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"The Tricky Reverse Narration That Impels Our Entwined Stories":

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Queer Temporalities

In 2006, longtime lesbian cartoonist Alison Bechdel released her graphic memoir, *Fun Home*. The nonfiction text chronicles her experiences growing up in rural Pennsylvania, her gradual awareness about her homosexuality, and her relationship with her siblings and parents, especially her enigmatic father.

Given this subject matter, *Fun Home* has a strong appeal to adolescent readers. Even though the graphic memoir was not written with this audience in mind, it addresses an array of issues that young people face. As one commentator said of the narrative, *Fun Home* "is similar to several young adult literature novels because the navigation through different spheres of identity and the ultimate end goal of claiming one's autonomy are quintessential themes" ("Alison Bechdel," 2014, para. 6).

In the years since its release, *Fun Home* has become popular with teens in general and queer and questioning youth in particular. While the graphic memoir has not yet been incorporated into the curriculum of many public high schools, it has been chosen as the common reading for first-year students at a variety of colleges and universities. At institutions such the College of Charleston and, most recently, Duke University, the book has been seen as relevant for young people who are in their late teens. A variety of cultural commentators have agreed. Susan E. Kirtley (2012), in a book exploring gender in American comics, identified Bechdel's book as one of the most poignant portraits of girlhood to date (p. 11). Likewise, Jessica Grose (2014), in an article that appeared in *Elle* magazine, included *Fun Home* on her list of the top-ten books "about teenage girls and growing up" (para. 3). And Emily Temple (2015), in an essay that was posted on the popular media commentary site *Flavorwire*, deemed *Fun Home* among "the best coming of age books for girls" (para. 1).

Analogous assessments about Bechdel's text have been made by industry insiders. In 2014, *Booklist* codified *Fun Home*'s status as a popular book among YA audiences when it included the graphic memoir in its compendium of the Best Young Adult Books released since 2000 (Olson, 2014, p. 98). In November 2015, the National Council of Teachers of English gave further credence to this designation when it included Bechdel as one of the featured authors at its annual convention (p. 48). Taken collectively, these examples affirm that *Fun Home* not only could, but should, be approached as a text for adolescent readers rather than simply a queer text composed for adult audiences.

Given the way in which *Fun Home* spotlights growing up and coming of age, it is not surprising that the graphic memoir offers a multifaceted meditation on the passage of time. In recounting the story of her "family tragicomic," as she calls it, Bechdel features an array of events over the course of her life and in the lives of her mother and father. These include her parents' courtship and the early years of their marriage; the first time that she got her menstrual period;

her experience of coming out to her family in college; and—in the mystery that forms the heart of the book—her father's elusive sexuality and his death by possible suicide.

That said, *Fun Home* does not address these events in a chronological or linear way. As Rob Spillman (2014) has commented, "[T]he memoir loops and spirals through time" (para. 2). The narrative opens with Alison as an elementary-aged youngster playing a game of "airplane" with her father on the floor of the living room (Bechdel, 2006, p. 3). While the chapter goes on to provide an overview of her father's life—his passion for restoring old homes, his dictatorial parenting style, and his complicated and deeply closeted sexuality—the bulk of the chapter presents Alison as a prepubescent girl. We get a summary of Bruce Bechdel's life, but the visual representation of Alison throughout these pages suggests that she does not age during this discussion. Instead, based on physical indicators such as her height, weight, and facial structure, she remains frozen in time.

The second chapter of *Fun Home*, however, does not pick up chronologically where the opening one leaves off. Instead, it leaps ahead roughly a decade to the death of Alison's father when she was 19 years old (Bechdel, 2006, p. 27). This temporal marker, though, is far from fixed. Within the span not simply of a few pages but of a few panels, Alison takes the reader on an adventure through time. First, she scrolls back to her father's boyhood in Pennsylvania during the late 1930s (p. 30), and then she jumps ahead to his service in the Army amidst the Vietnam War (p. 32). The chapter closes at a point even further ahead in time than when it began, with the cartoonist as an adult visiting her father's grave years after his death (p. 53).

All of the remaining chapters of *Fun Home* operate along analogous lines of temporal unpredictability. Both between sections, and frequently within them, the text jumps around in time. Many of the titles that Bechdel chose for her chapters announce, or at least signal, these shifts. Chapter One is called "Old Father, Old Artificer," Chapter Four is titled "In the Shadow of Young Girls," and Chapter Five is dubbed "The Canary-Colored Caravan of Death." While most of these monikers are taken from her father's favorite books, they also signal her narrative's interest in exploring the meaning and significance of temporality. Indeed, some of the ontological questions around which *Fun Home* pivots include the following: *How does the past influence the present? In order to make sense of a current situation, must we always examine the events that preceded it? Is it possible for the present to be a clarifying lens on the past, rather than the other way around, as is commonly assumed?*

