

The Diary as a Verbal and Visual Tool:  
Retelling Traumatic Experience in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*  
and Phoebe Gloeckner's *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*

By

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*For my parents.*



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## Abstract

This thesis explores the graphic and diaristic aspects of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* and Phoebe Gloeckner's *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures*. Though increased scholarly attention has been paid to the graphic aspects of these texts as it relates to childhood and adolescent trauma, far less has been written about the diaristic. By focusing my analysis on the graphic as well as the diaristic aspects of each text, This thesis argues that, for both Bechdel and Gloeckner, trauma is able to be reconciled when the life-writing is filtered through the perspective of the an adult narratorial lens and is expressed in a form that rejects secrecy by making trauma material and visual. Additionally, the diaristic aspects of the text offer a unique tool to prompt the recollection of memory, honor the adolescent perspective, and provide a context for traumatic experience that is emotionally immediate.

This analysis is focused on the combinations of word and image that appear within both texts as well as the archival diaries from each authors' childhoods that are integrated into each work. This thesis utilizes the work of trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub to understand how the graphic novel and diaristic aspects of each text are able to function as a tool for transforming trauma. I also directly engage with Hillary Chute's readings of both texts as a point of departure. However, Chute's analysis does not account for the specific ways that the diary uniquely blends with the graphic. Therefore, Phillippe Lejeune's theories of diary provide the theoretical context to engage Chute's work on the portrayal of adolescent female trauma within these texts.

In the concluding chapter, I elaborate on Scott McCloud's concept of "closure" within comics. For McCloud, the invisible space between panels, which force the reader to mentally fill in the gaps themselves, is the defining aspect of comics as a medium. I connect McCloud's theoretical "closure" to the emotional closure that can be reached when both authors tell their story through the graphic novel form. McCloud's "closure" can also be tied to a unique sort of closure that exists through the blending of the graphic image with the diartistic text. Perhaps state your central argument here again

Key Words: graphic narrative, comics, trauma theory, diaries, gender, sexuality, autobiography, Alison Bechdel, Phoebe Gloeckner, *Fun Home*, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*

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Short Titles

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## INTRODUCTION

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* has recently been the focus of much controversy. During the summer of 2015, *Fun Home* was chosen as voluntary, but encouraged, summer reading for all incoming first-year students at Duke University in order to "give incoming students a shared intellectual experience with other members of the class," said Michael Schoenfeld, vice president for public affairs and government relations at Duke (CNN). However, students began protesting *Fun Home* as the chosen summer reading material by citing that its depictions of lesbian sexuality were "pornographic" and did not align with their morals. Similarly, Phoebe Gloeckner's *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* has faced the threat of censorship from multiple outlets on the charge that it is "pornographic." In fact, her work was described as "a how-to book for pedophiles" by Gary Podesto, the mayor of Stockton, California, when it was banned in Stockton in 2004 (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund).

Why is it that graphic narratives written by women are often deemed "pornographic?" In defense of his position regarding the summer reading at Duke, student Brian Grasso explains:

I think there is an important distinction between images and written words. If the book explored the same themes without sexual images or erotic language, I would have read it. But viewing pictures of sexual acts, regardless of the genders of the people involved, conflict with the inherent sacredness of sex (Washington Post).

Statements like these, which emphasize the visual nature of graphic narrative, contain the vestiges of an extensive history of the censorship of comics in America. In 1954, the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) established the Comics Code Authority to encourage comics publishers to self-regulate content. The idea of a non-governmental regulatory body began to take form after an emerging discourse that correlated juvenile delinquency with reading comics. Frederic Wertham, a psychiatrist, was a leading crusader against comics. His book *Seduction of the Innocent* provided supposed evidence to support the claim that depictions of

sex, violence, drugs, crime, and other adult themes present in popular comics of the time led to juvenile delinquency. Wertham and his colleagues' McCarthy-esque crusade against comics eventually prompted the 1954 comic book hearings in which the issue of explicit content depicted in comic books was presented before the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. These hearings eventually led to the adoption of the Comics Code Authority by the MCAA that same year. Although the code was not a governmental body, it still served as a strong regulatory force. Comics were submitted to the MCAA and, if they met the standards imposed by the code, were stamped with the official seal, which read, "Approved by the Comics Code Authority" (Nyberg).

After the creation of the Comics Code, most mainstream publishers only published works that were in compliance. However, beginning in the 1960's, underground artists, mostly situated in San Francisco, began to subvert the power of the code. These artists were not concerned with gaining the respect and attention of mainstream publishers and were able to ignore the rules inscribed upon them. Instead, they created comics that were completely uncensored. These comix (this spelling refers to works that were conceived, created, and published within the sphere of the underground) were self-published or published by small collectives (Chute 14). These works were often confessional in nature and depicted violent and sexual situations in graphic detail. Robert Crumb and his wife Aline Kominsky-Crumb were leaders of the underground comix revolution. Their works were explicit and often included representations of the couple having sex. In a recent interview, Kominsky-Crumb stated, "I'm trying to create something that is influenced as little as possible by all the commercial forces out there that want to tell me what to buy and what to do" (Kominsky-Crumb 341). This is not a unique position for members of the comix underground movement. By placing themselves in

direct opposition to mainstream culture, underground cartoonists in the 1960's and 70's were able to subvert regulations imposed upon them by the Comics Code and mainstream culture's crusade against comics.

It is within the underground comix movement that the first autobiographical comics by women were created and the genre of graphic narratives began to emerge. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud defines the broader genre of comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.” McCloud also points out that the correct term, “comics,” is a noun that is “plural in form, used with a singular verb.” (McCloud 9). However, for the purposes of this study, a more specific term than “comics” is necessary. This thesis will explore the diaristic and graphic aspects of both Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* and Phoebe Gloeckner's *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures*. These texts are both book-length works composed of comics content, which include text and image, and are also autobiographical in nature. Thematically, both works deal with female childhood and adolescent trauma. Additionally, both texts utilize an archival diary record from their respective childhoods as a crucial tool for retelling their experience as it relates to key male figures in their lives.

Due to the fact that both Bechdel and Gloeckner's texts contain comics content and are autobiographical in nature, I will refer to the genre that I am studying as “graphic narrative.” I borrow this vocabulary from Hillary Chute, comics scholar and author of *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. For Chute, graphic narrative is distinctly different from the more recognizable term “graphic novel.” Both terms describe book-length works that contain comics content, a hybrid form of word and image. However, for the purposes of my

work, the term graphic novel will be used to describe fiction works whereas graphic narratives are autobiographical or semi-autobiographical in nature. Chute states:

I prefer graphic narrative because...the most riveting comics texts coming out right now—from men and women alike—are not novels at all. Instead, even as they deliberately place stress on official histories and traditional modes of transmitting history, they are deeply invested in their own accuracy and historicity. They are texts that either claim nonfiction status or choose...to reject the categories of nonfiction and fiction altogether in their self-representational storylines (Chute 3).

As Chute implies, it is important to avoid the tendency to treat comics as a monolithic genre. Instead, there should be a clear distinction between fiction and nonfiction works written in comics form. In this tradition, my analyses will consistently make the separate genres of graphic novel and graphic narrative clear. Therefore, both of these texts should be referred to as graphic *narratives* as opposed to graphic novels since they are not fictional texts but are based on the real-life stories of their authors. Aline Kominsky-Crumb and other women who belonged to the underground comix movement wrote about their personal histories and everyday lives, including their most explicit sexual experiences, in order to defy standards imposed by the culture of mainstream publishing and the Comics Code. These women originated the genre of feminist graphic narrative.

