

Minds in the Gutter: Psychological Self-Exposure in Graphic Memoir

Tanya Heflin

What I loved about cartooning was . . . that the space between the image and the words was a powerful thing if you could figure out how to work with it.
(Alison Bechdel)¹



Fig. 1. Bechdel, illustration for "Relatable Transitional Objects"

Energizing the fields of both comics and autobiography, graphic memoir has proliferated in recent years as artists and writers have capitalized upon an expressive depth available through the drawing together of text and image to narrate difficult stories of the self. From the perspective of autobiographic analysis, what makes the hybrid strategies of graphic memoir so compelling are the potentials they offer for memoirists to amplify identification with readers, to tap organically into the visual underpinnings of memory itself, and to rep-

resent the very unconscious—that ineffable, inexpressible, slippery, hidden part of mind—visually through the blank spaces of the comics gutter. Comics theorist Scott McCloud suggests the uniqueness of the comic gutter’s function as he claims: “. . . what’s between the panels is the only element of comics that is not duplicated in any other medium” (“Scott McCloud: Understanding Comics” 13). While gaps, pauses, aporias, fade-outs, and other narrative strategies may be used to represent gaps in prose texts, the visual gutter is unique in its ability to interpellate the reader into making meaning between panels and thereby forwarding the narrative. McCloud goes so far as to suggest that the gutter, despite its “unceremonious title,” holds the unique ability to force readers to create narrative closure between two panels and that this closure is the very “grammar” of comics: “. . . the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics! . . . Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (66-67).

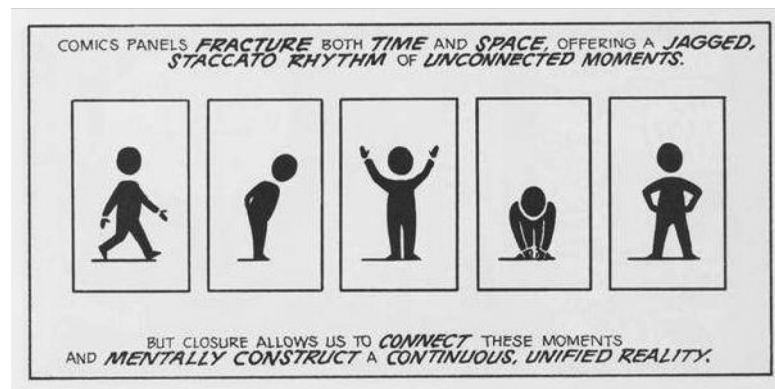


Fig. 2. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, p. 67.

Because the mechanism of comics functions as a pictorial sequence, the visual gap of the gutter only appears to be empty—yet this emptiness is deceptive, as the gutter not only drives the expression of pacing and time itself, but it also invites readers to project the narrative mentally in the mind’s eye. Graphic memoirists, particularly those whose projects compel them to write about painful personal experiences, as I discuss in this essay, have begun to capitalize on this deceptively blank space between panels in order to make newly visible those messy, chaotic, abject, and fecund processes of the unconscious that have long remained unseen.

The potentiality of graphic memoir to express the nearly-inexpressible is made evident in two deeply psychological memoirs that appeared within months of each other in 2012: Alison Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* and Ellen Forney’s *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo & Me*. While Bechdel’s first graphic memoir, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, has won widespread acclaim, her second offering, *Are You My Mother?*, has re-

ceived more pallid, even bemused reviews, yet I argue it constitutes the more psychologically attuned and complex of her two memoirs, in part because it demands of its readers new reading strategies in order to make sense of a great deal of abstract psychological material. Therefore, in addition to telling her autobiographical narrative, Bechdel must simultaneously offer a primer in object relations theory, particularly the psychoanalytic theory of D. W. Winnicott that undergirds the narrative, in order to impart the knowledge necessary for readers to absorb her self-defined life narrative on its own terms. Likewise, in *Marbles*, Forney narrates the story of her long path toward a formal diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Through her free-form memoir, she explores the role of bipolar experience as a force of creativity for artists, linking her own life as an artist to a long history of other famous lives and resisting the cultural stigma so often placed on mental illness. Like Bechdel, Forney must provide readers instruction in the underlying psychological conceptualization of bipolar disorder in order to wrest control of the narrative as she risks being stigmatized by her self-exposure. Both memoirs rely on visual strategies to amplify reader identification with very painful narrative and psychic states; both force readers to co-construct the narrative by skillfully manipulating the gutter spaces; and both take pains within the memoir itself to instruct readers about the complex psychological research and concepts necessary to make sense of the memoirist's experience. These two projects are ambitious, difficult, and complex—and their hybrid narration relies equally on both verbal narrative and the strategic mechanism of comics. In this essay, I bring together two parallel, but often separate, strands of thought from comics theory and autobiography theory in order to illustrate graphic memoirs' potentiality for representing difficult psychological concepts—and even to gesture toward the very unconscious itself—in ways that provide writers and artists access to depths that go beyond strict prose representation in autobiography.