This essay makes the case that the treatment of time in *Fun Home* is far from an incidental or even idiosyncratic facet of the text; instead, it embodies an important and underexplored method for viewing, discussing, and understanding the graphic memoir. The construction of chronology in the 2006 narrative places it in dialogue with what has come to be known as queer temporalities.[1] Since LGBTQ relationships have historically existed outside of the typical progression narrative embodied in paradigmatic examples of heterosexual romance—first courtship, then marriage, then procreation—they can be connected with nonlinearity. For example, the still-popular slogan "I Can't Even Think Straight!" that adorned t-shirts in the LGBTQ community throughout the 1990s compels us to contemplate the ways in which nonlinear storytelling is a queer act—and *vice versa*.

By resisting or even rejecting conventional chronology, time itself in *Fun Home* can be seen as queered.

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* offers an extended meditation on queer temporalities. In a powerful indication both of how the cartoonist's nonheteronormative identity is imbricated with that of her father and of the centrality that time plays in this relationship, Bechdel closes the book with an observation about "the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 232.2). By resisting or even rejecting conventional chronology, time itself in *Fun Home* can be seen as queered. Understanding how Bechdel's graphic memoir engages with queer temporalities complicates the text's representation of coming of age as well as coming out.

At the same time, these details yield new critical insights about and, by extension, new pedagogical approaches to a narrative that young adults are reading, both inside and outside of classroom settings. Exploring how *Fun Home* offers an alternative presentation of chronology and teleology also places the book in

dialogue with contemporaneous LGBTQ events, such as the It Gets Better Project and the recent Supreme Court ruling legalizing same-sex marriage. Finally, but far from insignificantly, mapping the way in which queer temporalities operate in *Fun Home* offers a useful demonstration for how teachers can bridge the gap between seemingly abstract concepts in queer theory and concrete discussions in their own classroom practices.

Time/Out: Heteronormativity, Chrononormativity, and Queer Temporalities

As Sam McBean (2013) has rightly noted, "Temporality and the affective register of historical inquiry have been important to queer theory from the start" (p. 124). Back in 1993, for example, Judith Butler called attention to the "temporality of the term" queer in her book *Bodies That Matter* (p. 223). In a discussion about how the meaning of this word has shifted over the decades, she pointed out that "queer" is by no means a temporally stable concept. Instead, it is a "point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings" (Butler, 1993, p. 228). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993), in her influential study *Tendencies* released the same year, likewise discussed queer in relation to temporality. She called the concept "immemorial current . . . relational and strange" (Sedgwick, 1993, p. xii). To be "immemorial" is to defy a point of origin and be beyond memory. In this way, to be queer was, for Sedgwick, to be both figuratively and literally "out of time" (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 9).

For generations, gay men and lesbians were legally forbidden from marrying, biologically unable to procreate on their own, and bureaucratically prevented from adopting. Thus, queer individuals existed not merely outside of heteronormativity but outside of the chrononormativity that arose from it.

While queer theory has always had a strong connection to temporality, the opening decade of the new millennium saw the field take what Elizabeth Freeman (2007) has rightly called a "turn toward time" (p. 117). An array of books—ranging from Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004), Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), and Carla Freccero's *Queer/Early/Modern* (2006) to Heather Love's *Feeling Backward* (2007), José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), and Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010)—examined not simply how queer might be understood in relation to time, but the relationship that queer itself has to temporality.

As these studies all pointed out, conceptions of time in Western culture have long been regarded as both linear and teleological. The chronology of an individual's life is expected to follow a certain ineluctable order, namely "the conventional forward-moving narratives of birth, marriage, reproduction and death" (Halberstam, 2003, p. 314). This pathway, however, is predicated on heterocentric understandings of the human life cycle. As Jodie Taylor (2010) explains, "Dominant heteronormative temporalities operate under the assumption that a life course is (or should respectably be) conducted in a linear, sequential progression—that is, birth, childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, marriage, reproduction, child rearing, retirement, old age, death and kinship inheritance" (p. 894). Elizabeth Freeman (2010) has called this prevailing conception of time "chrononormativity" (p. 3). As she discusses, this concept signals "a mode of implantation through which institutional forces"—namely, the societal expectation that the proper, appropriate, and even natural life trajectory is to marry and have children—"come to seem like somatic facts" (Freeman, 2010, p. 3).

The LGBTQ community has historically been excluded from following this temporal pathway. For generations, gay men and lesbians were legally forbidden from marrying, biologically unable to procreate on their own, and bureaucratically prevented from adopting. Thus, queer individuals existed not merely outside of heteronormativity but outside of the chrononormativity that arose from it. In the years before events such as the Supreme Court ruling legalizing same-sex marriage, their lives did not—and for reasons that emanated from sources both *de facto* and

de jure could not—adhere to the expected temporal order.