Contemporary graphic narratives written by women like Gloeckner and Bechdel were directly influenced by the highly intimate and confessional nature of the underground comix written by women in the 1960's and 1970's. In fact, in *Diary*, Minnie, who is a teenager during the 1970's in San Francisco, describes her love for underground comix and writes a fan letter to Robert Crumb and Aline Kominsky-Crumb. Interestingly, Alison also begins writing in her childhood diary during the early 1970's. The underground comix movement coincided with the second wave feminist movement that occurred in the 1960's and 1970's. The majority of the

underground comix work was happening in San Francisco, which was also a prominent site for multiple social movements such as the women's movement, the civil rights movement, and the gay liberation movement. The close proximity of these activist social movements to the underground comix movement directly influenced the content of the comix. Not only was this the first time that women were writing about their personal histories in comics form, but the stories that they were telling were fundamentally imbued with a social awareness that was typical of the culture of 1960's-70's San Francisco. This social awareness eventually led to a genre of women's life writing that was undoubtedly influenced by the feminist movement.

Both generations of graphic narratives written by women push back against restrictive and repressive notions about women's sexuality through their visualization of lived experience in a way that is undoubtedly feminist in nature. For example, one of the most important common threads between the two generations of women's graphic life writing is the focus on the everyday lived experiences of women. Kominsky-Crumb and other members of the *Wimmen's Comix* collective paved the way for women to begin writing about their everyday lives in a way that was both personal and political through the graphic form with their confessional style. As Jared Gardner states, "There is no glamour, but neither is there any shame: the open, even prideful honesty of this work would become an inspiration for a new generation of comics autographers, opening up a new sub-genre of diarists and chroniclers of the everyday" (Gardner 14). Decades later, the work of documenting everyday lived experience becomes a central aspect of both Gloeckner and Bechdel's texts with the use of both fictional and archival diary entries from adolescence.

We are currently living in an interesting cultural moment regarding contemporary feminist graphic narratives. There is a tension between the popularization and suppression of

these works. As previously discussed, American graphic narratives have a brutal history of censorship and vestiges of this history still remain today as evident from the controversy at Duke University. However, despite these attempts at censorship, the graphic novel has received critical acclaim and widespread attention. Within the last decade, graphic narratives have gone from receiving barely any critical scholarly attention to becoming almost canonized in feminist studies. Substantive work has been done on trauma as it relates to these texts. This thesis will elaborate on the work of Hilary Chute, Julia Watson, and Jared Gardner. All of these scholars have discussed both Bechdel and Gloeckner within the context of the graphic narrative form as well as the retelling of childhood trauma. Though these scholars have discussed the function of the diary in both of these texts at some level, I wish to expand on this discussion. Within this body of critical work, much attention has been paid to the archival photographs in *Fun Home*. For example, both Chute and Watson place great emphasis on the importance of Bechdel's photographic archive in their analyses. However, significantly less attention has been paid to Bechdel's use of archival diaries. Additionally, Gloeckner's work has generally received far less critical attention compared to Bechdel's. In terms of what has been said about *Diary*, Chute has mostly focused her analysis on the visual aspects, such as the simultaneous representation of pleasure and degradation. And while other scholars such as Frederick Byrne Kohlert have looked at the graphic narrative form's usefulness for portraying trauma, less concern has been given to the fictional and archival diary entries as a useful form for dealing with trauma.

However, little research has been done on the diary as a form of literary expression. Philippe Lejeune states, "There has been very little exploration in this field as yet; almost everything still remains to be done" (Lejeune 165). This is especially true as it relates to women's diaries. In their introduction to *Interfaces*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson state,

“Seeing women’s art as merely personal— is one way in which the autobiographical has signaled that women can only be self-interested, implying their diminished artistic capacities and vision” (Smith and Watson 13). The diary is a form that is often viewed as feminine in nature, narcissistic and lacking creative potential. Though the graphic narrative is beginning to receive scholarly attention for its ability to portray trauma, this thesis contends that diaries are similar in this way. Specifically, Lejeune describes adolescence as the principal period of diary keeping, and that this is especially true among young girls. He states, “a fairly large number of persons keep a diary during moments of crisis or significant periods of adulthood” (Lejeune 34). Despite the fact that little attention has been given to the diary form, it is a form that is especially relevant to the stories of female adolescent trauma that this thesis explores. Therefore, one of the projects of this thesis is to give generative critical attention to two undervalued and under-analyzed literary forms, the diary and the comic.

This thesis will explore how the interplay of the graphic and diaristic aspects of each text uniquely allows for the processing of childhood and adolescent trauma. Through these texts, confused adolescent secrecy is transformed into a reconciled adult perspective. The graphic and diaristic aspects of both texts serve as a sort of therapeutic tool in the sense that they converge with recalled experience from youth, documented in diary form by both authors as adolescents, and are then reworked, redrawn, and reinterpreted by the adult authors both visually and verbally. These graphic narratives courageously tell the story of confusing and painful childhoods from the perspective of reliving those experiences through the eyes of an adult author. As adults, these authors are capable of reconciling the trauma and confusion they experienced as adolescents, forced to deal with complex issues in secrecy and without supportive parental figures. I will argue that the simultaneous presence of the graphic and diaristic creates a

unique formal environment that allows both authors to relive and re-process their childhood beyond the simple recalling of that history. Through the use of the graphic narrative, both authors are able to develop a visual account of their histories. This allows them to subvert the secretive nature of their traumas by quite literally making their stories material. Therefore, trauma is able to be reconciled in a transformative way for both Bechdel and Gloeckner when the form of expression itself rejects secrecy. On the other hand, the diaristic aspects of the text offer a unique tool to prompt the recollection of memory, honor the adolescent perspective, and provide a context for traumatic experience that is emotionally immediate.

Though the diaristic and graphic aspects of both texts allow for a transformative retelling of traumatic history, they also allow the authors to comments on the layers of mediation that are entailed in this reconciliation through the historical material of the diary. My analysis of the diaristic and archival strategies of both texts will bring to light the fragmented, disjointed, and uncertain nature of writing about childhood trauma. This analysis will be divided into three chapters. The first will be focus on the diary as a tool, which utilizes secrecy and uncertainty to gain agency as it relates to death and sexuality in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. The second chapter will center on the blending of the adult narratorial perspective and the first-person adolescent voice through the verbal and visual modes in Phoebe Gloeckner's *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures*. The thesis will conclude with a discussion of Scott McCloud's concept of "closure" as a defining aspect of comics as a form and how this idea is especially relevant for graphic narratives that deal with trauma. Specifically, a reading of the last images presented in each text will highlight key themes and establish how the work of the diary also provides it's own unique "closure." Ultimately, this thesis will add to the critical conversation regarding these works by establishing that the blending of the graphic and

diaristic creates a unique narrative space, which is able to create a bridge between the visual and verbal, the adult and adolescent, and the known and unknown. Through the connection of these seemingly opposing forces, another linkage becomes possible, the reconciliation of the self with the traumatic event. In both texts, the interplay of the graphic and diaristic elements offer the potential for reconciliation, but they also allow the authors to represent the nature of traumatic recollection in a generative way by highlighting and announcing the gaps in memory.



