

Self and Memory
in *Fun Home* and *One Hundred Demons*

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Abstract

I denne oppgaven analyserer jeg representasjonen av minner og jeg-et i to nyere amerikanske selvbiografiske tegneserier, *Fun Home* (2006) av Alison Bechdel og *One Hundred Demons* (2002) av Lynda Barry. Jeg diskuterer hvordan tegneserieformen tar for seg, og på mange måter eksemplifiserer, nyere tanker om jeg-et som fragmentert og dynamisk. Jeg ser også på hvordan minner iscenesettes i lys av Annette Kuhn sin teori om «memory work» som fungerer som et slags rammeverk for oppgaven. Hun kompliserer ideen om at det selvbiografiske har en direkte relasjon til det ‘sanne’ og ‘ekte’ og fremhever hvordan «memory work» behandler minnet som noe som er åpent for tolkning og analyse. Både Bechdel og Barry ytrer et tvetydig og komplisert forhold til sine egne minner og sin egen selvforståelse. Begge gir rom for tvilen og stiller spørsmål ved egne tanker og minner. Jeg ser også på hvordan Andrew Sofer’s «dark matter» kan være beskrivende for måten tegneserieformen visualiserer og finner sitt eget ‘språk’ for det usynlige eller immaterielle, enten det er ideen om det hjemlige, skamfølelse eller traumer.

Oppgaven er strukturert tematisk og oppdelt i tre kapitler som tar for seg ulike aspekter relatert til det selvbiografiske. Det første kapitlet handler om representasjon av hjem, og hvordan ideen om hjemmet er sterkt tilknyttet ideer om sosial tilhørighet og identitet. Det andre kapitlet handler om traumatiske minner, og hvordan fragmenterte minner finner sin form i den fragmenterte, visuelle tegneserieformen. I det tredje kapitlet utdyper jeg hvordan det selvbiografiske tar form i tegneserieformatet, og hvordan ‘embodiment’ i flere betydninger er sentralt for begge historiene jeg analyserer.

Hensikten bak den tematiske oppdelingen er å vise hvor ulikt Bechdel og Barry behandler liknende tematikk, og å demonstrere spennvidden og kompleksiteten tegneserieformen innehar.

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Introduction

“The lesson these identity narratives are teaching, again and again, is that the self is dynamic, changing, and plural” (Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories* 98)

In film theorist Annette Kuhn’s *Family Secrets* (1995), she explores memory through an investigation of her own family photos. Part memoir, part cultural theory, the book coins a contemporary spin on autobiography, and what she calls *memory work* questions narrative authority and the attainability of truth. Kuhn writes:

This in effect is my understanding of memory work: an active practice of remembering which takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and the activity of its (re)construction through memory. Memory work undercuts assumptions about the transparency or the authenticity of what is remembered, treating it not as ‘truth’ but as evidence of a particular sort: material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined for its meanings and possibilities. Memory work is a conscious and purposeful performance of memory: it involves an active staging of memory; it takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and its (re)construction through memory; it calls into question the transparency of what is remembered; and it takes what is remembered as material for interpretation (157).

This thesis will discuss two autobiographical comics in the light of this kind of memory work, Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006) and Lynda Barry’s *One Hundred Demons* (2002). *Fun Home* received a lot of critical attention upon its release, and *One Hundred Demons*, although discussed slightly less, is often mentioned in connection to it. These comics¹, although very different in style, both explore self, identities, memory, trauma and family dysfunction. They are created by two female cartoonists born in the US within four years of one another, though in very different socio-economic settings, which as we will see plays a role in the handling of the topics they focus on. The idea of memory as performative, or of memory work as a staging of memory rather than the remembering of an absolute truth, is relevant to the questioning and doubt that dominate Bechdel and Barry’s works. Visualising the past in these comics is a process of interpretation and reinterpretation, not a finalized and coherent

¹ I will refer to these works as *comics* rather than alternative terms such as *graphic novels*. I will expand on this choice of terminology shortly.

narrative. Kuhn's concept will consequently provide a frame for my discussion where I will take an interdisciplinary approach to *Fun Home* and *One Hundred Demons* – works that in very different ways demonstrate the complexities and possibilities of the comics form.

Comics and Autobiography

From being associated with popular culture and children's entertainment, comics have in the past few decades come to encompass a whole range of different genres. Serialised superhero comics have maintained a stable popularity, but simultaneously underground comics, freed from commercial constrictions, have also come to the public's attention. Influential works like Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980) and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986) became immensely popular and made evident to a larger commercial public what comics could be. The form can express serious topics for an adult audience, challenging public expectations. Now, the publication of book length comics aimed at an adult audience is not uncommon, although when Bechdel's *Fun Home* reached the top-lists in multiple publications in 2006, many were surprised at the commercial appeal of a 'graphic novel'.

Possibly as a result of this change in the public reception of comics, the comics form itself has been increasingly more present in the academic conversation, starting perhaps with Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993). As foundational in the field, McCloud's work establishes an academic vocabulary that has been used since, although expanded on and complicated in the 2000s. Critics such as Douglas Wolk and Thierry Groensteen, though through very different approaches, have both argued comics to be more complex and harder to define than McCloud suggested. Much of comics studies has overlaps with other disciplines, like film studies, with particular attention to frame and mise-en-scene. However, theorists in the field all aim to establish the vocabulary for comics studies as a distinct academic vocabulary, for instance by noting how the frame of comics differs from that of the cinema screen. Methodologically, critics may not agree on how one should read and identify comics, but certain formal aspects seem to be acknowledged by all. One such is the fragmented nature. McCloud, for instance, refers to the gutters of the comic as "limbo" (95). Comics, he argues, are a mono-sensory medium, but between the panels, no senses are required. Thus, all senses are engaged (89). The reader then "performs closure" (87) by creating meaning from the spaces between the panels. Moreover, Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith state that comics are a "collaborative medium", "both reductive and additive, as both the source and receiver in the exchange contribute to the dynamics of meaning making" (8).

Thierry Groensteen notes that “comics is a genre founded on reticence” (10) and thus “it is also an art of conjunction, of repetition, of linking together” (22). Much like young Lynda reading the lost and found ads in the newspaper in *One Hundred Demons*, then, comics give us “so many weird blanks to fill in” (210).

Autobiographical comics is one of the genres in the comic form that has received the most scholarly attention in later years. The interest in this genre, which again contains a very versatile body of texts, might be related to its embodiment of the changing nature and understanding of autobiographical writing itself. In the opening panels of *One Hundred Demons* the author is seen sitting by her desk while wondering: “Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?” (7). Barry’s self-declared “autobifictionalography” thus raises many of the same questions that scholars have raised about autobiography in the last few decades. In “Autobiography as De-Facement,” (1979) Paul De Man writes that there is no either/or polarity between autobiography and fiction, and that the autobiography “lends itself poorly to generic definition” (919). In De Man’s opinion, the autobiographical is a way of reading, and in effect of understanding, a text. He criticises the “autobiographical pact” that Phillippe Lejeune suggests is made between the writer and reader of an autobiographical work, a promise of the true (920). De Man’s arguments have been highly influential to critical readings of autobiographical writing, and it has become rarer in contemporary criticism to argue a direct connection of autobiography to truth. It is however still important to note how public reception is linked to generic expectations. A reader expects a very direct relationship to the real and true when picking up an autobiographical work.

Kuhn’s approach is thus but one of a number of contemporary approaches to autobiography that complicate and break down conceptions of the autobiographical self as dominant in traditional prose autobiography. Kuhn argues that memory work “unfolds less as a fully-rounded narrative or drama than as disjointed flashbacks, vignettes, or *sketches*” (Italics mine, 82). She never discusses the comic form specifically, but identifies memory as inherently visual, writing that “the language of memory does seem to be above all a language of images” (160) Memory, she proposes, is an active *production of meanings* (161). I find this not only relevant to my chosen works, but to comics in general. Moreover, in later years, more research has been published specifically on autobiographical comics. Books like *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels* (2011) and Andrew Kunka’s monograph *Autobiographical Comics* (2018) aim to provide an overview of the genre. Critics like Julia Watson has written insightfully on autobiographical comics, and together with Sidonie Smith, has more generally explored ‘other’ forms of autobiography.

Interfaces: women, autobiography, image, performance (2002), for instance, tackles the autobiographical in a range of different forms – from performance art to photography – theorizing and discussing “women’s self-representation as a performative act” (4). Another scholar, Martha Kuhlman, writes that autobiographical comics “have the unique potential to exploit the possibilities of comics form to express an evolving sense of identity” (113). Many scholars of autobiographical comics highlight the idea of comics as a formally distinct way to represent self and memory, noting how the form differs from traditional prose autobiography. In “The Space Between: A Narrative Approach to Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*” (2011) Robyn Warhol points out that one of the main differences between traditional prose autobiography and what she calls “autography” – autobiography in comics form – is that the visual element “multiplies the diegetic levels or storyworlds” (3). In prose autobiography, the boundaries between the narrator and the protagonist are loose and blurry, because they are one and the same (3). In comics, however, voice-over can work alongside a visualisation of for instance childhood, the “autobiographical avatar” illustrating or contradicting that perspective.

As we shall see, both Barry and Bechdel place their drawn selves at the centre of their narratives. Bechdel explores her family history and centres her young self, and her father, within the conventional façade of their suburban home. Still, Bechdel’s references to canonical works throughout her narrative and her claim that “my parents are most real to me in fictional terms” (67) is clearly related to the erasure of the autobiography/fiction divide. Her exploration of her own “epistemological crisis” and the continuous interpretation, reinterpretation, and doubt in her memoir serve to question the attainability or existence of an ultimate “truth” in what Yaël Schlick calls “the “I think” writ large that looms over the narrative as a whole” (42). Similarly, Barry not only breaks down the autobiography/fiction divide in her opening panels, *One Hundred Demons* asks a series of rhetorical questions: “The history of vampires and people are not so different, really. How many of us can honestly see our own reflection?” (94) she asks, as she revisits her “demons”. In this way, both Barry and Bechdel work as examples of how memory work “calls into question the transparency of what is remembered; and it takes what is remembered as material for interpretation” (157), as Kuhn suggest. My thesis will place itself in this conversation, discussing and comparing *Fun Home* and *One Hundred Demons* and the unique way in which these works access memory while they also “undercut assumptions about the transparency or the authenticity of what is remembered” (Kuhn 157).

The Selected Works

In *Fun Home*, defined by the author herself as “a family tragicomic,” Alison Bechdel according to Douglas Wolk “spirals around (...) central incidents” (359) of her childhood and adolescence in the small Midwestern town of Beech Creek, Pennsylvania, where her father spends all his free time refurbishing and restoring their old Gothic Revival house. The work is structured into seven chapters, each of which has a title referencing a work of fiction. The story is a simultaneous exploration of the mystery of her father, who she believes kills himself right before she turned 20, and her own coming-of-age/coming-out story. The story spirals in that it does not chronologically follow events but aims to move closer and closer to the material evidence from her father’s life that Bechdel collects and recreates – photographs, documents, letters. The perspective is that of an adult narrator looking back on her childhood through remembering and interpretation. The narrator of the captions, then, is always considerably older than the Alison of the drawn panels. Bechdel’s stylistic work contains finely drawn lines and intricately detailed panels in subdued greenish tones which I will argue displays the need for a similar kind of visual control to the one her father displays in his manic preoccupation with interiors and façade.

A lot has been written on *Fun Home*, though primarily for shorter academic articles. Here, the focus has often been limited to certain thematic or formal aspects of the work. I will however argue that very few extensively cover these themes as interlinked with one another. The interweaving of the literary canon into the personal life of Alison the narrated and her family, for instance, is certainly relevant: through it, narrator Bechdel aims to understand and interpret her own story, which I will touch upon in chapter 3. Ariala Freedman, in “Drawing on Modernism in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*” (2009), makes some very insightful points on the function of modernist texts in the narrative. This approach, however, is not sufficient alone. Critics also focus on the coming-out story of *Fun Home*. Queer theory is relevant, as Alison’s realisation that her dad was a closeted homosexual causes her to reinterpret scenes from her childhood. Moreover, this is also highly relevant in Alison’s rebellion against the confines of traditional “femininity”. Ann Cvetokovich interestingly calls *Fun Home* a “queer archive” (111), but these questions of sexuality are also related to the social confines of the suburban Midwest. In my opinion, much of the work that has been done on Bechdel’s autobiographical text has failed to acknowledge the intimate links between these different themes and these different representations of self.

In *One Hundred Demons* Lynda Barry, supposedly inspired by a 16th century Zen-monk, draws her “demons”: the “life moments that haunt you”. *One Hundred Demons* consists of 17 “demons,” chapters where Barry explores time, family, love, the fragility of memory, even death and suicide. Her aesthetics is a striking contrast to Bechdel’s. Barry’s line is a thick black-line, almost childlike. Her style is colourful and every chapter, or demon, has its own cover page – a collage of what is to come, and of newspaper clippings, colourful drawings, and patterned backgrounds. The combination of silliness and the serious that informs the work is often visible here. Like Bechdel, Barry too asks questions of memory and self, and foregrounds the function of both reading and telling stories in relation to both.

Considerably less has been written on *One Hundred Demons* than *Fun Home*. Barry’s work had in fact been practically overlooked until the publication of L. De Jesus’s “Liminality and Mestiza Consciousness in Lynda Barry’s *One Hundred Demons*” (2004). She points out how Barry’s racial identity is at the core of many of her relationships in *One Hundred Demons*. Her light complexion and freckles “hide” her Filipino identity, she embodies “mestizanness,” she argues – a “perfect mix of European and Asian heritages” (77) in the Filipino community. In a problematic case of internal colonialization, De Jesus suggests, the liminality of mestiza consciousness causes a lot of self-doubt for Lynda. But I would also argue that Lynda’s racial identity is closely interlinked with her working-class background. Furthermore, in the chapter “Girlness” she explicitly draws the connection between class and gendered identity. She deliberately links the many identities or personalities she played with as an uncertain teenager, to the very fragmentation of her own identity as an adult. Hillary Chute goes further in acknowledging the complexity of Barry’s work in “Materializing Memory: Lynda Barry’s *One Hundred Demons*” (2011) – arguing that the work “captures the structure of remembering” and of “self as collage” (292). Still, the limited amount of work done on Barry leaves a lot to be done.

Hillary Chute’s work has been vastly influential to this thesis. She is one of few scholars who have written extensively on both *Fun Home* and *One Hundred Demons*. Her monograph *Graphic Women* (2010) and its insights, alongside interviews with the authors/cartoonists, has been invaluable. I have however yet to read a thorough thematic comparison of the two works like the one I propose in this thesis. The two works are often compared on a surface level, acknowledging the more obvious thematic likenesses, without addressing the specific ways in which the texts explore the opportunities provided to them by comics as a medium to explore memory and self. I have consequently chosen to structure my thesis thematically in order to best demonstrate both their similarities and differences. By

adhering to this structure, I wish to bring to light the complex ways in which Bechdel and Barry stage memory and self. For while both works are autobiographical comics tackling certain similar topics, the results are strikingly different. Key to my discussion is the way in which comics find a language and a form for that which is intangible. The works, by discussing central themes of identity, self, belonging, and trauma, show how comics can visualise the ‘invisible,’ like issues of conformity, shame, trauma, and selfhood.

The theoretical approach I apply to these questions is quite interdisciplinary, which also differs from most of the critical work on these texts. The critical theory I have used ranges from comics theory and trauma theory to performance theory. This is to suggest that while comics is a form with a grammar of its own, they require a different kind of reading, a different approach, paying attention to the different formal elements all at once. Thus, Kuhn’s theory of memory work provides a frame of understanding which I believe encompasses many of the tendencies of contemporary autobiography as self-consciously analytical, investigatory, sometimes ambiguous. I use Andrew Sofer’s concept of “dark matter” (2011) in the theatre to argue the importance of that which is invisible, but vital, to the comics panel. Marianne Hirsch’s work on family photography in *Family Frames* (1997) largely informs chapter 1, while I draw concepts of the line and *gesture* from art history in chapter 3 (Van Alphen 2016). I believe such interdisciplinary approach to be necessary to do these works justice.

The first chapter, “Representing Home,” will tackle a fundamental part of autobiographical comics about growing up: the idea, and representation of, home. I will, among other things, look at how the suburban setting of the Bechdel’s Victorian home, the attention to ornament and façade is also a sign of a destructive suburban ideal of conformity and conventionality in Bechdel’s childhood. Expectations of social conformity in her predominantly white middle-class surroundings continuously inform her sense of self. The wish to appear “normal” is at the core not only of Bruce Bechdel’s obsession with façade, but of young Alison’s concern that the neighbourhood will see their big Victorian house and assume they are rich. In relation to *One Hundred Demons*, on the other hand, I will discuss how representation of home is always intimately connected to class, race, and gender. In the working-class neighbourhood in the outskirts of Seattle where Lynda grows up, her Filipina family are very visibly racial others.

The second chapter, “Remembering Trauma” will look at how traumatic memory, often deemed ‘unrepresentable,’ is represented in the two works. I will look at how the fragmented, disrupted comics form is well-suited to narrate the fragmentary experience of

trauma. In *One Hundred Demons* the cover page collage for the chapter “Resilience” contains the words “Can’t remember. Can’t forget” (61) written on a window and “Can’t forget” and “Forgot” (62) written in glitter glue. What follows is a chapter about Lynda becoming a teenager and asking herself when it happened. But primarily, it is an exploration of trauma: “I cringe when people talk about the resiliency of children,” (66) she writes. In *Fun Home*, the father’s death becomes a haunting presence in the story, a scene the narrative always returns to. The central mystery and traumatic experience of the work, it signals how traumatic memory can disrupt temporality. Bruce’s death “resonate[s] retroactively” in the story (23), influencing both past and present.

In the third chapter, “Reimagining Self” I take a closer look at autobiography and self-representation in comics form. The autobiographical comic requires a very obvious and visual recreation and remembering of lived experience. Both Bechdel and Barry use this to plant visual clues, to ask questions, to reimagine. At the very core of Bechdel’s and Barry’s works is the pain of *not knowing*, of uncertainty, of the limitations and subjectivity of memory. The nature of autobiography as subjective might cause it to be read as *a* truth, but not *the* truth.

A Note on Terminology

Theorist Douglas Wolk in his 2007 *Reading Comics* points out how comics wrongly has been identified as a genre (11), when, he argues, it in fact is a medium, or form, through which different genres can be negotiated (11). In French academia, comics are described as the “ninth art”, and should be read as a different form all together, not as “literary” or “filmic,” Wolk argues (14). In *The System of Comics*, Thierry Groensteen’s, too, acknowledges the problem of comics’ generic definition. He argues that comics can “only be described in the terms of a *system*,” because of its unique and complex collection of codes (6). The particular works I will discuss here have grown out of a long tradition of comics and comic books, but in terms of form and content, they are often discussed as “graphic novels”. Notably, the introduction of *The Cambridge Companion to the Graphic Novel* (2017), for instance, draws a distinction between comics and the graphic novel. It defines the graphic novel as “an extended comic book freed of commercial constrictions, written by adults for adults, and able to tackle complex and sophisticated issues using all of the tools available to the best artists and writers” (I). Simultaneously, the *Companion* addresses how the genre “graphic *novel*” seems to include only fictional works, stating that “despite the obvious meaning of graphic “novel” that they “include non-fiction as well as fiction” (I). It introduces and identifies many

of the formal features that distinguishes comics from other forms, while referring to them as graphic novels.

