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In the caption, Bechdel emphasizes the contrast between her “earnest daily entries” and the “implicit lie of the blank page” (186). Of course, Wilde’s play is itself a satire in which its characters are anything but earnest.

## Writing Prompts

*Use these prompts to allow students to think critically and creatively about the text.*

### 1. **The Political is Personal**

Bechdel frequently references the Nixon impeachment and the Watergate hearings in this chapter. First, conduct some basic online research to learn about the Nixon impeachment and Watergate hearings.

Then, write a few paragraphs explaining what thematic connections exist between this political event and Bechdel's own family life. What connections does Bechdel attempt to draw between the two?

Finally, reflect on how the extent to which current political events shape your views and impact your own personal life. What is the relationship between larger political events and your own, everyday life?

### 2. **Unreliable Narrators**

Think back to a significant or memorable event from your childhood. Write a diary entry in which you pretend to chronicle the event as you were at that age: what details do you think you would have remembered? What do you think you may have overlooked or failed to write about or emphasize?

CCSS. W.11-12.1, W.11-12.2, W.11-12.3, W.11-12.4

## Chapter 7 (pp. 187-232)

### Discussion Questions

Use these questions to prompt students to consider, analyze, and discuss the text.

1. In this chapter, Bechdel recalls an incident when the family was visiting New York when her younger brother John wandered off to the “cruising grounds” and was almost picked up by a stranger. Yet, Bechdel notes that when John returned, Bruce “was uncharacteristically eager to forgive and forget,” even though we know he has a temper (191).

- Why do you think Bruce is so eager to “forgive and forget” in this instance?
- In what ways does this incident parallel the incident from the previous chapter where Bruce gave a beer to a neighbor boy and took him on a ride in his car? Why do you think Bechdel suggests a connection between these events by placing them close to one another?

2. On pages 195-197, Bechdel imagines “what [Bruce’s] life might have been like if he hadn’t died in 1980,” wondering if he would have died during the AIDS epidemic (195). Then, she notes: “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. There’s a certain emotional expedience to claiming him as a tragic victim of homophobia, but that’s a problematic line of thought. For one, it makes it harder for me to blame him” (196).

- Why might Bechdel think that her father’s “senseless” death would have been rendered “meaningful” if he had died of AIDS?
- What does Bechdel mean when she calls this a “problematic line of thought” that makes it “harder for [her] to blame him?”
- To what extent do you think Bruce was a “tragic victim of homophobia?” Why does Bechdel call this “emotionally expedient?” What does she mean by that?
- Why might Bechdel want to “blame” her father? And what for?

3. Bechdel notes that “in [her] earliest memories, [Bruce] is a lowering, malevolent presence,” but that as she grew older, “he began to sense [her] potential as an intellectual companion” (197, 198). She writes that their intellectual bond produced a sense of “intimacy” in which “books . . . serve[d] as our currency” (199, 200).

- Why do you think it is significant that Bruce and Alison bonded over books and fictional characters/stories?
- Why is it so difficult for Bechdel to fully capture or characterize her relationship with her father? What makes their relationship so complicated and fraught?

4. On page 197, Bechdel presents the “vagueness and distance” in the dictionary’s definition of ‘father’: “a man who has begotten a child.” Later on page 206, she illustrates a discussion in a college literature course on the theme of “spiritual father[hood]” in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

- Why is Bechdel so preoccupied with understanding what a father is or should be, both in the literal and “spiritual” sense?
- How do you think Bechdel would define ‘father’ based on her own experiences with Bruce?
- Do you think she considers Bruce to be a good father? Why or why not? Do you think he was a good father?

5. The panels on pages 220-221 illustrate a significant moment when Bruce comes very close to openly discussing his sexuality and his possible shared connection with Alison.

- Why is this such a significant moment for the two of them?
- Why do you think Bruce stops short of being more open or explicit with Alison?
- Look closely at the layout of the panels on the page. How does this layout stand out compared to other pages? Why do you think Bechdel makes this design choice? What does it convey to the reader?

