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The Graphic Memoir as a Transitional Object: Narrativizing the Self in Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*

In the last two decades or so, the long-form comic medium has seen a rise in the genre of personal narratives, or what Lynda Barry more accurately terms “autofictionalbiographies”; these narratives, although heavily mediated by the authors’ own lives, defy straightforward classification as autobiographies because they generously use creative liberties to articulate their non-fictional stories. The indie-comic scene has enabled publication of a diverse range of work that uses the comic-space to produce creative non-fictions that articulate a crisis that the creator was witness to and/or participated in, such as Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, about life under a fundamentalist regime in eighties Iran; Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do*, about the liminal life of a diasporic immigrant; David Small’s *Stitches*, about living with a disability, and many other works about marginal identities, each brilliant in its own right. Alison Bechdel, in *Are You My Mother?*, takes this hybrid genre a step further as she uses the comic-space to not just narrate her story, or facilitate a dialogue between her queerness and mental disability, but to analyze and process her complex sense of Self and the traumas that mediate it. (Note: Satrapi too uses the comic form for analysis, but hers is an implicit form of autoethnographical cultural analysis that is mediated through the Self; this is very different from Bechdel’s genre of analysis, which is almost entirely directed inwards than outwards.)

The text and the image are incredibly powerful tools of literary and artistic performance and the comic form brings the two into conversation in a way that opens up new horizons of immersive reading, since the reader becomes privy to the “temporal-spatial experience of [the author’s] cognitive processes” (Wong 13) through the pictorial reenactment. In traditional memoirs, the analysis is often

already complete and laid out by the memoirist-- as a result, they do not quite solicit active analysis during the act of reading. In contrast, Bechdel's genre of life writing is like a work in progress where, as a result of psychological transference to the reader, the creator and the reader are simultaneously involved in a quest to get to the bottom of the narrative maze. Therefore, through a triangulation of analysis, understanding, and formulation that is directed inwards as well as outwards, Bechdel "stretch[es] the understanding of how storytelling works" (Robyn Warhol, qtd. in "The Space of Graphic Narrative" 197). Towards the end of Bechdel's book, her mother, on the telephone with her, quotes a passage by Dorothy Gallagher, which reads: "The writer's business is to find shape in unruly life and to serve her story. Not, you may note, to serve her family, or to serve the truth, but to serve the story" (qtd. in Bechdel 283).

Serving the story naturally requires sporadic rearrangement of Bechdel's memories or even of archival objects (as found in 32-33 of *Are You My Mother?*) to fit the overarching hypothesis of the narrative, however what makes her writing (and its process) so transparent and engaging is that she makes no attempts to hide the subjectivity of representation. On the contrary, her genre of graphic memoir writing visibly relies on a representation of truth in a way that will help investigate a conflict, as opposed to the bare-bones representation of memory chronologically as found in traditional autobiographies. Through "a network of time, places and people" (Wong 3), Bechdel simultaneously explicates the complexity of subjective representation and also accommodates opposing subjectivities, such as how her mother insinuates that this memoir is far from factual and is only Alison's perception of it (Bechdel 250). In doing so, despite a creative rendition of the truth, she is able to preserve the authenticity that is required of life writing.

Comic and Analysis

Bechdel herself has indicated that although she had started the memoir textually, she soon “started hitting a dead end with that” and had to resort to the conflation of Image-Text to achieve the nuance she was after (“Interview” 163-164). She calls her creative procedure “a barely harnessed obsessive-compulsive disorder” (qtd. in Chute, *Why Comics* 202). This definition implies that by accommodating Bechdel’s need to reproduce in the narrative a myriad of archival objects—photographs from her childhood, letters exchanged by her parents, journal entries—the comic form mirrors her OCD by “replicat[ing] the compulsive spatial focus and arranging” (Chute, *Why Comics* 202). In fact, the structure of her manuscript



Figure 1. *Are You My Mother*, Page 285

resembles that of a problem-solving quest more than a storytelling narrative. She consistently emphasizes that writing this memoir “is something she need[s] to do” (6), since “telling the story was the only way to do the dismantling” (qtd. in *Graphic Women* 175); the Image-Textual exploration of her memories then, was like “a new way of ordering ideas” (qtd in Chute “Interview: Hillary Chute Asks”). Her use of the word “ordering,” as opposed to variants such as “collecting,” implies active introspection and analysis. The purpose, then, is not to just

recount her life story to her readers, but to use the Image-Text space to revisit and examine her memories in an effort to garner a better understanding of her Self and her relationship with her mother. The Image-Text space—through a number of formal features such as transcending of spatial and temporal boundaries, facilitating seamless transition between seemingly disparate but ultimately connected pieces of memory, expediting the process of discovering patterns (in one’s personal history)—allows Bechdel to not just narrate but to conduct analysis of the Self, which ultimately culminates in her finding meaning and resolution at the end of the narrative.