However, I would argue that even though the observations made by these scholars are relevant, graphic novel is in a sense a misnomer, and few scholars within the field of comics use the commercial term in their analyses. I will primarily refer to *comics* as the medium through which genre is negotiated. I will use ‘graphic narrative,’ as suggested by Hillary Chute (2010), when I speak of book length comics in general. For the specifics of the genre or subgenre I am exploring, I will use ‘autobiographical comics,’ and ‘autography’/‘autographies’, coined by Warhol, interchangeably. These terms are most relevant to me because the critics who coined them have taken into account the difficulty of generic definition in relation to the autobiography/fiction divide.

When referring to the authors and narrators of the works, I will refer to them as Bechdel/Barry or ‘the narrator. When talking about the drawn self on the page, the autobiographical avatar, I will refer to Alison/Lynda. I furthermore choose to not make a distinction between the idea of a memoir and autobiography. *Fun Home* would definitely qualify as a memoir due to the limited time span of the story. Similarly, Barry’s “autobifictionalography” borders on the *semi*-autobiographical. But complicating such generic distinctions is at the very core of my argument. My theoretical approach bases itself on a notion that Lejeune’s notion of the “autobiographical pact” (3) is outdated and complicated in relation to the representation of the contemporary self. It is more interesting to view the autobiographical as encompassing very different kinds of narratives, two of which are the focus of this thesis.

Chapter 1: Representing Home

home, n.1

A dwelling place; a person's house or abode; the fixed residence of a family or household; the seat of domestic life and interests.

Without article or possessive. The place where one lives or was brought up, with reference to the feelings of belonging, comfort, etc., associated with it.

The family or social unit occupying a house; a household.

A refuge, a sanctuary; a place or region to which one naturally belongs or where one feels at ease.

(*OED Online*)

What is a home?

In this chapter I will look at representation of home in *Fun Home* and *One Hundred Demons*. In narratives about childhood, and memoirs and autobiographies about growing up, the (family) home is a natural outset. But what does home mean? According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, home has come to encompass a number of different meanings, of which I have chosen to focus on a few. *Home* can refer to “A dwelling place; a person's house or abode; the fixed residence of a family or household; the seat of domestic life and interests,” to “The family or social unit occupying a house; a household,” and to “The place where one lives or was brought up, with reference to feelings of belonging, comfort etc., associated with it”. The first, a person’s house or abode, is linked very directly to place and material space. The other definitions, however, go further in suggesting the social connotations of what home can mean. It can also refer to the family or social unit within the space of the house or residence – and perhaps most interestingly, it carries connotations to “feelings of belonging, comfort etc.”. Thus, the idea of home carries both practical and emotional associations, and encompasses both the material surroundings and the people inhabiting it – home is a laden word.

In the broader US context, the idea of home has had great significance in cultural production. Home ownership and the nuclear family were central parts of the post-war American Dream, but this ideal had its obvious limitations. Not only did it carry with it

demands of conservative social conformity, it failed to acknowledge the parts of American society for which these ideals were largely inaccessible. At the core of this ideal is the ability to coexist in a kind of harmony, a successful family life. But the presence of ideals, not only related to the American dream, but of general associations with the home as a place of comfort and belonging, are equally relevant if only by their absence. In my chosen works the inability to function, the dysfunction, of the home is narrated in different but equally interesting ways.

In *Fun Home*, ideas of the ‘good home’ form part of the crushing convention that looms over the narrative, over the Bechdels’ lives. In *One Hundred Demons*, the harsh social reality of the family’s multi-cultural working-class neighbourhood is seen in contrast with the streets where the houses are bigger, and the young girls are well-dressed. Young Lynda is “one of the little cootie-girls” (18) with bad teeth who grows up in a house with asbestos and chain-smoking parents. Essentially, both of these stories are intimately linked to place and home, though in vastly different ways: from the almost claustrophobic provincialism of Beech Creek, where most of the action is restricted within the walls of Alison’s Victorian villa – to Barry’s working-class neighbourhood on the outskirts of Seattle, where Lynda tries drugs at the age of 13. Thus, the very absence of, or ambivalence to, the idea of ‘comfort’ in the home – of the safe space related to the ideal home – is at the core of these stories and conflicts. Where the Bechdels are controlled by the invisible forces of social conventions, the home Barry presents is subject to actual viewers – their visible otherness and Filipino family open to prejudice from the outside. In both these graphic narratives, the representation and visualization of the domestic scene is furthermore intimately connected to the relationships between and sense of self of the people inhabiting it.

FUN HOME

“The juxtaposition of catastrophe with a plush domestic interior was life with my father in a nutshell” (Bechdel 83).

Meticulous Period Interiors

In the 2006 paperback edition of *Fun Home*, the cover is a closeup of a table in the Bechdel home (see Figure 1). In shades of green and grey, we spot a flowery wallpaper in the background. On the table is an ornamented lamp, a family photo of the mother and three children, and a tray on which a business card presents the title of the work.

This cover is in many ways representative of what is to come. It hints at Bruce Bechdel’s obsession with ornament and detail – of decorative objects and period wallpaper that gives him control over his surroundings and the appearances of his home. It also displays the style of Bechdel the artist, equally concerned and obsessed with visual detail, recreating home and family photographs with fine-lined precision, staging her memories in each panel. Furthermore, the family photograph on the cover alludes to the concern with the image of the family: of a conventional façade that hides family secrets that might deviate from the picture perfect. All of this is part of how home is represented in *Fun Home*, the focus of this chapter.

The rural Gothic Revival house in Beech Creek, Pennsylvania that the family in the photo poses in front of is in every way essential to Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. The very title of the work is linked to the home, the peculiar domestic scene and the family business: the local funeral home. It is also an ironic allusion to the focus of her “family tragicomic” – a home which, in a number of ways, is no “fun” at all. The Bechdel family moves into a worn-down old house, and her father Bruce Bechdel spends 18 years renovating it. Narrator Bechdel calls it his passion “in every sense of the word”: “Libidinal. Manic. Martyred” (7), the caption states, placed over a representation of her father carrying a beam over his bent back – a clear reference to Jesus carrying the cross (see Figure 2). Thus, Bechdel introduces her father’s relationship to the house as one that carries multiple tensions in the story: his homoerotic truth that is – at least outwardly – suppressed his whole life, his mania that is often to the harm of his family, and his ultimate death. All this is repressed, controlled, hidden in what the narrator at one point describes as “meticulous, period interiors (...) expressly designed to conceal” his shame (20). The Victorian home in a sense works as a kind of stage for the performance of normalcy in the Bechdel family. Julia Watson argues that it also

“evokes a fun house of mirrors” where the “home proves to be as a psychic incubator for Alison’s story” (*Autographic Disclosures*, 27). *Fun Home* is after all as much a story about Alison’s journey as it is a story about Bruce.

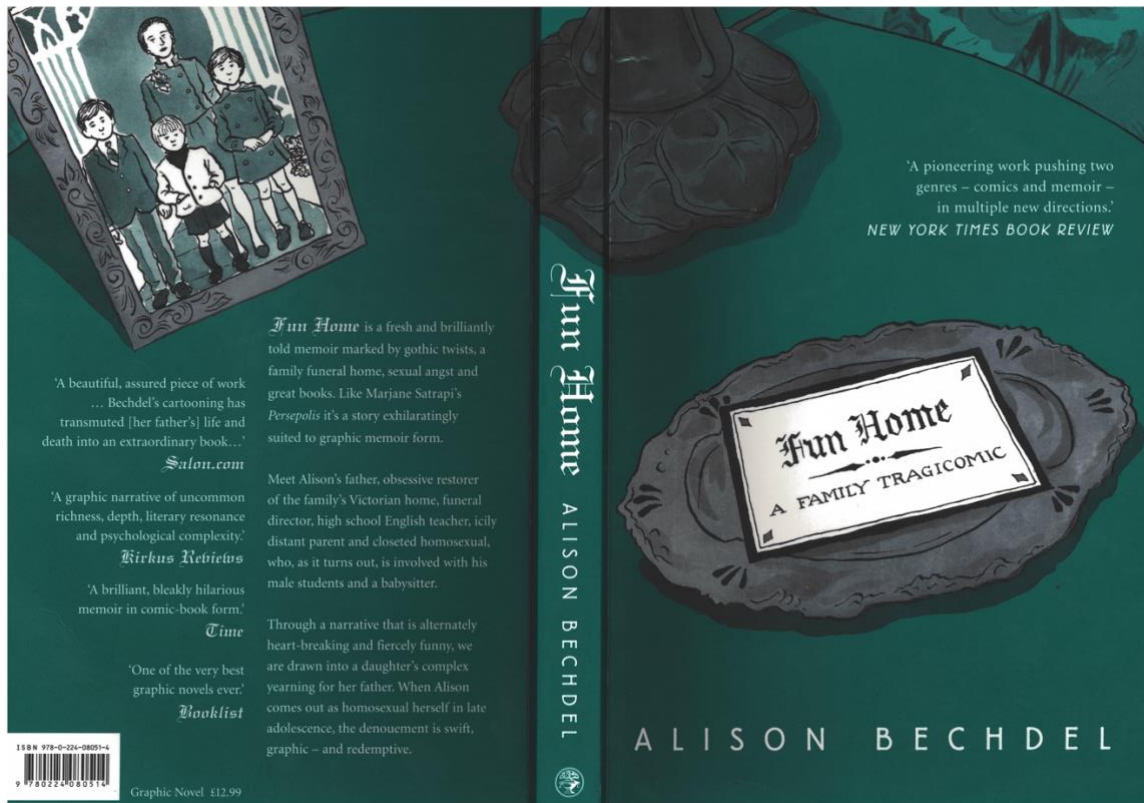


Figure 1. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 30.

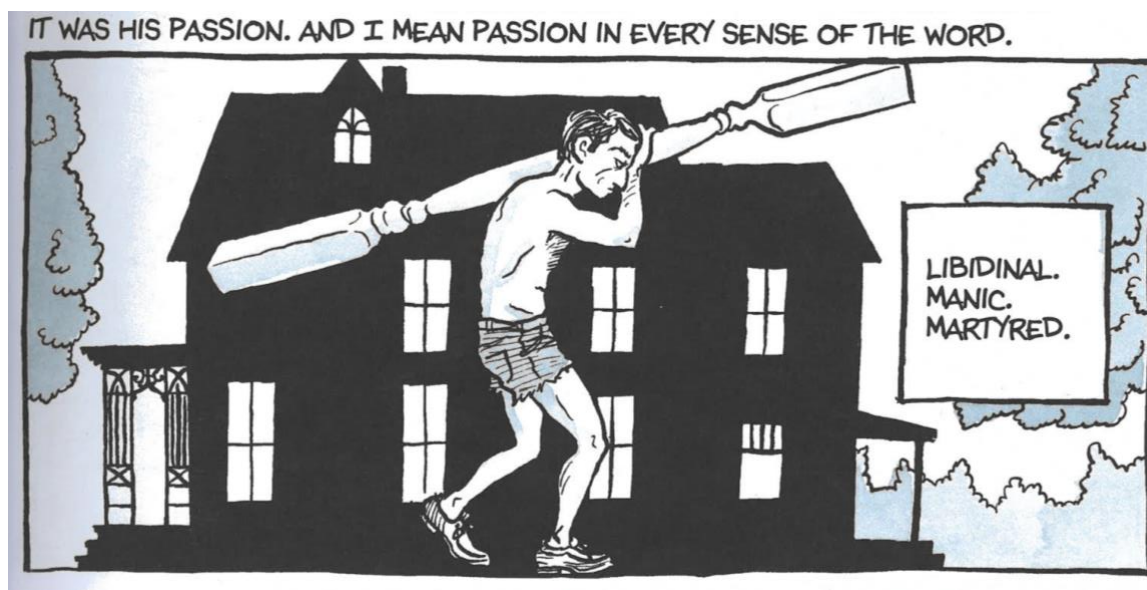


Figure 2. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 7.

The domestic setting we have in *Fun Home* is reminiscent to other works of fiction, the style of the Gothic revival house most obviously to Gothic fiction wherein the architecture of the mansion (dark corridors, hidden rooms) is symbolic of the secrets or psyche of the characters. Watson notes how the ““dysfunctional” unhappy family evokes a literary tradition of the modern novel, alluded to in the copy of *Anna Karenina* lying on the floor on the first page of chapter 1,” (*Autographic Disclosures*, 30), and how the Victorian interiors might also be reminiscent of strict Victorian moral codes. But Bechdel’s work, immensely intertextual, also compares her home directly to other works of fiction. Young Alison “confuses” her own family with the Addams family – a series specifically known for its subversion of suburban conformity (ref), but perhaps most interestingly, she contrasts her family with an American movie classic as she writes: “It could have been a romantic story, like in *It’s a Wonderful Life*” (10). In this film, George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart) and Mary (Donna Reed) buy a worn-down house, renovate it, and live in it with their children. When George is in financial difficulties and on the verge of suicide, he is saved by his guardian angel. Harmony is restored. Because, as narrator Bechdel points out, “in the movie when Jimmy Stewart comes home one night and starts yelling at everyone...”/“... it’s out of the ordinary” (10-11). The image accompanying this remark shows Alison watching the American cinema classic on the television while her father hits her brother for being unable to hold the Christmas tree straight. By contrasting her own family life to this ideal – a family that despite its challenges is able to work through and live in harmony – she points to the presence of a family ideal that is set up to, but ultimately fails to, compensate for Bruce Bechdel’s secret.

Critics have also pointed out the house’s likeness to a museum. Valerie Rohy argues that the house “shares with the funeral home a quality of embalmed life” (345). Bruce’s preference for detail and historic accuracy is however a passion shared by no other member of the family. The mother’s frustration of having to “clean this museum” serves to emphasise the house and home not as a collaborative process, but as Bruce’s personal project. Narrator Bechdel claims that her father enjoyed having a family perhaps primarily for “the air of authenticity we lent to his exhibit”/ “A sort of still life with children” (13). The father thus seems to enjoy the image and idea of the family more than the reality of family life, signalling what the narrator calls a “preference of a fiction to reality” (85).

SOMETIMES, WHEN THINGS WERE GOING WELL, I THINK MY FATHER ACTUALLY ENJOYED HAVING A FAMILY.



Figure 3. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 13.

In *Fun Home*, Bechdel stages memories the way Bruce Bechdel stages a scene of normalcy and conformity in their house. The book's staging and performance of memory is evident on several levels. It is evident in the mere creation of the work itself – which involved Alison Bechdel posing as all members of her family in different settings, photographing herself for reference and drawing from the photographs (Chute, "Gothic Revival"). Bechdel is

thus setting the scene, even posing as her dead father in the coffin – becoming all the members of her family in telling her story. All the subjects are mediated through her. More interesting, however, is the visual staging of memory within the work itself, and Bechdel could be said to use the comics form to engage with her father’s own artifice: the pretence of a perfect family life. Bechdel’s representation, not only of memories, but of artefacts, photographs, letters, and interior details – the archival quality of the work that many critics have noted – is complex and rich, and suggests an ambiguous, investigatory approach to her own home and family.

The Family

Early on in *Fun Home*, the narrator writes that her father “used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not”/”That is to say, impeccable” (16). The visual of the panel shows the family looking displeased, dressed in formal attire. The mother’s comment that “mass will be over before we get there” indicates that they are on their way to church. It also suggests that the family photo is orchestrated by Bruce.

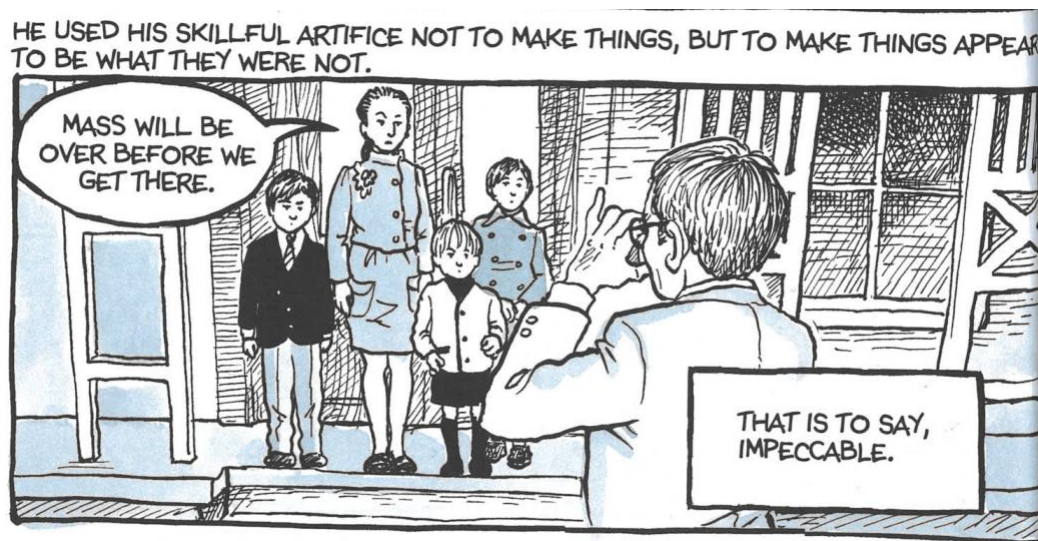


Figure 4. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 16.

Bechdel uses this family photography to illustrate how the family façade is “skilful artifice,” a construction often most evident in photographic representation, how one chooses to capture family. This relates well to Marianne Hirsch’s *Family Frames* (1997), where she looks at the connections between family photography and ideas of family and home in a manner similar to Kuhn’s. They both connect real life material, their own family photographs, to cultural theory.

Hirsch argues for an idea of a “familial gaze” through which one sees and is seen in the social structure of the family, a “familial mythology, (...) an image to live up to” (8). In *Fun Home* this image seems embedded in a larger American post-war dream, with whatever repression and shame this may result in. Hirsch makes explicit the connection between the ideological implication of this ideal and the function of family photography, arguing that in family photos “the familial gaze situates human subjects in the ideology, the mythology, of the family as an institution and projects a screen of familial myths between camera and subject” (11). Family photography, in her opinion, is an ideological tool and projects familial myths of what the family should be. Bruce Bechdel’s photograph in Figure 4 aims to capture a traditional family on their way to church. It is one of the ways in which the ideology of the conventional family disguises and suppresses his true desires. When Hirsch asks about how otherness can be represented in the photo album: “how much diversity can it accommodate?” (47), this is reminiscent of Kuhn’s analysis of photographs from her own childhood, to scenes that “give expression to the desire, the power, we invest in the idea of the family as a safe haven; while yet exposing the impossibility of that ideal” (97). Family photography is as much marked by what is *not* seen, what there is no room for, like Bruce’s homosexuality. Bechdel’s work continuously questions and blames conformity for the death of her father, and the strained family life – both by directly questioning the restricting norms, and by planting visual cues that suggest that Bechdel the narrator is certainly present in the reinterpretations of her childhood.