6. Bechdel describes her last visit to home before her father dies, in which she introduces her girlfriend to her father—though not as her girlfriend. Bechdel recalls that, during the visit, “a family friend remarked admiringly to Joan on the close relationship between my father and me...It was unusual, and we were close. But not close enough” (225).

- Is there a reason why Alison and Bruce were so “unusually” close that evening? Do you think that it is just a coincidence that this moment of closeness coincides with Alison’s last time seeing her father alive? Why might Bechdel want to believe there is greater significance to this closeness?
- What does Bechdel mean when she undercuts their closeness by remarking that it was “not close enough”?

7. Near the end of the chapter, Bechdel writes that, “Perhaps my eagerness to claim [Bruce] as ‘gay’ in the way I am ‘gay,’ as opposed to bisexual or some other category, is just a way of keeping him to myself—a sort of inverted oedipal complex” (230).

- What does Bechdel mean by this? Why would she want to “claim” Bruce as “‘gay’ in the way that [she is] ‘gay’”?
- Do you think that Bruce owed it to Alison to share his “erotic truth” with her? Do you think that Bechdel herself believes she was owed it?
- What do you make of the fact that Alison did not introduce Joan as her girlfriend to her parents?

8. The final moments of the memoir reflect on questions of fatherhood and ask us to consider the relationship between “spiritual” and “consubstantial” fatherhood: “Is it so unusual for the two things to coincide? What if Icarus hadn’t hurtled into the sea? What if he’d inherited his father’s inventive bent? What might he have wrought? He did hurtle into the sea, of course. But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt” (231-232).

- How would you characterize the tone of these final pages? Do we have a clear sense of closure or finality from Bechdel about Bruce, or are we left with more ambiguity? Is this consistent with the memoir as a whole?
- When Bechdel asks, “Is it so unusual for [these two things] to coincide?”, what is she implying about her father? Would you interpret this line differently if Bechdel had written it as a statement instead of a question (e.g., “It is not unusual for the two things to coincide”)?<sup>9</sup>
- In reflecting on her relationship with her father, why do you think Bechdel draws on Christian language of the Holy Trinity and specifically the relationship between Christ and God the Father?
- The reference to Daedalus and Icarus in these final moments recalls the allusion to that same mythic relationship that opens the memoir. Why do you think Bechdel recalls this very first moment at the end?
- What does Bechdel mean when she wonders what would have happened if Icarus had “inherited his father’s inventive bent?” How does this query relate to her relationship with Bruce? Did Bechdel inherit her father’s “inventive bent?”
- What do you think Bechdel means when she says Bruce “was there to catch me when I leapt?”

CCSS. RL. 11-12.1, 11-12.2, 11-12.3, 11-12.4, 11-12.5, 11-12.6

## Writing Prompts

Use these prompts to allow students to think critically and creatively about the text.

### 1. The Antihero

The final chapter is titled “The Antihero’s Journey.” Throughout the chapter, Bechdel references a letter from her father in response to her coming out in which he claims, “*I am not a hero*” (230). Discuss the extent to which Bruce can or should be considered a hero or antihero in this novel. In your answer, be sure to define “hero” and “antihero” so that you and your reader have a common understanding of these terms. Do you think that Bechdel considers him to be a hero or an antihero? Why or why not?

### 2. First and Last

Look closely at the panels at the very beginning of the memoir on pages 3-4 and compare them with the final images on pages 231-232. Analyze the details, connections, similarities, and differences between these opening and closing images of the memoir. What is the significance of these images and their relationship to one another? Why begin and end the novel in this way?

CCSS. W.11-12.1, W.11-12.2, W.11-12.4

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<sup>9</sup> Note to educators: In asking this question, Bechdel seems to imply that she does, in fact, see Bruce as her “spiritual” and “consubstantial” father. However, Bechdel’s choice to phrase this as a question—one posed to herself and to the reader—leaves her true feelings ambiguous.

