

Under the Loving Gaze of Mourners: Witnessing Death's (Dis)placement and Emotional Dissonance in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*

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In his book, *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America*, Gary Laderman explains that with the rise in popularity of funeral homes in the twentieth-century, "The body had become something more than simply a container for the spirit...with no religious power to transform the experience of the living. Under the loving gaze of mourners, the corpse acquired a sacred status that was decidedly material rather than spiritual, and comforting rather than horrifying" (22). The bodies of the dead come to serve a social function, providing the living with a sense of closure and the opportunity to revisit the dead one last time in a state that resembles life, an opportunity that is achieved through the embalming, dressing, and preparation of the body. Laderman notes, "Dead bodies, in effect, disappeared from the everyday world of twentieth-century Americans. When they reappeared in the living world, social mediators often controlled the terms of the encounter—but not exclusively" (22). Preparation of the body for funerary purposes becomes, at its core, a masking of death's gruesome reality in order to present a socially-acceptable and perhaps even comforting image for family and friends to remember the deceased. Yet, these social mediators even extend beyond the preparation and viewing of the body to appropriate decorum at funerals and acceptable displays of emotion when reacting to the death of a loved one. More generally, this suggests that there are certain standards of behavior that one is expected to uphold when demonstrating (and perhaps even feeling) certain basic human emotions.

Chapter two of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* is entitled "A Happy Death," an allusion to Albert Camus' work of the same name. The chapter, along with detailing her life growing up around the family-run funeral home business, focuses on two formative events: the first time she witnesses death without the illusory concealment provided by embalming and makeup and her return home for her father's funeral after learning of his sudden and tragic death. These events

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are not only significant in shaping her life, but also greatly affect her understanding of and ability to express her emotions. She struggles with a perceived disconnect or dissonance between her feelings and her actions in the same way that the title of the chapter is ironic. As Jean-Paul Sartre asserts in his tome on existentialism, *Being and Nothingness* (1992), feelings are socially constructed: "A feeling, for example, is a feeling in the presence of a norm This norm or totality of the affective self is directly present as a lack suffered in the very heart of suffering. One suffers and one suffers from not suffering enough" (141). That is, one's ability to conform to socially-guided principles of feeling not only affects one's ability to understand his or her emotional health, but in effect, creates those feelings by one's very awareness of the judgment of others. Through the interplay between the visual representations of experience and verbal recollections of feeling in each of these scenes, the reader becomes witness alongside Alison¹ to the bodies of both her father in the funeral home parlor and the cadaver in the prep room. By becoming an observer, the reader is dually engaged in a dialogue with Alison on her struggle with emotional dissonance, a conflict between her feelings and actions, and the ways in which she copes with the trauma of her father's death.

Perhaps one of the most visually graphic and striking scenes in the memoir is when Alison first becomes witness to the activities in the "inner sanctum" of the funeral home (Bechdel 43). According to Julia Watson in her article, "Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*," "There is a tension in *Fun Home* between its decorous cover and the graphic disclosures inside, much as a funeral home's display galleries mask the work done in its back rooms..." (33). Just as Watson makes the distinction here between the graphic memoir's decorative cover design and the story on the printed pages, the spaces in the funeral home are separated, some of which are concealed from view, for purposes of appearances. The private quarters, where Alison's father works on the bodies before they're displayed in front of friends and family, exposes the gritty realities of death, and even Alison is not fully aware of what occurs in the room. It is hidden from view with a frosted glass window and a clear sign reading, "Private" (Bechdel 43).

During her routine chores around the funeral home, Alison disinterestedly pulls the vacuum behind her as she passes in front of the doorway. The etched "Private" sign is visible in the background. Her face is expressionless, a reflection of her habitual obligation to cleaning the funeral home to help her father and grandmother with maintaining the space. Yet, the panel's composition does not reflect complete normalcy: the picture plane is slightly unbalanced and tilted to the left, emphasized by the checkered pattern on the floor. The following panel begins on the next row, the top border of which is positioned significantly lower on the page than the panel beside it. The unbalance from the preceding panel and the dramatic drop creates a sense of falling or slipping into the next panel. This panel's shape and perspective is further disruptive: a tall and narrow panel, elongated by the bird's-eye perspective that is suspended over the

empty examining table of the embalming room. In Will Eisner's groundbreaking work, *Comics and Sequential Art*, he explains that a "narrow panel evokes the feeling of being hemmed in – confinement" (92). The room is "dominated by" the looming anatomy and physiology wall chart, which also monopolizes much of the panel's picture plane. The bird's-eye perspective, Eisner notes, can also be emotionally estranging by emphasizing the distance between the reader and the characters or objects in the panel: "Looking at a scene from above it, the viewer has a sense of detachment – he is an observer rather than a participant" (92). Prior to witnessing her father work on the body, this essentially describes Alison's relationship to the space, a detached observer to the sterile environment of the room without the presence of others (living or dead).