Bruce Bechdel dies after being hit by a Sunbeam Bread truck in the road outside the home. Interestingly, throughout Bechdel’s revisioning of memories from her own childhood, the Sunbeam Bread logo is seen in the background, or foreground, of various scenes. In fact, the logo appears as much as seven times (21, 31, 59, 67, 96, 112, 217), the first six in the first half of the book. I will suggest that it serves a dual function: on the one hand it is directly connected to the truck that kills Alison’s father and thus a trigger of a traumatic memory. On the other hand, it symbolizes the very ordinary and mundane. The logo is thus at once a visual clue to suggest the always-present trauma of Bruce’s death, and a symbol of middle-class conformity and consumerism. Placing the logo into central scenes is one of the interesting ways in which Bechdel uses the medium of comics to visualise an interpretation and reinterpretation of her memories, which Kuhn argues is central to memory work as she conceptualizes it (157). It makes evident the visual processes of remembrance and treats what is remembered as “material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined for its meanings and possibilities” (157). By placing the Sunbeam logo into these scenes, the narrator’s

reinterpretation of these memories is brought to the forefront, the idea of destructive conformity is given place in the scene of memory. The logo works with and alongside the narrator's story while at the same time being an insignificant and unnoticeable part of everyday life. The logo has not received much attention in scholarly work, but as we see it plays a key role in the story. I believe Sunbeam to be a good example of how the comics form can multiply the diegetic levels or dimensions of narrative, creating what Robyn Warhol calls a "multi-dimensional storyworld" (3).

Sunbeam



Figure 5. Detail excerpted from Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 57.

The 'little miss Sunbeam' logo, which is still seen on Sunbeam Bread in the US, was developed in 1942. It features a young wholesome-looking girl with red cheeks and curls, a ribbon tied neatly in her hair. Moving into the late 1940s and 1950s, the age of the nuclear family and of middle-class domesticity and increasing consumerism, the brand's target audience seemed to be the suburban white family. In a 1950s commercial for the brand (Tvdays, YouTube), a young boy is seen playing in a lush garden before running into the kitchen where his mother gives him a slice of Sunbeam Bread. Words like "gentle" and "delicate" are used to describe the product, which is presented as "the full measure of tenderness". Sunbeam Bread is thus associated with an unthreatening, safe, and mild domestic ideal of white middle-class America. The mother as nurturer and housewife is central. Like

many other commercials of its time, it embodies values of the new American reality, and the new American dream.

Although Bechdel depicts a childhood in the rapidly changing 1960s and early 1970s, the image of idealised domesticity as seen in the Sunbeam Bread commercial is still ever present in her home life, much like the restored Victorian villa is an image of an idealised past, a kind of museum, as Valerie Rohy suggests. That Sunbeam Bread is a brand of white bread is significant. The colloquial term “white bread” is used for “a middle-class white person; a person who embodies the perceived materialistic values or conventional attitudes of the white middle class; such values or attitudes as embodied by an individual,” according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*. And the crushingly conventional is certainly present in *Fun Home*.

Little miss Sunbeam also connotes, in my opinion, the “the vision of the perfect, immaculate, well turned out, little girl” (59) which Kuhn describes in *Family Secrets*, as linked to the domestic ideal and the concern with appearances and façade. As mentioned, Kuhn never discusses graphic narratives and my chosen works specifically, but I would argue that there is an interesting link between her ideas of the dressing up of little girls and the performance of normalcy and conformity in *Fun Home* – more specifically Bruce Bechdel’s performance. The presentability, especially of the young girl, is central to the story of *Fun Home*, where young Alison finds herself an unwilling ‘victim’ of enforced femininity. When on holiday in Europe she argues “compellingly for the right to exchange my tank suit for a pair of shorts” (73) and notes that “such freedom from convention was intoxicating” (73). Kuhn argues that, in general, the dressing up of little girls “like its cognate activities *making up and doing one’s hair* – suggests a relation of fabrication, construction, production” (61). She moreover claims that dressing up “points to the element of display, of performance, inherent in certain relations to dress” (60). When Kuhn suggests that home life and conformity can be a performance in itself, this resonates with Bruce Bechdel’s skill of being able to “make things appear what they were not”. The author-artist Bechdel’s performance of memory is always in relation to, or in conversation with, Bruce’s attempt at a seemingly perfect family life.

In many ways, then, Sunbeam represents the “image to live up to” that Hirsch describes, an image that comes to encompass the ideological implications of the nuclear family, all the while carrying the sinister associations of Bruce Bechdel’s suicide. Moreover, Sunbeam logo in a sense marks the main themes of the story, and the main questions that arise. As mentioned in the introduction, Robyn Warhol notes how the visual element of

autography “multiplies the diegetic levels or storyworlds” (3). Voice-over can contradict or confirm the perspective of the “autobiographical avatar” in the panel, and Bechdel’s use of both text, image, and visual symbols certainly multiply the diegetic levels. By inserting the logo into the reimagined scenes of her childhood, she blurs the distinctions between past and present – her interpretation is given subtle, but explicit room in her memories. Like the narrator sometimes occupies the perspective of the young Alison, the visual space is often also occupied by several temporalities. Where and when the logo appears also support the idea that Sunbeam is linked to the central themes and underlying tensions in the story.

Shame

MY MOTHER, MY BROTHERS, AND I KNEW OUR WAY AROUND WELL ENOUGH, BUT IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO TELL IF THE MINOTAUR LAY BEYOND THE NEXT CORNER.



Figure 6. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 21.

When the logo first appears, the Sunbeam bread truck is yet to be introduced as the truck that killed her father. The first time the bread is seen on the kitchen counter of the Bechdel home, an unnoticeable part of a middle-class domestic scene. The family is sat by the table in Figure 6, and Bruce Bechdel throws a plate to the floor in a fit of rage, leaving (as an arrowed text box notes) permanent marks in the linoleum (21). The scene may serve to represent how his temper, instability and rage leave permanent marks – in the house, and in the family. In the

previous panels, the Bechdel home is described as a maze-like funhouse of mirrors “expressly design to conceal” what the narrator calls Bruce’s “fully developed self-loathing” and “shame” (20). His shame is likened to a minotaur, the mythical monster from Greek mythology, confined to a labyrinth. The narrator states that the family never knew if the minotaur was hiding behind the next corner. Not only does Bruce’s shame of his closeted sexuality cause him to see himself presumably as a sort of monster; the anger that his shame causes is monstrous and frightening to the rest of the family. This scene is essential, subtly introducing Sunbeam while not yet exposing its full importance. It is instead a foreboding, but also a hint at how the father’s shame is intimately connected to the ideology and moral codes of small-town family life. But just like the norms and social codes of Beech Creek, his shame is intangible: it is an underlying and ever-present tension in the story.

In *Dark Matter* (2013), Andrew Sofer discusses “the invisible dimension of theatre that escapes visual detection, even though its effects are felt everywhere in the performance” (3). He names this invisible dimension “dark matter”, an allegory to science and “the secret ingredient whose mass holds our visible world together” (3). I would argue that dark matter, what Sofer calls the ““not there” yet “not not there”” (4) of theatre performance, is very much relevant to how book-length comics create meaning. One of the central themes that Sunbeam marks and connects across scenes and episodes is shame, and that shame is intimately linked to social expectations. Shame is part of the “dark matter” of the story, only sometimes mentioned, but always present in Bruce Bechdel’s life. We saw that Bechdel the narrator suggested that the period interiors of the Gothic Revival mansion were “expressly designed to conceal” his shame, (20) a diversion, or a performance of normalcy on Bruce’s part. Interestingly, Jared Gardner writes that “comics are, as Scott McCloud has influentially defined them, “the *invisible* art”—a title the form earns in part for its cultural invisibility, but equally for its unique ability to invent new “language,” new “words” for that which is invisible, inaudible, ephemeral: smell or dizziness, fear or dreaming” (*Archives*, 793). Bechdel does exactly this throughout *Fun Home*, weaving shame into the fabric of her story, staging memories in the wake of an unbearable loss, bringing forth the destructive nature of invisible conventions – the ““not there” yet “not not there”” (4) of the story.

Not long before Bruce commits suicide, he sends Alison a letter. The narrator calls it “the one where he does and doesn’t come out to me” (230). In it, he writes that he is “envious of the “new” freedom” of the times, and states: “my world was quite limited” (212). He goes on to explain: “There was not much in the Village that I hadn’t known in Beech Creek. In New York you could see and mention it but *elsewhere it was not seen or mentioned*” (*Italics*

mine, 212). Sofer uses an interesting analogy to what “dark matter” might be. He says that it is like sex in the Victorian novel – definitely there, but unspoken, unheard of, invisible, drowned by convention. When Bruce is convicted for buying alcohol for young boys, narrator Bechdel says that “The real accusation dared not speak its name” (175) but that “a whiff of the sexual aroma of the true offense could be detected in the sentence” (180). Small-town conventions and prejudice occasionally seep into the narration of the story as well, in clever and small shifts in narrative perspective.

The narrator sometimes takes the perspective of the well-articulated, educated adult who looks back at her young self to understand and analyse her past. Other times, the narrator speaks from the perspective of young Alison, whose internalised gender norms tell her that by not living up to ideals of butch masculinity, the family is less protected from harm. The Sunbeam logo appears in a window behind a gas station as Alison compares her father to “grimy deer hunters” (96). The narrator notes that it was clear to her that her father was a sissy. She compares masculinities – her father’s impeccable façade in comparison to the “yellow work boots and shorn-sheep haircuts” of the men at the gas station. She says that she had “sensed a chink in my family’s armor” (95). The subtle switch between “my father was a sissy” and the more elaborate vocabulary of her retrospective look is suggestive also of the journey Alison goes on. She leaves the small town and the ideology that accompanies it and embarks on a sexual and intellectual journey outside the realms of the home, a home intimately connected to her father. She wonders: “Would I have had the guts to be one of those Eisenhower-era butches?” (104) and by doing so explicitly asks to which degree identity and self is shaped by convention, place, and history. Ann Cvetkovich argues however that while she “gestures toward this version of historical contextualization, she also refuses to settle for it definitely” (123). Because, although *Fun Home* works as a kind of counter-narrative or revisionist autobiography, it actively embraces the doubt and ambiguity of Alison’s relationship to her father and her home.

ONE HUNDRED DEMONS

“The city is there and so are the streets, but at a certain distance people disappear. Whole neighborhoods of children just vanish” (Barry 33).

The Neighbourhood

In *One Hundred Demons*, Lynda Barry uses the comics form in a distinctly different way than Bechdel does, and the treatment of home is no exception. Where I have established that the “image to live up to” is central to Bruce Bechdel’s performance in *Fun Home*, this image primarily informs Barry’s narrative in its inaccessibility. Young Lynda grows up in a Filipino American home in a working-class neighbourhood right outside of Seattle in the 1960s. Where much of the action in Bechdel’s narrative is restricted to the interior of their home, Barry’s sense of home and belonging is equally concerned with the surrounding streets. Barry puts her young self in a very clear social context and class setting – as she indeed must do, since her Filipino American family are visibly ‘other’. Her story of self is marked equally by individual and social circumstance, if they can even be separated. When describing her own working-class upbringing in the very different social sphere of the United Kingdom, Kuhn argues that “class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being” (117). This is in many ways applicable to how class, race, *and* gender is intertwined with Lynda’s development and self-esteem – a connection to home that is not limited to the confines of the neighbourhood she eventually leaves behind.

When discussing ideas of good and evil, of stories and real life, the narrator in *One Hundred Demons* argues that: “in real life there are no angels named Clarence” (204) – a reference to *It’s a Wonderful Life*. It is interesting that Barry too references the same film as Bechdel, and I would argue that this goes to show how the ‘image to live up to’ is ever-present in so many representations of homes in American fiction. The presence of a fictional ideal serves to emphasise the autobiography’s relationship to the real or ‘true,’ while suggesting a counter-story, writing from the margins. However, where Bechdel looked at queerness and gender in the context of middle-class small-town life, Barry’s narrative makes light of class, race and gender issues in a working-class environment around the same time. At the core of

Barry's representation of home are her mother and grandmother – Filipina women marked by the hardships of life in the Philippines during World War II, and central to Lynda's sense of self. Melinda L. De Jesus notes how Barry uses her family stories and traditional stories from the Philippines to make sense of herself in an intersection of race, class and gender identities. She argues that “claiming space and asserting voice” has been particularly important to Filipina American women, or American Pinays², because “compounding mainstream American culture's tiresome stereotyping of all Asian American women as passive, submissive “lotus blossoms” and/or exotic-erotic “dragon ladies” is the parallel erasure of Filipinas from the construction “Asian American women,” which is most often understood to signify solely women of Japanese or Chinese descent” (3). Thus, where Bechdel brought to the page what lies hidden beneath a perfect façade, Barry brings forth a different kind of otherness, another form of cultural invisibility.

As mentioned, the most noticeable difference between the homes represented in Bechdel's and Barry's stories is that, while Bruce Bechdel aims to hide his secrets behind a conventional façade, this strategy of pretence is not accessible in Lynda's neighbourhood. While the Bechdels are part of a growing middle-class population in mid-century US, *One Hundred Demons* is set in a neighbourhood of limited resources. In *One Hundred Demons* intersectionality is key, meaning here that, as mentioned, narratives of class, race, and gender are always inextricably intertwined. Barry negotiates these themes in the interpersonal relationship of her young(er) self to others and to her own journey of becoming and accepting herself. Sometimes, she does this in subtle ways by mere visual presentation. Other times, her relationships are key to understanding how her home and social circumstance influence not only what she thinks of herself, but what others think of her. Thus home, and where she is from, is essential in every way to the representation of self in Barry's work.

I would moreover argue that at the core, shame could be argued to be the dark matter not only of *Fun Home*, but of *One Hundred Demons*, too. Kuhn writes:

Though perhaps for those of us who have learned silence through shame, the hardest thing of all is to find a voice: not the voice of a monstrous singular ego, but one that, summoning the resources of the place we come from, can speak with eloquence of, and for, that place (123).

Not only does the idea of finding a voice which is not one of a “monstrous singular ego” mark the main difference between traditional autobiography, and my chosen contemporary works,

² Tagalog slang for “woman,” this term is often used by Filipina Americans instead of “Filipina.” (De Jesus 2004, 3)

it also highlights how narrating the self is speaking for “that place” (123). Barry finds a voice through the comics form, through a particular “self as collage” (“Materializing Memory” 290) that is always inevitably connected to where she is from, and to the ambiguous relationship she has to that place. De Jesus argues that Barry “presents Pinay identity formation as an amalgam of the cultural and familial inheritances of genes, language, stories, and foods but also of the trauma of war and its aftermath, as well as the emotional effects of imperialism, migration and exile, and assimilation” (6). Through the comics form, Barry finds a voice for young Lynda’s complex experiences in mid-century America – narrating the life of a culturally ‘invisible’ subject through a culturally ‘invisible’ art form.

The Smell of Home

Barry paints home and childhood in a collage-like way reminiscent, as Chute has pointed out, of girlhood scrapbooking, diary keeping, and even *femmage* (“Materializing Memory” 284) “feminist collage” as coined by Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer (*Oxford Reference*). Bechdel played with words when she called her work a “tragicomic,” but Barry’s stock-in-trade is *truly* tragicomedy. The work handles serious topics, and traumatic memories, the latter I will discuss in more detail later – but her free-hand thick, black, lively line makes for an almost childlike aesthetic. Memories are often staged in a purposefully comical way, and the narrator’s presence in the panel is often for the comedic effect and the occasional clarification. Barry’s representation of home can be roughly divided into childhood and adolescence – the first painted with more fondness than the latter. Both representations, though, bring the personal circumstances of Lynda’s family into the social sphere of Filipina/o American culture and of the working class.

In a study published in 2001, Yen Le Esperitu found that Filipina/o identity in U.S. culture is largely kept and maintained within the family. She writes: “Excluded from the collective memory of who constitutes a “real” American, Asians in the United States, even as citizens, remain “foreigners-within” – “non-Americans”” (419). This issue is clearly linked to whiteness. Thus, the inescapable otherness of the immigrant experience is central to the selfhood of immigrant children. And rather than the invisible forces of convention in *Fun Home*, Barry’s family is directly confronted with the ‘otherness’ of their skin, food, or traditions.

One of the most interesting ways in which Barry represents home, and otherness, is through smell. The smell of home for Barry is marked by very different social circumstances than Bechdel’s, of a very different family life. In her childhood, the family lives with Lynda’s

grandmother, a woman who “liked a party atmosphere, even first thing in the morning,” (40) and the house is frequented by uncles and cousins dancing to the music from the record player in the kitchen. In the chapter “Common Scents,” Barry uses the comics device of *tagging* to point out the smells of her home, as seen in Figure 7. (The technique is notably used only once in *Fun Home* in a scene on a busy New York street) The effect is a sensory explosion – a home full of colour, life, people, sounds, and occasional weird smells. Barry notes how all houses smell differently, even when using the same air freshener – and how she cannot smell her own, even if it is the smelliest of all. When as an adult Lynda gets headlice, she notes how her childhood neighbourhood never had a headlice problem. The narrator asks: “Were we too toxic for headlice? Asbestos and lead were everywhere, and all the adults were smoking like crazy, and we chased house flies around the room with big spray-cans of raid” (16). Barry paints a picture of a certain time, and place, through the use of smell and the idea of toxicity, while simultaneously suggesting how racism and classism can cause whole neighbourhoods and groups of people to be deemed ‘toxic’.



Figure 7. Lynda Barry, *One Hundred Demons*, 54.

Scott McCloud argues that all senses are involved in the process of reading comics (89), and Barry's use of smell is particularly interesting in the context of memory work, as it is known for its ability to trigger or conjure memories. But the idea of smell in *One Hundred Demons* is, like most of the work, also strongly linked to race and class. In "Common Scents" the issue of racism is brought to the forefront through the character of a white mother whose obsession with air freshener vexes young Lynda (see Figure 8). The woman "free with her observations about the smell of others" uses generalizing and derogatory terms like "Orientals" and "bo-hunks" as she explains the smells of different "races". Young Lynda naively brings the information home to her grandmother, whose reply is filled with untranslated Tagalog words, with the essential message that "white ladies smell bad too" (56). Seen side by side, the two panels show the white woman and the grandmother almost back to back. Their glasses are similar, both are drawn with a cigarette in the corner of their mouths – but they are also contrasted, different. The smells of these homes, and the white mother's prejudice against them, makes evident how much home is linked to culture and traditions – to food, stories, family structure. And it shows how immigrant families, even from a former U.S. colony, will be deemed foreign in a culture that to a large extent equates 'American' with whiteness.



Figure 8. Lynda Barry, *One Hundred Demons*, 56.

The representation of home in Barry is thus always linked to the socio-economic reality of her neighbourhood, to the family structure and generational war trauma of her Filipino mother and grandmother, and to the prejudice associated with it. As an adult, Lynda

starts thinking about her neighbour and how, according to the narrator, “there was something she was trying to spray away. She saw smelly devils everywhere” (58). These ‘devils,’ unlike Barry’s demons, seem merely a manifestation of the woman’s fears or prejudices. I would argue the white mother with the air freshener obsession to be symbolic of how white conservative America desires to cover up diversity and difference but is unable to do so. According to Barry, air freshener only succeeds in creating more disgusting smells as they attempt to cover up, but never really eliminate what was there to begin with.