Queer temporalities recognize the unique relationship that LGBTQ individuals have with time, as nonlinear, nonteleogical, and even asynchronous. "Queer time," Halberstam (2005) asserts, is "about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing" (p. 2). It signifies an "existence outside of the heterocentric chrononormative time" (Mulvaney, 2013, p. 159). In the words of Freeman, queer temporalities represent "forms of interruption," as well as "points of resistance to this temporal order, that, in turn, propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others" (2010, p. xxii). In this way, queer temporalities embody "a way of being in the world and a critique of the careful social scripts that usher even the most queer among us through major markers of individual development and into normativity" (Halberstam, 2007, p. 182).

Asynchronicity, Nonlinearity, and Reverse Chronology in *Fun Home*

In *Fun Home*, Bruce Bechdel ostensibly conforms both to heteronormativity and to the chrononormativity with which it is associated. On the surface, the life of the cartoonist's father has followed the expected temporal progression: he grew up, got married, and had children. Indeed, as Bechdel remarks in the opening chapter about her dad, "He appeared to be an ideal husband and father" (2006, p. 17.1).

As readers quickly learn, however, both the trajectory of Bruce Bechdel's life and his relationship with temporality is neither this simplistic nor this straightforward. Far from experiencing time in a linear and teleological manner, Bruce's story is marked by twists, turns, loops, interruptions, stoppages, double-backs, and delays. First and foremost, his passion for architecture in general and for restoring old homes in particular connects him with a different temporal era. As Bechdel relays, "My father liked to imagine himself as a nineteenth-century aristocrat overseeing his estate from behind the leather-topped mahogany and brass Second-Empire desk" (2006, p. 60.1).

At repeated points throughout the graphic memoir, Bechdel calls attention to the fact that while she and the rest of her family lived in the contemporaneous moment of the Vietnam War era—with its peace signs, bell bottoms, and bean bag chairs—her father preferred to inhabit a different and far earlier period. In the opening chapter, Bechdel recounts how the gothic style home in which she grew up was built in 1867 (2006, p. 8.1) and how, over the course of the next 18 years, her father "restore[d] the house to its original condition, and then some" (p. 9.3). In many ways, in fact, he tried to transport himself back to this era. Using external elements like "the pattern for the original bargeboard" (p. 9.3) and interior décor such as "astral lamps and girandoles and Hepplewhite suite chairs" (p. 14.2), he created flawless "period rooms" (p. 17.4). His daughter was not alone in noticing this feature. As Roy, one of her childhood babysitters, remarked upon visiting, "Man, being in this room is like going back in time" (p. 65.2).

Far from experiencing time in a linear and teleological manner, Bruce's [Bechdel's father's] story is marked by twists, turns, loops, interruptions, stoppages, double-backs, and delays.

The images that accompany these passages accentuate both the visual splendor of Bruce's completed restorations and the fact that all of them draw on architectural styles from bygone eras. In one panel, for example, Alison and her brother are depicted having a quintessential childhood experience—they are watching Bert and Ernie on *Sesame Street*—but they are doing so from a highly unusual locale: a fainting couch (Bechdel, 2006, p. 14.2). On several additional pages, Alison is shown engaging in another common activity for young people—cleaning sections of the house as part of her weekly chores. But, once again, the images make clear that these tasks are anything but ordinary. In one scene, Alison is dusting the baroque spindles of a wooden side chair (p. 15.4). In another, she is polishing a table that holds an ornamental set of crystal decanters (p. 11.5). In a third instance, she is washing the glass orbs of an ornate chandelier (p. 13.2). Given the disjunction between the era in which she and her family reside and the one embodied by their home, she assures readers, "We really did live in those period rooms" (p. 17.4).

When Bruce died, he was memorialized in a way that reflected his strong connection with the past. "His headstone," Bechdel tells us, "is an obelisk, a striking anachronism among the ungainly granite slabs in the new end of the cemetery" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 29.2). Obelisks are more commonly associated with past historical eras—ancient Egypt and classical Greece—than with the current time period. Of course, wherever and whenever these objects are found, they are also exceedingly phallic. It is difficult to imagine that this Freudian implication eluded Bechdel's father, especially given his training, interest, and talent for decoding symbolism. Regardless, the suggestive nature of obelisks is certainly not lost on the cartoonist herself. As Bechdel says about this object in an exposition box embedded within this same panel, "It was also a shape that he was unabashedly fixated on" (p. 29.2). Her choice of the Freudian-infused verb "fixated," combined with the placement of this discussion soon after she has disclosed his closeted same-sex activities, causes this statement to nod in the direction of Bruce's queer nature.