The real-world gutter, literally that shallow channel, groove, or trough designed to carry off excess rainwater, simultaneously carries additional connotative meanings—of dirt, of squalor, of poverty, of non-normative sexuality, of stigma—and this second layer of meaning is redolent with much of comics history as a stigmatized form of expression. Shifting across the twentieth century from its roots in “yellow journalism” through its years of Comics Code Authority censorship restrictions through its underground commix countercultural eruptions—only in the recent decade have comics from across the century begun to receive significant critical attention. Interestingly, some of the earliest works to receive the most scholarly attention have been those narratives that incorporate autobiographic modes—a surprising confluence given that both memoir and comics are genres typically perceived as residing outside the more privileged literary genres of novel, short fiction, poetry, and drama. From the perspective of autobiographical theory, Michael A. Chaney points out that “many of the most-lauded graphic novels [are] autobiographical” (5) while Hillary Chute wonders, “What is gained from this hybrid form of expression?” (6). From the perspective of the makers of comics, one key to the power of the form lies in its connection to the hand-

made. Linking comics to handwritten diary—perhaps the most intimate and least privileged literary form—Art Spiegelman, acclaimed creator of *Maus*, suggests that reading hand-drawn autobiographical comics is “as close to getting a clear copy of one’s diary or journal as one could have. It’s more intimate than a book of prose that’s set in type. . . . You’re getting an incredible amount of information about the maker” (*The Complete Maus*, qtd in Chute 11). In a 2007 interview, Bechdel remarked, “I always felt like there was something inherently autobiographical about cartooning, and that’s why there was so much of it. I still believe that. I haven’t exactly worked out my theory of why, but it does feel like it almost demands people to write autobiographies” (Emmert 37). Ultimately, the linkage between word and line, particularly when drawn on the page by the very narrator who has lived the narrated story, imbues the narrative with a lived quality that becomes palpable to readers.

Born of a history of countercultural and non-legitimated modes of underground production and dispersal, much of the graphic memoir appearing in the early twenty-first century wears its outsider status as a badge of honor—and many of these artists and writers have found graphic memoir to be the most powerful, effective, economical, and expressive ways of telling stories that have been untellable in other times or forms. Giving voice and visibility to the previously inaudible or invisible, these narratives, like much of the autobiographical work of the “memoir boom” that began in the 1990s, tell stories of pain, addiction, trauma, illness, stigmatized sexualities, etc.—yet both recent scholarship and reading patterns suggest that the graphic element of these stories allows a version of reader identification that operates differently from prose-only texts.

Keeping one foot firmly in the gutter as we read graphic memoirs that risk significant self-exposure, two long-held axioms undergirding the analysis of prose-based autobiography may offer a useful lens when extrapolated to interpreting graphic representations of life-writing. First, critical discourse surrounding autobiographical genres takes as a touchstone French theorist Philippe Lejeune’s articulation of the “autobiographical pact,” which recognizes that readers assume that any text purporting to be “autobiographical” makes an implicit promise to maintain an alignment between author, narrator, and subject; thus the text’s purchase relies heavily upon readers’ belief in the authenticity of this alignment (Lejeune 12). From the position of the reader, Lejeune suggests the autobiographical text sets for the position “supposes that there is *identity of name* between the author (such as he figures, by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about” (12). Ultimately, Lejeune suggests that “what defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name. And this is true also for the one who is writing the text” (19-20). While Lejeune articulated *le pacte autobiographique* with respect to French literature in the 1970s, we continue to see its operation as an ongoing, all-but-invisible set of assumptions built into reader reception of contemporary autobiography, memoir, and film. While poststructuralist and postmodern thought causes us to question any steady reliance on the unitary

sense of self implied by the pact, these assumptions nonetheless remain in effect in no small degree—so much so that any autobiographical text that is discovered to have broken the pact will be emphatically disavowed as “inauthentic” by readers (cf. James Frey, Rigoberta Menchu, Norma Khouri, etc.). Second, theories of life-writing take as axiomatic that autobiographical texts will display a complex interplay between the multiple diegetic levels within the text. At the very least, sophisticated readers must distinguish between the “narrating ‘I’”—the writer in the present-day of the narration of the text who tells the story in retrospect—and the “narrated ‘I’”—the subject of the narration about whom the story is told. Further complicating these split voices, in many (perhaps most) works the “narrated ‘I’” exists not singly, but at multiple points in time from the beginning of the text through the end, sometimes in a linear fashion but often not. Presupposing these two versions of the “I” stands the “real” or “historical I,” which Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe as the “flesh-and-blood person located in a particular time and place” but simultaneously as an “I” who is “unknown and unknowable by readers and is not the ‘I’ that we gain access to in an autobiographical narrative” (72).² The proliferation of these diegetic levels of narration becomes particularly interesting in graphic forms, as memoirists represent the multiple versions of the “narrated ‘I’” through a changing series of pictorial avatars, or graphic representations of the “narrated I,” that may alter dramatically depending upon the episode within the narrative.

