

Sing Lesbian Cat, Fly Lesbian Seagul

An Interview With Alison Bechdel

By Wesley Joost

Guardian Staff Writer

If you've been a regular reader of "Dykes To Watch Out For" you're already hooked on the intricate weavings in the stormy lives of Bechdel's dynamic characters: "Mo, Our Hapless Heroine -- Jezanna The Type-A Boss Of Madwimmin Books -

Sparrow, Battered Women's Shelter Worker, Inner-Growth Addict -- Ginger Doctoral Candidate, And Procrastinatrix Extraordinaire -- Clarice, Mo's first ex-lover, Workaholic Attorney For The Environmental Justice Fund . . ."

Lois, Thea, Toni, Rafael, June, Malika, Ellen and Harriet.

All of these people comprise Bechdel's politically over-active, vegan alternative, Queer cultural, Mo-Centric Universe. To get the low down on what's happening with these off-Melrose Place women you should look for the pink triangle on an independent bookstore near you (not Bunn's & Noodle) and pick up one or all of the many Dykes to Watch Out For book collections. Her latest episodes can be found in the "Bay Times" twice a month so don't miss it, because "Soap Opera Digest" will not fill you in.

GM: Could you give us a summary of what's happened in your strip in the past year?

AB: The most interesting thing to me is the bad character I've introduced -- Sydney, the evil women's studies professor. I was getting tired of writing about such paragons of virtue all the time. Sydney's really insufferable, but I love her because she brings a whole new level to the strip. I was getting the feeling that people might be taking my cartoons too seriously. When I got a one-paragraph review in the Lambda Book Report which managed to use the phrase "politically correct" three times, I knew I had to do something. So I'm kind of using Sydney and her over-it-all postmodern attitude to reframe the strip, to take a little wider and more ironic perspective on things. And Mo, my main character, has this combination feud/flirta-

tion going with her, which is kind of fun.

GM: Do you have to chart the plot or do you improvise it?

Bechdel: I have a meticulous, complicated chart that's constantly under construction. I think it's actually similar to the system real soap opera writers use. It's a big grid with the characters running down the left hand column and the episode numbers



running across the top. Now I have it on my computer, and I can keep track of what's already happened in one color, and what I think is going to happen in another color.

GM: In your strip some characters adopted a baby. Is that a major trend among lesbians in real life?

AB: Well, lesbians having babies is a major trend. And because the *birth mother is the only one legally recognized as a parent*, the non-biological parent has to go through an official adoption process in order to have a legal relationship to the kid. So lots of women are pursuing these second parent adoptions. Until recently they were pretty routinely denied, but now more and more of them are successful. I'm not particu-

"I want men to read my strip and identify with Mo the same way women and people of color make a leap of identity to watch a Woody Allen movie or read Garfield, you know?"

larly into the marriage and kids scene personally, but I think the legal issues they bring up are really important. So I use the lesbian family in my strip to discuss that stuff. Clarice, the non-biological mom in the strip, is torn between wanting legal status in regard to her son, and hating to involve the state in her life

in this intimate way.

GM: Are you making a living from your strip?

AB: Yeah, fancy that. For eight years now. But I'm a pretty big scammer. I sell t-shirts with my characters on them and I do a calendar every year and I schlep around the country doing a slideshow and my books get published regularly. It was after I had a couple books published that the royalties added up to enough to supplement my syndication income without a second job. All together, my six books and my calendars have sold about 150,000 copies. That might sound impressive, but it's been



over a period of ten years. I have an incredibly loyal bunch of fans, and it's thanks to them that I've been able to keep doing this.

GM: Do you think there's any chance you might be nationally syndicated some day?

AB: Not in my lifetime. Actually, I got a call from Universal Press Syndicate a couple of years ago. They were thinking of developing a gay and lesbian strip for the daily papers and wanted to see if I want-

scene just bugs me so much. I don't want to be yet another commodity on network TV. I like being a pervert in the twilight.

GM: Your strips are always involving current political events; are you kind of the lesbian Doonesbury?

Bechdel: I certainly admire how Garry Trudeau does that--he's brilliant at it. I'm trying to do a little bit of his schtick, interweaving my characters' personal lives with things that are going on in the larger world.

GM: To what extent are you ambiguous about the political correctness of some of your characters? It seems like they're almost parodying themselves with their intensity.

AB: That's such a complicated question. The whole phrase "politically correct" sends me into paroxysms. It's been twisted around so many times I don't even know what it means. It used to be a joke and I think it was a useful joke, you know pointing out just what you said, how . . . oh, I don't know, my characters are politically

correct. What can I say. It's hard for me to think clearly about this because I think the principles behind "political correctness" are very worthy. To be kind to people -- that's the basic concept. You know? Get over it.

GM: There was an episode in Dykes To Watch Out For where it was awkward to have a male to female transsexual at an "All Women" poetry reading. Is it really that awkward in real life? Do you see transsexuals as men in sheep's clothing?

AB: You know, I used to. But this whole transgender movement has really shaken up some of my previous conceptions. I'm not exactly the most informed person on this topic -- I've gotten most of what I know from reading. One of the key concepts that you have to let go of in order to understand transgender is that orientation and gender are not connected in any way. You can be a biological female who thinks of herself as a male and is attracted to men, you know? Any combo is possible. I find queer culture increasingly difficult to keep up with. It's always

Alison Bechdel cartoonist

ed to submit some ideas. That was my chance at mainstreamdom but I didn't take them up on it, because there just seems to be too many limitations in doing something for that broad of an audience.

GM: But there's so many Gays in mainstream media now.

AB: Oh, god. That whole TV