

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Alison Bechdel reflects on her work and queer life in Minneapolis 01G7AC9AFBY9HC0V8RWK95P6T7

PRESENTER: You may have heard Alison Bechdel's name from the feminist film tool, the Bechdel test, or through her memoir turned Tony-Award-winning Broadway musical called *FunHome*. But, even before those achievements, Bechdel wove herself into the fabric of lesbian cultural identity when she started publishing her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* in Minneapolis back in 1983. And the strip had gained a worldwide cult following for its game-changing portrayal of American queer life. It went on hiatus in 2008, but it's still getting attention to this day.

Alison Bechdel is a MacArthur Genius Award recipient, the author of a *New York Times* best-selling graphic memoir, and a Tony Award winner. OK. Wow. She sat down with *Minnesota Now* producer Ellen Finn to look back on the roots of her work.

ELLEN FINN: Alison, I am so excited to talk to you.

ALISON Oh, thank you.

BECHDEL:

ELLEN FINN: Let me just say, I was a teenager growing up in northern California when I first read the comic *Dykes to Watch Out For*. I was 17. I was barely out of the closet, and the strip portrayed Minneapolis as some sort of lesbian utopia.

So, when I moved here a few years ago, I was surprised to see the tight-knit queer community that you depicted was very real.

ALISON Oh, cool. So it's still happening? I haven't been back in a while.

BECHDEL:

ELLEN FINN: Yeah. How did you come up with the name *Dykes to Watch Out For*?

ALISON Oh, gosh, that was something I didn't even think about. It just came out of my head one day, back in the very early '80s, when I was drawing these silly pictures of lesbians to amuse my friends. I just started giving them numbers, like as if I had a whole series of them. And then I, in fact, created a whole series.

BECHDEL:

But that title just came out of nowhere. And it was funny to me because it had a double meaning. Like, keep your eye out because these people are exciting, but also they might be dangerous, too.

ELLEN FINN: (LAUGHS) For folks who don't know, give a little synopsis of the strip's premise and characters.

ALISON *Dykes to Watch Out For* was a sort of soap opera kind of strip in gay and lesbian newspapers, and it centered around a women's bookstore where many of the characters worked. And we followed their lives and loves. But, at the same time, we followed current events as they were unfolding and the characters were responding to things going on in the news and politics.

BECHDEL:

ELLEN FINN: Can you tell me more about how, specifically, the Twin Cities colored the strip?

ALISON The big thing was Amazon Bookstore. You know, it's kind of hard to talk about Amazon Bookstore anymore because of how completely the online Amazon wiped it off the map along with countless other independent bookstores across the country, but long before the giant internet monopoly named for the biggest river in the world there was Amazon Bookstore, named for the mythological tribe of women warriors. And it was on Loring Park in [? Minneapolis. ?] It was the gravitational hub of this subculture, of this gay and lesbian community that I was discovering.

BECHDEL:

Authors would come through town and read. We were all very engaged with the writers and poets who were speaking there. There was the bulletin board, which did all the stuff we now do online-- you know, roommate and housing notices and announcements for political meetings and actions, all kinds of clubs and organizations.

There were the books themselves, of course, and the very knowledgeable and compassionate staff who were often a literal lifeline for people. So I found much of my real life revolving around this great bookstore, so I put that into my comic strip. I created a fictional bookstore called Madwimmin Books, and that's where a lot of the stuff that happens in the comic strip world originates.

ELLEN FINN: Hmm. It sounds like so much of the city informed the strip. I'm curious, what role did you want the strip to play in the city? Were you thinking about that at the time?

ALISON BECHDEL: No, I was not thinking that at all. It was a really different world then, and it's hard to explain it to younger people now because there just was-- we weren't part of the mainstream. We were really, really sidelined, and that was fine with us at that time. I mean, we were starting to think about wanting more access and wanting people to see us, wanting to have more visibility. But, for the time being, we were, like, building up our strength in this parallel subculture.