## CHAPTER 1

### COMPULSION & SECRECY: THE DIARY IN *FUN HOME*

In the author biography on the back cover of *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Alison Bechdel is described as “a careful archivist of her own life” who has been “keeping a journal [since] she was ten.” *Fun Home* might even be considered Bechdel’s ultimate journal entry. Her autobiography is made up of a variety of archival objects such as photographs, letters, maps, and diary entries. However, nothing in *Fun Home* was scanned. In fact, all of the archival documents presented in the text were recreated by Bechdel’s own hand (Chute 183). Additionally, Bechdel took photographs of herself posing for each character in every panel of the book: this adds up to about 1,000 panels. This strategy of assembling her memoir through the re-creation of archival objects such as her adolescent diary entries creates an artistic space to re-imagine and relive the past.

*Fun Home* is a complex memoir that is told in a nonlinear and recursive format. It centers on Bechdel’s relationship with her emotionally distant father, Bruce. Specifically, Bechdel focuses on the circumstances surrounding her father’s death during her freshman year at college. Bechdel explicitly deems his death a suicide despite the fact that the circumstances are ambiguous. His death occurs only two months after Alison comes out as a lesbian in a letter to her parents. Additionally, only a few weeks prior, Alison’s mom decides to file for divorce upon the realization the Bruce has been engaging in affairs with students and young men throughout their entire marriage. The similarities and differences between Alison’s and Bruce’s sexual and gender identities are at the crux of this story. The struggles that both Alison and her father grapple with in terms of sexual identity become inherently connected to Bruce’s death in Alison’s mind. She states, “The idea that I caused his death by telling my parents I was a lesbian

is perhaps illogical” (Bechdel 84). She deals with this guilt throughout the entire memoir. The acute traumatic event at the center of this story is Bruce’s death and Alison’s subsequent feelings of guilt surrounding her potential involvement in triggering his suicide by coming out. However, her suffering also stems from the emotional neglect that she experiences throughout her childhood because of her father’s insistence on repressing her burgeoning sexual identity as a lesbian. For example, when Alison is enthralled after seeing a butch lesbian for the first time while dining with her father he states, “Is **that** what you want to look like?” (Bechdel 118). Furthermore, she is pained by the recognition of *his* suffering due to his closeted gayness. However, as a child and adolescent, Alison is able to work through issues related to sexuality, death, as well as her relationship with her father with the help of the diary. More importantly, as an adult author, Bechdel’s inclusion of redrawn archival diaries in *Fun Home* allows her to comment on the layers of mediation that are necessary for her to tell the painful story of her childhood.

Bechdel’s story is complicated by an underlying obsessive-compulsive disorder. In *Fun Home*, she openly discusses her struggle with OCD. In fact, it was during the most severe period of obsessive-compulsive behavior that she experienced as a child that she began keeping a journal. Originally given as a gift from her father as a distraction from her OCD, Bechdel’s diary eventually becomes filled with its own series of compulsions. By foregrounding her archival diaries in *Fun Home*, Bechdel highlights the compulsive nature of her remembering and retelling of traumatic memory. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 11). For Bechdel, the death of her father by suicide is indeed the most “sudden” and

“catastrophic” event of her life. However, the emotional distance from her parents she experiences as a child as well as the realization of her father’s closeted homosexuality are less acute instances of traumatic experience, but are still traumatic nonetheless. In Caruth’s definition of trauma, the response to the traumatic event often includes some sort of intrusive phenomena. Psychoanalyst Dori Laub also elaborates on the intrusive nature of trauma. He states, “This imperative to tell and to be heard can become itself an all-consuming life task. Yet no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to that inner compulsion...and if words are not trustworthy or adequate, the life that is chosen can become the vehicle by which the struggle to tell continues” (Laub 78). By looking at the archival diaries Bechdel employs throughout *Fun Home*, it becomes evident that, for Bechdel, trauma prompts a repetitive, intrusive, and compulsive need to reconstruct and retell experience. These compulsions are simultaneously a part of Bechdel’s personal and traumatic history as well as render it possible for her to do the painstaking work of crafting her autobiography. And as Laub suggests, words alone are not trustworthy enough to adequately tell experience for Bechdel.

Alison first exhibits obsessive-compulsive symptoms at the age of ten when she begins counting the drops in the bathtub faucet to ensure that they stop on an even number. This eventually leads to a series of rituals that begin to dominate Alison’s life. However, Alison is not the only member of her family who demonstrates obsessive-compulsive behavior. Her father obsessively restores and redecorates their gothic revival home and her mother constantly plays the piano. Both parents exhibit compulsive behaviors as it relates to their creative pursuits. Bechdel remarks that her parents’ isolating hobbies causes her to resent them, but also teaches her to metaphorically “feed” herself with art. She states, “It was a vicious circle, though. The more gratification we found in our own geniuses, the more isolated we grew. Our home was like

an artists' colony. We ate together, but otherwise we were absorbed in our separate pursuits. And in this isolation, our creativity took on an aspect of compulsion" (Bechdel 134). For Bechdel, compulsion becomes an outlet for creativity, an artistic quality passed down from her parents. Her struggle with OCD becomes evident through the content of her archival diaries and is also echoed through the artistic construction of the precise, repetitive, and redrawn verbal/visual aspects of the text itself.

Alison's OCD symptoms do not lessen with the introduction of her diary. On the contrary, her compulsions were heightened within her journal entries. The adult narratorial voice of Bechdel states that her journal writing explains her "own compulsive propensity to autobiography" (Bechdel 140). She establishes how, at first, she merely began writing down her experiences after the encouragement of her father who suggests that she "just write down what's happening" (Bechdel 140). In fact, Bechdel states that the first three words of her diary, "Dad is reading," are written in her father's handwriting. Regarding diaries, Lejeune states, "The very fact that deciphering the handwriting slows one's pace has a certain utility; it affords valuable time to understand; little by little one assimilates the non-said, one picks up the code, one notices the gaps and one begins to read between the lines..." (Lejeune 41). The haunting image of Alison and her father's handwriting existing simultaneously on the same page of the journal immediately suggests that their personal histories are inextricably linked. The handwritten appearance of Bechdel's redrawn diaries gives an intense and intimate feeling. However, in opposition to her father's suggestion, Alison's later diary entries begin to take on a more complex function than the mere statement of fact, prompting the reader to begin to "read between the lines."

This change occurs after what Alison calls an “epistemological crisis.” This crisis is rooted in the fact that Alison could not be completely sure that the things she was writing were “objectively true” (Bechdel 141). She states, “All I could speak for was my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those...My simple, declarative sentences began to strike me as hubristic at best, utter lies at worst” (Bechdel 141). This uncertainty regarding the truth of her statements leads her to begin writing “I think” in between phrases in her journal, which then eventually morph into a shorthand version, a “curvy circumflex” symbol (*See Figure 1*) After the creation of the symbol, Alison begins drawing the curvy circumflex over entire diary entries to account for her complete inability to provide evidence for truth. In, “Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*” Ann Cvetkovich states that, “the graphic act of striking out words with a mark that is a cross between word and image (and which in turn makes the drawings of the text of the diary as much image as word) provides its own eloquent testimony to the impossibility of documenting truthfully what she is seeing or experiencing” (Cvetkovich 121). In this diary entry, word and image are fighting for presence on the page, obscuring one another in the process. It is only through this combination (albeit messy) of word and image that young Alison is able to reconcile her anxieties. In other words: young Alison was practicing the beginnings of the graphic narrative form. The adolescent journal entries that are inscribed with the annotation “I think,” as well as its equivalent circumflex symbol, reflect Alison’s anxiety surrounding the amount of uncertainty in her life. This uncertainty is especially highlighted in journal entries that focus on sexuality in death. In fact, it is in the journal entry where Alison describes seeing a dead body for the first time at her family’s funeral home that the text becomes completely engulfed by the circumflex symbol. As Jared Gardner rightly notes, “But beneath this entry is the first figural drawing that appears in Alison's diaries: a pathetic smiley face, untouched by text or circumflex”

(Gardner 4). Although an underlying compulsive need to accurately depict the truth of what she is experiencing prompts the battle of word and symbol onto the page of the diary, death is the catalyst for Alison's first use of the iconic, cartoon image.

