

Song 1

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Residents of a DysFUNCTIONal HOME

In a recent online interview, comic artist Alison Bechdel remarked, “I love words, and I love pictures. But especially, I love them together—in a mystical way that I can’t even explain” (“Stuck”). Indeed, in her graphic novel memoir, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, text and image work together in a mystical way: text *and* image. But using both image and text results not in a simple summation but in a strange relationship—as strange as the relationship between Alison Bechdel and her father. These strange pairings have an alluring quality that makes Bechdel’s *Fun Home* compelling; for her, both text and image are necessary. As Bechdel tells and shows us, alone, words can fail; alone, images deceive. Yet her life story ties both concepts inextricably to her memories and revelations such that only the interplay of text and image offers the reader the rich complexity, honesty, and possibilities in Bechdel’s quest to understand the past.

The idea that *words are insufficient* is not new—certainly we have all felt moments when language simply fails us and we are at a loss for words—moments like being “left . . . wordless” by “the infinite gradations of color in a fine sunset” (Bechdel, *Fun* 150). In those wordless moments, we strain to express just what we mean. Writers are especially aware of what is lost between word and meaning; Bechdel’s comment on the translation of Proust’s *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* is a telling example of the troubling gap:

Introduces author of work discussed, along with major topic

After Dad died, an updated translation of Proust came out. *Remembrance of Things Past* was re-titled *In Search of Lost Time*. The new title is a more literal translation of *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, but it still doesn't capture the full resonance of *perdu*. This means not just lost, but ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, and spoiled. (*Fun* 119)

Bechdel says of the new Proust title, "What's lost in translation is the complexity of loss itself" — the very struggles of loss that Bechdel must also confront (*Fun* 120). But how do we express something as complex as loss, if something is always lost between what we say and what we mean? Bechdel addresses the "complexity of loss" by trying to correlate herself with her father, attempting a "translation" of their lives (*Fun* 120).

René Magritte's painting *The Treason of Images* (Fig. 1), with text that translates as "This is not a pipe," reminds us to remain



Fig. 1. Magritte's *The Treason of Images*.

image of himself and of his home and family. The elaborately restored house is the gilded, but tense, context of young Alison's

skeptical of images because *images can deceive*. This is a lesson that Alison Bechdel shows us again and again within her own story and images. Bechdel's father constructs a false

Includes (and cites) image that clarifies first point

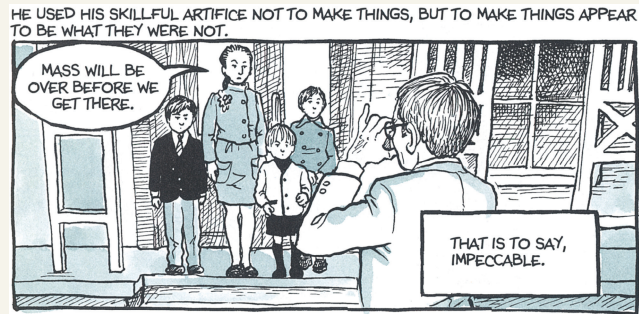


Fig. 2. Alison Bechdel's father posing a family photo (Bechdel, *Fun 16*).

familial relationships and a metaphor for her father's deceptions. "He used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not," Bechdel notes alongside an image of her father taking a photo of their family, shown in Fig. 2 (*Fun 16*). The scene represents the nature of her father's artifice; her father is *posing* a photo, an image of their family.

Analyzes each image included

In that same scene, Bechdel also shows her own sleight of hand; she manipulates the scene and reverses her father's role and her own to show young Alison taking the photograph of the family and her father posing in Alison's place (Fig. 3). In the image, young Alison symbolizes Bechdel in the present—looking back through the camera lens to create a portrait of her family. But unlike her father, she isn't using false images to deceive. Bechdel overcomes the treason of images by confessing herself as an "artificer" to her audience (*Fun 16*). Bechdel doesn't villainize the illusory nature

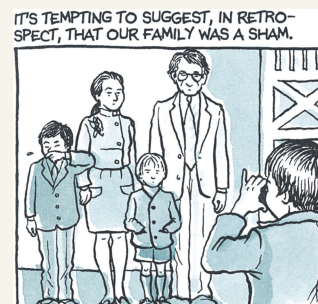


Fig. 3. Alison and her father trade places (Bechdel, *Fun 17*).

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of images; she repurposes their illusory power to reinterpret her memories.

Readers must understand that in Bechdel's *Fun Home*, neither image nor text plays a supporting role. The text does not only caption the image and the image does not always literally illustrate the text. Each is *a version of the memoir*. Both are interpretations and manipulations. In Chapter 1, "Old Father, Old Artificer," Bechdel draws up a tableau of her family situation.

Supports second main point by citing text

Here is an excerpt with only the text narration:

Daedalus, too, was indifferent to the human cost of his projects. He blithely betrayed the king, for example, when the queen asked him to build her a cow disguise so she could seduce the white bull. Indeed the result of that scheme — a half-bull, half-man monster — inspired Daedalus's greatest creation yet. He hid the minotaur in the labyrinth — a maze of passages and rooms opening endlessly into one another . . . and from which, as stray youths and maidens discovered to their peril . . . escape was impossible. Then there are those famous wings. Was Daedalus really stricken with grief when Icarus fell into the sea? Or just disappointed by the design failure? (*Fun* 11–12).

The text can stand alone as a story. However, a parallel story line is lost.

