

“I can’t help you. You’re on your own”: Alison Bechdel’s Graphic Memoir

by Ellen Handler Spitz

Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*

Alison Bechdel's engrossing new graphic memoir *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* is a worthy successor to the work of Art Spiegelman, Robert Crumb, William Steig, and Bill Watterson. Bechdel's book follows by six years her widely acclaimed *Fun Home*, which memorializes an aesthetically absorbed, emotionally constricted, closeted gay funeral director—Bechdel's father—who putatively committed suicide when Bechdel was twenty. This synopsis, however, conveys nothing of Bechdel's originality and erudition, her meticulous drawing, her sensitivity to suggestive design.

Fun Home opens with a young Bechdel perched on her father's upended feet for an airplane ride she calls “Icarian.” Casting her father in the role of Daedalus, she cherishes this game because, in the “arctic” gloom of their gothic Victorian mansion in rural Pennsylvania, it provides her with rare moments of physical contact. (Her mother stopped kissing her goodnight when she was seven.) At the end of the book, Bechdel draws herself as a slightly older child in a swimming pool with her father who holds out his arms as if to catch her. She ponders what would have happened if instead of plunging to his death (like her father, who fell under a truck), Icarus had lived and inherited his father's talents? A coda to the Daedalus-Icarus myth—not mentioned by Bechdel—explains that Daedalus was involved with a talented young apprentice called Perdix of whom he was jealous and whom he managed to drown for fear of being surpassed. His own beloved son's subsequent fall to doom, therefore, can be read as a punishment visited upon Daedalus. This silent back-story shadows Bechdel's art. For in her personal fantasy, her father doubles as craftsman-perpetrator and victim.

Are You My Mother? is a title borrowed from another pictured quest for a parent published in 1960, the year of Bechdel's birth. In this now classic children's book by P.D. Eastman, available even on YouTube, a newborn bird goes in search of its mother who has left the nest to forage. With no idea what to look for, the small bird wanders off; after a string of zany and dangerous mistakes, it eventually finds her. In Bechdel's case, the finding involves not her mother per se but an understanding of her.

Through her unsparing pictorial narration, we see, hear, and swallow the struggles that lacerate every childhood. (Not by accident does a mirror adorn this book's jacket). This is American life at its most candid. It stops mattering very much that the author hails from a Catholic family, that Bechdel is a lesbian, or that she has created this work while her mother is bristlingly alive and cognizant of the project. Bechdel's journey—backward in time—brings her in contact with a host of non-mothers (including a famous psychoanalyst, a pair of warmly caring women psychotherapists, and lesbian lovers) — but also iterations of her actual mother, who proves beautiful, highly literary, self-disciplined, and who morphs repeatedly according to decade fashions. However, Bechdel's mother remains enduringly remote: “I can't help you. You're on your own,” she announces tersely when told about her daughter's

need to do the *Fun Home* memoir. A child hearing such words knows with a pang that he or she is actually chained to the parent who says this.

Smarting like a slap, her rebuff occurs in an exchange so dreaded by the artist that, anticipating it, she almost crashes into a truck. "I hope that in time you'll come to understand," she imagines herself saying as she steers along a road with a background sign that reads: "No Shoulder." The ensuing letdown foreshadows much that is to come. But unlike authors of smarmy bad-mother diatribes who in retaliation sharpen knives of resentment, Bechdel achingly wants not to fight but to understand: what has her withholding mother *not* withheld from her? Sharing each hard-won insight, she welcomes readers to re-think their own less than perfect parents.

Generous without sacrificing honesty, Bechdel twins herself with her mother by drawing both characters with strikingly matched jet-black hair, a color code she accentuates by making all the other significant women blonde. This twinning holds even when Bechdel's mother turns gray, for in those images her short bob mimics her daughter's boyish cut. Like so much else, the visual pairing performs its effects subliminally.

Chapters begin with pictured dreams. The first of these appears transparently birth-like in that the artist must escape through a tiny window and plunge in fetal pose into turgid water. Icarus comes readily to mind. Each chapter's title, moreover, cites a theoretical premise by the late British pediatrician and psychoanalyst, D.W. Winnicott, the artist's adoptive intellectual mentor. She even resuscitates Winnicott in imaginative scenarios as she does likewise Virginia Woolf. Interlarding well-chosen snippets of literature and psychoanalytic theory with the wrenching details of her life, she offers transferable interpretive insights. The book itself becomes a teaching tool.

Several times Bechdel informs us of her mother's spider phobia and, elsewhere, of her own childhood horror of vomiting. In a riveting page, she connects the two in a session with her first therapist. Awakening her mother in the middle of the night, Bechdel (age 10) vomits a mess that uncannily resembles a spider. Her mother's affect is uncharacteristically kind, but a phobia ensues. The principal link concerns unconscious aggression and rejection, for a mother's most primitive function is to feed her child, and vomiting reverses this completely. Children feel shame and sometimes even terror as their bodies lurch out of control. As for the spider, it condenses every constructive and destructive maternal impulse into one irregular black shape. Louise Bourgeois' *Mamans* materialize as we read. Bechdel, twinned with her mother yet painfully distant from her, eventually learns that she cannot find her in this book, but she can recreate her.

A paradigmatic scene constitutes the book's climax, and it occurs twice. Needing special shoes to correct her arches when she was small, Bechdel was taken for repeated visits to a hospital where she witnessed severely crippled children and found herself envying them just as Bemelmans's *Madeline* is envied by the other little girls because of the attention won by her appendectomy. In *Madeline*, Miss Clavel silences them, but Alison Bechdel enjoys a superior fate. Bidding hard, she pretends to be a crippled child herself. With bated breath we watch as an amazing scene unfolds. Her mother joins in, makes believe with her, offers her imaginary leg braces, even pretends to lace up a pair of special shoes. What Bechdel comes to realize through this re-animation is how her mother actually gave her some of what she needed to become an artist. The mother-spider cripples you but also helps you walk. The family's

background, in which a mother is sexually sidelined by a husband who preferred young men, a mother moreover who was taught long ago by her own mother to favor sons over daughters, begins to fade. What matters is that she *plays!* And that Bechdel can *use* her now, in Winnicott's sense, of discovering that, no longer compelled to experience her as a need-gratifying object, she can recognize what has been offered all along as well as what was denied. And the book closes with measured gratitude and the words: "She has given me the way out." This "meta-book," as Bechdel's mother called it, is a masterful meditation on growing up.