The Image and the Achronological Text

For Bechdel, the visualization of memory prompts analysis that is directed inwards. However, since the in-depth cognitive and emotional introspection occurs concurrently with an omniscient overarching narrative voice, the simultaneity mandates that the story constantly move and jump to-and-fro across space and time with a rapidity that might have been dizzying for the reader had it not been stabilized by the visual component of the narrative. For example, in Figure 2, the second and third panels are located in completely different timelines—years apart—although they are both in seemingly similar surroundings. From the distinctly different facial structures of the two selves, the reader can infer that the third panel is a flashback to younger Alison's life.



Figure 2. *Are You My Mother*, Page 6. Different timelines on the same page.

Thus, despite the lack of a linear storyline, Bechdel's memoir stands no risk of dissolving into achronological fragments, because the visual component localizes any given panel/frame within a distinct

time period through positional and temporal cues, such as the characters' age, facial features, or their immediate location. As a result, the constant shifts in timelines do not have to be verbally explained, facilitating seamless transition between various points across time and space (as seen in Figure 2).

Moreover, by enabling simultaneous representation of time and space, the comic form allows multiple narratives to co-habit on the page at the same time. For example, in Figure 3, three narrative voices are present together on the page—the omniscient narrative voice that explains why it took Bechdel an exceptionally long time to finish the memoir, and how that mediates the final product; Alison's voice from earlier in the writing process, where she is trying to work out the structure of the memoir; and Jocelyn's voice, which serves to question her process, thereby answering the pressing concerns about the work readers would likely have had otherwise.

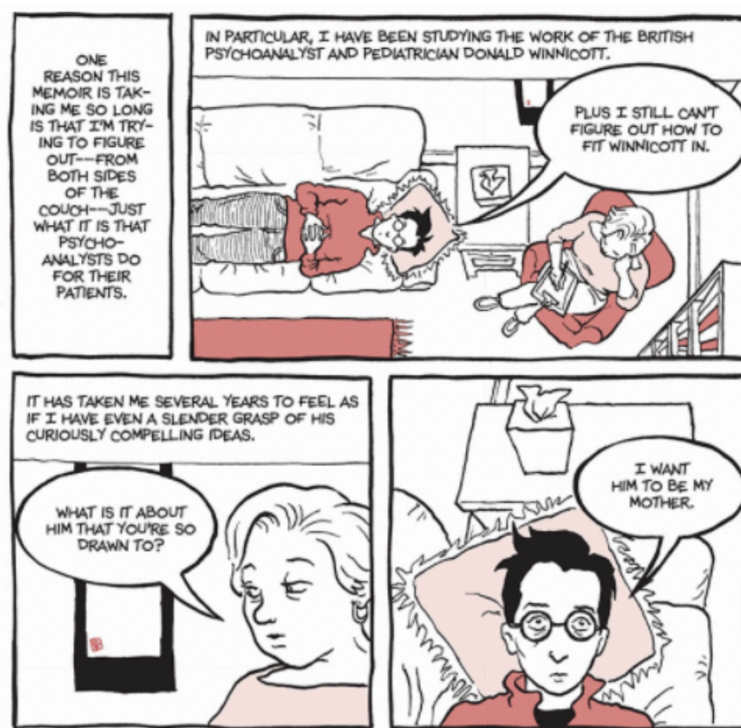


Figure 3. *Are You My Mother*, Page 21. Multiplicity of narrative voices

Consequently, the simultaneity the comic form enables also makes space for what comic scholar Hillary Chute terms “multiple autobiographical ‘I’-s” (*Graphic Women* 144), or the manifestation of multiple

versions of the author-protagonists at different stages of their life, inasmuch as we see Bechdel as a child, as a teenager, and as an adult concurrently in the narrative. Chute further explains that