Years later, as an adolescent, Alison is still writing in her diary, but she is no longer qualifying her statements with "I think" or its symbol. In fact, Bechdel states, "my diary was no longer the utterly reliable document it had been in my youth. A faltering, elliptic tone was creeping in" (Bechdel 162). One re-drawing of her adolescent diary states, "Uh... Ma & Pa went to the Playhouse to see 'No Sex, Please... We're British.' They liked it... I guess" (Bechdel 162). In this example, Alison's childhood compulsions to be undeniably accurate through qualifying statements like "I think" morph into a more overall tone of uncertainty due to the multiple ellipses and statements like "I guess." Her continued lack of certainty reflects her need to repeat, recover, and redraw experiences through the project of the diary as well as the autobiography itself. She also begins to utilize more statements of emotion and opinion. For example, "We watched Sonny & Cher. Which is the dumbest T.V. show in the world. Next to the 'Brady Bunch' and 'J.R.R. Tolkien died!' AAUGH!" (Bechdel 169). While Alison's childhood diary entries were focused on remaining true to reality, her adolescent entries become less concerned with certainty. Instead of remaining crippled with fear at the thought of inaccuracy, as she was as a child, Alison's adolescent entries *embrace* uncertainty after the discovery of the verbal/visual blend. Where words fail, images can fill in the gaps and vice versa, as is evident in her adolescent diary entries regarding sexuality.



Figure 1: Pg. 148, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel.

As she ages, Alison's comfort with inaccuracy continues to become more apparent within her diary entries. She sacrifices her childhood drive to compulsively tell the truth in favor of the more significant drive toward secrecy, even if this means lying to herself. Alison's engagement, with flux, secrecy, uncertainty, and multiple meaning allows her to find an aspect of stability and agency in the reprocessing of experiences she has little control over. Alison mentions her journal for the first time on page seventy-eight. On the previous page, she describes coming out to her parents via letter. A week and a half later, she receives a letter back from her mother expressing mild disapproval. Nonetheless, Alison is upset by her mother's disappointment and decides to buy a present for herself, a pocketknife. A symbol of her self-reliance and lesbian identity, Alison accidentally slices her finger while opening the knife and states "I smeared the blood into my journal, pleased by the opportunity to transmit my anguish to the page so literally" (Bechdel 78). The corresponding panel pictures Alison's open journal. The left page contains what appear to be several streaks of blood as well as an arrow pointing to the markings with accompanying

text in Alison's handwriting that states "My Blood." The right page contains Alison's text Dated February 21st. The journal states, "Bizarre letter from Mom today. One tantalizing sentence stands out: 'I still hurt from old wounds. I have had to deal with this problem in another form that almost resulted in catastrophe. Do you know what I am talking about?'" No! I don't! What the hell is going on?" (Bechdel 78). Just as the text stops, Alison's bandaged right hand is pictured, holding a pen. Her left hand rests upon the left page and the pocketknife sits just above the top right page of the journal. Alison's drive to visually display her anguish by smearing her blood onto the page of the journal suggests that it is simply not enough to accurately depict her emotional experiences with words alone. The 'wound' she experiences after receiving her mother's reaction to her coming out letter can only be accurately depicted by the material presence of a visualized wound, her blood on the page. This imagery also serves as a reminder of the "old wounds" that Alison's mother describes in her letter. In that case, the wounds refer to Bruce's closeted homosexuality and multiple affairs with men. In addition to the visual element of the wound, Alison feels the need to caption the image with the annotation "My Blood," so that she, or any other reader, has no doubt as to what the markings signify. Unlike her earlier childhood diaries where words and symbol do battle for importance on the page, here, word and image are working together to accurately describe experience.

Another diary entry that centers on the presence (or lack thereof) of blood deals with Alison's first menstruation. In what Bechdel calls a "momentous entry," meaning is almost incomprehensible behind a "hedge of qualifiers, encryption, and stray punctuation." The written text of the journal states, "I think I started Ning or something. (HAHA)? HOW HORRID!" (Bechdel 169). The narrating Bechdel explains that "Ning" refers to menstruating. In this case, Alison encodes the word "menstruating" in order for it to be incomprehensible to anyone who

might read it. As Lejeune states, “A private diary, by definition is allusive. Implicit reference is preponderant in the private diary, so that the reader spends a great deal of time trying to guess what is being spoken about” (Lejeune 41). Additionally, the presence of multiple ‘periods’ just below the entry make up the “stray punctuation” that Bechdel refers to, but also function as a subliminal and visual reminder as to what “Ning” really refers to, her period. The tendency to encode meaning ensures secrecy, especially as it relates to conflicted gender identity and sexuality. This not only reflects Alison’s attitude to her own sexual identity, but her father’s as well. Secrecy is a pervasive aspect of Bruce’s sexual life, and, in turn, secrecy becomes inscribed into young Alison’s journal and attitude to her own sexuality.

Three years later, at sixteen, Alison uses the encryption “Ning” to refer to another sexual event, masturbation. Her journal entry dated Sun. March 6 states, “I gave up ning [sic]for lent and I just did it twice. Argh!!” (Bechdel 170). The events surrounding Alison’s first masturbation are also interesting. Alison states, “I didn’t know then that there was a word for the oddly gratifying motion of rocking back and forth in my chair as I drew at my desk” (Bechdel 170). In the preceding panels, Alison is pictured at her desk drawing a male basketball player. The first panel on the next page establishes Alison’s feet, shifting back and forth in the chair. The final panel of the sequence pictures Alison’s hands tightly clenched to her desk, her pen has fallen out of her hand, suggesting orgasm. Here, the act of drawing and engaging in the process of visualization is directly connected to intense pleasure. Though the act of drawing the basketball player was not the cause for orgasm, the two events are associated in Bechdel’s memory. In this journal entry, Alison is still encoding meaning regarding events related to gender and sexuality to ensure secrecy. Additionally, both momentous journal entries include aspects of visualization. The stray periods incorporated into Alison’s journal about her first period allow her to visually

represent something that she is currently unable to describe in words. Additionally, Alison's first orgasm occurs while she is in the act of drawing, establishing the immense pleasure she gets out of the visualization process. Interestingly, the journal entry in which she describes drawing the basketball player, there is no mention of orgasm or masturbation despite the fact that Bechdel clearly remembers the event. The journal states, "I drew a fantastic picture of a basketball player. I had watermelon for breakfast" (Bechdel 171). Pictured below is the drawing of a cartoon person eating watermelon and spitting out the seeds. Another larger picture of an eaten watermelon is drawn just to the left. While there is no mention of masturbation, the element of the visual that is so connected with Alison's first masturbatory experience is still there.

