

Graphic memoirist Bechdel, Starr lecturer

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See RUGBY on page 19 courtesy of Karl Rabe for Vassar College medium. 'Fun Home,' a memoir on her relationship with her father, has become a nationally-acclaimed bestseller. Katie de Heras/The Miscellany News Alison Bechdel spoke on Tuesday in the Villard Room about her use of cartooning as an artistic and literary

Cartooning and graphic novels, often considered lowbrow art forms, have historically been excluded from the literary canon. However, they remain important sites of resistance, political commentary and representation of marginalized identities.

Readers who come to these texts seek all of these elements, in addition to a good laugh. Regarded as a master of balancing the funny with the personal, the serious and the subversive, Alison Bechdel gave the annual William Starr Lecture on Oct. 7.

Bechdel has been designing cartoons since the early 1980s, with her running comic strip “Dykes to Watch Out For” gaining notoriety among the queer community. In 2006 her memoir “Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic,” a graphic novel that documents the tumultuous relationship between Bechdel and her father, struck a chord among writers and readers, receiving widespread accolades, including a GLAAD Media Award and nomination for National Book Critics Circle Award.

Since the book’s publication, Bechdel wrote a follow-up, “Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama,” another memoir which this time focuses on her relationship with her mother.

In addition to having “Fun Home” adapted into a musical, Bechdel received the MacArthur grant this year.

“There have been many pivotal moments in graphic memoir—’Fun Home’ is one of them,” said Associate Professor of English and Director of Jewish Studies Peter Anteleyes in his introduction.

“Fun Home” has been incorporated into the Vassar curriculum for several years, most notably in the English department. Hua Hsu, Associate Professor of English, began teaching the memoir for a freshman writing seminar several years ago and has most recently taught it in his Postmodern Literature class. “It’s such a remarkably dense experience—it makes readers very conscious of the care and intentions that go into all art, especially something that initially appears to be very simple and familiar,” he wrote in an emailed statement.

“Unfortunately, I think there are still people who find it strange to see a graphic novel or comic book on a college syllabus. But I think a book like

‘Fun Home’ provokes and challenges readers in this immersive and unexpected way, far more so than any other contemporary work I can think of.”

In addition to being noteworthy for its discussion of homosexuality, familial relationships and literature, “Fun Home” is largely considered a story about growing up, which is perhaps what makes it particularly relevant as the common freshman reading this year. Susan Zlotnick, Dean of the Freshmen and Associate Professor of English, explained that the choice was meant to offer an alternative perspective on the transition to college.

“As a coming-of-age and coming-out story, ‘Fun Home’ is about becoming who one will be as an adult,” she said. “Bechdel’s memoir speaks to a broad range of concerns: It’s about how one fabricates one’s own identity in relationship to parents and siblings, to place and time, and to books” (“Vassar News Info,” 9.10.14).

During her talk, Bechdel spoke to the pedagogy of her graphic novels, remarking that “Fun Home” is at its core a book about reading, while “Are You My Mother?” is a book about writing. A large part of both these works is Bechdel’s journaling, which shaped her relationship with her mother as well as her relationship to memoir.

As she flipped to a frame showing her mother taking down dictations into her diary, she said, “It wasn’t the moment I became a writer, but it was the moment I became a memoirist. The moments of contact we had were channeled through this act of writing down what you did each day.”

Though memoir doesn’t typically spur the average writer to tackle a graphic novel, for Bechdel this medium is essential. “There’s an old saying that cartoonists are mediocre writers and mediocre artists. What this fails to take into account is that these two things together are their own separate category,” said Bechdel.

For Bechdel, the combination of words and pictures has a mystical, mesmerizing quality that has to do with what she identifies as “slippage,” a disjuncture between these textual and visual components.

“Nothing ever really matches up—this slippage is everywhere. And even when you try to tell the absolute truth, you can’t,” she explained. “I always sensed on some level that language was unreliable and appearance was deceiving, so I try to triangulate between those things because I feel like it gets closer to the truth.”