The images tell a story distinct from the text, yet the ties between image and text are not severed. In the first panel

accompanying this story, Bechdel correlates her father with Daedalus (Fig. 4). Her father’s household “projects” are accomplished at the “human cost” of cruelty to his children, as the father strikes Alison’s brother and causes him to flee.

In the panel that introduces the “half-bull, half-man” minotaur, the reader shifts between the metaphors with surprising ease; now her father is the looming minotaur whose wrath Alison fears (Fig. 5). Alison’s father morphs from Daedalus into “Daedalus’s greatest creation,” from father to monster. The image evokes both the minotaur myth and Alison’s genuine fear of her father’s wrath.

In the next three panels (Fig. 6), Alison, too, flees. However, the text does not mesh exactly with what is seen within the frame: “. . . escape was impossible,” Bechdel notes, but shows an image of young Alison escaping the house and evading the wrath of her father. Bechdel uses the Daedalus story—and Daedalus’s relationship with Icarus—to explain her relationship with her father, but she complicates their relationship by casting both father and daughter as both Daedalus and Icarus.

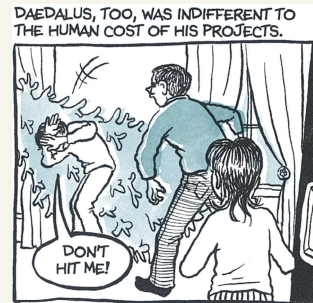


Fig. 4. Father as Daedalus (Bechdel, *Fun* 11).

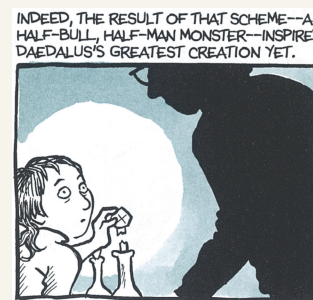


Fig. 5. Father as minotaur (Bechdel, *Fun* 12).

Analyzes complicated relationship between text and image

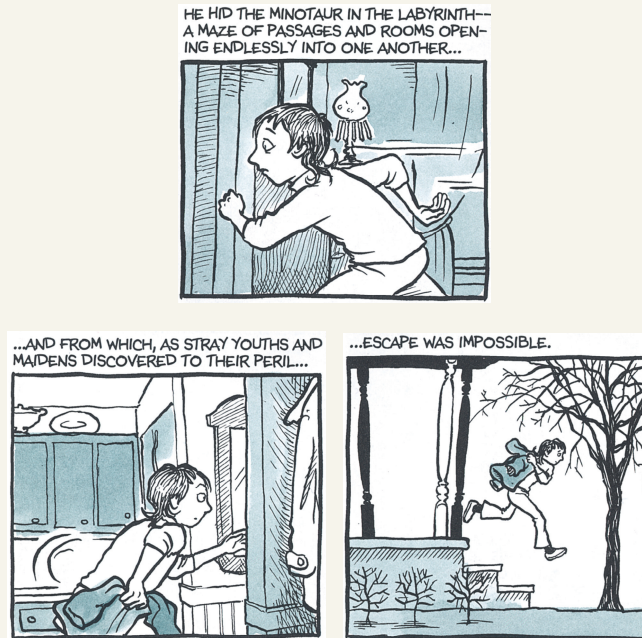


Fig. 6. Alison flees the labyrinthine house (Bechdel, *Fun 12*).

In the last two panels of this section, where Alison is seen first walking, then returning to the house, her now-dead father is implied to be the fallen Icarus while Alison, alone, suggests the bereaved or disappointed Daedalus (Fig. 7).

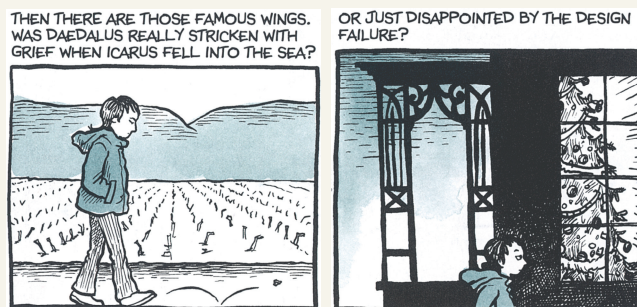


Fig. 7. Alison alone (Bechdel, *Fun 12*).

Finally, we can see how image and text function together. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel pushes the boundaries of the relationship between image and text. If the words and pictures matched exactly, the story would read like a children's book. However, text and image can't be so mismatched that meaning is completely incomprehensible. Bechdel crafts her story deliberately, leaving space for the reader to experience cognitive dissonance. The reader's need to create coherence from disparate text and image results in a more complex understanding of the story.

Through the strange but compelling pairings of image and text, the reader acquires a more thorough understanding of the strange and compelling relationship between father and daughter. Bechdel consistently informs the reader that *Fun Home* is her *interpretation* of the past. She understands that "[t]he memoir is in many ways a huge violation of [her] family" (Chute 1009). As an artist, her effort to lay to rest her anxieties about her past comes at the cost of publicizing her family's secrets. She does not let herself or the reader forget: "We really were a family, and we really did live in those period rooms" (*Fun* 17). Bechdel does not ignore the impact that her act of remembering has on the present. In the end, her memoir is not so much an accurate record of events as a monument to the incredible human ability to reappraise the past. Bechdel's stories — told between the lines and entwined with stories told within the frames — impel our heads and hearts. And if nothing else, the painful confessions and wishful remembering of *Fun Home* provide a proper tribute for her father and allow Alison Bechdel a sense, almost, of closure.

Conclusion analyzes effect of text / image pairings

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