Scott McCloud also notes in his work *Making Comics* (2006) that the bird's-eye view in a panel can function as an empowering perspective: "getting above a scene can give readers access to a wealth of info about a setting – and a sense of 'rising above it all' emotionally as well" (21). Ironically, Alison believes she has a grasp (although tangentially) on the function and operations of the embalming room. She is able to "rise above it all," in the sense that she can be in some way removed from the reality of her father's work in the room, but her perspective is dependent on what she knows of the *empty* space: "I didn't normally see the bodies before they were dressed and in a casket" (Bechdel 43).

Panel shape, perspective and page layout take on an unsettling and ominous tone. Yet the final panel on the page offers some solace, a grounded image with a perspective close to the floor portrays Alison as she kneels to rewind the cord for the vacuum cleaner. A word balloon stretches from the right side of the panel, representing her father calling her into the embalming room. Alison is in profile, facing the right-side of the panel, which is also the edge of the page. Her eyebrow arches in mild irritation at her father's next command, and it is clear that she is not expecting anything out of her normal frame of reference: the embalming room sans undressed and unfinished cadaver. Both Alison and reader are about to confront the startling sight of the partially embalmed body as they enter a new space: Alison into the occupied embalming room and the reader into the next verso recto page spread.

Any confidence in what she knows about the room or the bodies that her father prepares for funerals is jarringly unsettled when she enters this space as a witness. The first panel stretches across the top of the page. Both Alison and reader are left to silently observe the full length of the cadaver's naked body. Evidence of Alison's presence in the room is acknowledged solely through her silhouette in the corner of the image. In McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, he describes the process by which readers are more or less likely to identify (or objectify) characters based on how they are visually represented: "when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face – you see it as the face of another, but when you enter the world of the cartoon – you see yourself....By de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts" (36, 41). The shadow or outline of

Alison's form is all that is represented here, making the reader's and Alison's perspectives even more closely aligned. Beyond the obvious shock of the man's nudity and open chest, the narration above the panel suggests that the man on the table differs greatly from those that Alison has witnessed already in their caskets: this man is "jarringly unlike dad's usual traffic of desiccated old people," and the image accentuates the body's otherness with its more intricate shadowing and detail in contrast to the clean, simple lines of both the room and of Alison's father, who works over the body (Bechdel 44).

The following panel focuses the reader's gaze on the man's torso. According to Jennifer Lemberg, author of "Closing the Gap in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*," looking and witnessing are an integral part of the narrative's construction and its ability to directly involve the reader. She writes, "The emphasis on looking in these panels suggests the overwhelming visibility Bechdel assigns to this figure and engages us in seeing the connection..." (Lemberg 136-37). Lemberg is referring here to Alison's first encounter with a woman, who she refers to as a "truck-driving bulldyke" (Bechdel 119) while dining at a luncheonette; however, Lemberg's assessment applies to the rest of the narrative, not only when the reader becomes witness alongside Alison, as is the case in encountering the cadaver, but also when the reader is made to explicitly observe Alison and her actions. The reader's perspective shifts in the next panel, no longer situated alongside or from Alison's perspective. Rather, the reader now peers over her father's shoulder. Alison gazes at the unseen body, while her father casually asks for her to "hand [him] the scissors." The perspective is elevated and distant, situated above eye-level, and Alison appears small and vulnerable in the middle of the picture plane. The narration above the previous panel explicitly states that she remembers the experience to be quite "shocking," but ironically, she "studiously betrayed no emotion," which is portrayed in her neutral and often expressionless face throughout the scene (Bechdel 44). As her gaze continually focuses on the body, the reader's gaze is now directed toward Alison, thereby allowing the reader to observe and even judge Alison's lack of emotion, which is ironically contrary to the emotions that she is feeling as indicated through the narration.