Barry thus paints a complex and ambiguous picture of her childhood home. She seems to suggest that lived life is all of these things, good smells and toxic fumes, good and bad things. Because although she speaks fondly of her home and its smells and how “if they could get that into a spray can, I’d buy it,” (60) the Barry household is dysfunctional on many levels – the mother is violent and unpredictable, her relationship to her home life is difficult. Although she adores her grandmother who adores her back, she notices how her troubled relationship to her own mother is passed on from her grandmother who clearly favours her granddaughter over her daughter. Barry moreover demonstrates how Lynda’s relationship to her house and home changes as she grows older. When Lynda is an adolescent, her grandmother moves out, and her parents start seeing other people. She is confined to the domestic to take care of her younger brothers. Here, the once so colourfully painted home is represented in blueish tones. The interiors appear smaller. The narrator notes how: “I was left to watch my two younger brothers and keep house. I was supposed to stay at home all day, every day” (101) and that her brothers “could go wherever they wanted but I was never allowed to leave” (102). Lynda thus grows up to be confined by the gendered expectations of a young Filipina-American working-class girl, and becoming an adolescent describes how “there is a mood that sets in” (104). The intangible nature of the “mood” adolescence brings is represented through darker surroundings and more subdued colours, her grandmother, previously so present in the frame, now gone. In this way, the representation of home follows the development of Lynda and changes in accordance with the liminal stages Barry is so concerned with. With it comes Lynda’s increasing awareness of her position in the world and how she sees herself in relation to others.

Shame

Young Lynda, with her red hair and freckles, does not look like she is of Filipino heritage, and in the comics form this contrast is made very clear. Painted alongside her mother and grandmother, her different look is obvious. Even when not explicitly pointed out, Lynda’s

inability to properly ‘fit in’ with her family, or with kids at school, is visible in many panels. De Jesus thus argues Lynda to embody “mestizanness” – “a perfect mix of European and Asian heritages” (77) in the Filipino community. But in a problematic case of internal colonialization, she goes on to suggest, the liminality of mestiza consciousness causes a lot of self-doubt for Lynda: “Caught between her physical appearance and her racial identity as a mixed-race Pinay Lynda must negotiate the double-edged sword of her whiteness and its significance within U.S. racial formations” (74). In a related vein, when Kuhn describes her own working-class identity, she makes a pertinent point by describing how she was “caught between two ways of belonging, between milieu which demanded entirely different kinds of conformity” (114). The “double-edged sword” is emphasised in Lynda’s relationship to others, as is her struggle to adapt to the different expectations of her social spheres. The conversation with the white mother in the discussion above is one of the situations wherein Lynda has access to both sides of a race and class divide. Her white appearance enables her access to the prejudice towards racial others, while her actual racial heritage *is* inescapably other.

Passing has been defined by Kimberlyn Leary as “a cultural performance whereby one member of a defined social group masquerades as another” (84) to benefit from that group’s privileges. In *One Hundred Demons*, the idea of passing can be applied not only to Lynda passing as white because of her light skin, but also to her admittance into an art world that calls her work “adorable” (211). Narrator Barry describes being confronted with a world where authors talked about “classic stories I never read, but I lied about because I was scared it was proof I wasn’t really a writer” (212). She only had three books as a child (213) and her favourite thing to read was the Lost and Found section of the newspaper. Faced with a cultural capital she does not have, she pretends. Thus, the deep-seeded feeling of inferiority and shame that stems from her background is an incentive for passing. Self-doubt and shame seeps into every part of Lynda’s story, but also sparks interesting questions of how racial otherness is linked to economic circumstance and poverty, and how economic circumstance and poverty in turn is linked not only to the possibility of an upwards mobility, but to questions of gender.

In the chapter “Girlness,” for instance, Barry elegantly ties in the adult narrator’s perspective on social difference with her young self’s acknowledgement that the girls in her street are different from the girls “up where the houses were nicer” (184). Theresa Tensuan argues that in “Girlness” Barry shows “how constructions, performances, and evaluations of femininity are inflected not only by social ideals, individual desires, and acts of self-

fashioning, but also by *histories of conflict, differences in class, and demarcations of race*” (955. Italics mine.). This chapter can be linked back to the “the vision of the perfect, immaculate, well turned out, little girl” (Kuhn 59) that I identified in relation to the Sunbeam Bread logo. Here, it was connected to a performance of middle-class conformity. In *Demons*, femininity is also linked to social ideals, but in a very different socio-economic setting where class and race are brought to the forefront in more visible ways.

Tensuan notes that femininity is linked to “histories of conflict” and seems to be referring to how Barry cleverly links ‘girlness’ to generational trauma as she compares her own circumstances with those of the daughter of a Japanese immigrant, who has been in the same war as her mother – though on the other side. Barry links these histories of conflict to the mothers’ subsequent treatment of their daughters. Lynda’s mother denies her the material goods associated with ‘girlness’ and femininity on the grounds that long hair will look terrible on her (a comment on her white appearance) and that she never had any of the things Lynda wishes for. The mother of the Japanese girl is a home-keeper, a clear indication of a slightly higher-class status, and does not allow Lynda to play with her daughter’s dolls. Thus, gender always works against the backdrop of their mixed-race working-class neighbourhood. Barry’s work is intersectional because it refuses to completely separate issues of race, class, and gender, suggesting these issues to be interlinked. But like Bechdel who wonders if she would have been an Eisenhower-butch had she grown up in a different time, Barry does not settle definitely for a conclusion that different circumstances would make her a ‘girlier’ girl. She simply suggests and questions the extent to which place and circumstance impact these ideas of self.

The place Lynda calls home becomes an important issue in her relationships as well. The stories of classism, of crippling self-doubt, and replicating harmful relationships as a result of it, are all intimately connected to her background. In “The Visitor,” young Lynda has a crush on a boy named Dean who has a fascination with the working-class neighbourhoods and “insane places” (116). He works in a supermarket in the “bad side” of town, and brags about being held up at gunpoint several times. Dean thinks that Lynda is the same as him: “You’re like me. You like to explore insane places. I never met a girl that was so much like me,” (116) he says.

The narrator lists all the things that Lynda does not tell him about her intimate familiarity with the neighbourhood, how she has come there throughout her childhood. So, when Lynda meets her mother while tripping on acid in China Town, Dean exclaims that it cannot be her mother because she is “not even shouting in English” (118). Whiteness is not

supposed to be shouting in a foreign language. Lynda's looks grant her access to narratives about otherness as seen from the white people she encounters. However, this access is only limited. Her life and sense of self is intimately connected to her heritage and background. When Lynda tells Dean "(...) about myself. About my mom. About Chinatown. About living in the "insane places" he was only visiting" (120) their connection fades. Dean is only interested in Lynda for the drugs, but her connection to an exotic otherness of which he is only an observer certainly changes their relation. Here, the "double-edged sword of her whiteness" is made evident.

Already at the outset of her work Barry calls it an "autobifictionalography," and thus the lines between 'truth' and 'fiction' are blurred. However, in the way she stages episodes and memories, it is very clear that narrator-artist Barry is visible in the panel. One instance can be found in "Head Lice and My Worst Boyfriend," where a similar feeling of inferiority to the one she experiences with Dean is at play (see Figure 6). Barry parallels the literal toxicity of asbestos, passive smoking, and spray-cans of raid, with the toxicity of her relationship with a boyfriend who is never named. The narrator states that he was from a 'better neighbourhood' and clearly found Lynda inferior: "He was raised in a nice suburb and had always been something of a gifted child. He seemed interested in my background and nicknamed me "little ghetto girl". I'm sure he meant it in the nicest way" (21). Through the sarcastic last remark and a parenthesized text box that states "(actual dialogue)," narrator Barry is clearly present both in the caption and in the image. The boyfriend's speech bubble is huge, dominating the frame, creating division and imbalance between the two characters, and visibly controlling the conversation. He is reading "Lonely Genius Gazette". If one compares Barry's use of the panel here to Bechdel's treatment of the panels in *Fun Home*, the presence of the narrator and her retrospective look is more evident. There is obvious mockery in Barry's representation of the ridiculously condescending boyfriend.

Bechdel primarily tries to make sense of her own life story alongside the mysteries of her father's life. At the core of Barry's representation of home are however more general questions about growing up and belonging. Sometimes, the narrator will ask rhetorical questions like: "Who knows which moments make us who we are? Some of them? All of them? The ones we never really thought of as anything special?" (36) Other times, the reader is directly addressed: "I know this may be hard to understand, this compulsion to repeat the situations that harmed you" (71). Barry's final address to the reader, encouraging him or her to go through the same process suggests that the project is as much about working through memories, traumas and events, as it is about finding answers.



Figure 6. Lynda Barry, *One Hundred Demons*, 21.

Chapter conclusion

In this chapter I have aimed to demonstrate the ways in which comics can represent the complex notion of home. In relation to *Fun Home* I have looked at how Bechdel's detailed panels work in contrast or conversation with her father's artifice, and how her staging of memories is a conscious and purposeful use of the comics form. In relation to *One Hundred Demons* I have suggested that Barry's representation of home is intimately interlinked with the social circumstances of her working-class neighbourhood, and that intersectionality is key to understanding how intimately linked issues of class, race, and gender are to Barry's representation of self. In both stories, the reality of the dysfunctional families is set up against an "image to live up to," but in very different ways. I have suggested that at the core of this representation of the "image to live up to" is shame, related in different ways to what this

image leaves out – which is the “dark matter” of the works. But most essentially, I have argued that both works offer counter-stories of contemporary selves.

In an interview with Chute, Barry’s describes first reading and enjoying comics because they felt like “a world [she] could watch through a portal edged in ink” (*Why Comics*, 141). In *Fun Home*, the reader is given access to a “world” that scratches the surface of a picture-perfect façade. In *One Hundred Demons* the reader is given access to one that has previously been unrepresented in American culture. It is near impossible to envision how these stories could have been told in traditional prose autobiography, since Bechdel and Barry as artists actively use the “multi-dimensional storyworld” made possible in comics to create complex narratives of home. They illustrate some of the ways comics can represent the ‘intangible,’ like shame or conventionality, and let the intangible find its own ‘language,’ in Gardner’s words. In these ways, comics can be argued suitable for the narration both of the previously unrepresented and that which is deemed ‘unrepresentable’.

Chapter 2: Remembering Trauma

“Freud portrays the process of mourning as a passionate or hyper-remembering of all the memories bound up with the person we have lost. Mourning is represented as a dizzying phantasmagoria of memory” (Kuhn, 125).

In the previous chapter I argued that in their representations of home, *One Hundred Demons* and *Fun Home* give form to the ‘invisible’, notions of conventionality or shame. In this chapter I will look at traumatic memory which, in similar ways, is often deemed invisible, ungraspable or unrepresentable. In *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory* (2010), Kate Douglas says that “trauma has been central in contemporary self-representation” (106) because bringing previously silenced narratives to the forefront is contributing to a process of empowering “writing back” (107) for the victim, arguing that contemporary autobiographies about childhood often involve trauma. She quotes Leigh Gilmore who has noted the paradox “that trauma is largely considered “unspeakable” or unrepresentable” – that language is inadequate to articulate trauma – yet, at the same time, writing and speaking are authorized as the primary modes for healing trauma” (107). The inherent paradox of the representation of traumatic memory is thus that it, in its very nature, is hard to access and even harder to express and depict.

Comics is an inherently fragmented visual form of narration, and many critics have argued for links between it and the structure of remembering, suggesting that this makes comics particularly apt for the narration of memory. Chute among them attests to comics’ formal possibilities and goes so far as to argue that “the basic structural form of comics (...) replicates the structure of traumatic memory with its fragmentation, condensation, and placement of elements in space” (“Materializing Memory” 114). She further argues that “graphic narrative puts pressure on dominant conceptions of trauma’s unrepresentability” (“Materializing Memory” 110). Thus, not only does comics, according to Jared Gardner, create its own “language” for the invisible; its very structure may be argued to suit the narration of trauma which is often deemed unrepresentable. Kate Douglas notes that “it is generally acknowledged (...) that those experiencing trauma commonly experience difficulties in remembering” (109). Similarly, Robert D. Stolorow argues that “an essential dimension of psychological trauma is the breaking up of the unifying thread of temporality”

(159). Thus, traumatic memories are even more fragmented than regular memories, and disrupt or alter one's sense of time. In comics, the narrator might move beyond the "inadequacy" of words to more accurately represent the complexity of trauma by relying on and relaying images of trauma pictorially. Moreover, the comics' fragmented form and possibility for multiple storyworlds may be well suited to capture the processes of memory.

However, *One Hundred Demons* and *Fun Home* stage their traumatic memories in fundamentally different ways. In *One Hundred Demons*, Barry addresses her "demons" – while working "in the edges" (Chute "Materializing Memory" 95) of a central and terrible trauma that is never directly brought to the page, theorising around nature of remembrance. *Fun Home*, on the other hand, "spirals around its central incidents," in Douglas Wolk's words (359), rehearsing and trying to make sense of Alison's father's suicide. Here, the almost possessive nature of traumatic memory is at play. To better understand this quality, Sofer's ideas of trauma is helpful. In *Dark Matter*, he argues that "Trauma tilts toward the past or future; in the present it is foglike, ungraspable" (128) and that it "disrupts both narrative and epistemology" (118). For all their differences, both works treat (traumatic) memory not as an easily accessed truth, but as part of an interpretive process that effects the very structure of narrating a life – another way in which these texts come to exemplify Kuhn's *memory work*.

ONE HUNDRED DEMONS

“When I was little, bad things had gone on, things too awful to remember, but impossible to forget. When you put something out of your mind, where does it go?” (Barry 65).

One Hundred Demons is, as mentioned, a work where Lynda Barry stages multiple memories in 17 chapters, each dedicated to different ‘demons’. Each chapter, or ‘demon’, has its own cover page – sometimes hinting at what is to come, like a foreboding. The idea of demons evokes the ghostly presence of trauma in itself, but these demons, more or less serious, also capture the structure of episodic memory. Each chapter episode is intertwined with Barry’s musings on remembering, forgetting, and growing up: “Who knows which moments make us who we are? Some of them? All of them?” (36) she asks. According to Daniel L. Schacter’s “memory systems,” episodic memory “allows us to explicitly recall the personal incidents that uniquely define our lives” (17). Barry, then, asks what these moments are, in a sense questioning the function of autobiography as what Robin Frivush describes as “organizing our knowledge about ourselves, a self-defining function” (*How Our Lives* 111). Who knows what ultimately shapes us? Do we truly know ourselves? *One Hundred Demons* is not as much an answer as it is a series of questions of this kind. Amidst them is a recurring focus on trauma and traumatic memories that haunt and seep into every story.

Traumatic memories work on several levels in *One Hundred Demons*. Firstly, trauma is addressed directly, for instance through Barry’s explorations of her mother’s unpredictable and violent behaviour. These episodes are connected by the narrator to the mother’s upbringing and war trauma in the Philippines, and thus explore how traumatic experience can impact family relations through the generations. But the presence of a more “unspeakable” trauma that is embedded in the structure of the work suggests that *One Hundred Demons* not only discusses trauma, but also in Chute’s words enacts traumatic memory’s paradox, namely “how it defies and demands our witness – in its narrative composition” (“Materializing Memory” 113). The underlying, and for a long time in the narrative unnamed, trauma serves as an overarching theme of “can’t remember, can’t forget” that informs many of Barry’s demons. We eventually learn that the trauma is of a sexual nature. Barry’s treatment of this illustrates Chute’s paradox, by primarily visualising the effect of traumatic memory,

suggesting its origin but censoring the traumatic event itself. In the following I will look at the different ways in which *Demons* tackles trauma.

Too Awful to Remember

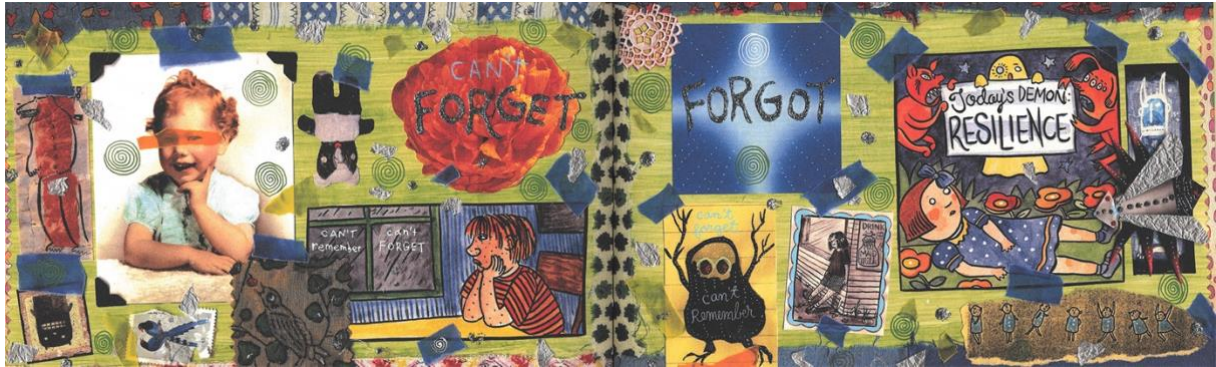


Figure 7. Lynda Barry, *One Hundred Demons*, 62-63.

It is in “Resilience,” a chapter about growing up and becoming a teenager, that young Lynda’s central and unspeakable trauma is suggested to be of a sexual nature. The cover page collage (Figure 7) displays variations on the theme of “can’t remember, can’t forget,” which is at the core of the chapter. A toy bear is seen upside down, hanging from one leg. A photograph of young Lynda with a line drawn over her eyes suggests the inability to see, or even censorship. Amidst the other demons, to the very left, we see a demon with the figure and posture of an adult man. There is a panel wherein “today’s demon” is presented. In her own discussion of *Demons* Chute notes that this in fact looks like a stage, the doll placed front and centre, looking helpless (“Materializing Memory” 117). She suggests that the doll stands in for Lynda. As a foreboding, the collage suggests the complex nature of childhood trauma – of helplessness (the doll) and of a life turned upside down (the toy bear). But like a traumatic memory, the picture is incomplete, snippets or fragments of a story that the narrator can neither remember nor forget.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Sofer’s concept of “dark matter” is central to both the works I analyse. I suggested that in the representation of home, shame could be seen as precisely a kind of “dark matter”. However, this theory might also help to understand trauma as something that is often hard to remember, to access, but is still “felt everywhere”. Like dark matter, the “intangible yet omnipresent” (4) childhood trauma is intrinsic to Barry’s musings on childhood experiences and selfhood. The narrator writes that as a young teenager Lynda “already knew too much about sex, found out about it in harsh ways” (65). The chapter

shows Lynda's struggles with fitting in, her desperation "to be one of the good people" (69), crying alone in her room, taking acid at age 13. Then, at the very end of the chapter we are presented with a suggestive panel of a young Lynda, doll in hand, next to a man seen only from the waist down, cigarette in hand, asking if she and her dolly "want to go for a ride" (72). Thus, the chapter concerns itself not with the traumatic event in itself, but the way in which an adolescent Lynda aims to cope with her traumatic memories of childhood abuse.