The complexities of narrating self-told life-stories becomes even richer when the writer of the verbal text is also the artist of the visual pictorial images, as is the case with both Bechdel and Forney. While the history of autobiographical comics includes a rich body of work created by collaborations between writers and artists who create the text and image separately (e.g., writer Harvey Pekar in collaboration with artist Robert Crumb), the implicit autobiographical pact will be strongest when writer and artist align in one creator. Writing about traditional prose-based narrative, theorist Margo Culley gestures toward the complications of subjectivity that life-writing intensifies: “The act of autobiographical writing . . . involves the writer in complex literary as well as psychological processes. It is a paradox that the process whose frequent goal is to establish self-continuity involves at its heart a dislocation from the self, or a turning of subject into object” (10). I argue that this “turning of subject into object” takes on additional weight when the representation of selfhood straddles both visual and verbal modes. Bridging literary and psychological understandings of selfhood, an understanding of what is involved in this act of “narrative self-ing,” as narrative psychologist Dan P. McAdams terms it, deepens our sense of what is at stake in autobiographical writing. McAdams proposes a “life story model of identity” that “asserts that people living in modern societies provide their lives with unity and purpose by constructing internalized and evolving narratives of the self” (“The Psychology of Life Stories” 100). Ultimately, narrative psychologists suggest “the purpose of the life story is to form a cohesive identity so that one does not get pulled apart by the deconstructive forces of modernity” (Thorne and Latzke

372). For graphic memoirists whose narrative self-representation incorporates the self-exposure of potentially stigmatizing mental illness, the act of creating a hybridized visual/verbal avatar of selfhood serves not only an expressive function, but also serves nothing less than a constitutive one, as well. In short, the self-stories they tell not only work to express some version of individual subjectivity but may also serve in key ways to constitute the author's ongoing subjectivity itself.

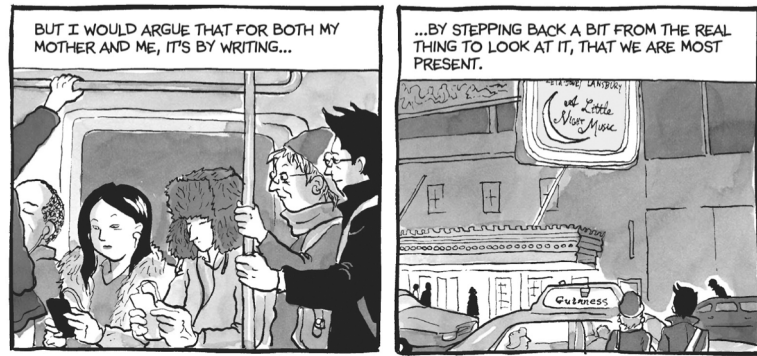


Fig. 3. *Are You My Mother?* p. 242.

Are You My Mother?

In *Are You My Mother?*, Bechdel's painstakingly detailed images are characterized by a stripped-down color palette of black line drawings shaded by watercolor washes of greys and muted reds, a visual coding that is consistent with the muted blue-green washes that characterized *Fun Home*. Written six years earlier, *Fun Home* explores Bechdel's complex relationship with her father, whose closeted sexuality is analyzed by the narrating "I" of the text as having significantly complicated her own coming out as lesbian years later. *Fun Home* was immediately acclaimed by critics to be a "pioneering work," winning numerous awards and achieving both critical acclaim and cult status among readers. Throughout both memoirs, Bechdel's artistic process is famously meticulous: for every rendered image, Bechdel herself physically poses in character in order to represent fine nuances of gesture and expression (see Fig. 4). Her narrative is likewise complex as Bechdel herself describes the non-linear structure as "starting from the outside and spiraling in to the center of the story" ("Interview with Dena Seidel"). Bechdel's companion memoir about her mother, *Are You My Mother?*, while following a similar visual coding and non-linear narrative structure, has been reviewed more tepidly, being called "essayistic" by one reviewer (Bradley 162) and "a bit too much therapy" and not "nearly as much fun" by another (Laura Miller n.p.). Centered on Bechdel's ongoing relationship with her living mother and drawing its title from Eastman's classic 1960 children's book illustrating parental psychological imprinting, *Are You My Mother?* lacks *Fun Home*'s unambiguously