...comics reveals the complex creation of subjectivity and unfinished selves. It does this through attention to locating bodies, but not fixing them, in space: older and younger selves collide, and different iterations of the “I” can be literally contiguous, available but not stabilized. (“The Space of Graphic Narrative” 206)

In effect, through the triangulation “between the different versions of herself represented on the page” (Chute, *Graphic Women* 144), Bechdel effectively illustrates how memory is not a stagnant being but a living entity that constantly mediates one’s life in the present. In doing so, she makes visible to her reader “the visual and discursive process” through which she comes to terms with her familial trauma. The multiplicity of younger and older selves on the page also creates “a tension with the protagonist’s voice from within the frame” (Chute, *Why Comics* 205); this “tension” between the voices helps the author communicate the fact that their “obsession or a compulsion isn’t rational” as well as conveying their “profound need to execute” what the voice mandates regardless (205). The manifestation of these dual voices is “key to communicating ... the double vision of OCD” (Green 205). The tension between the different voices of the same self also makes itself apparent through Alison’s need to censor herself and “to edit [her] thoughts before they even took shape” (Bechdel 49). She hits the *Delete* key on her keyboard in the middle of writing what is presumably this very memoir—which also serves to illustrate the subjectivity of representation we encounter in her work.

Furthermore, retracing memory for Bechdel is a way to help her (and her reader) to connect the dots between similar events or responses that she had overlooked when the event had originally transpired, revealing behavioral patterns that aid in the analysis. Indeed, the narrative is replete with a desire for finding patterns, such her mother’s fascination for daily puzzles, or Alison’s dream about a patterned blanket “spanned by perfect dew-covered spider web (41), and most evidently in her mother’s letter where

she writes that “Patterns are my existence. Everything has significance. Everything must fit. It’s enough to drive you crazy” (31). Echoing her mother’s need for finding patterns, Bechdel writes that she “went over and over” the manuscript repeatedly, “tweaking the connections between what had happened and what was still coming” (qtd. in *Graphic Women* 178)—indicating that the process was somewhat akin to solving a puzzle, where the pieces were excerpts from her memory. She writes that the story of her mother and her was “unfolding” (Bechdel 10) as she was in the process of writing it. In fact, it is not until she was writing this memoir that she was able to draw the connection between the time her mother found a lewd picture she drew as a child and the time her mother stopped the bedtime ritual of “coofie”-ing her. She writes that “Until now, the memories have been separate: the time mom stopped kissing me; the time mom found the dirty picture” (144). Her use of the adverb “now” implies that she makes the connection at the time she was illustrating this memoir, which suggests that the act of drawing and the act of analysis were occurring concurrently. Thus, the analytic drawing in a way helps her to trace the roots of her stunted relationship with her mother and understand how her mother’s decision to stop kissing her goodnight caused an abrupt break in the transitional process—maiming her psychologically to a certain extent; especially so because, at the moment the trauma was inflicted, she was not permitted the space to “betray” any reaction (134). As a result, it is Bechdel’s reenactment of trauma through the pictorial self that helps her comprehend what was not visible to her at the time of the infliction—as is often the case with trauma. Cathy Caruth explains that

the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that ... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again. (19)

At the time when her mother abruptly ceased the bedtime ritual, “its violence [was] not yet ... fully known” (35), but the reenactment of it allows Bechdel to “see something that [was] right in front of [her]

all along” (Bechdel 64), which stands as a testimony to the comic form’s uncanny ability to make absence legible. This capacity, in turn, makes the form especially conducive for “express[ing] traumatic histories,” as “its basic narrative form works with a counterpoint between presence and absence” (Chute and Dekoven 193). As is the case in the pictorial exploration of the bedtime ritual, similarly the many archival objects and the reproduction of the photographs by Bechdel is not the expression of a latent desire to keep the past alive as much as they are an effort to catch signs she had missed before through a process involving “visualization and embodiment” (193). In other words, writing and drawing herself into a readable character to encounter from an external perspective allows her to distinctly assess her life retroactively.