Figure 8. Lynda Barry, *One Hundred Demons*, 72.

Formally, most of Barry's panels are split almost exactly in half, one half with the narrator's writing, the other half with the colourful blackline drawings. The even distribution of different temporalities in the narrative signals that past and present given equal space. The temporal order of remembering trauma thus finds its representation in the form. Moreover, the caption, representative of the adult narrator, cuts the image and censors the man and

perpetrator, perhaps, it is suggested, because it is “too awful to remember but impossible to forget” (65). The caption, covering a little over half the panel, says: “I became a teenager when I discovered how to give myself that feeling of wholeness” (72) but ends with “I don’t remember”. This trauma, however invisible in the frame, is felt everywhere in the book.

Central to this chapter is furthermore the way Barry, as Chute suggests in her discussion of *Demons*, theorises memory. At the core is young Lynda’s experiences, but she also notes how she was not alone “in her knowledge” (66). She writes: “Nearly every kid in my neighbourhood knew too much too soon. Some people call it “growing up too fast” but actually it made some of us unable to grow up at all” (66). Chute argues that “the author-subject makes political, collective claims by testifying to the very ordinariness of her trauma” (“Materializing Memory” 108). The subtle switch from *me* to *us* indicates that Barry theorises memory in a similar way to how she represents home: by closely interlinking her individual experiences to the experiences of other people in her working-class neighbourhood. Moreover, the chapter, and the overall narrative, questions the very nature of remembrance in the wake of traumatic events – be it sexual abuse, or, as in another chapter, suicide.

The Haunting Presence of Loss

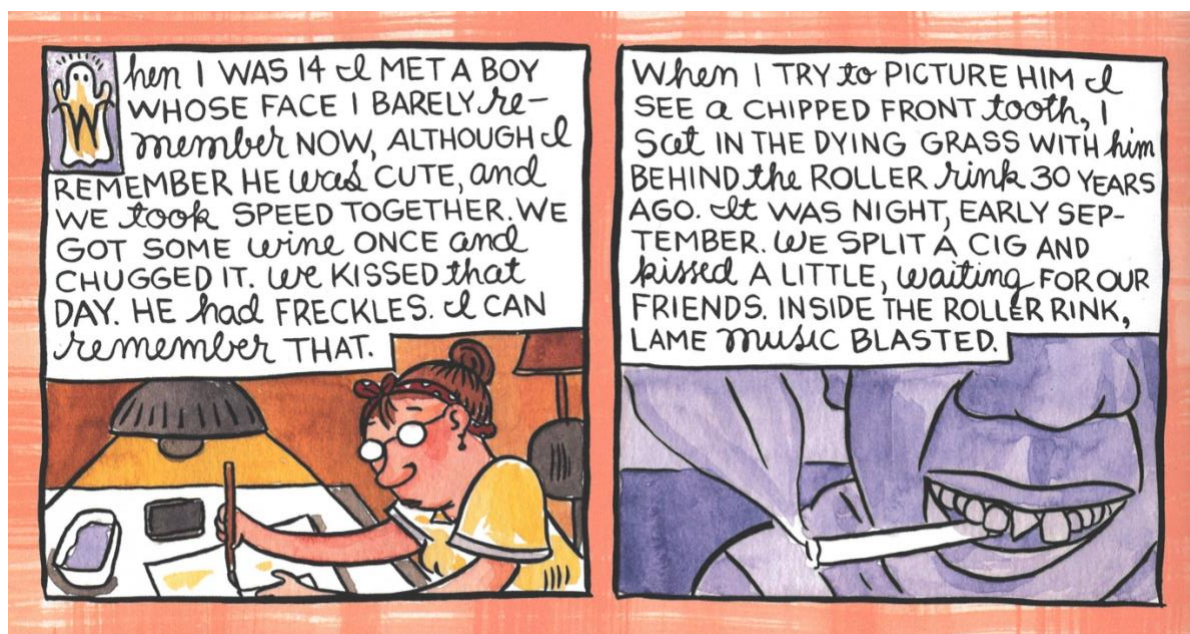


Figure 9. Lynda Barry, *One Hundred Demons*, 160.

The chapter “Cicadas” too is not only *about* the traumatic loss of two friends who committed suicide. It is essentially also about the fragility of memory, where one on the one hand is

unable to properly remember or access memories, but, on the other, in Robert Stolorow's words may be "perpetually returned to" (160) traumatic memories. The narrator recalls a boy young Lynda liked one summer, Dean "whose face I barely remember now" (160) and who was the first person she knew to kill himself. The fragmented memories of the summer they spent together – taking speed and drinking cheap alcohol, his smell and his arm around her – are the only things she can remember. And when the summer ends and Dean kills himself in a basement she never saw, she writes: "The blankness spread itself. An opaque stain where knowing and believing met. A gap of nothing. His silhouette" (164). She then brings the narration back to the "present", "as I write this" (168) – a year after another of her friends kills himself.

These two temporalities are brought together by symbols and objects that serve to trigger memories. Moreover, they connect the blank feeling experienced by the young Lynda to the adult cartoonist seen creating the story we are reading. The latter offers to help clean up the room where her friend has hung himself. She denies that she does it out of bravery, stating: "It was the unrealness that drove me. The blankness. Bob" (167). When she enters the room, she sees two nectarines sitting in a brown paper bag. On a table, some nectarine pits. "They were so real. Perishables," (167) she says. I would argue that the perishable nectarines serve as a kind of *memento mori* – "a warning or reminder of the inevitability of death"³ (*OED*). The perishability of the nectarines is here linked to the impermanence of human life. Interestingly, Barry describes the loss of a friend, a person "not gone but not here" (161) in a similar way to how she presents traumatic memory in "Resilience". She is unable to fully remember, and properly mourn.

The faceless figure in the chapter (see Figure 10) further emphasises the narrator's inability to remember or correctly picture her summer fling. However, this figure is now pictured between the trees, enormous, perhaps paralleling the "creatures who call from the treetops". Barry thus expresses how loss and trauma can cause a *lack* of emotion, or an emotional distance in the shock of trauma. She is unable to properly mourn her adolescent fling, a part of a secret life she is hiding from her family. When her friend kills herself years later, her impulse is to act, not feel. Barry calls it "blankness" (164). The figure then, is also a picture of the "blankness" Lynda experiences in the loss, a blank canvas which comes to represent the "ghostly" presence of loss itself.

³ I come back to this in more detail in connection with *Fun Home*.

The cicadas further emphasise the “can’t remember, can’t forget” theme that I argue is at the core of Barry’s theorising of trauma. Their noise and presence “filling this hour with sound” (168) trigger traumatic memories and are reminiscent of the ghostlike presence of traumatic memories. Barry writes: “Some cicadas stay burrowed underground for 17 years. The world turns ‘round with them inside, alive in the blank darkness. Until the news reaches them. A telephone call. A scream. Come out, come out, where ever you are” (168). I would argue this to be an obvious link to how traumatic memory works. We furthermore know that Barry has been influenced by Lenore Terr, who is known for her theories on repressed memories and trauma. Terr believes that memories, also fully repressed memories, can be triggered by what she calls memory cues (Kindle Location 355). This is similar to what Stolorow argues when he uses an analogy to “Portkeys” in *Harry Potter* – physical objects that work as portals to other places (160). Traumatic memory, he argues, works similarly. One is met with Portkeys and is “perpetually returned to” these moments of trauma (160). Terr also argues that repressed memories can be triggered by (often) visual stimuli. The notion of a cicada staying burrowed underground until “the news” reaches them, is consequently similar to how a memory and a trauma can stay repressed until it is triggered, often by a sensory cue. And although full *repression* of memory may be central to *One Hundred Demons*, the image of a world turning with the cicadas inside is reminiscent of the way Lynda’s childhood traumas continue to inform and shape her adult sense of self.



Figure 10. Lynda Barry, *One Hundred Demons*, 166.

In the final panel of the “Cicada” chapter, and in one of many meta moments in the work⁴, the narrator is drawn sitting by her desk again. She is painting the ghost-like figure from the previous panels. In the background, two nectarines are placed on her desk. “One year, 17 years, 30 years. I thought I would be over it by now” the caption says. The suicides continue to haunt her and the trauma is continually triggered by the yearly sound of cicadas, or the perishability of nectarines. These memories are simultaneously unattainable and unforgettable, rehearsing the paradox of “can’t remember, can’t forget”.

⁴ I will return to these meta moments in more detail in chapter 3.

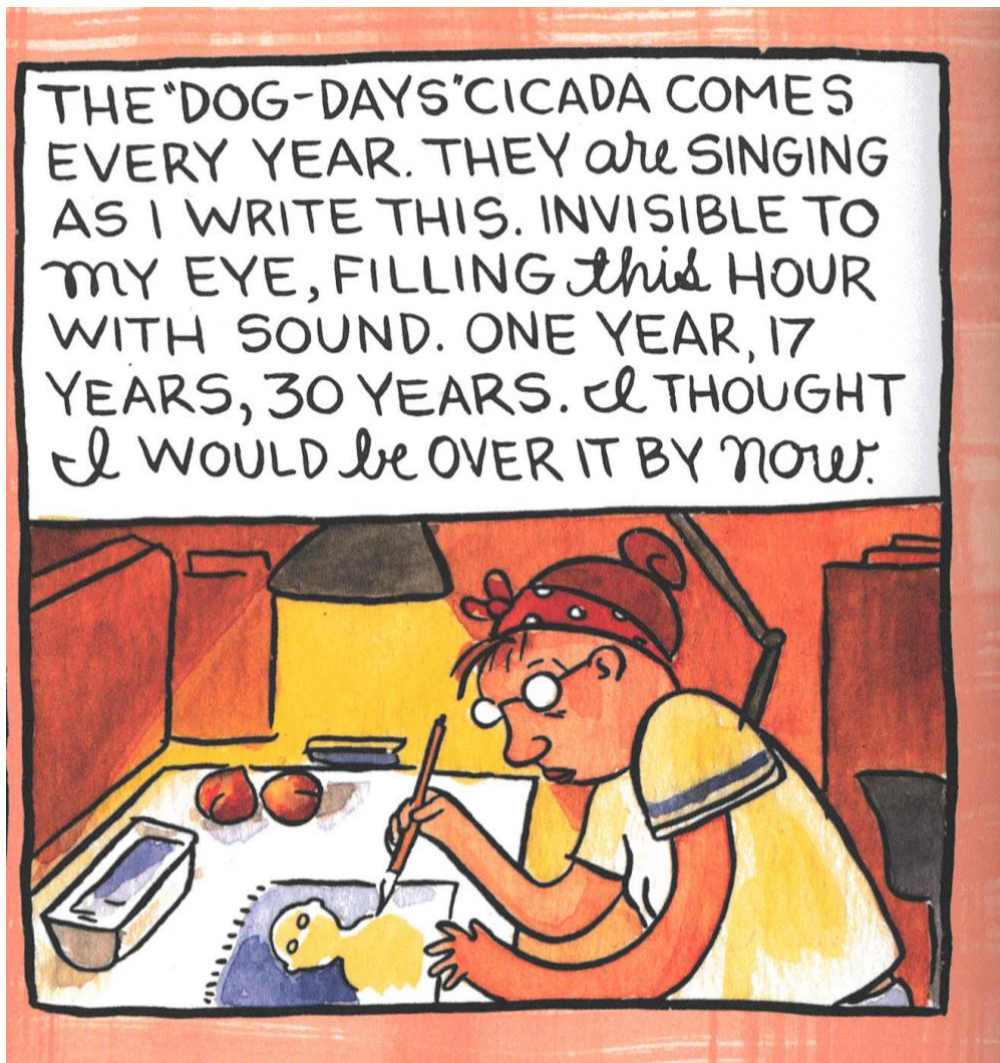


Figure 11. Lynda Barry, *One Hundred Demons*, 168.

Thus, Barry theorises and thematises on the very “not here not not here” of *dark matter*, or the “not gone but not here” that she herself addresses. The chapter “Lost Worlds,” a chapter on remembering the seemingly unimportant events from childhood, is framed by a repeated theme of evaporating water. The typed print looks like it comes from a book: “Where does the water go after it leaves the puddle?” is set against a handwritten ‘response’ which says “lost”. Another cut-out, most likely from the same book, asks: “Why can’t we see the water in the air?”. Water is transformed when it evaporates, and is invisible to the eye, but does not disappear. I would argue that this further emphasises how Barry is concerned with that which is unseen but present in the story, allegorizing how traumatic memories may be lost, blurred, unattainable, but are still *present*. “What is forgetting?” (66) Barry asks. Throughout the narrative, she explores how the inability to forget trauma affects relationships and selves – suggesting that the inability to forget is central to transgenerational trauma.

Generational Trauma

The dysfunctional family a fundamental part of Barry's story, as I have already suggested. Much of this dysfunction stems from unresolved trauma, and intergenerational family problems. In the chapter "The Aswang," Lynda's grandmother introduces her to the aswang, a blood-sucking monster "who always seemed very complicated" (89): "I was always trying to get the details straight," the narrator writes. The monster seems like a mix of different kinds of fears, a sort of all-encompassing monster: it can fly, it sucks your blood, it is a shape-shifter – a dog during the day, a woman at night. But, as is symptomatic of Barry's stories, the chapter is simultaneously about something else, in this case Lynda's troubled relationship with her mother. She writes: "I wasn't afraid of the aswang but I was terrified of my mother. She was unpredictable and quite violent" (91). The threat of the complicated creature of her grandmother's story cannot compare to the actual fear of her home life. When the narrator suggests: "Monsters hardly ever started out as monsters. Something always transformed them" (92), this seems to be as much about her mother, and the need to understand which life moments have made her mother the way *she* is. Throughout "The Aswang" it is implied that the troubled relationship between Lynda and her mother is similar to that between her mother and her grandmother. Meanwhile, Lynda hurts: "I worshipped my mother. I was terrified of her, and it broke my heart that she didn't seem to like me much, but she meant more to me than anyone" (93). The home life trauma, of a mother unwilling or unable to love her child the way she wishes to be seen and loved, is something that impacts Lynda's life and sense of self, as we see in several chapters.

In the scene with the condescending boyfriend in "Head Lice and My Worst Boyfriend," which I discussed in chapter one, the narrator muses on, in Chute's words, "the way that people repeat the traumas of their filial relationships in their romantic ones" (*Why Comics* 290). These relational issues and traumas have everything to do with the subtler ways in which *One Hundred Demons* addresses trauma. An adolescent Lynda finds herself in dangerous situations, doing drugs at age 13, in part to deal with her untreated trauma. In response, her mother shames her, at one point calling her a prostitute (72). Lynda's dysfunctional home life is linked to what cannot be said or processed in her relationship to her mother. The mother, perhaps resulting from generational traumas of parental neglect and war traumas from the Philippines, fails to provide the comfort and safety Lynda needs. As a young child Lynda continues to find herself in compromising situations, and the narrator addresses the reader: "I know this may be hard to understand, this compulsion to repeat the situations

that harm you” (71). Throughout her youth, and in her relationships, Lynda finds herself in possibly destructive situations and relationships. In “Dogs” she yells at her traumatised dog in the same way, she realises, as her mother repeatedly yelled at her. “History, as we know, repeats itself. This goes for good as well as bad,” (173) she states. This, it is suggested, is one of the ways in which trauma is never really forgotten. However, in a sense, Barry ends on a positive note as her dog changes her behaviour and finds peace in Lynda’s home: “All she needed was to find the right home. But that’s true for all of us, isn’t it?” (180).

FUN HOME

“What’s lost in translation is
the complexity of loss itself”
(Bechdel 120).

Fun Home, too, is centred around traumatic memory. As we saw, Bruce Bechdel dies after being hit by a Sunbeam Bread truck in the road outside the Bechdel home, and the daughter’s guilt and trauma following this incident becomes one of the central scenes the narrative returns to. What really happened to her father, and was her coming out as a lesbian a catalyst for his suicide? Bechdel “spirals around its central incidents” (Wolk 359) of the truck, of her receiving the shocking news on the telephone – interpreting and trying to understand her father’s life, and then reinterpreting her own interpretations (359). This is what Yaël Schlick calls “the ‘I think’ writ large that looms over the narrative as a whole” (42). Alison is certain that Bruce has killed himself, even when the official statements calls the crash an accident. The suicide happens after Alison has moved out of her parents’ provincial Victorian home, but as the narrator writes: “It’s true he didn’t kill himself until I was nearly twenty. But his absence resonated retroactively, echoing back through all the time I knew him” (23). The loss of her father not only impacts and colours her memories. When the narrator writes that young Alison “ached as if he were already gone” (23), it is reminiscent of traumatic memory and its ability to impact or disrupt one’s sense of temporal order. In other words, the traumatic memory of her father’s death influences both past and present.

In the previous chapter, I argued that the Sunbeam Bread logo was symbolic of white middle-class consumerism and conformity, a part of the “image to live up to” that is ever-present in Bechdel’s representation of family and home. Here, I want to look at how the logo also serves another function. The panels of *Fun Home* can be read as staged performances, and the logo serves to remind us that the narrator’s memories are shaped and influenced by a specific loss and trauma that connects scenes and episodes to enforce a sense of coherence. The first time the logo appears is, as mentioned, on the kitchen counter of the Bechdel home. It is also one of the ways in which Bruce’s death is ‘present’ before it has even occurred, the logo foreshadowing the truck that will kill him. Bechdel seems to ask whether her father’s death was always imminent, suggesting in the chapter “That Old Catastrophe” that his death

“was not a new catastrophe but an old one that had been unfolding very slowly for a long time” (83). In this way, Sunbeam works as *memento mori*, which I will come back to shortly.

Fun Home suggests that the family trauma at the core of the story is not only the traumatic *event* itself, Bruce Bechdel’s death, but indeed all the years that led up to it. He is always drawn as a stern man; his silhouetted dark shadow is often seen looming in the background in various panels. Bechdel writes: “In my earliest memories, dad is a lowering, malevolent presence” (197). Moreover, it is not far-fetched to argue that death certainly is present throughout *Fun Home* – after all, they run a funeral home. After moving back to the small town and taking over the family business, young Alison even starts confusing her own family with the Addams family. She compares a childhood school photograph to the Addams. She has dark hair, a dress she hates, and as the narrator states: “I appear to be in mourning” (35). And mourning, or the inability to properly mourn, will later become a problem for Alison. In *Fun Home*, like *One Hundred Demons*, working through traumatic memory is about process – and in Bechdel’s performance of memory, the Sunbeam logo serves an important function both in marking the themes of the story and in foreboding death.

Memento Mori

“If he’d intended to die, there was a certain consolation in the fact that he succeeded with such aplomb” (Bechdel 29).