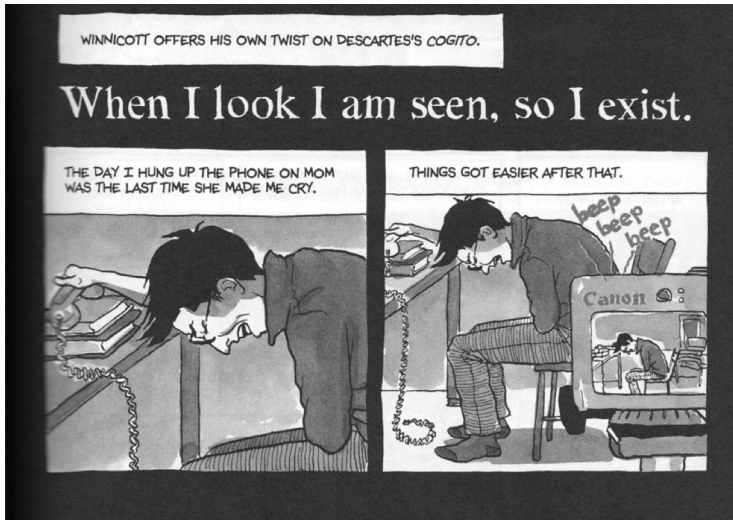


Fig. 4. *Are You My Mother?* p. 233.

propellant narrative drive toward the foreshadowed death of a major figure—and it therefore requires the writer to delve even more deeply into the murky, quiet, subtle complexity of a relationship characterized by the entwined subjectivities of mother and daughter. As Bechdel writes: “the story of my mother and me is unfolding even as I write it” (*Are You My Mother?* 10).

Both the abstraction and the erudition of the memoir are evident from its table of contents: Each of the seven chapters of *Are You My Mother?* is titled after a key concept from D.W. Winnicott’s long body of psychoanalytic work. (Chapter titles mimic Winnicott’s book or chapter titles: “The Ordinary Devoted Mother,” “Transitional Objects,” “True and False Self,” “Mind,” “Hate,” “Mirror,” and “The Use of an Object.”) Not only is the text’s key structuring device centered on Winnicott’s heady psychological theory, each chapter then opens and closes with black-grounded pages that relate dream-work that Bechdel experienced while in the process of therapy. Images of Bechdel within therapy sessions abound, and the therapy sessions themselves—as well as historical renderings of psychological and literary figures including Winnicott, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich—comprise central plot points in the memoir. In contrast to the plotted nature of most graphic narrative, including Bechdel’s own *Fun Home*, these more subtle shifts in action require of readers more patient reading strategies, as well. Ultimately, these psychological themes and historical figures are not extraneous, but are deeply interwoven with Bechdel’s lived experience of therapy and the multi-level foci of this memoir: Bechdel’s reconstructed relationship with her mother, her exploration of depth psychoanalysis, and her creative process itself, rendered in the very moment of writing and drawing the memoir.

Fig. 5. *Are You My Mother?* p. 3

The grammar of the gutter is exemplified in one of the most subtle yet profound sequences of the memoir, a five-page rendering that represents nearly a year of therapy sessions during which we readers witness Bechdel's Alison avatar traversing from crisis to breakthrough with therapist Jocelyn. (In order to emphasize the differentiation between the "narrating 'I'" and the 'narrated 'I,'" I will refer to the nar-

Fig. 6. Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?* p. 21.

rating voice by the author's last name [e.g., Bechdel] and the narrated subject of the memoir, or its "avatar," by the author/subject's first name [e.g., Alison].) In this sequence, Jocelyn responds to Alison's mounting anxiety by asking her the following question: "Can you describe your cosmology to me?" (102). Bechdel renders her response pictorially with images first of what she does not see and then of what she does see as "God"(see fig. 8).

Continuing this sequence, Bechdel conveys the passage of time spent in therapy with a five-page series of images of the two speakers in dialogue on opposite sides of a therapist's office that centers on a window through which we watch a tree shed its leaves through fall and winter and blossom in the spring (102-06). The repetition of images, up to five nearly-identical frames per page for five consecutive pages, coupled with the emotional crisis conveyed within the panels, relies upon the mechanics of the gutter to convey the passage of time. Significantly, any gestural movements of the characters are minimal—Alison runs her hand through her hair or hangs her head, the therapist Jocelyn maintains focused eye contact—with the exception of one hug. Because the pacing of the sequence is so exquisitely timed, readers are confronted with an absence in the space we have come to expect being allotted to the therapist Jocelyn—and that sudden absence is startling (105).