In addition to the clear emphasis on the visual elements of her adolescent journals, Bechdel also notes recurring verbal aspects of her diary. She establishes that she uses the same phrase, "How Horrid!" to describe two life-altering events. She first references it in the entry that describes her first period. She uses it a second time later when describing her father's involvement with a trial due to allegations that he provided alcohol to a minor, a young male student of his. As Bechdel states, this verbal phrase is able to epitomize young Alison's because of its ability to "embrace the actual horror—puberty, public disgrace—then at the last second nimbly sidesteps it, laughing (Bechdel 174). Thus, it is neither the verbal nor visual alone that can accurately describe experience, but the unique blending of the two. When discussing her father's trial, the blending between the graphic and diaristic becomes extremely useful as a narrative device. The first panel of Chapter 6, "The Ideal Husband," pictures one of Alison's archival diary entries. The entry reads, "Mom went State College. Dad's gonna go to a phsychiatrist!!!! Moley Hoses! He says it's because he does dumb dangerous things and because he's bad and wants to be good...or something" (*See Figure 2*). The next four panels picture

Alison speaking with her father in the kitchen. In the first panel, she asks him where he is going after noticing that he was dressed in a suit and tie. The second panel pictures a confused Alison exclaiming “Why!?” The narrating caption reads, “The import of what he said was remarkable, but less so than the fact that he was saying it to me” (Bechdel 153). However, these two panels never establish Bruce saying anything. Instead, the reader is able to assume that Bruce tells her that he is going to see a psychiatrist after being exposed to Alison’s diary entry in the first panel explaining the situation. We don’t see Bruce speak until the last panel on the page in which he says, “I’m bad. Not good like you” Without the diary, this scene traces a tense conversation between Alison and her father for which there is no context.

However, we revisit this scene later in the chapter. The bottom three panels on page 162 could quite possibly be copied and pasted into the scene at the beginning of the chapter to create a full sequence explaining the conversation. In these three panels, the reader finally gets Bruce’s answer to Alison’s question “Where are you going?” He responds with “To Danville...I...I have to see a psychiatrist” (Bechdel 162). Alison presents this conversation to us in an intensely disjointed way. Just before she presents us with the gaps that were missing from the conversation, Bechdel discusses the “faltering, elliptic tone” that was entering into her diaries. Interestingly, the conversation with her father about the appointment to see a psychiatrist is composed of three consecutive panels of equal size, almost mirroring the visual of the ellipses that appear in her diary (*See Figure 3*). This is another testimony to Bechdel’s unique representation of things that are unknowable or uncontrollable. By explicitly portraying the context of the scene in such a disjointed way (refusing to establish the entire sequential conversation until the middle of the chapter) the reader becomes acutely aware of how important the diary is for Bechdel’s process of reliving and retelling experience. However, the discussion

of the elliptical and uncertain tone of her diaries that precedes the three panels that fill in the gaps from the beginning of the chapter establish that the historical material of the diary is still unable to fill all of the gaps in memory. Instead, a combination of memory, diaristic record, and visual/verbal imaginings must suffice.

Bechdel's childhood was filled with secrecy: the secret of her father's sexuality, his multiple affairs with young men, the secret of her own sexuality, and ultimately, the unconfirmed secret of her father's suicide. The covert nature of her trauma prompts childhood Alison's need to write diary entries with obsessive and compulsive attention to truth. However, through the work of her diary, Alison is able to utilize uncertainty and secrecy as a tool to regain agency regarding events and experiences she has little control over. As an adult author, Bechdel continues to be able to reconcile her anxieties about unfaltering truth by actively visualizing as well as verbalizing her experiences through the blending of the graphic and the diaristic. When Bechdel notices that a period of important events goes unrecorded in her diary, she refers to "the implicit lie of the blank page" (Bechdel 186). Whereas childhood Alison was cripplingly afraid of the implicit lie of the written word, the adult Bechdel's use of word *and* image, as well as archival diary entries, allow her to push against the notion that she is somehow "lying" when speaking of experiences that are traumatic and, therefore, uncertain in nature.



Figure 2: Pg. 153, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel

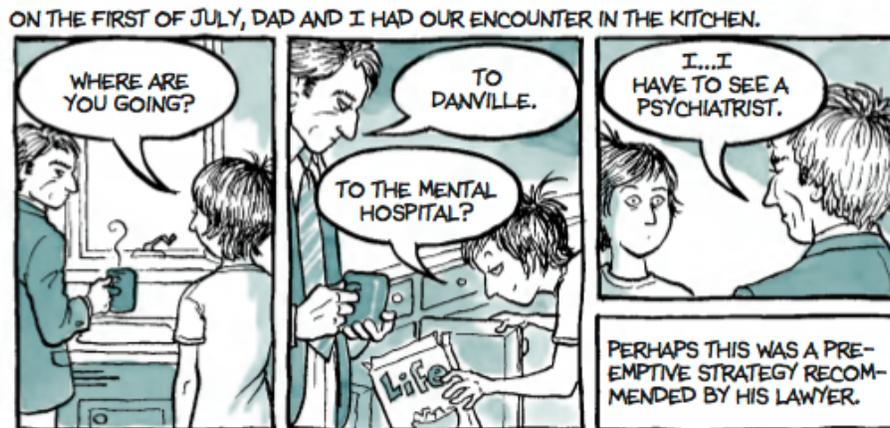


Figure 3: Pg. 162, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel



## CHAPTER 2

### THE DIARY AND NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE IN *THE DIARY OF A TEENAGE GIRL*

In an interview with *Bitch* magazine regarding *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures*, author Phoebe Gloeckner states, “My mother is constantly threatening to sue me” (Gloeckner 1). However, despite comments like these, Gloeckner insists that her work is not autobiographical. In the preface to the revised edition of *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* Gloeckner states, “*The Diary of a Teenage Girl* has often been characterized as autobiography, life-writing, or memoir... I see my work differently. This book is a novel. The differences between a diary and a novel (even a novel with the word ‘Diary’ in its title) are important to consider” (Gloeckner xv).

In this way, Gloeckner and Bechdel are opposites. Bechdel openly welcomes the labels of memoir and autobiography and she consistently establishes *Fun Home* as rooted in her real life experiences. On the other hand, Gloeckner is insistent that *Diary* is *not* a memoir. This is despite the fact that *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* employs some of Gloeckner’s own childhood diary entries verbatim. Although Gloeckner has referred to *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* as a work of fiction, it is undoubtedly based on her life. The protagonist, Minnie Goetze, shares an uncanny physical resemblance to the author. The text also mirrors actual incidences in her life, which she plainly acknowledges. In an interview with *Salon* she states, “I mean, really, my motivation is, ‘This all happened to me. I feel really totally fucked-up. I don’t understand any of this. Let’s look at it. Let’s not look at it sideways or make it look prettier, but let’s just look at it for what it is.’” (Salon, “Not Your Mother’s Comic Book” 74). Additionally, she seamlessly moves from referring to “Minnie’s” experiences to referring to her own experiences. Suggesting that “I” and

“Minnie” are one and the same. Therefore, I will refer to Gloeckner’s text as a semi-autobiographical novel in order to respect authorial intent, but also not to ignore the clear autobiographic elements of the text.