Only the third time the Sunbeam Bread logo appears is the Sunbeam Bread truck revealed to be the truck that killed Alison’s father (see Figure 12). This is at a point in the narrative where the narrator asks whether her own coming out as a lesbian was the reason for her father’s death, wondering: “If I had not felt compelled to share my little sexual discovery, perhaps the semi would have passed without incident four months later (59).” And as mentioned, the scene of her father’s death, so deeply entwined with guilt, is returned to in her narrative several times, with several different outcomes. Sofer quotes Cathy Caruth who argues that “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event,” (121) and Bechdel’s story is certainly possessed by Bruce’s death. This happens despite the fact that this is not an actual memory; it is a retrospective construct open to ensuing interpretations. In the narrative we see that nobody was present at the scene of Bruce’s death, except himself and the truck driver, who later says Bruce had jumped into the road “as if he saw a snake” (89). The introduction of her father’s death is contrasted with the imagined alternate reality where the truck passes in

the background behind her father, and a small text box says, parenthesised, “(Yes, it really was a Sunbeam Bread truck.)”. This is connected to the profound guilt Alison feels after the loss of her father. Monica B. Pearl argues that “this is the fantasy anxiety that any gay child of heterosexual parents harbors: that coming out to them, telling them, will kill them” (294). I would argue that this feeling of responsibility, or guilt, in part fuels the narrative’s near obsession with the father’s death – a death which haunts both a domestic kitchen scene and an embalming room. Sunbeam emphasises this haunting presence.

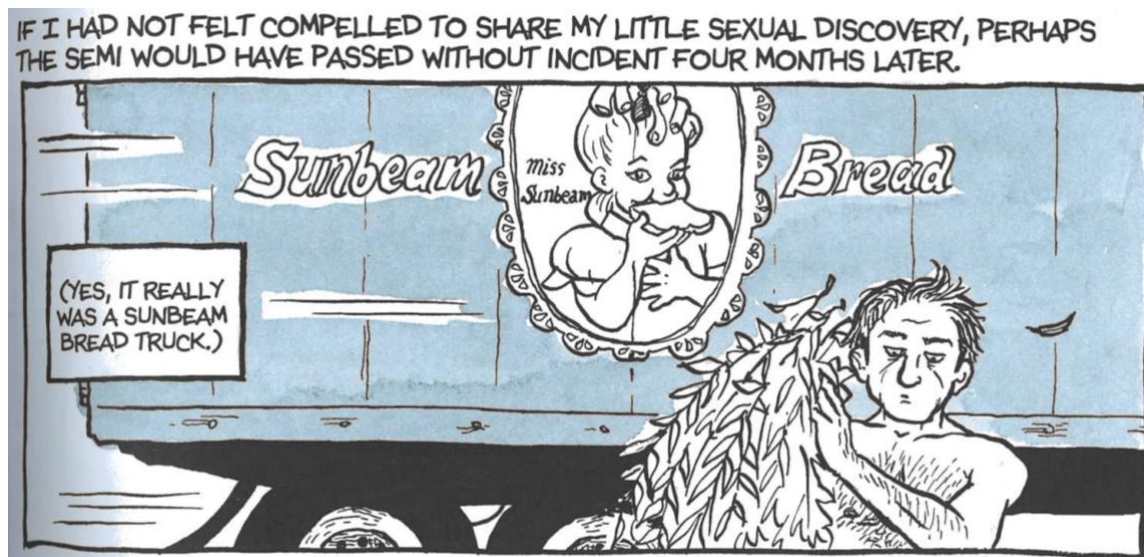


Figure 12. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 59.

However, Sunbeam works as *memento mori* alongside other ambiguous symbols throughout the narrative. For instance, in “A Happy Death” Bechdel notes how her father had an obelisk collection: “It symbolizes life,” he says (29). But the obelisk is also the shape of Bruce’s gravestone, and it is a phallic symbol. Simultaneously then, it is symbolic of life, death, and arguably what Bechdel eventually believes kills Bruce (his repressed homosexuality). In one panel, Alison and Bruce are pictured working in the study together. The curtains in the room create an obelisk shape around each of them as the narrator states that a part of her wants to be responsible for her father’s death (in Figure 13). “I’m reluctant to let go of that last, tenuous bond” (86) she says. To know her father’s fate, to own his narrative, is one way in which Alison can feel connected to him – as they are ambiguously framed by the obelisk, indicative of both life and death in the story.

Unlike the obelisk, however, Sunbeam does not have an established symbolic function. It is an everyday object which comes to encompass much of the complexity of the story. In this sense, the central trauma takes on a similar kind of “ordinariness” to what the

central trauma did in Barry, when she subtly shifted the focus from her own sexual trauma to concern “a lot of kids in my neighborhood”. This also suggests that the trauma, and Bruce’s death, is a part of the everyday. According to Chute, throughout the narrative “he has already, in a sense, begun dying; the coherence, the shape, of his life and person are riddled with insurmountable gaps” (198). His death, then, is intimately tied up with the representation of his person throughout the story. And, as mentioned in chapter one, both the house and the funeral home share a “quality of embalmed life” according to Valerie Rohy (345). Death is present both in Bruce’s life and projects. Even the Bechdel children’s favourite story from childhood is one about the near-death experience of young Bruce.



Figure 13. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 86.

Stuck in the Mud

In “A Happy Death,” Bechdel describes the very space of the funeral home as present in her childhood memories. The Bechdel “fun home” is in the back of the house where her grandmother lives. While Bechdel describes the funeral home not being “the sort of place you wanted to be alone in,” (39) she recreates fond memories from spending the night at her grandmother’s place – in a sense this dynamic is also representative of the ambiguous relationship to home I discussed in chapter one. The descriptions of the funeral home showroom on the second floor of the garage is especially representative of how death and

trauma is represented in *Fun Home*. Here too, Bruce has been in charge of the interior design, and the narrator notes how “velvet drapes muffled any sounds from outside and heightened the sensation that time was at a standstill” (38). The room is described as having “a somber mood even on the sunniest of days” (36), and the notion that time is at a standstill is reminiscent of the timelessness of trauma that Stolorow identifies (160). The narrator moreover states that: “Though there were never any dead people in the showroom, it had the otherworldly ambience of a mausoleum” (38). This then suggest the presence of death even without the literal presence of a dead body.



Figure 14. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 42.

When the children stay over at their grandmother's place, the Bechdel children always encourage her to tell them a story, or, the narrator states: "The story, I should say, because there was one tale that held us in such thrall that the rest of my grandmother's repertoire – her stillborn twins, the time my aunt has worms – paled before it" (40). The overall seriousness of her grandmother's bedtime stories is evident. But their preferred story is the story of their young father, at the age of three, who wandered out into the fields and got stuck in the mud. Luckily, the local mailman found him and rescued him. The narrator notes that "here the story reached its bizarre, Grimmsian climax" (42) as their grandmother describes how she wrapped her cold son in a quilt and "put him in the oven" (42). While the adult narrator knows that "She was referring, of course, to a cook-stove," (42) the young Alison finds the story "endlessly compelling" (429) imagining a fairy tale-like scenario.

In the recreation of these scenes, scenes constructed from the compelling story told by her grandmother, the narrator's voice is inserted into the drawn panel in parentheses. She notes how although she knew her father was rescued by a mailman, she always pictured him as a milkman, "all in white – a reverse grim reaper" (41). This scene, on the one hand, demonstrates the contrasts between the perspective of child Alison and the adult narrator who is analysing and interpreting things in retrospect. On the other, it displays the different temporalities present in the comics panel. This scene is also representative of how *Fun Home* is a staging of memory, a reconstruction. In her recreation of her father's near-death experience, though she knows it is incorrect, the narrator chooses a narrative with a more interesting symbolic function. Here, the narrative touches upon the problem of representation, and reveals itself clearly as a construct. Moreover, as she tries to make sense of her father's death, him being "Stuck in the mud for good this time," (54) the problem of representation is brought to the forefront once more.

Narrating Trauma

"Mourning is represented as a dizzying phantasmagoria of memory" (Kuhn 125).

Alison's first 'diary' is written on a wall calendar from "Ray Burial Vault Co." (140) and is what she calls "a curious memento mori" (140). It is interesting that Bechdel herself chooses to use this phrase herself in the narrative – it supports my argument that she stages her

memories so that Bruce's death is ever-present, even before it has occurred. A calendar is meant to show progression and chronology, while a burial vault conceals a coffin, preventing it from sinking by decomposing or collapsing. The vault is an enclosed space, specifically designed to keep the grave in its place. This odd juxtaposition holds Alison's first attempt at narrating her life, what she calls her own "compulsive propensity to autobiography" (140). But Alison's diary writing is, after all, marked by increasing uncertainty. She notes that: "All I could speak for was my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those" (141). The "Ray's Burial Vault" calendar, then, points to movement and stasis all at once – a sensation which captures the impossibility of time and temporal order in relation to traumatic memory, the paradox of the representation of trauma.

Her use of a calendar that marks the contradiction of progression and stasis, points to the difficulty of narrating life. As the young Alison increasingly begins to doubt her own ability to narrate and represent her experiences, the diary becomes increasingly unreliable with a "faltering, elliptic tone (...) creeping in" (162). She overwrites all her entries, at first with a written "I think," then with a curvy circumflex shorthand symbolising the same doubt. In a "sort of epistemological crisis," (141) young Alison doubts her own ability to represent her reality. In an interview with Chute, Bechdel in fact says that *Fun Home* in many ways could be seen as an extension of her childhood diary (*Why Comics*). Alison's issues with representation in her diary parallel the artist Bechdel's struggle to represent trauma and come to terms with her loss.

As we have seen, death is present in the everyday life of the Bechdel home. On some level, Alison and her brothers develop a habitual relationship to the family business – they lay down in a graveyard and pretend to be dead, and at one point young Alison asks if she can lie down in a dug-out grave. But when a distant cousin of hers dies, a boy exactly her age, she notes: "My diary entries for that weekend are almost completely obscured" (148). This is one of two important dead bodies seen on the autopsy table in *Fun Home*. The other one is a man her father's age. Alison is called into the room as Bruce is performing an autopsy; the man is nude, and his chest is cut wide open. Bechdel question his father's motives in showing the child the horrific sight. The adult narrator asks: "maybe he felt that he had become too inured to death, and was hoping to elicit from me an expression of the natural horror he was no longer capable of..." (43) or "maybe he just needed the scissors" (43). The reaction the dead bodies elicit from Alison suggests a more direct realization of her own and her father's mortality. The shock of the brutal scene, however, causes her to suppress her natural emotions. When her father dies, she says that "[t]he emotion I had suppressed for the gaping

cadaver seemed to stay suppressed” (45). She tells people about her loss in a “flat, matter-of-fact tone” (45) and the narrator notes: “They say grief takes many forms, including the absence of grief” (227). Like with Barry’s “blankness” of emotion, Alison too is unable to properly mourn her father, just like she is unable to process or narrate the experience of seeing the young boy on the autopsy table.

The narrator moreover points the reader to what is *not* there, what is left out, that which is not narrated, when she speaks of the “implicit lie of the blank page” (186). But Bechdel works with these spaces, what Warhol calls “the space between” image and word. The narrator notes that strangely enough: “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” (50). As the narrative ends, The ultimate trauma is the incomprehensibility of her loss.



Figure 15. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 232.

Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how both works discussed in this thesis are informed by trauma. In *One Hundred Demons*, Barry, who according to Chute is “deeply engaged with theorizing memory” (“Materializing Memory” 96) works through her *demons*, “the life moments that haunt you”. Chute writes that Barry “does not display trauma so much as work in the edges of events” by working “with the absences the form provides” (ibid. 97). In *Fun Home*, the central tension is Bruce Bechdel’s death and how the trauma and guilt of what she believes was a suicide “resonated retroactively” (23) through the memories of her childhood. Bechdel describes the “constant tension” (21) of a home described as cold and detached. While both works deal with very personal trauma, *Fun Home* seems primarily motivated to situate Alison’s self in relation to the father, to understand her loss, to work through the past. *One Hundred Demons* on the other hand situates the personal trauma, uses it as a frame, suggests its profound impact on Lynda’s life, but also moves to a more general tone, arguing for what Chute calls the “ordinariness of her trauma” (“Materializing Memory” 108), moving consciously between the personal and the public.

I have already argued that state titles challenge the autobiography/fiction divide and qualify perhaps more as critical “memory work,” which in Kuhn’s terms is “a conscious and purposeful performance of memory” which “involves an active staging of memory” (157). Despite their differences *Fun Home* and *One Hundred Demons* show ways in which graphic narratives can represent trauma. They suggest that comics as a form is able to capture traumatic memory by demonstrating a unique narration of memory and trauma, both through fragmentation, condensation, and, as Chute notes, placement of elements. The different temporalities within the same panel serves to emphasize that “trauma (...) is timeless” (Stolorow 160).

Chapter 3: Reimagining Self

“Autobiographical narration begins with amnesia, and once begun, the fragmentary nature of subjectivity intrudes” (Smith “Performativity” 18).

In the introduction, I argued that autobiographical comics can support Paul John Eakin’s argument that (contemporary) narratives of identity teach us that “the self is dynamic, changing, and plural” (*How Our Lives* 98). As opposed to a static view of the self as, in Eakin’s terms, “given, monolithic, and invariant” (xi), this view of autobiography complicates the narration of self. The preceding two chapters have already touched upon representations of the self. In chapter 1, I made evident how intimately notions and representations of home are connected to ideas of self and belonging. I looked at how Barry and Bechdel consciously make use of the possibility for multiple storyworlds, representing and finding a form for intangible concepts like the idea of home, or shame. In chapter 2, I discussed how comics can give form to the disruptive experience of trauma, equally intangible and ‘unrepresentable’ – and how in turn trauma can impact, and fragment, one’s sense of self. In this chapter I will pick up some of these threads as I aim to look more closely at how comics stage the self in autobiographical narration, and specifically at how *embodiment* is key to understanding autobiographical comics. I will suggest that the emphasis on staging and embodiment supports my argument that comics is an appropriate medium for the narration of the self.

The Oxford English Dictionary’s definitions of *embody* includes, apart from the more intuitive “To put into a body” that it can mean: “a. To give a concrete form to (what is abstract or ideal); to express (principles, thoughts, intentions) *in* an institution, work of art, action, definite form of words, etc” (*OED*). Thus, *embody* can be linked to the literal body, or to a mere idea of giving concrete form. This echoes Chute’s argument that embodiment in comics works on several levels. Comics give concrete form to the abstract as I have already argued with regard to the intangible concepts of home, shame and trauma. But furthermore comics seem intimately linked to the body. Chute argues that the comics form is “about bodies – about locating them in space and time” and moreover that the form “has a multivalent and complex relation to embodiment. Embodiment in comics may be read as a kind of compensation for lost bodies, for lost histories. Comics resurrects and materializes” (“Comics Form” 112). The “compensation for lost bodies” resonates well with the idea of the culturally unrepresented which I discussed briefly in chapter 1, of bringing othered bodies to the page. But it also further extends my argument that comics can find its own language for

that which is intangible or invisible; in this case selfhood, subjectivity, the autobiographical self.

“Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?” (7) Barry asked. As previously mentioned, in “Autobiography as De-Facement,” (1979) Paul De Man problematised the polarisation between autobiography and fiction, arguing the autobiographical to be a way of reading and interpreting, rather than a separate genre. The previous two chapters have in part demonstrated how autobiography in comics involves a *staging* of self and memory. And perhaps, similarly to how comics require a different way of reading and interpreting, the autobiographical, too, will necessarily take a different form in these works. Chute argues that: “Comics is a largely hand-drawn form that registers the subjective bodily mark on the page; its marks are an index of the body, and its form lends its pages the intimacy of the diary” (“Comics Form” 113). This might be one of the reasons why Bechdel has claimed there to be something “inherently autobiographical” (*Graphic Women* 10) about cartooning; drawing connotes subjectivity on the page. In a related vein, in “The Gesture of Drawing” (2016), Ernst van Alphen looks at the drawn line as a gesture. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *gesture* as “movement of the body or limbs as an expression of feeling” (*OED*). Gesture, then, is the bodily expression of emotion or feeling. Emotions and feelings are inevitably a part of what constitutes subjectivity. Chute, Bechdel, and van Alphen thus identify similar elements— the hand-drawn quality of comics and its link both to the more intangible concept of subjectivity and its concrete expression in bodily gesture. Van Alphen specifically outlines ways in which the link between drawing and the subject, and drawing and the body, have been made – how ink to paper has been differentiated from other kinds of visual arts. He argues: “The gestures of the moving hand register, one could say, the movement of the thinking eye” (110). This movement can result in very different lines – Bechdel’s precise and clinical ones, Barry’s expressionistic and childlike.

Another important differentiation between traditional prose autobiography and autobiographical comics is the possibility for multiple diegetic levels, the multiple storyworlds which Warhol identifies and that I have discussed previously. These complicate the notion of one coherent *narrated* self, and the idea that this self is one and the same one as the *narrating* I. In essence, autobiographical comics can support Eakin’s notion of the self as “dynamic, changing, and plural” (xi). The autobiographical avatar, the drawn self on the page, makes visible this disruption. Although the disruption of the idea of a coherent self is not exclusive to the comics form, there is a clearer sense that the narrator of the captions and the reimagined and drawn self of childhood occupy two temporal levels – split and separated.

Kuhn argues that this split is at the core of revisionist autobiography in that it insists “on a gap between the ‘I’ that writes and the ‘I’ (or perhaps better the ‘me’) that is written about” (151) – breaking or complicating Philippe Lejeune’s theory of the “autobiographical pact” (3). Kuhn only refers to prose autobiography, but perhaps what is unique to the comics form is that this kind of disruption is unavoidable, the form in itself being fragmented, and the complexity of narrating the self made evident on the page. Kuhn links revisionist autobiography to resistance, to a writing back from margins previously unrepresented, and as I have already briefly suggested, comics might be particularly apt for these counter-narratives.

Eakin speaks of “the absence of body in traditional autobiography” (*How Our Lives* 36), which Sidonie Smith also identifies. In *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body* (1993) she argues: “In patriarchal culture men enjoy the privilege of conceiving themselves as “the universal subject,” rational, self-determining, transcendent, and *disembodied*” (*How Our Lives* 36). Smith thus suggests that the ability to narrate the *disembodied self* is almost exclusively available to the privileged few. She claims that “this democratic self positions on its border all that is termed the “colorful,” that is, that which becomes identified culturally as other, exotic, unruly, irrational, uncivilized, regional, or paradoxically unnatural” (“Subjectivity” 9). Disembodiment is thus not an option for women and racial ‘others’ who cannot escape the “politics of the body as border/limit” (10). Embodiment thus seems key to stories written from the margins because, according to Smith and Julia Watson in *Interfaces: women, autobiography, image, performance*, the limited access to *disembodiment* brings the body and embodiment to the forefront in contemporary (women’s) autobiography (10).

Key to the present chapter are notions of a contemporary self that highlight variability, the dynamism of identity. I would argue that *Fun Home* and *One Hundred Demons* are both written from perspectives where the escape of the “politics of the body as border/limit” is difficult, if not impossible (if it is even desirable). As a consequence, these autobiographical comics bring the body to the forefront thematically (be it race in *Demons* or sexuality in *Fun Home*). Moreover, the comics form “registers the subjective bodily mark on the page” as Chute suggests (“Comics Form” 113), and allows for several simultaneous temporalities within one frame, opening up the possibility for multiple storyworlds. I believe these elements to be interestingly intertwined in my chosen works, as they both problematise autobiography’s ability to access one unambiguous truth. They both embrace subjective doubt. But Bechdel and Barry make use of these formal qualities in entirely different ways. Bechdel displays an almost clinical reproduction of interiors, archives and memories from her childhood. Her autobiographical project is a simultaneous exploration of her father and her

self. Barry's work, meanwhile, is a simultaneous exploration of her own memories and the processes of remembrance as what Chute calls a "visual practice" ("Materializing Memory 113).