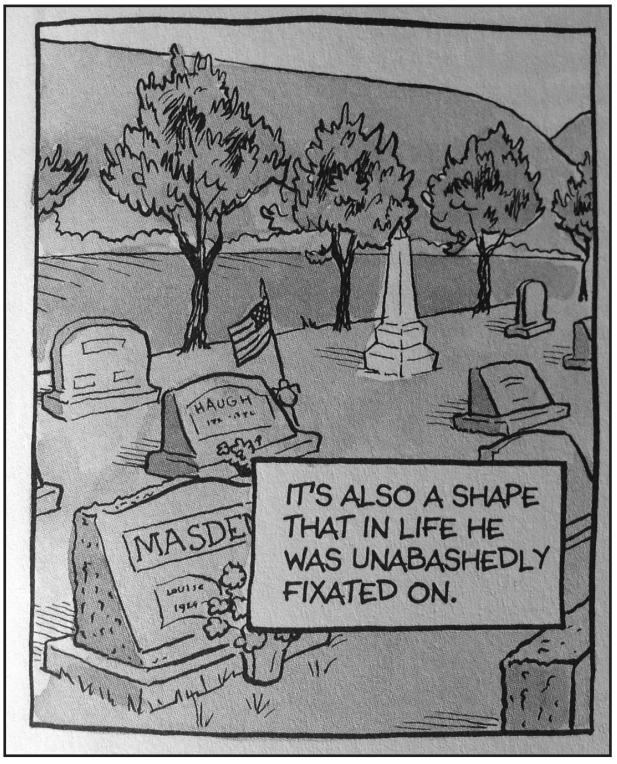

Figure 1. Bechdel explores multiple levels of symbolism in her father's choice of grave marker.

The drawing that accompanies these comments likewise calls attention to her father as fascinated with an item that is equal parts eccentric and phallic. The image shows the rural Pennsylvania cemetery where her father is buried. Whereas all of the grave markers in the foreground of the image are traditional headstones, the obelisk that denotes her father's burial site stands out prominently in the middle ground of the composition. To further accentuate its difference, the obelisk is bright white in color, while all of the other objects—from the grass and trees to the headstones and sky—are presented in grey wash. Finally, given the grave marker's long shaft and tapered tip, the obelisk can be described as being stiff, rigid, and erect in more ways than one (see Fig. 1).

Both the grave marker for Alison's father and his death reflect the asynchronous manner in which he lived. "It's true that he didn't kill himself until I was nearly twenty," Bechdel writes (2006, p. 23.1), "but his absence resonated retroactively, echoing back through all the time I knew him" (p. 23.2). Lest the significance of this observation be overlooked, she repeats it a few panels later: "He really was there all those years, a flesh-and-blood presence. . . . But I ached as if he were already gone" (p. 23.3, 23.5). The drawings that are paired with these remarks show an elementary-aged Alison and her father engaging in a physically intimate task—he is shirtless on a warm summer's day, and she is sitting in his lap learning how to drive the riding lawnmower. Through both the words and the images, Bechdel reveals a compelling contradiction about her father's life and especially about his connection with temporality. Although Bruce existed in time, he was also, paradoxically, outside of it; he was a Victorian in the Vietnam era, and he was emotionally and psychologically absent decades before he was physically gone.

Bruce Bechdel's passion for Victorian architecture, however, is not the only feature that skews his relationship with temporality. An even more powerful factor is his queer gender identity and nonheteronormative sexuality. In a rhetorical question that appears in the opening chapter and that also forms the central preoccupation of the graphic memoir, Bechdel asks, "Would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?" (2006, p. 17.1). The drawing that she couples with this text box makes the question even more jarring. The image shows the entire Bechdel

family sitting together in a pew at church. While everyone else looks bored, restless, or unhappy as the service begins, Bruce is shown slyly eying the altar boys as they walk down the aisle. This disclosure interrupts the simple linear narrative that Bechdel has had about her family. Far from following the pattern mapped out by chrononormativity, Bruce can more accurately be seen through the lens of queer temporalities. When the cartoonist's mother reveals that her father has had sexual liaisons with other men—even during their marriage—the news wholly upends Bechdel's understanding of past chronology and thus her position in present time. As Bechdel relays to readers, "This abrupt and wholesale revision of my history—a history, which, I might add, had already been revised once in the preceding months—left me stupefied" (2006, p. 79.3; see Fig. 2).

