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Fun Home: Change and Tradition in Bechdel's Graphic Memoir

Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home* navigates the waters of non-traditional literary texts by deploying within the physical and psychological boundaries created by the panels of a graphic memoir Vivian Gornick's well-known dichotomy of the *situation*, or the events and occurrences, and the *story*, or the author's thoughts about those events and occurrences. While these qualities certainly speak to Bechdel's deft authorial and artistic hand, they also have important implications for the development of literary nonfiction as the genre continues to take new forms in the multimodal, multimedia, multiplatform age.

Bechdel's text, within the visual nature of the graphic memoir, is not a representation of nonfiction, where the term "representation" implies something lesser and unrealized. Rather, Bechdel's re-presentation of the nonfiction form takes some of the elements that are the hallmarks of the genre and re-imagines, re-creates, and re-presents what those elements look like on the page by reconciling them with the conventions of the graphic memoir form. By doing so, Bechdel demonstrates that the blurred boundaries of the emerging "multi" world of nonfiction do not imply that the genre is degraded in the process of change, but rather that a change can take place while maintaining the literary core.

This distinction is particularly evident by excluding the lines of dialogue and pictures found in the panels:

Like many fathers, mine could occasionally be prevailed on for a spot of ‘airplane.’ As he launched me, my full weight would fall on the pivot point between his feet and my stomach. It was a discomfort well worth the rare physical contact, and certainly worth the moment of perfect balance when I soared above him. In the circus, acrobatics where one person lies on the floor balancing another are called ‘Icarian games.’ Considering the fate of Icarus after he flouted his father’s advice and flew so close to the sun that his wings melted, perhaps some dark humor is intended. In our particular reenactment of this mythic relationship, it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky. But before he did so, he managed to get quite a lot done. His greatest achievement, arguably, was his monomaniacal restoration of our old house (3-4).

Looking at only this brief excerpt, it’s fair to say that the narrative does survive dismemberment, but that it loses some of its color in the process; the graphic panels provide illustration, both in terms of the pictures on the page and the interpersonal tension of the dialogue—such as Bechdel’s request to play the Icarian game “Again” being ignored by her father who notes that “This rug is filthy” and instructs Bechdel to “Go get the vacuum cleaner.” While the narrative drives the action forward, the dialogue depicts the human interactions that add depth and complexity to the situation—the dialogue and illustrations help show what Bechdel is telling.

This containment allows Bechdel to use a very spartan approach to the text itself. The prose doesn’t have to grapple with portraying a sex scene or a pre-burial embalmment—it can instead focus on driving the narrative forward through the “now” voice reflecting on the images happening “then.” The result of this split is that Bechdel maintains a detached tone throughout the text because she is not implicated as the narrator of the call-out bubbles. This detachment also reflects the content of the narrative—Bechdel didn’t understand her father during her youth (the panels—Gornick’s *situation*), but once his secret was revealed she was able to reflect and make

some sense of who he was (the narration—Gornick’s *story*). While these distinctions might seem to be unique characteristics of the graphic memoir, they are in fact representative of conventions found in almost any quality literary nonfiction text, particularly memoir.

Instead of using white space, page breaks, and paragraphs to distinguish situation from story, reflective from narrative, or then from now, Bechdel mediates these elements through the graphic memoir form. The result is not a deconstructed nonfiction text, but rather a re-imagining of what a nonfiction text can accomplish. Bechdel hasn’t simply stripped down a traditional memoir and thrown in some pictures. Rather, she has translated the situation and the story through the relationship between words and image. The creative process is one of choice. The panels, speech balloons, captions, and other graphic elements each fulfill a specific purpose within Bechdel’s authorial and creative lens. This artistic point of view demonstrates that when transformed by a thoughtful practitioner, the nonfiction genre can accomplish more than words on a page.

Bechdel also uses the non-chronological organization of the book to reinforce the narrative divide—by moving fluidly through time and leveraging the contained “now” voice, Bechdel is able to hit readers with big reveals (we learn of the father’s sexual encounters with teenage boys on page 17) and then move on from those moments, using the information to inform our understanding of the “then” events. This works especially well with the announcement she makes to her parents that she is a lesbian. Though this revelation takes place during her college years, Bechdel in the text moves from this point back to her childhood—these shifts are not necessarily flashbacks, but are representative of the conversation taking place between Bechdel’s childhood and her early adulthood as she unpacks her family history. With these dual, hidden complexities to the characters, the narrative is given an overarching tension—the daughter trying to figure out her identity and the father trying to conceal his—that would not contain the same

impact in another form. We live with this tension throughout most of the text and it culminates when Bechdel realizes that though her father wasn't able to be present for her as a child, he was essential to her adult life. While many writers of nonfiction manipulate time for effect, the speed with which Bechdel is able to move is largely a function of the literary form she chose to work with.

Even in the post-*Maus* age, the graphic memoir must justify its non-traditionality and even exceed the expectations of genre traditionalists simply because nonfiction does not have a similar graphic history as, say, fiction. A video clip, a podcast, flash animation, or whatever else accompanies a text must have value that in some way supports, enhances or compliments the text itself. Simply providing illustration and being cutting edge risks gimmickry. Bechdel's text serves as a model for avoiding this pitfall. While *Fun Home* is certainly a re-presentation of the nonfiction form, it is also representative of the best elements of the genre—Bechdel shows that neither situation nor story need be sacrificed when exploring the creative opportunities afforded by the “multi” world.