Even more significantly, the interstitial gutter spaces running horizontally between the panels force readers to imagine the deep interior work that takes place for the individual in therapy; we readers read into the gutters the visual expression of an ineffable and unreachable unconscious, which unfolds over many weeks and months, as represented here by the tree going dormant for winter then blossoming in spring. A key feature of this pictorial sequence, the tree stands consistently in the space between the two speakers. So telling for the psychic rebirth the Alison character experiences throughout the sequence, a verbal representation of the tree would fail to capture the subtlety that the pictorial representation suggests as it illustrates the slow passage of time required for Alison's growth.

Ultimately, this long sequence of twenty repeated images ends with the final three panels bracketed by a collage of text rendered directly from Winnicott's formal discussion of the "false self," that external defense and façade that precludes one from experiencing the authentic reality of the "true self" (Winnicott, "Ego Distortion"). In these images, Bechdel expands the diegetic levels to encompass the already-complex roles of 1) the "narrating 'I,'" Bechdel's voice as writer of the memoir, to be found in block lettering in black figure on white ground; 2) the "narrated 'I'" Alison in dialogue with Jocelyn, to be found within balloon quotes in the images; and 3) Winnicott's theoretical voice itself, to be found in the red-washed type-style font between the images (see figure 10). The narrating 'I' reflects on the complications of attempting to get beyond layers of falseness: "And woe betide the person with the 'double abnormality' of a false self and 'a fine intellect' that they find they can use to escape their pain" (106). Meanwhile, in a rendered image of Winnicott's article, Bechdel quotes: "The world may observe academic success of a high degree, and may find it hard to believe in the very real distress of the individual concerned, who feels 'phoney' the more he or she is successful." (Winnicott, qtd in Bechdel 106). Ultimately, both abstractions are illustrated in the pictorial image with the Alison avatar expressing deep conflict: "I want to do this right! I want to be your best client. . . . God. It's a good thing my cartoons get me a little attention, I'm so desperate for it. . . . Yet when I get it I feel so unworthy. . . ." (106). At just that visual moment, the tree is bursting into pink

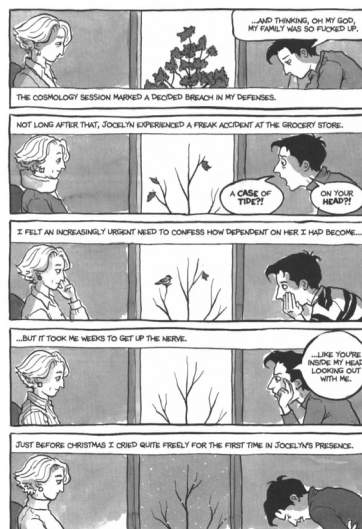


102



103

Fig. 8. p. 102-03



104



105

Fig. 9. p. 104-05.



Fig. 10. p. 106.

Where Bechdel's pictorial images convey a tightly controlled line and colored ink wash, Forney's images are strictly black and white, and throughout the memoir, her images vary dramatically, incorporating at various times combinations of cartoon, collage, un-paneled free-form expressionistic images, erotic drawings, photo-images from sketchbooks, long lists of names, and recreations of artworks by Michelangelo, Van Gogh, Edward Munch, Georgia O'Keefe, and many others whom she identifies as having experienced bipolar episodes. A long-time artist and illustrator whose projects include the comic series *I Love Led Zeppelin* and the illustrations for Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Forney's bracing, yet funny portrayal of bipolar experience weds the visual and verbal so tightly that attempting to extricate the two robs the work of coherent meaning. More precisely, Forney's work reveals the ways that the comics mechanisms of time and closure may work not only to teach readers difficult concepts and amplify their identification with the writer, but also to relay pictorially the ups and downs of mental disruption. For example, Forney's explication early in the book about the varying diagnoses possible as mood disorders melds the *DSM-IV*'s formal definitions with images of a carousel rider to convey mood (see fig. 15). More poignantly, her wordless series of images depicting depression—drawn with a simple stick figure to amplify through simplification—conveys the silent quality of clinical depression in ways that text-heavy pages would fail to accomplish (see fig. 16). Beginning and ending the one-page series with nearly identical images to convey depression's cyclical quality, and economically conveying the passage of time with simple lines, Forney expresses depression at its barest as a quiet, sad passage of time. In this series, the gutter is, of course, invisible or implicit—or perhaps the entire series exists within a kind of gutter. Ultimately, the silent visual rendering embodies the silence of depression in ways that provoke a strong empathy within readers, a key feature of all autobiographical modes.