*The Diary of a Teenage Girl* is a complex and jarring work that blurs the lines of genre on many levels. While *Fun Home* is a more traditional graphic narrative due to the fact that is almost exclusively written in comics form, *Diary* is an original form that combines traditional prose, full-page illustrations, and dispersed sections of comics. The novel is structured as a series of diary entries written by 15-year-old protagonist Minnie Goetze. However, almost half of the diaristic prose is taken from Gloeckner’s own teenage diary, written from 1976-1977, and is reproduced word for word in the text (Chute 74). The other half of *Diary* does not consist of word for word reproductions. Instead, Gloeckner, as an adult author, writes this portion of the text and does not rely on translations from any original source. This is all despite the fact that many of the events might align with Gloeckner’s real teenage experience. Additionally, *Diary* consists of four representational layers: Minnie’s “real” and “fictional” diary entries (“real” diary entries refer to those reproduced from Gloeckner’s childhood diary whereas “fictional” entries were written by Gloeckner as an adult author), archival cartoons and comics drawn by Gloeckner herself as a teenager during 1976-1977, seventeen comic strips written from an adult narratorial perspective that occasionally interrupt the prose text, and twenty-seven full-page and fifty-six in-text illustrations. Clearly, *Diary* is an original, complex, and hybrid form composed of both word and image.

Taking place from 1976-1977, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* centers on a year in the life of 15-year old Minnie Goetze who lives in San Francisco with her mother and sister. Minnie begins writing in her journal after she loses her virginity to her mother’s middle-aged boyfriend,

Monroe Rutherford. The majority of the novel explores the complexities of Minnie's sexual relationship with Monroe. Although Monroe is not related to Minnie by blood, the dynamic of their relationship is potentially deeply disturbing to readers because of its incestual undertones. Due to her inability to speak with her mother about her relationship with Monroe, Minnie takes to writing in her diary as a way to cope with the confusion she feels regarding her newfound sexuality. As in the case of *Fun Home*, this text engages in a conversation with the adolescent self through the material of the historical diary. Unlike Bechdel, Gloeckner's archival diaries are interspersed with fictionalized diary entries, and there is no way to tell the difference between fiction and archive. However, in a way that is similar to Bechdel, Gloeckner uses the diary as a tool to reprocess and retell her traumatic story through visual and verbal means while honoring the adolescent perspective and regaining agency for herself.

Like Bechdel, secrecy plays a central role in Minnie's choice of artistic expression. She attempts to better understand the complexity of her sexual relationship with Monroe, her mother's boyfriend, through diary writing. However, she must tell her story through this secretive form because the controversial nature of her relationship with Monroe renders it impossible for her to speak with her mother. In a section titled "A Note of Caution to the Reader" she states:

This book contains private information. On these pages I have spilled my feelings and thoughts as they have come to me, spontaneously. I would not care so much if I hadn't written things that are directly connected to the lives of others, but I have, and if you do read this you may be deeply hurt and bewildered and confused and you may even cry, so please, do not read any further (Gloeckner xix).

This introduction establishes the high stakes nature of Minnie's story. Secrecy is imperative for her due to the fact that she has written about the "lives of others." Specifically, this introduction clarifies her fear of "deeply hurt[ing]" her mother through the simple act telling of her story.

However, the traumatic nature of her relationship with Monroe requires her to find some form of expression, albeit secretive, as a means of survival.

Although the written diary is an effective tool for survival, words alone are ultimately unable to accurately depict Minnie's experience. The seventeen comic strips along with the twenty-seven full-page and fifty-six in-text illustrations that interrupt the first person diary narrative are told from an adult narratorial perspective. The comic strips and illustrations do not advance the story line. On the contrary, the images serve a more interpretive purpose, as they are the adult author's additions to the story, which has already been presented through Minnie's diary. The visual nature of the comics and illustrations rejects the secrecy of the original form of the diary. Instead, the images serve the expository purpose of revealing the traumatic nature of the narrative. As Cathy Caruth states in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth 5). The graphic narrative form itself reflects Minnie's trauma, since it is visual in nature, reminiscent of the visual flashbacks and memories that often accompany Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. As Minnie states herself, "Some things are too complicated to type down on paper. You just would not understand them even if they were described in the most meticulous detail possible" (Gloeckner 15). The comics and illustrations represent things that would not suffice with the use of words alone. Additionally, the images reflect the gaps in memory that often accompany traumatic recollection. The way that the comics and illustrations interrupt the prose text also reflects the fragmented and incoherent nature of trauma itself.

Although the diaries tell Minnie's story, the trauma is too immediate for her to recognize it as such. Instead, the diary serves as a way to record the events as they are happening. However, the 15-year old Minnie lacks insight. The adult narratorial perspective that creates the

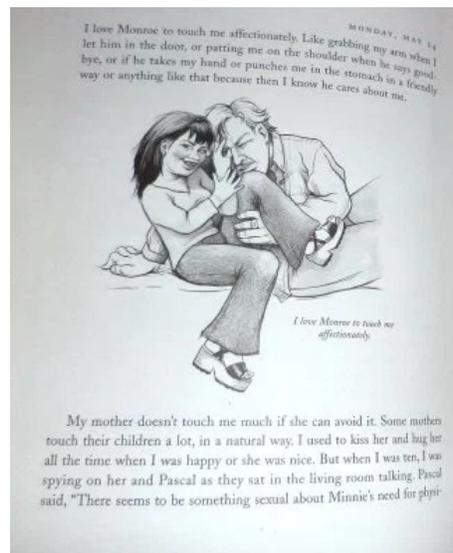
interrupting comics and illustrations is able to reconcile the trauma by interpreting and exposing it. For example, Minnie's diary entries teeter back and forth between her experiences of pain and pleasure. On the other hand, the images show the adult author's more self-aware perspective on the events. Through the interrupting comic strips, Gloeckner engages in an authorial conversation with the adolescent diaristic perspective that highlights the simultaneous desire and disgust that often accompanies adolescent sexual trauma.

While Minnie is never able to recognize her relationship with Monroe as abusive, the interrupting comics establish the uneven power dynamic between Minnie and Monroe both implicitly and explicitly. For example, in her isolation, Minnie often confuses sex with love. Even though she does express some level of awareness when she states, "I feel as if I'm being taken advantage of because I know he only loves her," she becomes more confused as the relationship progresses (Gloeckner 11). She states, "I think I am in love with Monroe... When I awoke this morning and realized that he was gone, I felt so sad... I miss him too much to call what I feel just a passing fancy" (Gloeckner 140). Although the diary entries are clearly written from the perspective of a 15-year old girl, there are moments within the text that establish the complexities of adolescence and maturity. For example, Minnie often describes her sexual appetite in a way that rejects innocence with statements like, "I really like getting fucked" (Gloeckner 26). These statements are often what make the work so importantly uncomfortable for the reader. In these moments, Gloeckner refuses to ignore the complexities of pleasure as it relates to adolescent sexual abuse. As Chute states, "Gloeckner's work, refusing to excise titillation, is an ethical feminist project that takes the crucial risk of visualizing the complicated realities of abuse" (Chute 75). By acknowledging the erotic and pleasurable aspects of Minnie's relationship with Monroe, Gloeckner complicates traditional notions of sexual abuse. However, a

reading of the conflict between Minnie's adolescent diary with the adult narratorial images will establish that the blending of maturity and naiveté as well as pleasure and pain help to expose the traumatic nature of the story.