And, to me, that was all that my comic strip was about. It was like I was showing the lives of people like me and my friends to people like me and my friends. It never occurred to me that it would go further than that. Maybe I had a dim little hope of that, but it was not part of my agenda. I just wanted to help people like me to see themselves as whole human beings, citizens, members of the community.

ELLEN FINN: I'm curious, *Dykes to Watch Out For* explores lesbian humanity at a time when mainstream images of queer women were one-dimensional at best and hateful at worst. Your strip made life visible and especially highlighted lesbians at the forefront of political movements, but also trying to start a family, navigate a career, and love. What role did you want your strip to play?

ALISON BECHDEL: Well, when I started doing this, people were openly hostile toward gay men and lesbians. And not just hostile, but even worse than that in some ways was the mockery and humiliation. Like, it was just people making fun of us-- or lesbians especially were just thought to be these ridiculous figures, these crazy old spinsters or I don't even know what.

But I felt really indignant about that. I was just as much a regular person as anyone, and I felt like I wanted to show that in my work. Like, me and my friends, we're deeply humane people actively engaged in changing the world, and I just wanted to create a record of that. Can I tell you a little side story?

ELLEN FINN: Please.

ALISON BECHDEL: When I moved to Minneapolis in 1986, I had been drawing *Dykes to Watch Out For* for a couple of years, but it didn't have those regular characters. It just had-- like, I would invent new characters for each episode because I wanted to have regular characters, but I didn't feel like I had the skill to do that, either to draw them recognizably from panel to panel and episode to episode or to create a really rich, believable, dense world for the characters.

But it was soon after I moved to Minneapolis that I felt ready to take that plunge, and I think it was directly a result of living in that incredibly rich, thriving subculture where there was so much going on, so much support for my crazy alternative lifestyle. I started writing about a set of characters. I started with Mo, who was this young woman who kind of looked like me; her best friend, who was like the sort of Don Juan character of the strip; their friends, the couple, Clarice and Toni. And then this whole little community of people started forming a constellation, and I just kept writing about them for many years.

ELLEN FINN: Wow. What do you make of people who say your characters are maybe not only the first lesbians that they met in their life, but their role models?

ALISON BECHDEL: (LAUGHS) I smile. I always was a little disturbed by that. Like, wow, that's a lot of responsibility, so I just tried not to think about that. But, it would-- definitely, I would hear from people who claimed that was true, and certainly people in small towns. This was way before we had gay and lesbian characters on TV, so it was just helpful, I think, for us to see a reflection of the kind of lives we were all leading.

ELLEN FINN: Yeah. It's pretty clear from your graphic memoir, *Fun Home*, and even just the bold title of your strip-- you know, *Dykes to Watch Out For*-- that you've been out as a lesbian from a young age and didn't shy away from the complexity and intimacy of your gay identity in your work. I'm just curious, do you have any advice for people who are struggling to be out these days?

ALISON BECHDEL: Honestly, Ellen, I don't know what to tell anyone. I feel like the world is really changing rapidly, and I don't know what's really happening. You know, it seems like we're very much on the brink of possibly moving backwards in many bad ways.

I've always felt like coming out is important, and that's what changes people's minds and makes the world safe for everyone. But I'm not making any pronouncements, right now.

ELLEN FINN: Do you think you'll ever return to those characters, Mo and the crew?

ALISON BECHDEL: You know, I am returning to them in a funny way. Right now, I'm working on another project where-- not a memoir, but a sort of auto-fictional story about my life where those characters are my actual friends.

[LAUGHTER]

It's funny because, when I first created those characters, in a way, I was making them just for myself. Just, they were my imaginary friends, the community I wished that I had. And so I'm kind of resurrecting them now as my friends in late middle age. They're all much older now, of course.

ELLEN FINN: That's fantastic. I can't wait to see that. Well, thanks so much for the work that you've done. It really has changed my and many people I know lives. So thank you so much, Alison.

ALISON BECHDEL: Thank you, Ellen. Lovely to talk with you.

PRESENTER: That was cartoonist Alison Bechdel speaking with our producer Ellen Finn.