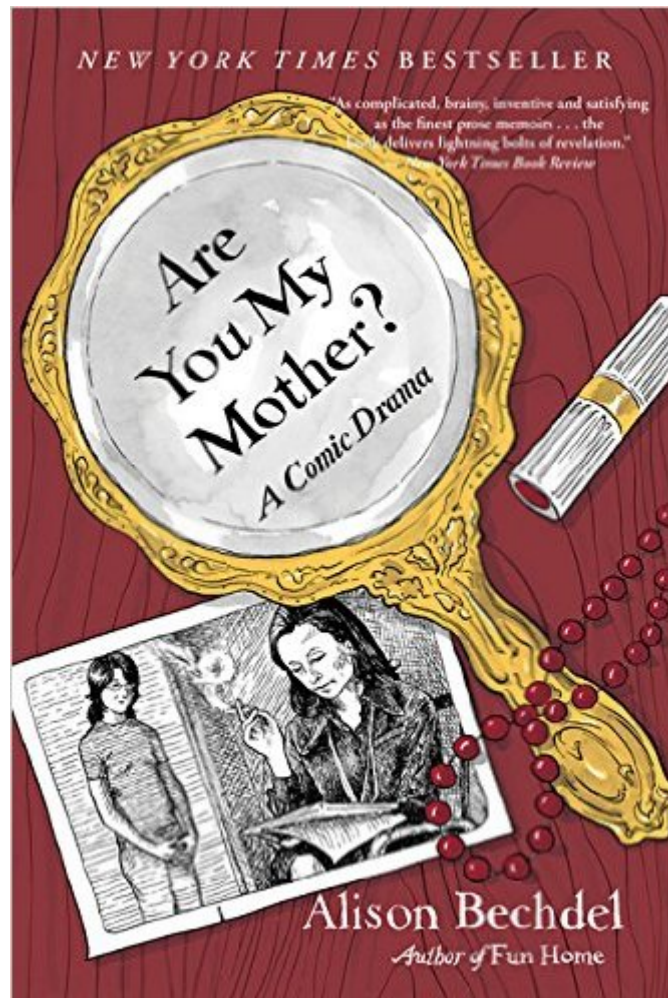


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Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama



Synopsis

From the best-selling author of *Fun Home*, *Time* magazine's No. 1 Book of the Year, a brilliantly told graphic memoir of Alison Bechdel becoming the artist her mother wanted to be. *Alison Bechdel*'s *Fun Home* was a pop culture and literary phenomenon. Now, a second thrilling tale of filial sleuthery, this time about her mother: voracious reader, music lover, passionate amateur actor. Also a woman, unhappily married to a closeted gay man, whose artistic aspirations simmered under the surface of Bechdel's childhood . . . and who stopped touching or kissing her daughter good night, forever, when she was seven. Poignantly, hilariously, Bechdel embarks on a quest for answers concerning the mother-daughter gulf. It's a richly layered search that leads readers from the fascinating life and work of the iconic twentieth-century psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, to one explosively illuminating Dr. Seuss illustration, to Bechdel's own (serially monogamous) adult love life. And, finally, back to Mother's to a truce, fragile and real-time, that will move and astonish all adult children of gifted mothers.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A story about a dead parent has a beginning and an end. A story about a living parent is quite a different thing, especially if you know the parent will be reading the story and you're invested in their response. With all that, I am astonished and in awe of Bechdel's courage - not just to reveal herself so intimately, but to do the same for her relationship with her mother. This is not *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* 2. It's much more complicated and diffuse. Bechdel's story about her father felt complete and symmetrical. This is much more distant and intellectual with the trailing off nature

inherent to a story about two living people who continue to interact. Again and again we return to the image of Bechdel reading in this book . . . reading books about psychoanalysis, reading old correspondence between her parents, even reading transcripts of telephone conversations between her mother and herself (she would type what her mother was saying during the calls). She relates to her mother through reading and this central image tells us more about the brokenness of the relationship than anything else. Her mother, in return, will tell her about stories she reads in the New York Times that make her point instead of saying directly what it is she wants to say. There is little that is tactile or intimate about their relationship. The reader winds up thinking their way through the book in the same way that Bechdel has thought through her relationship with her mother. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel used literature, concepts of sexual identity, and even mythology to explore and illuminate her relationship with her father.

Well this hurts. I wanted to love this book so much. I adore Alison Bechdel. She's incredibly smart, witty, analytical, and heartbreakingly honest--all qualities that have made *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, her first foray into graphic memoir, a modern classic. It's one of my favorite books, not to mention one of my most frequently recommended titles. *Fun Home*, if you'll indulge me for a moment, is the story of Bechdel's relationship with her father and her coming out process. Her father was many things: an English teacher, a funeral home director, an antique collector, a vigilant restorer of their family home, and a closet homosexual. Bechdel strongly suspects that his sudden, mysterious death after walking in front of an oncoming truck was suicide. He could be distant, demanding, temperamental, and cold to his family. Writing *Fun Home* was (I imagine) like a therapy session for Bechdel, who hadn't come to terms with what it was like to grow up in the cold, dark household her father created, and who wanted to understand why her father made the decision to hide his sexuality. It works in large part because there's automatic tension between Bechdel and her father: he being emotionally distant and firmly closeted, she sensitive and determined to live her life out in the open. The emotional journey she undergoes in the process of writing it all out is cathartic--revelatory, poignant, and beautiful. This is not the case with *Are You My Mother?* It has been said that the unexamined life is not worth living.

Well, Bechdel's mother says it--in these pages--after previewing several chapters--of this book--pre-publication: "It's a metabook." It's a book about--among many things--the creation of this book about her mother, and her mother is commenting on the creation of this book about her. How meta is that? A dream sequence opens each section, and is usually revisited with greater insight later in

the chapter. Psychology and psychoanalysis play a massive role here, with Alison's sessions with two different counselors giving us an intimate and ongoing look into her personal struggles. Parallel to this is her self-imposed (and almost obsessive) study of the work of psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. His books, his papers, his biography--all give her another lens to view her conflicted and evolving Self through. Another Bechdel feature is how she refers to and draws on other literature and writers: Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, and a fabulous aha moment with Dr. Seuss. And mom. A gifted actor, a stunted writer of poetry, a woman married for many years to a closeted gay man, and a mother who learned from her own mother that "boys are more important than girls." There are some heartbreaking moments here (I won't share and spoil it). At times mom seems to purposely seek to diminish her daughter by referencing other authors, other memoirists, or other cartoonists, understandably triggering envy. And sometimes she seems to do this unconsciously. Not sure which feels worse when you are on the receiving end. On the other hand, there is absolutely a bond here. The two speak often by phone, visit, do a trip to the city together. So in their own ways, they do keep trying.

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