As she reaches over the body to hand her father the scissors, the reader's perspective is situated at the end of the examining table, the open chest no longer in sight. The reality of the embalming process is somewhat concealed, distancing the initial emotional impact of the image. Alison remembers the event feeling "like a test," which is reinforced by the composition of the panel (Bechdel 44). Her and her father's hands reach from either side of the panel in a symbolic rite of passage, the body becomes the agent through which she learns to suppress her emotions, to become emotionally dissonant. R. J. Lifton, in a study on the psychological trauma sustained from witnessing graphic death imagery, writes, "In the face of grotesque evidence of death and near-death, people – sometimes within seconds or minutes – simply ceased to feel. They had a clear sense of what was happening to them, but their emotional reactions were unconsciously turned off" (qtd. in Fisher and Fisher 44). In an interplay between the immediacy of Alison's reaction as represented in the

images and her retrospective conclusions as represented in the narration, she recalls that her emotional repression was by no means “unconscious.” In fact, she considers that it was somehow imposed on her by her father, that it was expected and, therefore, taught to her through this distorted initiation. In the next panel, she begins to step out of the room, and she continues to gaze at the body, looking back over her shoulder. She creates a space between herself and the horror of the sight that she just witnessed, yet this may be the opposite of what her father expected: “maybe he felt he’d become too inured to death, and was hoping to elicit from me an expression of the natural horror he was no longer capable of” (Bechdel 44). She considers that her father may have perhaps used her in an attempt to bridge his own acquired emotional dissonance between himself and the images of death to which he was witness on a continual basis.

Yet, this assumption is in hindsight, and she wonders if he perhaps really “just needed the scissors” in the following panel, located at the top of the next recto page (Bechdel 45). The page-spread’s panel layout creates a literal space and emotional distance between her non-expressive reaction to the shocking sight of man on the table at the bottom of the adjoining verso page and the reality of her and her father’s conversation: “Is that all?” she asks, her father coolly responding with “Mm-hmm” (Bechdel 45). In this panel, the reader’s perspective is distant and slightly above eye-level, situated behind Alison as she stands at the doorway before leaving; however, the reader can no longer fully see into the room. The man’s feet are all that are visible, and this reminder of the scene’s disturbing reality becomes all the more apparent in its stark juxtaposition with father and daughter’s “practical exchange” (Bechdel 44).

In the next panel, Alison leaves the room. Her hand still holds the doorknob as she closes the door behind her. This panel directly engages the reader in a dialogue with the character, and the accompanying narration serves even greater significance in both understanding Alison’s struggle with emotional dissonance and the way in which she later learns to cope with her emotions after her father’s sudden death. She stands square in the center of the picture plane, her inexpressive gaze fixed on the reader. She says nothing, but as she looks, the narration above the panel engages the reader in an ironically silent dialogue: “I have made use of the former technique myself, however, this attempt to access emotion vicariously” (Bechdel 45). This panel is referential both backward and forward in the narrative. The use of the present perfect tense here (“have made”) makes the referent of this sentence—the time and place which she “made use” of the technique—ambiguous. As a result, the narration has the potential to refer to multiple “uses” of the technique at different times and in different places.

Most directly, the “former technique” to which Alison refers is that on the prior page, where she retrospectively assumes that her father shows her the body so as to vicariously “access emotion” through her. There is no way for Alison to know that her father in fact intended the encounter as a way for him to see if she would react to the gruesome scene as they never discuss it afterward nor is there any questioning exchanged during the encounter. The event is rep-

representative of what Lemberg notes as a pervasive silence present both in Alison's interactions with her family and even in the writings of her diary: "What remains unspeakable in her family and unrepresented in her diary can be at least partially represented through images" (133). In this scene, and in particular, this panel, the communication that is lacking between father and daughter is facilitated through the participation of the reader in a direct dialogue with the image of young Alison. Because Alison stares directly at the reader, the panel takes on an additional meaning: the narration is specifically intended for the reader. Her "use of the former technique" is also the *reader's* experience with the last three pages, where he or she inadvertently becomes witness to an open-chested cadaver in much the same way that Alison recalls her own experience as a child. Young Alison the character and the retrospective narrator become one in a direct address to the reader. Alison opened the door reading "Private," not expecting to see her father working on a body just as the reader turned the page, entering this new space unknowing of what he or she might find on the other side.²