# After Reading

## Wrap-up Questions

*Use these questions to discuss whole-book themes with students as a final wrap-up of the novel.*

### 1. Narrative Structure and Genre

- Why do you think Bechdel chooses to structure the memoir out of chronological order? How does that structure impact the story and our reading experience?
- How does the structure of the memoir reflect some of its thematic concerns with memory and the past?
- Why does Bechdel subtitle her memoir “A Family Tragicomic”? How does the memoir embody the paradoxical nature of the “tragicomic”?
- To what extent is Bechdel a reliable narrator of her own life? Of her father’s? Does it matter?

### 2. Character Development

- How does our understanding of Bruce change over the course of the novel?
- To what extent is Bruce an “antihero”? Can we understand him using the traditional language of protagonist and antagonist? If Bruce is not an antagonist, who (or what) is?
- What is Helen’s role in this memoir, and what do you make of the fact that she receives relatively little attention?
- What do you think of the role of Alison’s brothers, John and Christian, in the novel? How might their relationship with their father be different from Alison’s and why?
- To what extent is Alison’s character development tied to Bruce and his development?

### 3. Family Relationships

- How would you characterize Bechdel’s relationship with her father over the course of the memoir? Does Bechdel reach any “conclusions” about Bruce and her relationship with him?
- How and why do you think writing this memoir changed the way that Bechdel sees her father?
- To what extent was Bechdel shaped by her parents? How does one’s family influence one’s life?

### 4. Coming Out / Coming of Age

- What is the role of literature in Alison’s coming out process?
- What role does Bruce play in Alison’s understanding of her own sexuality?
- How does Alison’s process of coming to terms with her sexuality relate to Bruce’s own process? What are some similarities and differences, and what causes them?
- To what extent did Alison’s relationship with Bruce or understanding of him change as a result of her own coming out process? Why might this be?

### 5. Visual Rhetoric

- What role do Bechdel's drawings play in this memoir? How do they enhance, complicate, and/or change the narrative and its text?
- How does Bechdel's drawing style and limited use of color impact the story?
- How do graphic narratives communicate information differently than alphabetic text? How do you think this memoir and our experience with it would change if it were only written alphabetically?
- Why do you think Bechdel mixes her own style with some hyper-realistic recreations of actual documents? What is the effect of including these documents?

### 6. Literary Allusions

- What are the main literary allusions in *Fun Home*? Why does Bechdel structure each chapter around a central literary allusion? How do these allusions enhance, complicate, or impact the narrative in each chapter?
- How do individual allusions—or the centrality of the allusions more generally—engage with some of the memoir's thematic concerns?
- How did your reading experience change when an allusion was familiar to you as opposed to when you encountered an allusion with which you were less familiar?

(CCSS. RL. 11-12.1, 11-12.2, 11-12.3, 11-12.4, 11-12.5, 11-12.6)

## In-class Activities

*Use these hands-on, engaging projects to allow students to explore the text using a different medium.*

### 1. Drawing from a Different Angle

*Materials Needed: paper, colored pencils and/or markers<sup>10</sup>*

Choose a section of the memoir or a particular event. Then, choose a character involved in that section or event other than Alison. Using a series of panels, redraw that section or event from the other character's perspective. Make sure to add speech and/or narration text to complement your drawings just like Bechdel does. Consider how your chosen character might have perceived the scene/event similarly to or differently from Bechdel and how you can convey that through your drawing and writing.

### 2. Adapting *Fun Home*

*Materials Needed: access to word processor (or pen/pencil and paper), internet*

In 2015, *Fun Home* was adapted for the stage on Broadway as a Tony Award-winning musical. Watch the stage adaptation (or, if unavailable in full, selected scenes) and write a paper in which

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<sup>10</sup> Tips for virtual instructional settings: You can also look into online tools such as [Pixton](#) or [StoryboardThat](#).

you analyze the memoir and musical side-by-side. What changes are made in the adaptation process and what impact do these changes have on the work's narrative, characters, and themes? To what extent is watching the musical a similar or different experience from reading the memoir?<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Allusion Deep Dive

*Materials Needed: internet, poster board, markers or other writing utensils, glue, and paper*