The image that appears below these lines reinforces this sense that time has been interrupted, fractured, and even broken. The illustration offers a bird's eye view of Alison's dorm room. Significantly, she is not shown talking on the phone with her mother matter-of-factly about this issue; rather, in an outward physical detail that provides a powerful indicator of her inner psychological state, she is depicted lying on the floor in the fetal position. Her eyes are open wide in amazement as she utters a remark that causes their conversation to linger on and thus elongate the precise moment when her mother reveals the shocking news: "Roy, our **baby-sitter?!**" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 79.3; bold in original). Moreover, the cord that connects the telephone's receiver to its base out of the frame resembles an umbilical cord. As a result, the college-aged Alison is likened to a fetus, or at least a baby. As such, the cartoonist in this scene is simultaneously presented as being in her twenties and also not yet born. This juxtaposition of young adulthood and infancy (or, more accurately, gestation) constitutes another instance of queer temporality embedded within this scene.

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This layering or doubling can be seen as queering the presentation of queer temporality itself. The news that her father had affairs with young men interrupts the linear narrative that Bechdel has had about her family, while it also disrupts her own sense of having a stable and secure

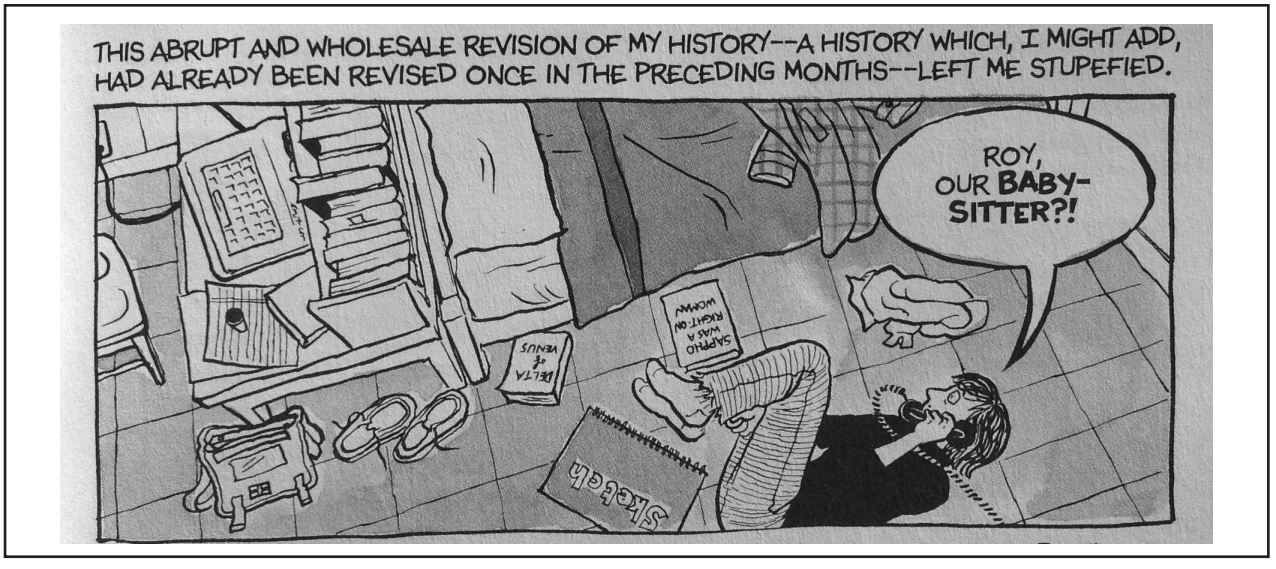

Figure 2. Bechdel's shock at the news about her father's sexuality is conveyed both through her words and through her body language.

chronological age. In a possible manifestation of the cartoonist's fears that if her father had been willing or able to live his life as a gay man, she would likely not exist, Bechdel ceases to be an adult and becomes a gestating fetus when her mother reveals his long history of same-sex affairs over the phone. Or, alternatively and even more queerly, this information causes Bechdel to become an adult-fetus or fetus-adult, her advanced age indicating that she had never been born.

This revelation about her father's closeted queerness instantly and irrevocably alters the temporal sequencing of Bruce Bechdel's life, as well as the chronology of the cartoonist's family and her childhood. It causes Alison to transport herself back in time, both materially and imaginatively. Immediately after the cartoonist learns about her dad's hidden history of same-sex affairs, she looks at the letters that he has written to her at college, especially the ones that he penned in response to her coming out as a lesbian, in a new way. Formerly enigmatic passages like, "There's been a few times I thought I might have preferred to take a stand. But I never really considered it when I was young. In fact, I don't htink [sic] I ever considered it till I was over thirty. let's [sic] face it things do look different then. At forty-three I find it hard to see advantages if I had done so when I was young" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 211.5) are now easily decoded as commentary on Bruce's own homosexuality.