FUN HOME

"I smeared the blood into my journal, pleased by the opportunity to transmit my anguish to the page so literally" (Bechdel 78).

The autobiographical in *Fun Home* is interesting on more than one level. One is its treatment of canonical works of fiction as a narrative frame through which Bechdel discusses and analyses her father's life. Another is its relation to archives and embodiment. The former feeds in to a more general discussion of the autobiographical, emphasising the increasingly blurred lines between fiction and autobiography because the fictional allusions create an aesthetic distance to her life. The relation to archives and embodiment has a more direct relationship to the comics form, to how the autobiographical is uniquely negotiated through a graphic narrative, the "inherently autobiographical" (Chute, *Graphic Women* 10) nature of cartooning. And in a sense, the literary frames produce a distance to the material, while the embodiment signifies a closeness, an attachment to it. These two contradictory movements of distance and proximity create tension in *Fun Home*, and I will begin this discussion by looking more closely at Bechdel's use of fictional frames and modernist works of fiction as intertexts. I read them as intertexts because of their allusive relationship to Bechdel's own life story. This is one of the aspects of *Fun Home* most frequently discussed by critics, in part to support its legitimacy as a complex work of art, but mostly for their essential role in her life story. I want to bring this into a more general discussion on autobiographical comics and the autobiographical in Bechdel.

Most Real in Fictional Terms

"I employ these allusions to James and Fitzgerald not only as descriptive devices, but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms" (*Fun Home* 67).

I have already noted that Bechdel actively compares and sets her own family history up against a variety of fictions. She compares her family to the Addams family and to the family in *It's a Wonderful Life*. This indicates the presence of a family ideology that Bechdel's story is in continuous communication with. But the more complex fictional frames throughout the work is the (predominantly) modernist and canonical works of fiction she references both in the story and in the chapter titles. Works by Joyce, Fitzgerald and Camus, among others, seep into the her narrative and become grounds for comparison. The work opens and ends with the same reference to Greek mythology. Ariela Freedman argues that these fictions in *Fun Home* serve a dual purpose: "it elaborates [Bechdel's] presentation of her life, and her parent's life, as formed through the reading of fiction, as a fictional auto-creation, and it reflects her father's and her own obsession with literary biography, and their inability to separate the life from the work" (137). *Fun Home* thus works as a somewhat detached and distanced response to the author-subject's own detached and distanced home life. She both criticises and enacts this aesthetic distance to her life and family.

Two of the ways in which such aesthetic distance is enacted in *Fun Home* are through the mythical frame of Icarus and Daedalus, and Bechdel's comparison of her parents to fictional characters. As mentioned, the work opens and ends in myth. In the very first panel, young Alison is seen balancing on top of her father's feet, called "Icarian games" in the circus (3). In what she calls "our particular reenactment of this mythic relationship," (4) her father serves the role of both Icarus, Deaedalus "that skilful artificer, that mad scientist" (5), and the monstrous minotaur hidden at the centre of his labyrinth. As I discussed in chapter 1, when talking about her father's rage and instability, Bechdel compares their house to a labyrinth designed to conceal a monster, which is his shame. In these ways, and throughout the narrative, the myth is referred back to. But Bechdel moreover compares the parents themselves to fictional characters: "If my father was a Fitzgerald character, my mother stepped right out of Henry James – a vigorous American idealist ensnared by degenerate continental forces" (66). These two allusions to fiction serve to emphasise the contrast between her two parents. The two met in a performance of *The Taming of the Shrew*, and Bechdel wonders if her father fell for her mother in or out of character. Their subsequent marriage seems unlikely and cold, her mother often the victim of her father's rage. Her mother, however, remains somewhat distant in the narrative, whether rehearsing for a play, or being a supporting role in her husband's performance of conformity. The complex intertextuality of *Fun Home* is clearer in the descriptions of Bruce, the central puzzle of the

story, whose “preference of a fiction over reality” (85) is indicative of the performative nature of his middle-class façade, a fiction in itself.

Literature and fiction moreover function on different levels in *Fun Home*. Throughout the narrative Bruce is usually seen reading a book. As I mentioned in chapter 1, Julia Watson noted how in the first panel, a copy of *Anna Karenina* is lying on the floor next to Alison and Bruce. With its themes of the domestic, infidelity and suicide, this is an early indicator of how Bechdel stages the panel and frames her life story through fiction. Bruce is drawn reading books on art history and architecture – indicative of his obsession with ornament and façade – as well as classics from the literary canon. Some are left undiscussed by the narrator. Some become evidence and material for the narrator’s interpretation, like the copy of *A Happy Death* by Albert Camus which Bruce was reading around the time of his death (27). The father’s preoccupation with Fitzgerald is discussed by Bechdel who states: “I think what was so alluring to my father about Fitzgerald’s stories was their inextricability from Fitzgerald’s life”/”Such a suspension of the imaginary in the real was, after all, my father’s stock in trade” (65). It is moreover through fiction, attending her father’s English class, that the two connect. When Alison later signs up for English classes in college, the two of them become closer than ever, so close that it becomes almost suffocating. He insists: “Faulkner IS Beech Creek. The Bundrens ARE Bechdels” (200). When Alison is reading *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he exclaims “Good. You damn well better identify with every page” (201). Her father’s relationship to literature is marked by an assertiveness that stands in stark contrast with her doubts and uncertainties.

Freedman argues that “[Bechdel’s] relationship to the modernist tradition is playful and sometimes combative” (130). This is perhaps primarily because Bechdel’s literary references are, in part, an extension of her father’s relationship to books and fiction. The narrator notes that “the line that dad drew between fiction and reality was indeed a blurry one” (59) and that “a suspension of the imaginary in the real was, after all, my father’s stock in trade” (65). The boundaries between the imaginary and the real thus become a direct point of address in *Fun Home*, as her emotionally distant father primarily communicates with her through the use of fiction. And with regards to her father, she wonders whether “affectation can be so thoroughgoing, so authentic in its details, that it stops being pretense.../”... and becomes, for all practical purposes, real” (60) In *Fictions in Autobiography*, Eakin works around the presumption “that autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and, further, that the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure” (3). Eakin thus

proposes a two-part argument: that autobiographical truth as such is part of the process of self-creation – that narration of self is the creation of self – and that self in autobiographical writing is a fiction. I would argue that in relation to her father Bechdel seems to question the extent to which the self is always performative, and where the boundaries between the imaginary and the real truly lie. In the thoroughgoing affectation Bechdel refers to, how she argues her father is reminiscent of Jay Gatsby in “the colossal vitality of his illusion,” (64) she heavily insinuates, but – in line with the rest of the work – never provides affirmative answers.

Freedman furthermore believes the use of Joyce in particular to have a specific function in Bechdel’s work. She argues that “Joyce stands in for an overbearing, inaccessible literary tradition, and also, in the autobiographical logic of the narrative, for an overbearing, inaccessible father” (127-28). The presence of these frames is directly related to Bechdel’s ambiguous and complex relationship to her father – a man she feels simultaneously connected to and distant from. Bechdel alludes to tradition, but overwrites it, alters it for the purpose of her own narrative. A part of the autobiographical ‘truth’ of *Fun Home* is exactly that there is no one truth to be found, and that part of Bechdel’s own development is finding her own bodily truth, writing over her father’s history in the creation of her own. The first expression of this is found in her childhood diary.

Embodiment of Archives

My discussion has already touched upon things that, in a wider sense of the word, becomes part of the archive of *Fun Home*; Bruce’s books, for instance. This part of the chapter is concerned with the embodied archive, the documentary evidence redrawn in Bechdel’s own line. Alison’s childhood diary is one of many documents that Bechdel draws or redraws in the family archive that is *Fun Home*. The diary, which becomes representative of Bechdel’s self-development, is initiated by her father, who starts her off, writing her first entry. In chapter 2, I discussed how the diary is marked by a similar ‘unrepresentability’ of lived experience that is often linked to the expression of trauma and traumatic experiences. The subjective doubt of young Alison’s writing, however, feeds into the autobiographical project of *Fun Home* as a whole – not only in the narration of trauma. Freedman argues that Bechdel writes “despite uncertainty, rather than in denial of uncertainty” (133) which I would argue again links *Fun Home* to Kuhn’s idea of *memory work* in that it takes “an inquiring attitude towards the past” (157) rather than presumably accessing a full and unambiguous truth. Alison’s struggles to portray ‘truth’ in her diary, the “epistemological crisis” of her youth, also reflect the problem

of conceiving autobiography as having a direct and unambiguous relationship to the real. She notes how “[f]alse humility, overwrought penmanship, and self-disgust began to cloud my testimony” (169). As we see in Figure 16, the problem of representation is made apparent in her diary entries. The smearing of her own blood becomes a way in which her emotional pain can be transmitted to the page when language fails on its own.

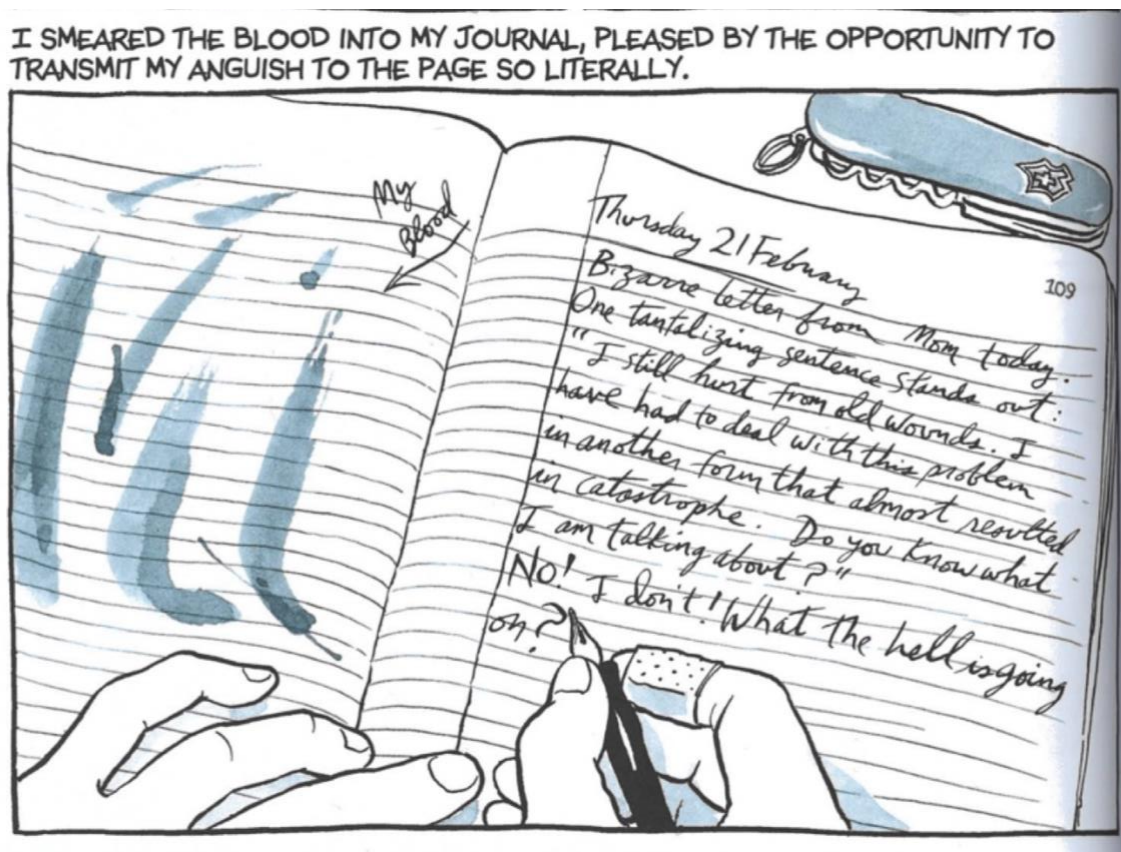


Figure 16. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 78.

The diary is part of the larger archive of the work, and *Fun Home*'s treatment of archives is often discussed by critics. Jared Gardner addresses the archival in comics form more generally, mentioning Bechdel's work as one of several contemporary comics, while Valerie Rohy and Ann Cvetkovich identify archival sites in *Fun Home* and place Bechdel's work in what Cvetkovich coins as a "queer archive" (111). Bechdel has after all called herself an "archivist," (Rohy 342), perhaps in her eagerness to make sense of her father through the material evidence from his life. But *Fun Home* encompasses two tendencies: the compulsion for archives and need for evidence, and the radical doubt of the extent to which her reality can be represented, or the puzzle of her father solved. Rohy, like Freedman, identifies *Fun Home*'s "radical uncertainty" (343) and argues that "even the text's archival impulse, its

preoccupation with material evidence, resonates with the difficulty of representing the past” (344). Thus, while on the one hand, archives and documents serve as material evidence of ‘truthfulness’, I would suggest that the text is ambiguous about the attainability of such a truth.

Eventually, young Alison does what she continues to do in her college literature class: she draws over the writings, or she supplements the writings with her illustrations. The “I think” that marked her uncertainty on the diary pages is replaced by a circumflex, a swift movement of the hand, a gesture in van Alphen’s terms, that comes to represent her difficulties. Chute argues that: “Bechdel claims and animates a family archive by drawing it and hence *marking it with her body*” (Italics mine, “Comics Form” 108). Thus, she claims that the archival in *Fun Home* is a kind of “embodied process” (113): By recreating these works, Bechdel embodies them. Freedman suggests that “the displacement and artifice involved in drawing the photographs rather than simply reproducing them also signals the way that she, as the artist, is manipulating and forming the narrative” (131). It is in a sense breaking free, signaling a shift from her father’s creative control into a narrative of her own. These critics identify a similar autobiographical tendency in Bechdel: that in order to tell her story, she must embody her narrative – owning it and shaping it. And that in this story, the body – and bodily truth – is essential. At its core, the coming-out story of *Fun Home* is not only at the core of Alison’s self-development, but one of her primary connections to her late father.

Bodies and Sexuality

Not only does the comics medium itself connote subjectivity on the page implying embodiment. In a narrative of queerness and sexuality such as *Fun Home*, the idea of ‘bodily truth’ or ‘erotic truth’ is at the forefront. Alison is in search of hers, while her father hides his. Alison’s initial realisation of her own sexuality comes through reading, “consistent with my bookish upbringing” (74), as she writes. However, the “sexual odyssey” (214) of her college years is as much about her need to “enter the human fray,” (76) from being a lesbian in theory to being one in practice. Her ‘odyssey’ towards her own erotic truth (230) is paralleled with her father’s hiding of his own. Bechdel explains how she “embarked that day on an odyssey which, consisting as it did in a gradual, episodic, and inevitable convergence with my abstracted father, was very nearly as epic as the original” (203). Thus, bodily truth here becomes both a part of the form and a theme of the story. Ultimately, *Fun Home* portrays selfhood as process, in Eakin’s words, “of self-discovery and self-creation” (*Fictions* 3) and at the core of this is embodiment.

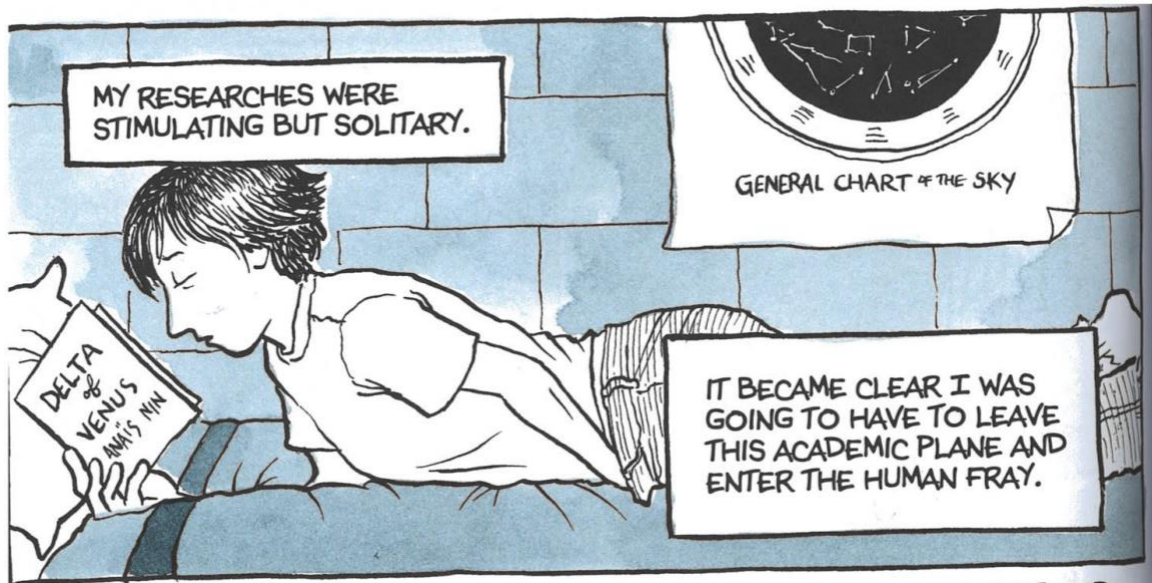


Figure 17. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 76.

Freedman argues that throughout *Fun Home* “sophisticated literary manifestations of the circumflex – recursiveness, reflexivity, irony, paradox, doubt – complicate the straight lines of Bechdel’s narrative, turn the linear story back into a loop, the rite of passage into a labyrinth” (133). These “literary manifestations of the circumflex” suggest that the whole narrative is marked by doubt, by the problem of representation. In “Art Today,” Jean-Luc Nancy argues that the *gesture* in art is always a gesture to something outside the work, beyond the end of that gesture (10). One could read the circumflex as a kind of gesture that results in an inconclusiveness in the story that works well with contemporary ideas of the self. It suggests that this autobiographical narration is only part of the truth, one piece in a puzzle. “The gestures of the moving hand register (...) the movement of the thinking eye,” (110) argued van Alphen. Drawing as gesture in this way perhaps captures the *process* not only of self-narration, but of self. This is even more evident in Barry’s work.

ONE HUNDRED DEMONS

“Who knows which moments make us who we are? Some of them? All of them? The ones we never really thought of as anything special?” (*One Hundred Demons* 36).

In Lynda Barry’s work, Albrecht Dürer’s idea of *Gwalt* as an artist’s “unique style” and a “manifestation of [...] individuality” in opposition to *ars*, a skill acquired through learning, is clearly visible. (van Alphen 114) So is the more direct relationship between pen and paper in the process of writing or drawing. Barry’s introductory chapter is written on yellow legal paper, and she writes on scraps and waste. Her style is expressive and colourful, easily distinguishable from other works in her genre. Barry creates her comics in paint brush and ink stone or ink stick, commonly used for calligraphy. The resulting lively line and bright colours are her trademark, in *One Hundred Demons* combined with multi-material opening collages for each chapter. In Chute’s words: “the collection of temporal moments palimpsested in the opening collage pages indicates the book’s overall approach to narrativizing a life” presenting a kind of “self as collage” (“Materializing Memory” 119). Thus, in many ways, Barry’s staging of self could not be more different than that of Bechdel’s intricate, fine-lined drawings.