Choose one of the major literary allusions in *Fun Home* and conduct research on your chosen text: its plot, characters, major themes, and general significance. Then, design a poster board in which you showcase your research, explaining how your chosen text connects with, enhances, or resonates with the plot, characters, or major themes of *Fun Home*. Where do references to your text show up in *Fun Home* and what significance do these references have?<sup>12</sup>

Examples of literary allusions in *Fun Home* include (but are not limited to):

- Homer's *The Odyssey*
- Joyce's *Ulysses*
- Camus's *A Happy Death*
- Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*
- Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*
- Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*

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<sup>11</sup> Note to educators: Instead of asking students to write a paper, you can use these as in-class discussion questions after showing one or two *YouTube* clips of the musical.

<sup>12</sup> Tips for virtual instructional settings: Consider having students make a PowerPoint presentation instead of a poster board.

## Supplemental Materials

### Comics and Graphic Novels

- ["Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative,"](#) Hillary Chute, *PMLA*, March 2008
- ["A Brief History of the Graphic Novel,"](#) Stan Tychinski, Diamond Comic Distributors
- ["Graphic novel,"](#) Christopher Murray, *Encyclopedia Britannica*
- ["A Brief History of Comics and Graphic Novels,"](#) Pearly Ma, *Medium*, January 2020
- ["The History of Comics: Decade by Decade,"](#) Taylor Ramsey, *The Artifice*, February 2013

### LGBTQ+ History 1970s-80s

- ["A Glimpse into 1970s Gay Activism,"](#) Rebecca J. Rosen, *The Atlantic*, February 2014
- ["The Gay '70s,"](#) Sam Metz, *Public Books*, June 2016
- ["Gay Rights,"](#) *History.com*, June 2020
- ["The AIDS Crisis,"](#) NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project
- ["Looking Back: The AIDS Epidemic,"](#) San Francisco LGBT Center, December 2018

### Alison Bechdel's Creative Process

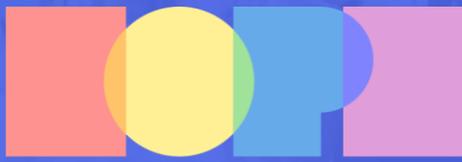
- ["The Alison Bechdel Interview,"](#) *The Comics Journal*, April 2007
- ["Alison Bechdel Deconstructs Her Latest Graphic Memoir,"](#) Ari Karpel, *Fast Company*, July 2012
- ["Drawn from Life: The World of Alison Bechdel,"](#) Judith Thurman, *The New Yorker*, April 2012
- ["Design Matters podcast: Alison Bechdel,"](#) Debbie Millman, 2016

### Fun Home's Literary Allusions

- ["Oscar Wilde Trial,"](#) *History.com*, December 2019
- ["When Oscar Wilde's Wit Couldn't Save Him,"](#) Jennifer Latson, *TIME*, July 2015
- ["On the Trials of Oscar Wilde: Myths and Realities,"](#) Andrew Elfenbein, *BRANCH Collective*, June 2012
- ["How Ulysses Got Published,"](#) Brian Hoey, *Books Tell You Why*, February 2017
- ["James Joyce's Ulysses,"](#) PBS
- ["Reviving the Dread Deity: Paul Davis finds a multitude of voices in a new translation of Marcel Proust's masterpiece, In Search of Lost Time,"](#) Paul Davis, *The Guardian*, November 2002
- ["Reading Group: How LGBT is Proust?,"](#) Sam Jordison, *The Guardian*, February 2013
- ["Why Proust? And Why Now?,"](#) Dinitia Smith, *The New York Times*, April 2000
- ["F. Scott Fitzgerald: American writer,"](#) Arthur Mizener, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 2019

### Alison Bechdel's Other Work

- ["Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama,"](#) Alison Bechdel, 2012
- ["Dykes to Watch Out For,"](#) Alison Bechdel, 1987-2008
- ["Fun Home,"](#) musical, 2015-present
- ["Fun Home,"](#) Tony Awards Show Clip, YouTube, 2015



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