Hybridizing the Visual and Verbal

In his introduction to *Graphic Subjects*, Chaney poses a fruitful question about the deepened effect on readers of graphic forms of memoir: "Why do life stories told in the pictorial mode of the comics have the power to trigger in us such a range of emotional reactions so effectively, from prurient humor to stupefying pathos?" (7). Particularly when it comes to the profoundly self-exposing graphic memoirs which take as their subject mental illness or psychological distress—subjects to which an unshakeable stigma continues to adhere—what is it that causes an exponential impact of visual and verbal narrative combined?

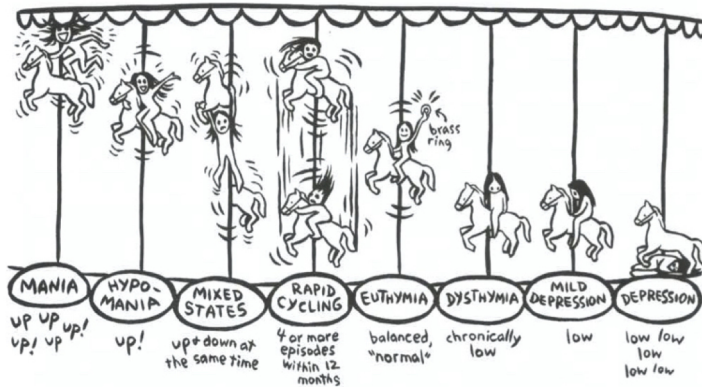
When linking theories of the visual/verbal art of comics with the narrative mode of autobiography, several possibilities emerge. Graphic memoir, according to Hillary Chute, must be seen as a "cross-discursive form," in which the verbal and visual do not merely blend together to create a unified whole, but instead are seen as operating together and separately on multiple planes of representation.

What is a "MOOD DISORDER" anyway?

BASICALLY, IT'S A CONDITION WHERE EMOTIONS ARE DERAILED FOR AN EXTENDED PERIOD OF TIME. THE MAIN TYPES ARE:

- ★ BIPOLAR I: ALTERNATING MANIC + DEPRESSIVE EPISODES ← (that's me)
- ★ BIPOLAR II: ALTERNATING HYPOMANIC + DEPRESSIVE EPISODES
R. "HYPOMANIA" = MILD MANIA
- ★ CYCLOTHYMIA: ALTERNATING HYPOMANIC + MILD DEPRESSIVE EPISODES
- ★ UNIPOLAR DEPRESSION: SINGLE OR RECURRENT EPISODES WITH NO MANIA
- ★ DYSTHYMIA: CHRONIC, LOW-GRADE DEPRESSION

... WHICH REFER TO THESE MOOD STATES:



NOTE: "BIPOLAR DISORDER" + "MANIC DEPRESSION" ARE THE SAME THING.

Fig. 15. Marbles, p. 59.

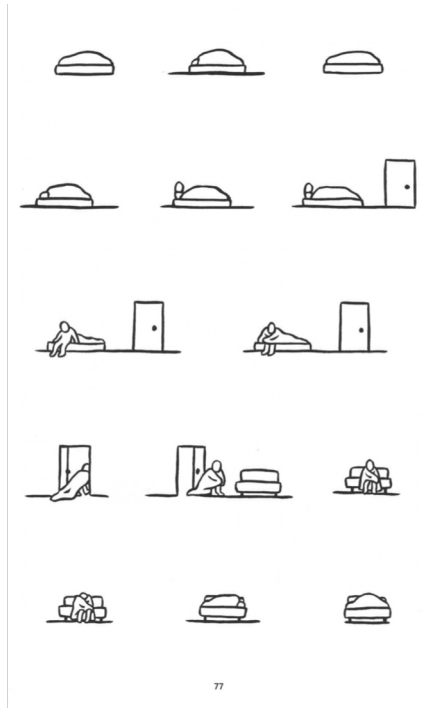


Fig. 16. *Marbles* p. 77.

Likewise, Gillian Whitlock, who has worked to popularize the neologism “autographics” as “life narrative fabricated in and through drawing and design using various technologies, modes, and materials,” suggests that graphic memoir requires extraordinarily sophisticated literacies from its readers (v). Describing the reading strategies required for readers of Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, Whitlock and Anna Polletti elaborate:

Bechdel’s *Fun Home* anticipates a reader with advanced literacies who can read the translations of photographs into drawings that draw on realist aesthetics, and which deliberately contrast to the cartooning style of the main text. The ironic play between the autobiographical avatar, Alison, who remains held within the frames of the comics, and the autobiographical narrator whose narrative proceeds through unboxed words, draws readers into complex intertextual memory work on every page. (x)

Smith and Watson highlight the potential for contestation that this complex “memory work” entails: “Mixing verbal and visual materials, autographics often present conflicting stories and oscillate between different planes of representations. Readers may observe stories in the visual plane that are not explicitly signaled by the verbal plane, and vice versa, thus engaging contesting stories and interpretations of autobiographical memory and meaning” (169). From

the perspective of reader, developing new literacies challenges readers to open to multiple planes of cognition simultaneously in order to recognize the multiple layers of meaning that are alternately congruent or divergent at any given point in the narrative.