English major Emma Gregoline '15, who is writing her thesis partly comprised of her own comic strip, wrote in an emailed statement, “Bechdel’s memoir style is very inspirational to me. It’s very logical and graphic, which I think is apt for an essay. Her work is so researched, and well thought-out. Many other graphic novelists just put all of their feelings on the page. Which is also great, but not exactly translatable into thesis form.”

Gregoline went on to emphasize Bechdel’s mastery of negotiating text and image. “I think Alison Bechdel’s work is so brilliant because she’s able to use the comic medium to its fullest. In ‘Fun Home,’ she articulates the intricate relationship between her and her father so beautifully, really using the layout and architecture of the page and repeated flashes of imagery in a way that most realistically represents the way memory works,” she wrote.

In undertaking the project of portraying her mother and father in truthful ways, Bechdel contextualized their personal experiences in the larger frameworks of literature, psychoanalysis and politics.

“The graphic novels are about how our personal lives can’t escape the political context,” she said, noting that her father’s life was influenced by the gay rights movements of the time, and her mother’s, by second-wave feminism.

Bechdel continued, “I’ve been very driven by the idea that the personal is political, but I’m also interested in the idea that the political is personal.” She went on to talk about how while this philosophy is certainly evident in her two graphic memoirs, she first hit on this idea in “Dykes to Watch Out for.” As Bechdel explored the dynamics of lesbian existence in the comic strip, she discovered that her cartoon style largely involved taking current political events and recasting them in familiar, personal settings.

“The comic strip became a way for me to normalize my difference. It was never really about defending homosexuality,” said Bechdel. As she explored her own identity, Bechdel was able to be both insider and outsider in her comic strips.

“I liked being an outside and being different from the normal. But I also yearned to be able to be a ‘regular person.’ I was able to work this out in ‘Dykes to Watch Out for,’” she said.

Gregoline noted that this dual consciousness is something that comic lends itself to as a reader as well as a writer. “You are kind of guided along without being told exactly what to read, or which order to read each panel in. You’re given a lot of freedom to move about the page, unlike film, which has more control and force over what the viewer looks at.”

She continued, “You are also given a lot of freedom to imagine what happens between each panel, in the ‘gutter,’ which exists for the viewer to connect the narrative together,” she said.

Bechdel shared that as a child, she had always wanted to be a cartoonist. However, when she got older, this transformed into a desire to be something she believed to be more practical—graphic design.

Nonetheless, she found her way back to comics when she was working what she called menial office jobs and would draw in her spare time.

“Another thing I liked...was that cartoons were lowbrow and populist and didn’t get the same scrutiny as fine art,” Bechdel laughed. Throughout her writing career, however, Bechdel noted she was no stranger to harsh criticism: At the beginning of the lecture, Bechdel shared with the audience old college papers she had written covered in red marks, as well as numerous letters of rejection—one authored by feminist scholar Adrienne Rich.

More recent critiques of Bechdel’s work, however, have been on the whole rather positive. The fervor around her comics garnered enough attention for the MacArthur foundation to take notice, which culminated in her receiving a so-called ‘genius grant’ this year to continue her work as a comic.

In her talk, Bechdel expressed her appreciation for the reward; in particular, the way in which it might indicate an increased visibility of comics. Bechdel is only the second cartoonist to receive the grant.

Associate Professor of Psychology Dara Greenwood, who specializes in media and communication, noted that the MacArthur grant is important not only for comics but for representation of queer writers as well.

“I think it is always a good sign when someone whose work offers a creative, personal and political window into lives and identities that have long been invisible or mis/under-represented is literally rewarded at such a high profile level,” Greenwood wrote in an emailed statement.

“Increased attention and resources may not only support Bechdel’s ongoing work, but the recognition may also send an important message to other aspiring artists, writers, and cartoonists for whom Bechdel is (or will be) a role model,” Greenwood explained.

As far as the future of her writing is concerned, Bechdel is currently working on her third graphic novel, which will be released in 2017.

Despite the intensely personal nature of her memoirs, Bechdel emphasized how important it is to express and revisit her unhappy past, both for herself and for her readers.

Bechdel ended her lecture with this positive retrospective approach. “Someone once asked me, ‘Would you rather have a happy childhood or these books?’ There’s no question—the books! And I still think that.”

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