For example, the series of panels on page 49 portray a struggle between Minnie and Monroe. The third panel pictures Monroe forcing himself upon Minnie, pushing her down on the bed and in the last panel on the previous page he is saying, "Maybe you need to be restrained." The last panel on page 49, the largest of the series, pictures Minnie submitting to Monroe. Although these images don't explicitly say, "this is abuse" in words, the dialogue implicitly interprets it as so, and the images explicitly reveal the interaction as abusive through visualization. Here, Gloeckner, as the adult author interpreting her own life, is able to reinterpret the diaries' confusion in a way that affirms the trauma she experienced while still honoring the adolescent perspective. Another interesting image portrays the conflict between Gloeckner's visualized interpretations of Minnie's experience. Minnie writes in her diary, "I love Monroe to touch me affectionately. Like grabbing my arm when I let him in the door, or patting me on the shoulder when he says good-bye, or if he takes my hand or punches me in the stomach in a friendly way or anything like that because then I know he cares about me" (Gloeckner 84). Pictured just below the text is an image of Minnie and Monroe with the italicized caption "I love Monroe to touch me affectionately (*See Figure 4*). Although Minnie describes Monroe's touch as affectionate in her diary, the descriptors used are not typically considered affectionate; "grabbing", "patting", "punches." The drawn image also presents a different story Monroe appears to be physically forcing himself onto Minnie, his face is pained, his eyes are closed, and he is aggressively leaning toward her and into her body, with his hand between her legs. Minnie is pushing against him with both hands and has her leg up, with her foot in a position to push him

away in an attempt to shield herself from Monroe's strong pursuit. Interestingly, Minnie's gaze is aimed directly at the reader. She is smiling and flirtatious, she seems to be enjoying the interaction. However, her gaze forces the reader to confront the discrepancy that is occurring between diaristic and the graphic on this page.



**Figure 4:** Pg. 84, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* by Phoebe Gloeckner

While discussing a different illustration of Minnie and Monroe Chute states “She looks out at us from the corner of her eye with a countergaze... The illustration importantly destabilizes the dominant visual mode (of culture, of pornography), which is aligned with the predatory identificatory gaze” (Chute 81). Similarly, this image also serves as a disruption. Minnie describes Monroe as affectionate, but the image establishes his touch as forceful and dominating. Minnie's direct gaze looks out at the reader, longing for someone to notice what is happening to her. By creating this contradiction between image and text, Gloeckner encourages the reader to question Minnie's statements regarding her perception of Monroe's touch. Though Minnie's statements certainly bear witness to the authentic feelings she experienced, the adult author's interpretive visual lens conflicts with the adolescent perspective. This blending of the adult and adolescent perspective (as well as the verbal and the visual) complicates the reader's notions of

adolescent trauma. Gloeckner is not ashamed; she makes the experience explicit and visual. However, the conflicting image and text prompt confusing feelings of disgust within the reader.

The fact that there is a conversation occurring between the adolescent diaries and the adult images becomes explicitly clear in one haunting image. Two full-page illustrations of Minnie's bedroom are interspersed between seemingly unrelated diary entries and one full-page archival comic from Gloeckner's childhood. On page 180 there is a full-text illustration titled "The left side of my room." It pictures Minnie's unmade bed with a poster of Janis Joplin above. Her cat is curled into a ball atop. Her typewriter is visible as well as her notebook, though no text is legible. The left side of the room appears to be very typical of a teenager in the early 1970's. "The right side of the room" pictured on 185 is more interesting. It continues the image, where the rocking chair was cut off in the previous image, its outline continues on this page. This side of the room contains Minnie's dresser and mirror. However, within the reflection of the mirror, an image becomes clear. This image is much different than the rest of the illustration, it is hyper-realistic compared to the rest of the cartoon illustration and might actually be a photo, though the reader cannot be sure if it is a drawn image or a photograph. The hyper-realistic image pictures a face of a smiling young woman with dark hair and bangs. What is extremely haunting about this image is that no one is standing in front of the mirror. There is no physical explanation for the reflection of the face looking out since the illustrations show both side of the room and no one is pictured in the room. While one could argue that the two pages could have been drawn on separate occasions in the room, the style and the continuity of the rocking chair in both images lead to an interpretation that these two images represent one singular moment in time; a disjointed still life. If the reflection in the mirror is Minnie, we should see the cartoon Minnie, looking into the mirror (as we do on page 34 in which Minnie gazes into a mirror in a public

restroom, noticing a zit on her face). However, this image is strikingly similar to the archival photograph that Gloeckner provides of herself in the back of the book. This haunting image establishes that Gloeckner is looking back onto the experiences of Minnie, her adolescent alter ego, and directly engaging with her perspective. For Gloeckner, the blending of the graphic and diaristic achieves the unique narrative space where the adult author is able to relive the traumatic event through her engagement with fictionalized diary entries by filtering them through the visualized adult perspective. This complicated relationship between the adult and adolescent self becomes encapsulated into this single image, where the adult author gazes, smiling, onto the space of the adolescent alter ego. Additionally, the fact that the still life that is Minnie's bedroom is disjointed, interrupted by pages of diaristic text and archival comic strips from Gloeckner's own childhood, reflect the disjointed nature of Gloeckner's own relationship to her adolescent experience.

On the dedication page, the conversation between the adolescent and the adult begins. Gloeckner's large, handwritten, cursive text encapsulates a trio of flowers and a small butterfly reading, "for all the girls when they have grown." Chute interprets this dedication as placing Minnie's story within the larger, "collective" history of female adolescence (Chute 87). However, this dedication also reflects the connection that is made between the adolescent and adult perspective through Gloeckner's blending of the graphic and diaristic. "All the girls when they have grown" might then reflect all of Gloeckner's multiple selves: the adolescent self who engages in a confusing sexual relationship with her mother's boyfriend, the traumatized and drug addicted teenager who has reached rock bottom, and finally, the adult cartoonist who decides to retell her complex adolescence through the alter ego "Minnie Goetze." In this text, images do more than just serve as the revealing agent of trauma. They allow Gloeckner to rise from the role

of victim by crafting her narrative through interpretative comics and illustrations where words do not suffice. Minnie states, “I’ve been waiting to start a new diary. A brand-new diary is like a brand-new life, and I’m ready to leave this one behind me” (Gloeckner 285). We might consider that Gloeckner’s *The Diary of a Teenage girl* is Minnie’s “brand-new” diary. However, this “new” diary is not a new diary at all. Instead, the new life comes from retaining and honoring the confused adolescent perspective while simultaneously inserting the adult perspective in the gaps of memory. When Lejeune speaks of his relationship to his own diaries he states, “I began, thus, not to keep a diary, but rather several diaries, successive and sometime simultaneous, sometimes in dialogue with the diaries of my youth; and the constraints which I placed upon myself have finally, in my eyes, erased the dichotomy between journal and autobiography” (Lejeune 47). Similarly, the Gloeckner’s artistic dialogue with her adolescent diaries allows her to erase the dichotomy between journal and autobiography as well as the verbal and the visual.



## CONCLUSION

### FINDING CLOSURE: GRIEVING IN THE GUTTER

Both of the texts that this thesis has discussed take on the difficult project of retelling childhood and adolescent trauma as it relates to formative male relationships. Interestingly, both authors decided to write their life stories through the use of the graphic narrative form. As previously discussed, Cathy Caruth identifies trauma as being “possessed by an image.” Therefore, the graphic narrative is particularly useful for portraying traumatic history due to its visual nature. Scott McCloud’s groundbreaking text *Understanding Comics* dedicates an entire chapter to the concept of “closure.” This concept, which he identifies as the defining aspect of comics as a form, has specific relevance to *Fun Home*, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, and other graphic narratives that grapple with issues of trauma.