Yet, this panel also refers forward in the narrative, where in the next panel she explains, "For years after my father's death, when the subject of parents came up in conversation I would relate the information in a flat matter-of-fact tone eager to detect in my listener the flinch of grief that eluded me" (Bechdel 45). The panel contrasts starkly to the one immediately preceding it. Rather than a direct confrontation with a character, this panel's long, narrow shape emphasizes the setting, a street corner where the mere silhouettes of non-descript pedestrians pass in different directions, each seemingly with their own intentions and places to go. In order to view Alison, the reader must look beyond the panel borders and into the confines of another frame, the window pane, where Alison sits at a table inside the restaurant in the background of the panel. Her word balloon stretches from the window and reads, "My dad's dead. He jumped in front of a truck" (Bechdel 45). The reader's perspective on Alison the character is as disassociated as her words are from her emotionless expression in the following panel: "The emotion I had suppressed for the gaping cadaver seemed to stay suppressed even when it was dad himself on the prep table" (Bechdel 45).

When it comes time for her to return to the family funeral home for her father's funeral, the task proves much more difficult than expected: "all the years spent visiting gravediggers, joking with burial-vault salesmen, and teasing my brothers with crushed vials of smelling salts only made my own father's death more incomprehensible" (Bechdel 50). The first two panels on the page flash back to Alison's first encounter with the cadaver. Her grandmother helps her father out of his surgical gown while Alison's silhouette is visible in the background pushing the vacuum past the "Private" door, a direct reminder of the formative events that recently transpired. However, the conversation among the characters is a conventional one. "I'm starving," says Alison, and her father replies to both Alison and his mother, "Let's go eat. I'll be back after supper to finish up" (Bechdel 50). The macabre task of embalming is jarringly punctuated by a routine family meal. What to an observer seems as a clear dissonance

between these two events was a part of Alison's daily life as a child. Her return to the funeral home is most fundamentally a return home, and it proves to intensify her awareness of the emotional dissonance and suppression that she learned from her father while in this space. The place that was once one where she was expected and even encouraged to show no emotion is now the exact place where she will be observed by a procession of well-wishers expecting her to demonstrate emotional distress over her father's death.

The narrative pace slows as four consecutive panels represent Alison and her brothers making their way into the funeral home. The first panel is long and narrow, and the three characters proceed toward the front door in a single-file line, further elongating the space and directing the reader's gaze over each figure. The next panel is narrower, and the reader's perspective is positioned inside the room where their father's body lies. Alison and John glance into the room (and by extension, in the reader's direction) as the stand-in funeral director guides them into the space. The next two panels are even narrower, and the narrowing of the consecutive panels has the cumulative effect of evoking a sense of "confinement" (Eisner 92). The reader's perspective is now situated behind Alison and her brothers, whose forms are the central focus of each panel. Once again, readers enter the space for the first time along with Alison, but simultaneously serve as witness to Alison's demonstration (or lack) of visible mourning. The final panel is once again long and narrow, spanning the bottom third of the page. The narrative pace slows, allowing the reader's gaze to linger over Bruce Bechdel's body in the casket just as Alison and her brothers do the same. She observes that "somehow, there he is," and studies all of the inconspicuousities between the body in the casket and that of what she knew of her father: "His face was rough and dry, scraped clean with no help from the expensive lotions and aftershaves on the silver tray in his bathroom at home" (Bechdel 51). Alison recognizes a clear disconnect between the body and her memories, the trauma of which is intensified on the next page.

Upon turning the page, the reader is once again confronted with the image of Bruce Bechdel in his casket; however, this time, Alison stands at its side. Her back faces the reader, and rather than one long panel to represent this scene, the panel is split into a polyptych straight through the middle of Alison's back. Half of the scene is represented in the panel on the left and the other half is represented in the panel on the right. As seen in the last panel on the previous page, a long panel often evokes a sense of movement, freedom for the eyes to linger; yet, the use of a polyptych here with the protagonist standing squarely at the center of the bifurcation creates a jarringly splintered perspective of the body, a splintering that is also reflected through Alison's experience of witnessing her father in death. The body is at once both her father and not her father. Each half of the image is further fractured by Alison's uncertainty of identifying the body in front of her. Above the first panel, the narration reads, "His wiry hair, which he had daily taken great pains to style, was brushed straight up on end and revealed a surprisingly receded hairline" (Bechdel 52). She recognizes the body's "wiry hair" with a receding hairline unlike what she remembers of her father. Yet, it is "his" hair.