The capacity to sort through these layers of contested meaning requires, among other things, a sophisticated “theory of mind,” the philosophical concept of an individual’s ability to attribute mental processes (e.g., belief, pretending, desire) to oneself and others. Lisa Zunshine suggests that graphic novels—with their reliance not only on verbal descriptions of interiority but also on non-verbal cues and layering of image and text throughout—demand from readers (and may serve to develop in young readers) a “high sociocognitive complexity” (130). Describing human minds as hungry for understanding the interior states of others, Zunshine calls us “greedy mind readers” and suggests that graphic narratives satisfy our hunger on multiple levels:

In other words, greedy mind-readers that we are, we read both fiction and memoir for people’s mental states. Graphic narratives cater to our appetite by exploring medium-specific ways of portraying sociocognitive complexity. By medium-specific, I mean that now it is the *visual* style or combination of visual and verbal styles that brings in complex mental states. . . .” (133)

Graphic narratives overall, and graphic memoirs, in particular, demand from readers a complex set of both literacy and empathic skills. Far from being unidimensional or juvenile, the form itself presupposes readers’ ability to decode on multiple levels at once, shifting priorities from visual to verbal to blended interpretation countless times throughout the reading experience. While this skillset is crucial to the reception of any graphic work, the additional skill of empathic reading, I would argue, is particularly crucial to understanding graphic memoir, given its assumption of an autobiographical pact in which readers accept that the narrator and narrated subject are aligned and that the narrative itself is, in fact, a lived story.

Shifting from the perspective of reader to that of creator, this alignment is no less crucial and is exemplified throughout the meta-narratives of both Bechdel and Forney’s texts. Examining prose narrative, Suzette Henke offers the useful term “scriptotherapy” to suggest that the writing of life trauma serves to give writers narrative control over traumatic experience: “The subject of enunciation theoretically restores a sense of agency to the hitherto fragmented self, now recast as the protagonist of his or her life drama. Through the artistic replication of a coherent subject-position, the life-writing project generates a healing narrative that temporarily restores the fragmented self to an empowered position of psychological agency” (xvi). On the simplest surface level, in *Are You My Mother?* and *Marbles*, both Bechdel and Forney plainly dramatize the early traumas they experienced. Yet even more significantly, both writers then go on to dramatize the therapeutic experience itself, as well as its aftermath and rippling repercussions—narrating the ongoing nature of this reflection right up to the moment of publication. (For example, in the last

few pages of *Are You My Mother?*, Bechdel narrates having sent the first half of the book to her mother for her opinion: “She showed the chapters to Bob first, so he could warn her if there was anything too upsetting. . . . So far she hasn’t commented much except to say, in what was possibly an accusatory tone, ‘You must have a pretty good memory’” [284-85].) Layer upon layer, written using in multiple diegetic voices, conveyed using multiple visual and verbal forms, expressed using both the panel and the silent gutter—both these graphic memoirs reveal a potential for complexity and multi-layered narrative that opens new spaces for life-writing. Added to the form’s inherent potential for multi-voiced narrative is its inherent appeal to new readers who may not have been drawn to life-writing in traditional prose forms: “Graphic memoirs have become a site for telling complex stories of gender, sexuality, trauma, and the nation that reach millions of readers and potentially circulate worldwide . . .” (Smith and Watson 168). For both readers and writers, the hybrid form of graphic memoir opens toward a new avenue for self-narration that is complex, multi-layered, and inherently self-aware.

A Way Out

Bechdel’s closing pages for *Are You My Mother?* represent not only the conclusion of her memoir, but also bring closure to her act of attempting to narrate her two parents, a self-constitutive writing practice that allows her to reflect upon and relate the incomplete, yet “good-enough”³ parenting that she received. Suggesting nothing more than the gaps, voids, and unknowabilities of human psychological experience and those formative relationships which most profoundly define us, Bechdel positions the final panel to cover two facing pages, surrounded by copious black space.

Positioned to take a gods-eye view, we readers see mother and daughter playing the imaginative game that the narrating Bechdel had previously described as “the moment my mother taught me to write” (287). Within the panel, the boxed text conveys the voice of the present-day narrating I, who writes of the gaps and voids that characterize the unconscious and the necessary incompleteness of mother-daughter relationship:

There was a certain thing I did not get from my mother .