Visual Footnotes

The Image-Text medium in Bechdel’s narrative is not only significant in making room for the complications of genre but is also useful in making discernible the elusive (in this case) difference between the two types of content. The role of the visual in communicating the distinction between truth and fiction is perhaps most evident in the scene where Alison’s mother asks if she loves her (86)—the complexity of the moment, and why it imposes a strange dilemma on young Alison is made legible with the aid of an illustration in the background of a TV series called the *The Forsythe Saga*. The dialogues from this TV series are strategically placed in the frame to annotate the conversation between Alison and her mother. It can be assumed that those were not quite the exact scenes from *The Forsythe Saga* that was being aired during their conversation. However, as Bechdel’s narrative is less concerned with an absolute reproduction of the truth, and more concerned with a representation of the truth that contributes towards the greater understanding of her story, she uses the contextually relevant dialogues from *The Forsythe Saga* as supplemental material to her autobiographical content. In the story, when her mother asks her “Do you love me?”, young Alison is unsure how to answer, concerned that her answer could be either too little (and thus not enough) or too much (and thus insincere). Her predicament is explicated through the fictional



Figure 4. *Are You My Mother*, Page 86. Visual Footnotes

component of *The Forsyte Saga*, which chimes in to comment that “It’s a hard question, the hardest I’ve ever had to answer” (86), closely followed by “You have duties, responsibilities” (87), comments which serve to illuminate the role that Alison is expected to play, even as a child. Overall, the comic form enables Bechdel to not just articulate/represent/document her sense of Self but to analyze it by accommodating a representation of truth than is more profound (or more telling) than a factually accurate reproduction of the actual event. Phoebe Gloeckner, a medical illustrator and a comic artist, writes that in comics one has to resort to a considerable amount of “manipulation of any set of facts or experiences to make them interesting or to

make sense even to yourself”—that in comics, the artist is not after “a set of true facts” as much as they are focused on “some sort of emotional truth” (Gloeckner et al. 193).

The background illustrations (as seen in Figure 4) then, by assuming the form of visual footnotes—such as the commentary provided by *The Forsyte Saga*—that do not get in the way of the narrative flow, enable this distinctive form of graphic storytelling; which, despite being outside Bechdel’s first-person account, does not interrupt the conversation between Alison and her mother. Subsequently, it also requires

active participation of the reader, by soliciting constant engagement with the text if one is to decipher and gather a cohesive meaning from the proliferation of verbal and visual symbols strewn across the pages.

Furthermore, the same visual device allows Bechdel to write her mother's fear of exposure and scandal into the narrative, which mediates the very direction her memoir ultimately takes (164-165). Textual engagement with these oppositions from her mother not only helps Bechdel understand her mother's distaste for memoirs, but also aids her in seeing how her mother's unfavorable response is shaped by the trauma she was unfairly subjected to by Bechdel's father's sexuality. Although Bechdel's second memoir is technically about her relationship with her mother, it is also about how her father contributed to the mother-daughter dynamic, both before and after his demise (95). Although predominantly absent in the narrative, his looming/residual presence is made legible through the pictorial component which, by relying on "commonality of experience", is able to "evoke images stored in minds" (Eisner 13) of both the creator and the reader.

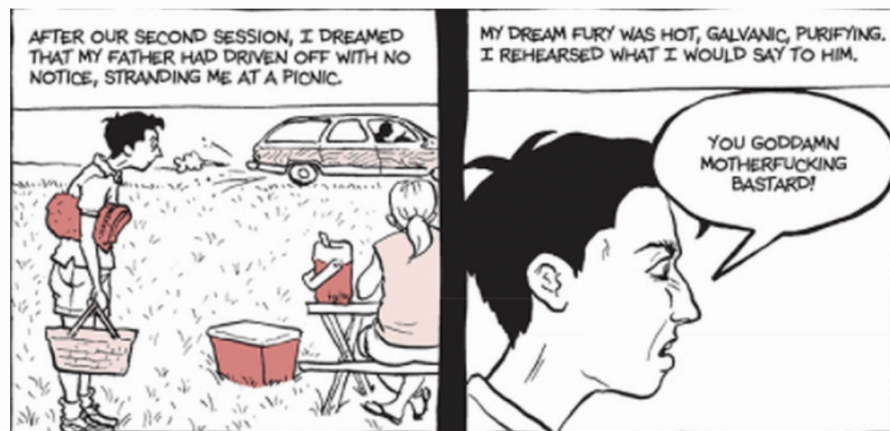


Figure 5 Are You My Mother: Page 74; Depiction of presence through absence

By extension of this rationale, the analysis Bechdel conducts in Image-Textual form helps her come to terms with the fact that her mother's rejection of her sexuality, her queerness, has less to do with Bechdel herself and more to do with how it reminded her mother of the way her husband's sexuality deterred her life. Ultimately, towards the end of the narrative analysis, Bechdel is able to conclude that "whatever she

wanted from her mother was simply not there to be had” and that it was not either of their faults—it simply was (229).