Scott McCloud defines closure as the phenomenon of “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (McCloud 137). Specifically, he discusses how the gutter, the space between the panels that contains nothing but invisible space, creates the magic of comics. He elaborates, “Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous unified reality” (McCloud 141). Similarly, the process of recalling a traumatic history is often accompanied by fracture, jaggedness, and seemingly unconnected moments. Additionally, the term “closure” itself is interesting as it relates to this thesis and the broader field of trauma studies. By writing their stories, Bechdel and Gloeckner are attempting to reach “closure” in the sense that their reliving past traumas allows them to reach a sense of understanding. Both of the authors that this thesis has explored use the theoretical “closure” of the graphic novel form to reach the emotional “closure” that their autobiographical projects seek. Through a reading of the

last image that each text presents, I contend that the authors utilize McCloud's theory of closure in very different ways. Specifically, Bechdel traditionally uses closure in her last images to highlight the complex and uncertain relationship between herself and her father by announcing the gaps between image and text. On the other hand, Gloeckner's use of closure is less traditional. She juxtaposes the space between the graphic and the diaristic, as well as the adolescent and adult, to reject the role of victim.

The last page of *Fun Home* is comprised of two panels. The first pictures the zoomed in front of a semi-truck, presumably the one that struck and killed Alison's father. The second is the reverse image of a redrawn photo that appears on the chapter title page for Chapter 7, "The Antihero's Journey" (See Figures 5 and 6). A child Alison jumps off a diving board, back facing us, toward her father, who is facing the reader, in the pool, his arms outstretched. When this photo is first encountered on the chapter title page, the perspective is switched. We see the father from behind and the child Alison leaping toward him. On the previous page Bechdel asks, "What if Icarus hadn't hurtled into the sea? What if he's inherited his father's inventive bent? What might he have wrought?" (Bechdel 231). The two captions on the last page go on to state, "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" (Bechdel 232). What's interesting here is that, although Bechdel tells the reader with words that her father was there to catch her when she leapt, she is actually mid-air in the redrawn photos, leaving the reader wondering. This sense of uncertainty is heightened by the fact that Bruce's face appears pained and lacks confidence. Though his hands are outstretched to catch Alison, the reader cannot be certain that this actually happens. Additionally, the image of the front of the semi truck is a haunting reminder of the traumatic event that prompts Alison's retelling of the story, her father's death. Only an extremely

thin white gutter space divides the two panels, the death of the father and the potential of the father's embrace existing simultaneously. The mental work of finding the "closure" that exists between these two panels has been the project of the book. Bechdel has recursively told her story in a way that entwines her and her father's histories in order to reach a better understanding of his death and their relationship. The fact that this last image is a cartoon version of the more redrawn, photorealistic version of an actual archival photograph on the title page for Chapter 7 also reflects the artistic process of the work itself. Through redrawing and retracing historically documented experience, Bechdel comes to a greater understanding about her father's life. By shifting the perspective, and redrawing the image *again*, she emphasizes the need to redraw and retrace when retelling her traumatic history. Although we cannot be sure that Alison's father *does* catch her when she leaps, the strong potential for a saving embrace is there. As McCloud describes, the blank page that the reader is left with following this image creates a space to imagine the embrace between the father and daughter, or not. By refusing to allow the reader to witness Bruce catching her, but telling us that he does, she highlights the complex uncertainty and unknowing that is entailed in this retelling.



Figures 5 and 6: Pg. 187 & Pg. 232, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel

Although Bechdel's piece can be applied to McCloud's theory of closure fairly well, Gloeckner's last pages are more complicated. Unlike *Fun Home*, *Diary* is not entirely made up of sequential comics content. It's a combination of prose, illustrations, and comics. The last two pages of the book feature one full text illustration and one last diary entry. At the end of the narrative, after Minnie's mother finds out about the relationship and after her subsequent downward spiral involving prostitution, drugs, and suicidal thoughts, she takes a trip with her friend Chuck to the beach to sell her poems. Through the diaristic text, Minnie explains that Monroe is jogging and slowly begins to approach them. Minnie and Chuck convince Monroe to buy a poem. He doesn't have the money in his jogging shorts, so Minnie and Monroe shake on the promise that he will pay her back. She states, "I suddenly recalled something Pascal taught me years ago. I looked Monroe in the eye as I shook his hand firmly, and I thought to myself, 'I'm better than you, you son-of-a-bitch'" (Gloeckner 291).

The preceding page features a full-page illustration of Minnie shaking Monroe's hand (See *Figure 7*). Beneath the image is the caption, "I'm better than you, you son-of-a bitch." Monroe's back is turned to the reader so that we cannot see his face. Minnie faces him, and the reader, smiling. Her body and face are strong and clear on the page. In her left hand she holds a small writing pad and behind her is a makeshift sign that reads "poems for sale." The significance of the pad of paper and the sign is that through art, Minnie is able to regain the agency that was lost in the abusive relationship with Monroe. In fact, the poem that she sells him is "not [her] best," at that. She states, "I felt unusually powerful and in control of the situation, despite the fact that I was somewhat high, and that Monroe is a foot taller than me and more than twice my age. It was exhilarating" (Gloeckner 291). Due to the fact that these last two pages are not composed of multiple comics panels, "closure" in the traditional sense, as defined by

McCloud, doesn't necessarily apply. However, I contend that another sort of closure is reached in between the invisible space of the full-page illustrative panel and the diaristic prose. In his discussion of possible endings to diaries, Lejeune gives the example of a published diary, which describes as "a transformation that assumes some sort of closure" (188). The last two pages epitomize the complex blending of narrative perspective that has comprised Gloeckner's entire work and highlight the published diaries potential for closure. Whereas the full-page illustration is from Gloeckner's adult interpretive perspective, the prose is told from Minnie's first-person adolescent perspective. The direct and consecutive blending of the verbal and the visual as well as the adolescent and adult allows for Gloeckner to comment on the relationship between the adult and adolescent self. As previously discussed, words and images would often contradict each other throughout Gloeckner's text. She would describe Monroe as "affectionate" in her diary and then the adult visual lens would portray him as domineering and forceful. However, in these two pages a transformation has occurred, the adolescent word and adult image seem to align. By concluding the book on this triumphant note, Gloeckner refuses to allow herself to stay stuck within the role of "victim" while simultaneously finding a way to reconcile the conflict between the adolescent and the adult.

Similar gaps are essential to the form of the diary as well. Lejeune states, "The diary is a piece of lacework or a spider web. It is apparently made up of more empty space than filled space" (Lejeune 181). In this way, comics and diaries are formally very similar. For both Bechdel and Gloeckner, secrecy and invisibility added to the intensity of their trauma through the use of the graphic and the diaristic. The interpretative nature of the graphic novel form allowed them to write their narratives in a way that honored their younger selves' attempts at expression, but continued the project of healing in a more productive way through the adult

interpretive lens. Ultimately, by utilizing their archival diaries for aiding in the process of recalling and reliving traumatic experience, both authors are able to reach “closure” by celebrating the gaps within their narratives through the blending of the graphic and diaristic, the adolescent and adult, and the known and unknown.



*"I'm better than you, you son-of-a-bitch."*

**Figure 7:** Pg. 290, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* by Phoebe Gloeckner

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