Knowledge about her father's gay history also prompts Alison to return to a variety of family events and childhood experiences, not simply imaginatively revisiting them but even temporally re-experiencing them in light of this new information. For example, the time in July 1974 when Alison and her two brothers spent a long weekend with family friends so that their mother could finish her master's thesis takes on a whole new significance. "It never occurred to me to wonder what my father had been up to during our absence," she muses (Bechdel, 2006, p. 161.1), "but as it happened he'd been on a spree of his own" (p. 161.1). As she goes on to relay, one evening over this weekend, her father drove to the neighboring valley and picked up 17-year-old Mark Douglas Walsh. They rode around together for several hours, drinking beer and ostensibly looking for his older brother, Dave. After dropping Walsh back home, "Dave recognized the car and called the cops" (p. 161.4). Bruce was arrested for "furnishing a malt beverage to a minor" (p. 175.1), but as the exposition box in the following panel reveals, "The real accusation dared not speak its name" (p. 175.2). Adding yet another vector of time to this incident, as the cartoonist relays to readers, "I know this because I looked it up in the police report twenty-seven years later" (p. 161.2). All of the panels on this page depict the event as the police record documented it: the top panel shows her father picking up Mark in the family's wood-paneled station wagon, while the bottom panel depicts Dave peering out of an upstairs window to see Bruce dropping off his younger brother (p. 161.1; 161.4). Sandwiched between these images is Alison's drawing of the police report itself (p. 161.2). Moreover, this large panel occupies the spatial center of the page and thus, one might say, serves as its focal point (see Fig. 3).

In this way, the revelation about her father's homosexuality alters time in multifaceted and multi-

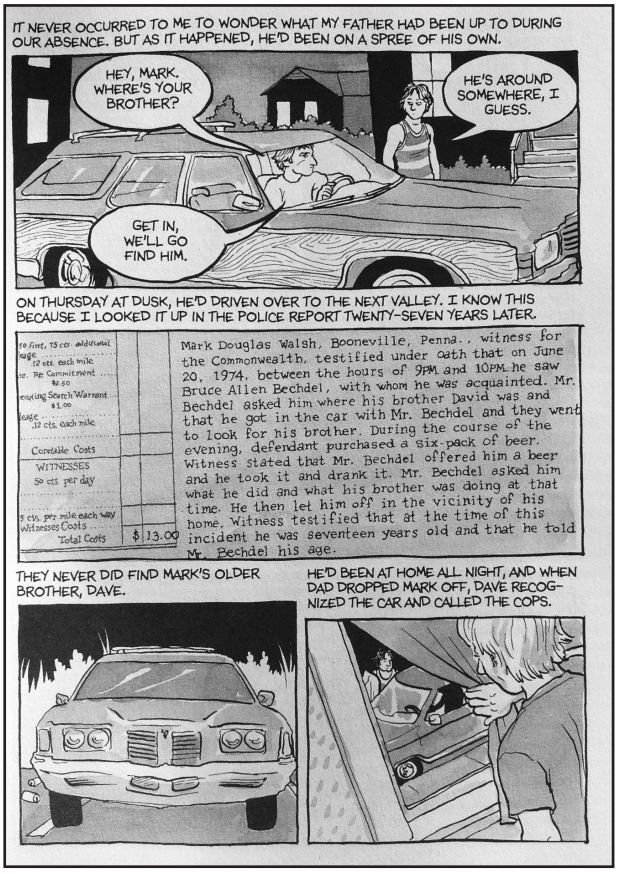

Figure 3. The juxtaposition of Bechdel's renderings of a long-ago incident involving her father demonstrates her new perspective on past events.

valent ways, transforming the formerly firm, steady, and predictable chrononormativity into unstable, even uneasy, queer temporality. The news disrupts Bruce's participation in the temporal progression from courtship to marriage to reproduction. Additionally, it interrupts the timeline formed by Alison's childhood memories of various family experiences. Finally, and even more significantly, it propels the present time back into the past, with events such as her decision to look up the police record about her father's arrest nearly three decades after it occurred. Indeed, in a passage that reveals how time has looped, twisted, and turned back on itself in the wake of knowledge about her father's homosexuality, she remarks about his apparent suicide, "Dad's death was not a new catastrophe but an old one that had been unfolding very slowly for a long time" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 83.4).

Numerous visual panels, written passages, and narrative sequences throughout *Fun Home* continue in this vein. These elements explore how the revelation about her father's queerness has queered time itself. It has caused a formerly linear timeline to become circuitous, it has shifted events that had previously seemed synchronous to emerge as asynchronous, and it has caused events that had been regarded as contemporaneous to become extemporaneous—to exist not within time, but outside of it, separate from it. One of the most poignant instances of queer temporalities in the graphic memoir is, perhaps not coincidentally, the visual centerpiece of the text itself: the semi-nude photograph of Roy that her father took while they were away on vacation to the Jersey shore (Bechdel, 2006, pp. 100–101; see Fig. 4).

As Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (2006) have written, size routinely conveys importance in book illustrations. As they assert, "We assume that a character depicted as large has more significance (and maybe more power) than the character who is small and crammed in the corner of a page" (p. 83). While they are referencing picturebooks, this same observation applies to graphic narratives, which are, after all, another type of illustrated text. The image of Roy in *Fun Home* forms the only double-page spread in the entire book. As such, the illustration is rendered several times larger than any other drawing, a detail that suggests its narrative importance. Additionally, the image is the only one that is not contained with a panel frame. Instead, it occupies the full page, from the top to the bottom edges, from the left to the right margins. Finally, and far from insignificantly, the drawing is focalized from the first-person perspective. Readers are looking at the image as if through Alison's eyes; we see what she is seeing. In fact, the fingers of the cartoonist's left hand, the one holding the photo, are visible (Bechdel, 2006, p. 100).

In the very first exposition box on the top left side of this drawing, Alison discusses when she first saw this image: "Shortly after Dad died, I was rooting through a box of family photos and came across one I had never seen" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 100.1). The exposition box that follows locates the photograph within a historical chronology: "It appears to have been taken on vacation when I was eight, a trip on which Roy accompanied my father, my brothers, and me to the Jersey shore while my mother visited her old roommate in New York City" (p. 100.2). That said, the gap between when her father took this pin-up style photo of Roy lounging on the bed clad only in his underwear and when she first sees it is not the only temporal lapse. As the cartoonist goes on to relay, "The borders of all the photos are printed 'Aug 69,' but on the one of Roy, Dad has carefully blotted out the '69'" (p. 101.3). Alison attributes this edit to her father's failed effort at concealment: "It is a curiously ineffectual attempt at censorship. Why cross out the year and

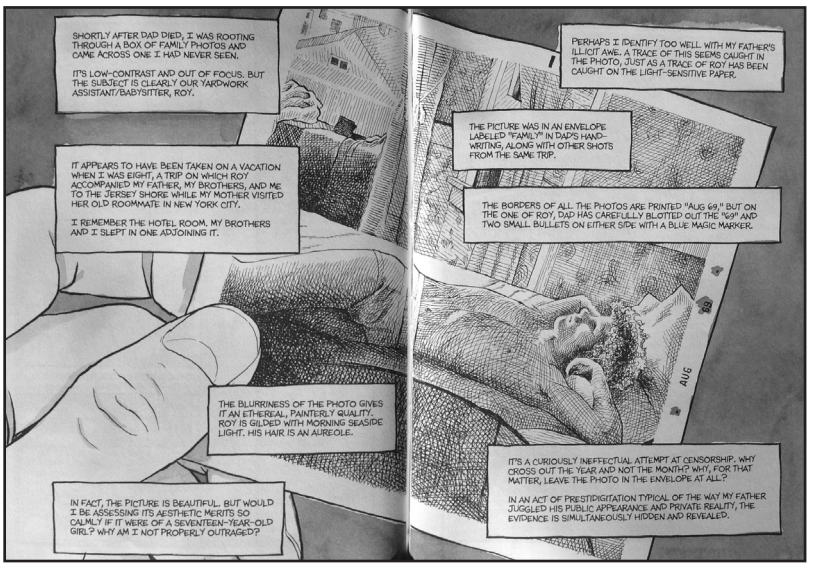

Figure 4. This image makes visible how the revelation about Bechdel's father's queerness has queered time itself.

not the month? Why, for that matter, leave the photo in the envelope at all?" (p. 101.4). While her father's alteration is a poor attempt at keeping the encounter secret, it is an effective strategy when it comes to altering its connection to time. Blotting out the "69" from the photo divorces the image from a specific year and thus from any connection to either clock temporality or sequential chronology. This act removes the image from the realm of chrononormativity and locates it within the arena of queer temporalities. Obfuscating the year that the photograph was taken causes Roy not simply to be frozen in time, but to exist out of time; he is disconnected from any calendar date, chronological age, or historical period.

One of the central preoccupations of *Fun Home* is whether the time span encompassing her father's life can be seen as "not just lost, but ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, and spoiled," both because his death by possible suicide at age 44 cut his life short by many decades and because he did not live in accordance with his "erotic truth" (p. 230.1).

Near the middle of *Fun Home*, Alison relays, "After Dad died, an updated translation of Proust came out. *Remembrance of Things Past* was re-titled *In Search of Lost Time*" (2006, p. 119.4). She goes on to explain how "the new title is a more literal translation of *Á La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, but it still doesn't quite capture the full resonance of *perdu*" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 119.5). This French verb means "not just lost, but ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, and spoiled" (p. 119.5). One of the central preoccupations of *Fun Home* is whether the time span encompassing her father's life can be seen as "not just lost, but ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, and spoiled," both because his death by possible suicide at age 44 cut his life short by many decades and because he did not live in accordance with his "erotic truth" (p. 230.1). The cartoonist vacillates on this issue. She sometimes condemns her father's cowardice for not coming out; at other moments, she is more sympathetic, given that, by his own admission, living openly as a homosexual "was not even considered an option" when he came of age in the 1950s (p. 212.2). While the meaning that time had in her father's life may be unclear, indeterminate, and uncertain, the way that it is being used throughout *Fun Home* is not. Any sense of a straightforward chronology, clear linearity, and direct teleology throughout the graphic memoir is repeatedly "ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, and spoiled."