Image-Textual Space as a Holding Environment

The graphic narrative, then, can be perceived as a space where the author-protagonist does not simply write about their grief, but analyzes and confronts it, soliciting a deeply visceral, affective response as the readers do not just read about Bechdel’s life. Instead, in *seeing* her life unfold the way she does, they “read beyond the narrated, toward the embodied—physically and emotively” (Davies 256). Furthermore, comics being an “additive medium” (Duncan 10) require readers “to add their own experience or imagination to the encapsulated moments in order to construct the story” (11). The gaps between the panels, or in the spaces from the panels to the margins, the gutter spaces, extend an invitation to the readers to interpret through the act of projecting themselves onto the events unfolding on the page. In essence, *Are You My Mother*, like *Fun Home* that came before it, “presents a reverse puzzle: its many pieces set perfectly in place—or, to use the language of comics, *fit in space*—it asks the reader to figure out the logic of its rigorous design over its gaps and elisions” (Chute, *Graphic Women* 178). Or in other words, the incursion of the visual helps Bechdel demonstrate and give the reader a window into her life, as opposed to just narrating its events. It is not so much a book about her mother, or even her relationship with her mother, as much as it is about writing autobiographical comics itself; i.e., it is about the act of writing about one’s own life in a public capacity, its processes, its problems (of representation), its pitfalls, its consequences, and even its reception. In an interview with Hillary Chute, Bechdel had said that *Are You My Mother* is an “attempt to figure out why and how therapy helped me” (“Interview” 170). Bechdel further comments on the act of illustrating the memoir that

I often feel, when I’m drawing, that the line I’m making on the paper is a way of touching the people and things I’m drawing. It’s a figurative stroke, because obviously the only thing I’m really

making contact with is the pen and the paper, but that contact—of the nib and ink on the paper—is very literal and sensual. The paper is like skin. And when you’re drawing comics, you have to physically touch every square inch of every page you’re working on. That feels really different from writing. (166)

The “pictorial embodiment” of Self provides Bechdel “the opportunity to represent [her] physical identities in ways that reflect [her] innermost sense of Self” (El Rafaie 51). It “occupies a territory between the subjective and the objective”; she writes that “it’s not “ME” but not “NOT ME” either” (Bechdel 56), so I contend that the memoir functions as an extension of her interiority.



Figure 6. *Are You My Mother*, Page 200.

The memoir is at least in part, an explanation of sorts to her mother as to why had to write Fun Home. (200), or why she needs to continue writing about her life.

Furthermore, the formal features of comics also facilitate the turning of words into images, a process theorized as *Lettering* (Eisner 10). This technique enables Bechdel to seamlessly interpolate her narrative with that of Winnicott’s in an effort to not only annotate her therapy sessions using relevant excerpts from Winnicott’s psychoanalytic theory, but also to understand or draw out the similarities that would help process her own trauma. The scene where Winnicott wonders if he would have been less ambiguous about the place “between the subjective and the objective” (Bechdel 62) “if [his mother] had weaned him more gradually” (61) is especially helpful to Alison for understanding how her own mother set in motion a

lifetime of trauma when she stopped the bedtime ritual of tucking her in abruptly. As a result of not being *weaned* more gradually, Alison as a child “learns to not risk being spontaneous” (92); instead, “to protect the true Self” she fabricates protective layers of buffer selves. Winnicott’s psychoanalytic interjections