Above the second half of the image, she recalls, "I wasn't even sure it was him until I found the tiny blue tattoo on his knuckle where he'd once been accidentally stabbed with a pencil" (Bechdel 52). She even questions the identity of the body, and searches it for details ("the tiny blue tattoo") to confirm the unbelievable and seemingly inexplicable truth of her father's death. Watson suggests that there is an integral "doubling" that is part of all autographical works:

The practice of composing autobiography implies doubling the self....That splitting of self into observer and observed is redoubled in autographics,³ where the dual media of words and drawing, and their segmentation into boxes, panels, and pages, offer multiple possibilities for interpreting experience, reworking memory, and staging self-reflection. (28)

She is literally broken, divided in two in both images and words between knowing that the body in the casket is her father while also not knowing whether to believe that the body there is really him, and as the scene progresses, the divide between the "observer" and the "observed" becomes even more apparent.

The next panel is long and narrow, stretching the uncomfortable silence and confining the three siblings in front of the body. All three wear stoic, emotionless expressions. Only their eyes shift to the side, suggesting their discomfort with this ritualized show of respect. According to the Center for Cartoon Studies' James Strum, who helped to posthumously update Eisner's classic work, *Comics and Sequential Art* (2008), the composition of this page demonstrates the emotional impact of the scene: "Employing five panels for this staid shot allows both for carefully observed details to be recorded and emotional impact to register on the reader" (Strum in Eisner 28). However, it is their *lack* of emotion that is most revealing to the reader rather than any demonstration of it. Lemberg also interestingly points to Alison's account of how as a child she found "dissonance [in] writing...[but] Drawing seems both to produce strong feelings and to provide a medium capable of expressing them ..." (134). The images of the cadaver and of her father's body are an attempt to illicit emotion, yet the subjects in the picture planes are either ironically no longer living or seemingly devoid of expressive emotion. This dissonance is jarring, making the reader focus all the more intently on the emotional expressions (or perhaps better phrased, the lack there of) from the three characters.

The siblings awkwardly "looked for as long as [they] sensed it was appropriate" (Bechdel 52). An awareness of appropriate protocol for viewing their father's body dually suggests an awareness of their objectification through other's observations, namely that of other mourners (and by extension, the reader) who have come to show the family support and pay their respects for Bruce Bechdel's passing. That is, as Sartre asserts, one's perception of him or herself is necessarily based on "an external relation which can be established only by a human reality acting as witness....Thus in the *human world*, the incomplete being which is released to intuition as lacking is constituted in its being by the lacked – that is, by what it is not"

(135-36). Alison is aware of her emotional dissonance through her conscious recognition of others' perceptions. She knows she should feel grief, but instead "the sole emotion [she] could muster was irritation" (Bechdel 52). She is acutely aware of her otherness by what she lacks: sadness over her father's passing.

Later in the work, Alison asks, "What would happen if we spoke the truth?" above a panel that depicts her and her family accepting condolences from various visitors (Bechdel 125). A man stands in front of Alison, his hand hesitantly outstretched toward her as he says, "The Lord moves in mysterious ways" (Bechdel 125). Hunched over, eyes squinted, eyebrows furrowed, and palms turned upward in clear frustration, Alison replies, "There's no mystery! He **killed himself** because he was a manic-depressive, closeted **fag** and he couldn't face living in this small-minded small town one more **second**" (Bechdel 125, author's emphasis). From the left side of the panel, her mother observes her with a controlled expression of shock; her eyebrows arch and eyes widen. From the right, Christian looks at Alison with a similarly shocked expression. Both Helen's and Christian's expressions are reminders of all other onlookers who are witness to Alison's socially-inappropriate display of emotion. Yet, this scene is merely hypothetical as the next panel reveals: "I didn't find out," reads the narration, and the scene is repeated once more with the reality of what Alison remembers actually occurred when approached by the procession of well-wishers (Bechdel 125). She, her mother, and brothers solemnly greet the guests, and in response to the man's condolence on the Lord's mysterious ways, Alison instead responds, "Yes. He does" while thinking "I'd kill myself too if I had to live here" (Bechdel 125). As Ann Cvetkovich observes in her article, "Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*," Alison "often circles around her feelings or speculates about them at a distance" (121). These two panels are mere reflection, a demonstration of her uncomfortable state of emotional dissonance based on the discrepancy between what she wants to express and what she actually demonstrates while under the careful observation of others.