There is a lack, a gap, a void

But in its place, she has given me something else

Something, I would argue, that is far more valuable

She has given me a way out. (Bechdel 288-89)

While the child’s merging with the mother is necessarily incomplete (from the perspective of Winnicott’s object relations), it is nevertheless, profoundly, somehow enough. For Bechdel, as for Ellen Forney, and for Lynda Barry, Robert Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Trina Robbins, Marjane Satrapi, Art Spiegelman, and the many other contemporary memoirists who make use of graphic memoirs to confront an all-but-unknowable unconscious—the interstitial gutter spaces within comics opens new paths that lead,

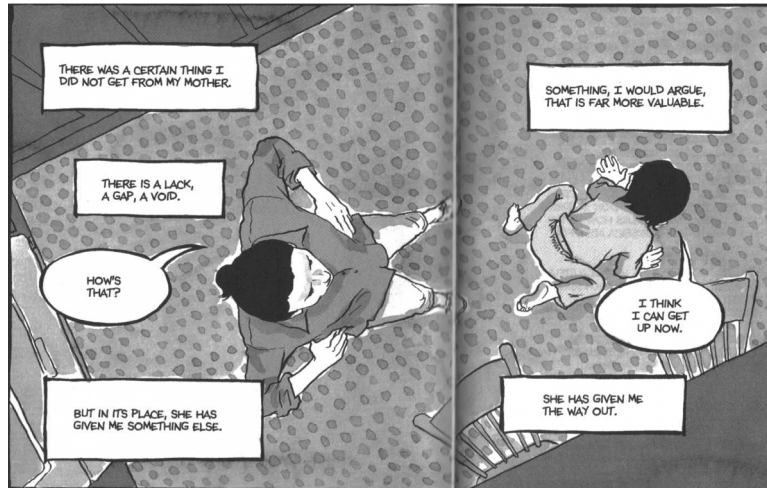


Fig. 17. *Are You My Mother?* pp. 288-89.

at least sometimes, to a way out.

Notes

¹ Quoted from Bechdel's speech to a PEN/Faulkner event co-delivered with Lynda Barry and Chris Ware on 9 November 2007 (qtd in Warhol 2).

² Complicating these distinctions even further, Smith and Watson additionally propose an "ideological 'I'" that they draw from Louis Althusser and Paul Smith to define as "the concept of personhood culturally available to the narrator when he tells his story" (76).

³ Winnicott's concept for parenting that provides a sufficient holding environment through which the child may appropriately develop autonomy.

Works Cited

- Bechdel, Alison. *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama*. Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2012. Print.
- . *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2006. Print.
- . Interview with Dena Seidel. *Alison Bechdel's Graphic Narrative*. Web video. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Writers House. Event occurs at 04:57. Retrieved 16 April 2008.
- Bradley, William. "Graphic Memoirs Come of Age." *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* 15.1 (2013): 161-65. Print.
- Chaney, Michael A., ed. *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*. Madison WI: U of Wisconsin P, 2011. Print.
- Chute, Hillary L. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. Print.
- Eastman, P.D. *Are You My Mother?* New York: Random House, 1960.

- Emmert, Lynn. "Life Drawing: An Interview with Alison Bechdel." *Comics Journal* 282 (April 2007): 34-52. Print.
- Forney, Ellen. *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me*. New York: Gotham Books, 2012. Print.
- Henke, Suzette. *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life Writing*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. Print.
- Konstantinou, Lee. "Relatable Transitional Objects." *The New Inquiry*. 3 Jul 2012. 29 Oct 2014. Web.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Trans. Katherine Leary. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989. Print.
- McAdams, Dan P. "The Psychology of Life Stories." *Review of General Psychology* 5.2 (2001): 100-22. Print.
- McCloud, Scott. "Scott McCloud: Understanding Comics." *Comic Book Rebels: Conversations with the Creators of New Comics*. Ed. Stanley Wiater and Stephen R. Bissette. New York: Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1993: 3-16. Print.
- . *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993. Print.
- Miller, Laura. "Are You My Mother? By Alison Bechdel." Rev. *The Guardian*. 24 May 2012. Web. 29 Oct. 2014. Print.
- Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010. Print.
- Thorne, A., & Latzke, M. "Contextualizing the Storied Self." *Psychological Inquiry* 7 (1996), 372-376. Print.
- Warhol, Robyn. "The Space Between: A Narrative Approach to Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." *College Literature* 38.3 (2011): 1-20. Print.
- Whitlock, Gillian and Anna Poletti. "Self-Regarding Art." *Biography* 3.1 (Winter 2008): v-xxiii. Print.
- Winnicott, "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self." 1960. in *The Maturation Process and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*. New York: International UP Inc., 1965, 140-152. Print.
- Zunshine, Lisa. "What to Expect When You Pick Up a Graphic Novel." *SubStance* 124 40.1 (2011): 114-34. Print.