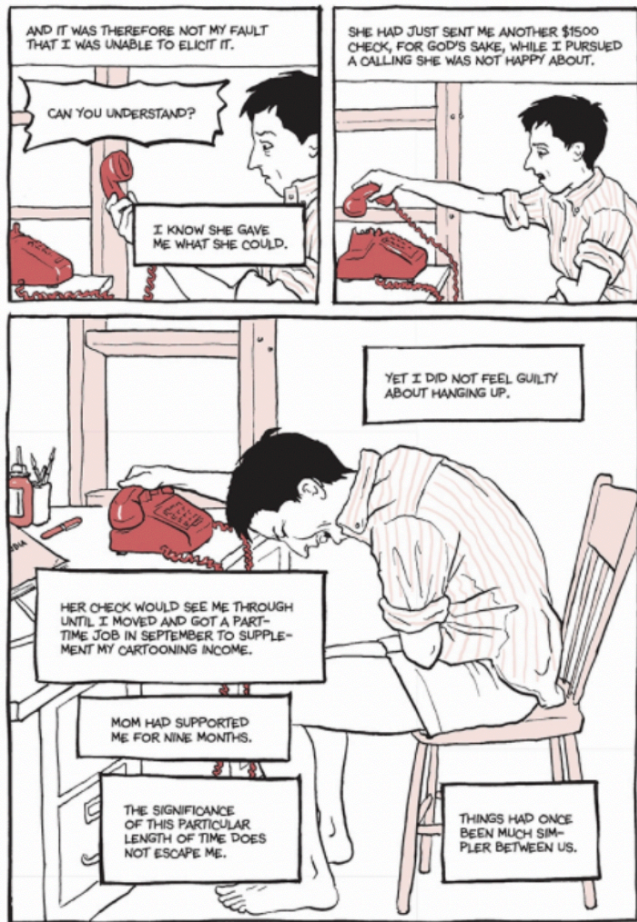


Figure 7. *Are You My Mother*, Page 229. *Letting Go*.

(although minimally interruptive in the dominant narrative due to being present in comic form) prompt a reversal of this emotional dysfunction, by demonstrating to Alison that in order to let go of her monsters she has to engage them first.

Equipped with this knowledge and with her lifelong craving for a tangible manifestation of her internal issues and invisible illnesses (as is evident from her envy of physically disabled kids, pp. 19-20),

Bechdel manufactures this memoir as a *transitional object* that would in the short-term help her engage with her mother and visually peel off one layer after another till the true Self is revealed. In doing so, she would finally be able to let go of her mother. At the beginning of her memoir, she writes that “My

mother composed me as I now compose her” (14), and she concludes her narrative by positing that “At last, I have destroyed my mother, and she has survived my destruction” (285). Thus, the emotional blows incurred during the dissociative process from her mother are softened by her graphic memoir as it facilitates a gradual transition between *holding on* and *breaking free*.

Lastly, by making “visible both external features of [her] condition, and internal, cognitive and emotional features that are otherwise hard to communicate accurate” (Chute, *Why Comics* 191), the graphic

space also allows Bechdel to process the emotions she harbors for her father, most of which were left unmetabolized since his suicide (Bechdel 2012, 74). This is achieved by transforming the question, “Do you ever feel angry at your father for committing suicide?” (asked by Jocelyn and repeated on pages 73 and 96) into a visual refrain that reappears in the narrative multiple times at various points of narrative development. The question yields a different response from Alison the further and deeper she delves into the graphical inquiry of her Self—a rhetorical strategy that doubles as a metatextual reference to the destructive and regenerative process of artistic and/or intellectual creation, or “creative risk taking” (Bechdel 275), as her mother would have suggested. The comic form, by becoming a medium that allow “doing and undoing the self in words and images” (Diedrich 183), becomes an experimental, investigational space. Most importantly, it becomes “a holding environment” (“Interviews” 184), where the author-protagonist can conduct analysis of the Self and its immediate surroundings through a visual examination of memories as well as a range of archival objects. In an interview with Hillary Chute, on being asked about why every chapter in *Mother* begins with a dream sequence, Bechdel had affirmed: “I feel like the book is in a way me, my self, my body. And I’m asking the reader to hold me not just figuratively, in the sense of an analytic “holding environment”, but literally” (“Interviews” 174).

By being able to cohesively accommodate Bechdel’s visual thinking and by sanctioning a manufactured ending, the memoir keeps her from “going to pieces” (Bechdel 284); through the tangible manifestation of her psychosomatic concerns on the page it staves off the anxiety stemming from “having no relationship to the body” (284), especially since drawing comics requires prolonged physical contact with the surface being drawn on; by facilitating detection of patterns, it enables orientation/direction of thought. Most importantly, by resisting formlessness through the tangibility of the comic form, it keeps her from “falling forever” (284).

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