I have already established that the two works are interesting to compare also thematically because of their immensely different approaches to certain similar issues. While in *Fun Home* the distance to the autobiographical material stems in part from the canonical fictional frames, *One Hundred Demons* has a very different approach. Stories and fictions do inform self-narration here as well, but these are the stories of her grandmother, the myths from her culture, or the stories that young Lynda connects or creates from the fragmented form of the classified ads in the newspaper. In opposition to Alison Bechdel’s “bookish upbringing” Barry, whose background is distinctly working-class, only has access to other types of text – a few children’s books, classified ads, Reader’s Digest stories, “Hints from Heloise”. Consequently *One Hundred Demons* is, according to Chute perhaps “a narrative powerfully invested in its own populism (literally and theoretically) and its accessibility” (“Materializing Memory” 109). Barry does not allude to works of classic literature, she displays “interest in collective address” (ibid. 110). Her language is accessible, her stories often generalised using the pronoun “we” instead of “I”.

If “I think” marked *Fun Home*’s narrative uncertainty in subtle ways, Barry’s is a more direct questioning. Throughout the work she poses a series of questions concerning the very nature of memory and self-development (“Who knows which moments make us who we are?” (36)), about the power of storytelling and about trauma. Chute calls one of Barry’s other works, *Naked Ladies!*, “a book that involves but decentralizes the self” (“Materializing Memory” 104). I argue that this insight can be applied to *One Hundred Demons* too. In one sense, it is very much about Lynda’s own struggles and life experiences. In another sense, the narrative often brings the focus out from the specificities of the memory to a more general address, a “who knows?”, an uncertainty. *One Hundred Demons* thus comes across as a more expressionistic work with a different narrative approach, and the idea of embodiment and the autobiographical will necessarily take a different form. One of the most significant ways in which it does this is through its meta-moments, the ‘present-tense’ Barry seen sat drawing by her desk, working on the panels of the book. Another is its distinct visual style, Barry’s line. In the following I will discuss how both of these elements complicate, disrupt and even collapse the different temporalities of the story. I will however start by looking at how Barry “decentralises” the self in her autobiography, or semi-autobiography.

Decentralising the Self

In chapter 2 I discussed how Barry, in representing and remembering her own trauma, also makes more general claims about the very ordinariness of that trauma. *One Hundred Demons* is framed by an invitation to the reader to go through the same process as Barry the narrator has. The introduction of *Demons* is drawn on yellow legal paper and shows Barry sat by a desk while a ‘demon’ outlines the origin of the work. The demon explains that she followed the instructions in a library book about a hand-scroll from 16th century Japan and “the demons began to come” but “they were not the demons she expected” (10). This introduction is a very accurate representation of what is to come and justifies a reading of *Demons* as a narrative process that challenges the readers’ generic expectations as well as presenting the work as what Hillary Chute calls a “passionate project of demystification” (“Materializing Memory” 121). The reader is made aware of the process behind the autobiographical writing. The “Outro” too is an appeal to the reader. The chapter includes photographs, one is of Barry sat hunched over her desk drawing. She points out the different materials she uses for her comics and gives the reader thorough instructions on how to make their own. I will come back to the significance of these meta moments, but for now it suffices to say that Barry is always just as concerned with ways of remembering and processing as she is about her own personal

memories, her own process. When Nancy argues contemporary art always *gestures* to a world beyond and outside the work (10), this seems to be happening here in the most literal sense.

Barry's work, like Bechdel's, involves movements of proximity and detachment to the autobiographical material. But where Bechdel's is an intimate, personal journey where these contradictory movements come as result of fundamental uncertainties and questions about her own father, I would argue that Barry's is fuelled by an insistence on the intimate relationship between the personal and the public/political. This is not to say that such intimate relationship is absent from *Fun Home*. As we saw in chapter 1, Bechdel theorises and questions the significance of place and convention on the development of self. However, while Bechdel *thematizes* the personal and political, this dynamic has an impact on the very *form* of Barry's work. The subtle switches of pronouns and the direct encouragement of the reader to go through a process of remembering their own demons highlights narration generally as a process of healing, especially, perhaps, for othered bodies.



Figure 18. Lynda Barry, *One Hundred Demons*, Introduction.

Chute suggests that: “Barry embraces the discursive and generic fault lines of her work as productive, making that instability—that problematizing of taxonomy and reference—the basis on which we approach her work” (“Materializing Memory” 109). If one compares this to traditional prose autobiography, Barry completely breaks Lejeune’s “autobiographical pact” (3). By coining her work as “autobifictionalography” and noting that

parts of her story are indeed fictionalised, the reader is not offered a promise of the true or real. But, like Bechdel, Barry embraces doubt and uncertainty. Meanwhile, the meta moments with her adult self present in the panel creating the work we are reading, not only highlight the work as a construct, but complicate and collapse the different temporalities present in the panel.

Occupying the Space of Memory

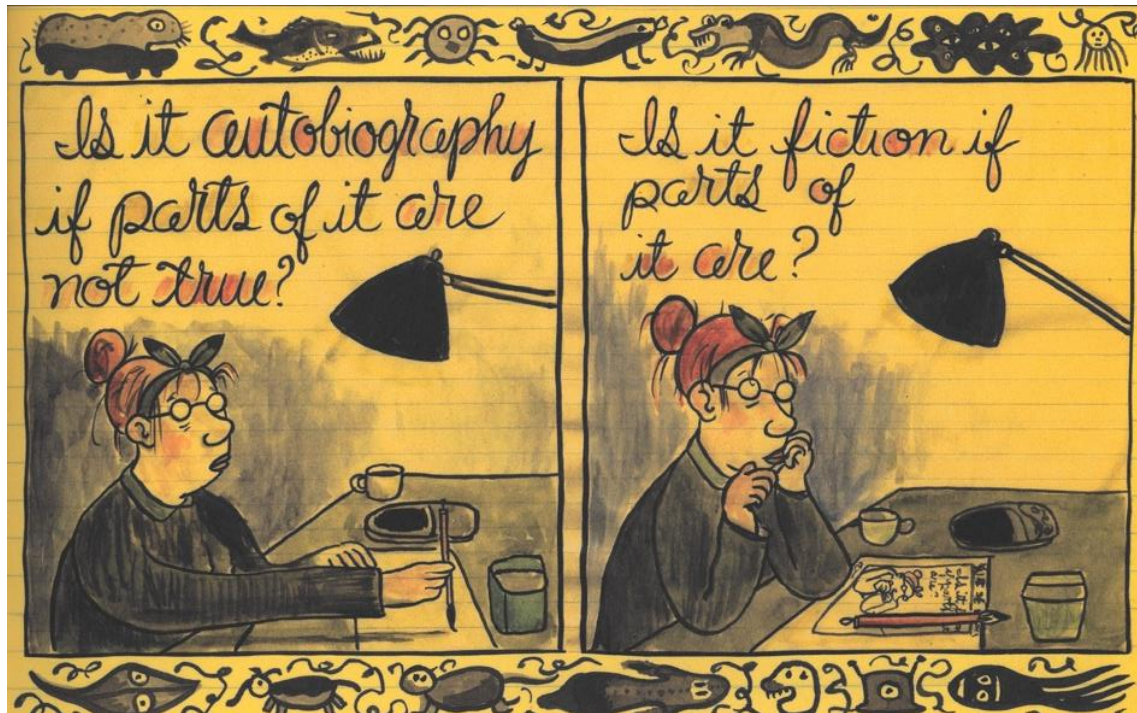


Figure 19. Lynda Barry, *One Hundred Demons*, Introduction.

Barry often paints herself painting the panels of *One Hundred Demons*. These meta moments differ significantly from Bechdel's work, where the drawn self on the page is always several years younger than the narrator. Barry makes *visible* the process, thus questioning distinctions between truth and fiction, presenting the idea of "drawing one's demons" as a process in itself. While the narrator sometimes seems to take the perspective of child Alison in *Fun Home* (as I mentioned in chapter 1 with regards to gendered expectations), the 'adult narrator' is never present visually. However, this self-conscious metafictional element in *Demons* is there from the outset, and the artistic process of making the book comes to frame the narrative, emphasising it as a construct. Where Bechdel framed her life story in myth, Barry frames her story in a populist, (in that it is "intended to appeal to or represent the interests of ordinary people" (*OED*)) direct approach to the reader.

I have argued that autobiographical comics make visible the gap between the narrator and the narrated I by opening up the possibility for multiple storyworlds and different temporalities to exist simultaneously within a single panel. In *One Hundred Demons* I would argue that there is a visual collapse of temporalities. Both past and ‘present’ seem to inhabit the same visual space. Thus, these moments where the narrator is present in the drawings of the panel in one way collapses the distinction between past and present. In an interview with Chute, Barry says: “I think the past has no order whatsoever” (“Materializing Memory” 119). I will argue that this approach results in a merging of different times and temporalities within one chapter, or even one panel. Notably, the meta moments, apart from the introduction and outro, are often about trauma. In chapter 2 we saw how trauma is often deemed unrepresentable because traumatic memories are hard to access and express. In the chapter “Cicadas,” about suicide, Barry is drawn by her desk in four different panels (160, 161, 166, 168). In “The Aswang,” a chapter about generational trauma, she notes: “The history of vampires and people are not so different, really. How many of us can honestly see our own reflection?” (94). Then, in the very last panel, she is drawn by her desk as she contemplates her decision not to have children to avoid passing on the same generational trauma, a way to “fight vampires” (96). I would suggest that as a meta moment, this represents the sense of being *in* the memory. In relation to trauma there is a breakdown of temporality – the past can always be triggered, one is always *in* the traumatic memory.

Barry’s adult self is not only present in these meta moments. She is often a vital part of the story itself that is unfolding. In the chapter “Magic Lanterns” she rereads *Charlotte’s Web*, one of three books she had in her childhood home, and wonders: “Why are we so moved by stories? Tales of things that never happened told by people we’ve never met? How does a story come so alive?” (154). In “The Election,” she connects her own obsession with the presidential election of 2000 to society’s obsession with good vs. evil: “In my life I’ve been both a bully and a victim,” she writes (201). In both examples Barry questions how stories function, how one creates false dichotomies of good and evil to make sense of the world. Thus, adult Barry is a presence that encourages reimagining, contemplation, and questioning. She reminds the reader, a reader she has already encouraged to create a narrative of his or her own, of how we tell stories about ourselves and others. Again, she writes about the self while decentralising the self. Furthermore, as we shall see below, Barry’s visual style has an impact on how one views adult narrator Barry’s presence in the panel.

The Line

Barry's line is interesting on more than one level. Firstly, the captions are written in capital letters combined with seemingly arbitrary words written in cursive. Handwriting is undoubtedly a subjective mark, as a literal signature of the artist the intense captions fill half the panel. Handwriting connotes both subjectivity and embodiment. Moreover, Chute argues that Barry "'breaks up" the visual surface of her handwritten text – she ruffles it, we might say" ("Secret Labor" 280). I will argue that this effectively breaks up the reading experience, disrupting it. Barry moreover ventures into expressionism in many scenes, most evident perhaps when she represents doing acid in Chinatown with Dean. The goal then is to capture the experience of tripping. The psychedelic backgrounds capture the discomfiting experience of the drugs. However, in this scene alongside the rest of the book some of the unease the reader feels are linked to the childlike line of the drawings combined with serious topics. I will suggest that the quality of Barry's line in a sense 'belongs' to childhood, firmly planted in the aesthetics of childhood diaries and scrapbooking. The line in a sense carries that temporality. When the adult narrator is drawn in this line, she thus occupies the space of childhood, visualizing the process of remembering and reinterpreting childhood: temporalities collapse. I will further argue that *this* is what makes *One Hundred Demons*, in Chute's terms, "an adult recollection of childhood events" that makes clear "its process of interpretation as visualization, an aesthetic "working through"" ("Materializing Memory" 110). Chute does not look at the line in this way, but in my opinion, the temporality of the line brings this 'interpretation as visualization' even further.

Writing on Barry's general body of work, from her comic strips to *One Hundred Demons*, Miriam Harris argues that:

The body is a vital presence in Barry's drawings. Her linework can travel with a hurtling velocity that threatens to zoom out of the frame; one is aware of the driving force of the hand and arm behind her marks. Her lines can also convey a tremulous vulnerability and sensitivity. Barry summons a full range of the senses with just a few strokes (136).

Harris then argues that Barry's line carries vulnerability and sensitivity. This perhaps, in my opinion, because it belongs to childhood. It does not aim to clinically capture 'real life,' or aim for realistic representation as it were, but captures the 'emotional truth' of Barry's stories.

That the line conveys “vulnerability and sensitivity” is also reminiscent of the gesture as a bodily expression of emotion. Consequently, Barry on the one hand theorises around the nature of remembrance in her captions, while also capturing the emotional significance of her own memories in her lines and drawings.

Chapter conclusion

Ultimately and in different ways, *Fun Home* and *One Hundred Demons* exemplify Eakin’s idea of “self as an awareness in process” (How Our Lives, x). They are open-ended narratives that always point to a world beyond and outside the work. They display contradictory movements of attachment and detachment to their material, and present life stories and memories as “material for interpretation,” (157) much like Kuhn’s concept of *memory work* highlights. Bechdel’s story displays an ambiguous relationship to fictions and fictional frames, an uncertainty in the believability of documentation and archives, and a simultaneous desire to draw them, own them, mark them with her body. Autobiography here has a labyrinthine form, spiralling around central events. Barry’s story is both centred on her own process *and* narrative processes in general. Autobiography here has a collective, populist approach – connecting the personal and the political in its very form. I would however argue both to be representative of how the contemporary self can be negotiated in comics form: They make visible the development and instability of the self in process and encourage the reader to question the ways in which we interpret our own memories and narrate own selves.

Conclusion

“[T]he present is increasingly characterized by a coming together of *different but equally ‘present’* temporalities or ‘times’, a temporal unity in disjunction, or a *disjunctive unity of present times*” (Osborne 17).

“But if autobiography is a specific writing strategy, one through which a certain self, a particular identity, is constructed and made public, both writing and identity can equally well be deconstructed: not only through criticism but also through other practices – most notably through stories of different lives, told differently” (Kuhn 149).

In this thesis, I have looked at self-representation and memory in *Fun Home* and *One Hundred Demons* and compared them thematically. I have showed the different, but equally intriguing ways in which Barry and Bechdel stage memory and self in their works to display the complexity of contemporary identity through the comics form. I have borrowed Kuhn’s idea of *memory work*, which she uses to understand her own life story through family photography, as a framework through which I could look at how the attainability of one truth is complicated or even near impossible, and how memories in the two works are treated as “material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined for its meanings and possibilities” (Kuhn 157). The two narratives show identity and self as a dynamic process, and indicate an intersectional approach to issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class. I have looked at how intimately notions of home and self are tied together and investigated the different ways Barry and Bechdel represent home and belonging. I have discussed how the works treat traumatic memory – and how the fragmentary form of comics may be well suited for the narration of traumatic memories, which are often of a very visual and fragmentary nature. I have finally argued that embodiment takes many forms in comics, and that for narratives of queer and racialized bodies, it is impossible to escape the “politics of the body as border/limit” (Smith, “Subjectivity” 10). Van Alphen’s idea of “the movement of the thinking eye” (110) is negotiated in the drawn line on the page, which also connotes subjectivity on the page.

My focus on two contemporary comics has not been to suggest that our preoccupation with self and memory is a new phenomenon. However, in an increasingly visual world, where self-representation through social media is a huge part of people’s lives, it is natural that we

apply new perspectives to what the autobiographical can be and how self and identity are represented to us. One might read Instagram feeds or blogging as different types of contemporary autobiographies and question the extent to which these are telling of new ways to view self and identity. Some of the insights from Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* (2002) may provide a framework for understanding these newer media as autobiographical sites. Smith and Watson write: "The autobiographical is a performative site of self-referentiality where the psychic formations of subjectivity and culturally coded identities intersect and "interface" one another" (11). They identify the autobiographical as a *site*, where personal and public notions of self and identity meet. This framework is applicable to many different narratives of self. In "Coaxing an intimate public: Life narrative in digital storytelling," for instance, Anna Poletti uses the frames provided by Smith and Watson to suggest the social function of digital storytelling. The interactive nature of such storytelling, although visual like comics, operates in different ways. Thus, autobiographical comics is but one such autobiographical site, but can challenge its reader to question and reflect upon *how* we construct and narrate self through its visualisation of the fragmented self – or its representation of memory. Reading the autobiographical in comics can be a good practice in critical readings of self-representation, as it forces us to think differently.

In the chapter "Resilience," Lynda Barry explores one of the main themes of *One Hundred Demons*, and perhaps of much memory work in general; the tension between what is remembered and what is forgotten. "What is forgetting?" (66) she asks. A similar tension seems to be the driving force of interdisciplinary memory studies, where much work has been done to understand the impact of both individual and "collective memory" (Assmann & Czaplicka 1995). We saw in Chapter 1 that Yen Le Esperitu argued that the Filipina/o-American community was "Excluded from the collective memory of who constitutes a "real" American" (419) – and thus a story like *One Hundred Demons* becomes a counternarrative where the memories and experiences of an individual, and her community, complicate the "collective memory" of what American identity means. Here, the memory work writes against or in dialogue with the "collective memory" of a society. Furthermore, Marianne Hirsch speaks of "postmemory," especially in relation to second-generation survivors of the Holocaust. In her work on Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980), the reworking of memories which now only exists in narratives and the archival mirrors the archival tendency of autobiographical comics. I would argue that the comics form has the potential to carry many tensions of memory as identified in memory studies. This is not to say that it is the only form capable of

doing so, but not only is it, as I have argued, inherently visual and fragmented like a memory. As we have seen, it finds interesting ways to both disclose and conceal through its multiple diegetic levels.

The scope of this master's thesis does not do this topic justice, and there are a number of directions I was unable to go. While I decided to cover more than one theme in my discussion, the representation of home or the remembrance of trauma alone could carry a thesis in themselves. The increasing number of works that tackle the autobiographical through the comics form make for an interesting comparison, both of works written and published in English, and works written in other languages from across the globe. Many of the works that have been frequently discussed in relation to *Fun Home* and *One hundred Demons* were originally written in other languages. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000) which handles Satrapi's childhood during and after the Islamic revolution in Iran, for instance, was originally published in French. Norwegian Steffen Kverneland's *En frivillig død* (2018) thematises paternal suicide, bearing obvious thematic resemblances to *Fun Home*. I have already suggested that in my chosen works, the personal and the political/public are intimately interlinked. An interesting approach could be an intercultural analysis of trauma narratives in comics form, where autobiographical comics might be capable of inviting intercultural understanding. One of my main concerns throughout this thesis has been to explore how complex the comics form is, and the ways in which the form opens up for interesting counternarratives. Who knows how many more worlds are left to be discovered through these "portal[s] edged in ink" (*Why Comics*, 141)?

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