Even without this dramatic display, the stoic emotional state that she adopts while observing her father's body is equally inappropriate, and she is concerned that it may be perceived by others as an utter lack of feeling for her father's death. As she walks away from the casket, she indirectly looks at the body once more by gazing back over her shoulder in the exact way she does when she is witness to the cadaver for the first time. The experience is clearly traumatic, suggested by this last detached observance of her father in death, and the experience is even more troubling in that she is acutely aware that her lack of expressive emotion is in some way socially inappropriate: "If only they made smelling salts to induce grief-stricken swoons, rather than snap you out of them" (Bechdel 52). The reader becomes witness to Alison's emotions as the panel's perspective focuses on her expressionless face. In the background, the stand-in "pinch-funeral director" looks directly at the reader, placing the reader in a simultaneous position as witness and object of observation. It is as if the funeral director judges the reader's

emotions just as the reader reciprocally judges Alison. The director looks to the reader to see if he or she is able to “muster” any more emotion than Alison (Bechdel 52).

As she leaves the parlor, the funeral director reaches out in a comforting gesture to touch Alison’s arm. Her response is immediate, and for the first time in this scene, her actions and emotions are in concordance with one another: “I shook it off with a violence that was, in fact, rather consoling” (Bechdel 53). Her face, no longer stoic and expressionless, peers at the funeral director, lips pursed and eyebrows lowered in clear agitation. Even under the careful observation of others, she is able to outwardly express her emotions; the funeral director gives her something to which she can react. Like her hypothetical response to the well-meaning mourner at her father’s funeral that she retrospectively imagines years later, she is relieved in this moment to outwardly express the same emotion that she feels. She notes, “This same irritation would overtake me for years afterward when I visited dad’s grave,” but like her action in response to the funeral director’s condolences, the irritation is only comforting when accompanied by a similarly expressive action: “On one occasion it was desecrated with a cheesy flag. . . . I javelined this, ugly brass holder and all, into the cornfield. . . . Again, there was some fleeting consolation in the sheer violence of my gesture” (Bechdel 53). Alone in the exterior space of the cemetery, she is liberated by her actions. Yet, even without the gaze of onlookers, her father’s death still proves painful, one feeling that perhaps is more easily expressed in this ironically private yet open space. She succumbs to her sadness as she stares at the obelisk monument placed at her father’s gravesite. She has bags under her tired eyes, and she stands with her shoulders hunched and hands limp at her sides in a posture that clearly reflects her feelings: “Intentional, accidental. It was *un mort imbécile* any way you looked at it. My father really was down there, I told myself” (Bechdel 54).

In discussing the way in which Bechdel begins each chapter with the recreation of a family photograph, Lemberg notes, “By framing each of her chapters with words and images that bear a complex relationship to each other, Bechdel reminds us that it is in the space between existing visual images and familiar storylines where we make meaning of our individual lives” (130). Yet, the relationship between images and words is also complex within the chapters, particularly with those images that are devoid of dialogue and include a character, who directly confronts the reader. Young Alison, after witnessing her first cadaver, challenges the reader to judge her emotional reaction, but also requires that the reader question his or her own emotional reaction to the scene as witness. Likewise, the funeral director, representative of all other onlookers at the funeral, reciprocally judges the reader, who examines Alison’s emotional response. Lemberg asserts that Bechdel’s use of the graphic narrative form “push[es] us to recognize our role as viewers” and “reminds us of just how much our relations with the world around us depend on how, and what, we see” (139). The dual and sometimes discordant relationship between the narratives of the images and the words creates a space between the two media (literally and figuratively)

that invites and even demands the reader's participation to evaluate Alison's lack of emotion related to her father's death. Yet, the reader's role as a viewer is stressed beyond the duality of form: the reader becomes both witness and participant in Alison's struggles to cope as a child, who is faced with the gruesome reality of a cadaver, and as a young adult, who must confront the sudden loss of a parent.

Notes

¹ Here and throughout, I refer to the narrative voice and the character represented in the images in *Fun Home* as "Alison" so as not to confuse the character with that of the author.

² This is, of course, assuming that the reader does not read out of order or "cheat" by looking ahead.

³ Gillian Whitlock's term for autobiographical works in the graphic narrative form.

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