Queer Futurity in *Fun Home*

Just because queer temporalities disrupt the linearity, sequentiality, and teleology of chrononormativity ought not to imply that this concept lacks a clear relationship with futurity. On the contrary, as José Esteban Muñoz (2009) argues in *Cruising Utopia*, queer temporalities are inextricably focused on becoming. Precisely because they do not follow the prescribed temporal pathway, queer temporalities are able to imagine a future that is radically different from the expected, namely, a period that is less homophobic and more egalitarian for LGBTQ individuals.

In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz details how a concern with queer futurity needs to be more of a priority in the way that the LGBTQ movement conceptualizes and utilizes time. For decades, Muñoz argues, the fight for queer rights in the United States "has been dominated by pragmatic issues like same-sex marriage and gays in the military" (Muñoz, 2009, para. 1). This focus, he asserts, is not simply presentist, but shortsighted (para. 1). It has placed undue emphasis on the current historical moment, and in so doing, it has led to social, political, and even temporal stagnancy. Because the millennial LGBTQ movement has been so fixated on addressing contemporaneous issues, it has neglected to work toward or even imagine speculative possibilities that might come. Muñoz argues that the focus on here-and-now concerns like adoption rights and marriage equality has been at the expense of conceptualizing more radical and liberating forms of futurity. If the LGBTQ movement truly seeks to move closer to what might be called a "queer utopia"—or a world that is devoid of homophobia—it needs to shift its focus out of the present time and on to one aimed at "cruising ahead." Accordingly, Muñoz "contends that queerness is . . . a futurity bound phenomenon, a 'not yet here' that critically engages pragmatic presentism" (para. 3). As Jon Binnie and Christian

Klesse (2012) aptly explain, *Cruising Utopia* "argues that queerness is essentially a rejection of the limitations of the present, and about imagining new ways of living and being together, and envisaging new modes of intimacy" (p. 582).

The finale to *Fun Home* models this concept. Although Bruce Bechdel's death precluded any material, temporal, or physical future, it paradoxically connected him with a queer futurity through his lesbian cartoonist daughter, Alison. The closing panels to the graphic memoir discuss both the literal and figurative components of this legacy. Of course, as his biological progeny, Alison represents Bruce's attainment of reproductive futurism. However, as *Fun Home* goes on to detail, the connection between Bruce and Alison extends beyond the mere continuation of the family name or the passing along of inherited genetics. The cartoonist also embodies Bruce's legacy from a social, cultural, and political standpoint; her queer, creative life picks up where his left off. Unlike her parents and especially her gay father, Alison charts a life that is determined by queer futurity rather than reproductive futurity. Indeed, as she reveals near the middle of *Fun Home*, when she was still in elementary school, "I cemented the unspoken compact with [my parents] that I would never get married, that I would carry on to live the artist's life they had each abdicated" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 73.4).

Forming yet another facet to their unconventional and even iconoclastic engagement with teleology, this detail causes the relationship that Alison has with her father to be placed in dialogue with what Judith Halberstam (2011) has termed "the queer art of failure." As Halberstam argues in her book by that name, LGBTQ individuals have long been associated with disappointment and even defeat. As I have written elsewhere on this subject, "[B]ecause notions of success with regard to sexual activity are commonly defined not simply in heteronormative terms concerning the interplay between male and female sexual organs but also from the reproductive standpoint of impregnation and procreation, queer erotic interactions are always acts of failure" (pp. 2–3). In the words of Halberstam, "[F]ailing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp" (p. 3). That said, "Failure for the LGBTQ community is simply not a dour state of perpetual frustration; it can also have distinct advantages and even important rewards" (Abate, 2014, p. 3). Indeed, Halberstam notes, "[W]hile failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (2011, p. 3). For this reason, she goes on to assert, "Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development" (p. 3). As my previous analysis of these comments explain, "Failing to conform to both gender and sexual norms has allowed LGBTQ individuals to imagine new, and more libratory, ways of being. It has permitted them to escape the traps, pitfalls and limitations associated with mainstream heteronormative American life" (Abate, 2014, p. 3). For this reason, Halberstam states flatly, "[T]here are definite advantages to failing" (2011, p. 4).

More than simply wishing to avoid making the same mistakes as her father, Bechdel uses his multitudinous failures as a starting point for building a life that is more personally, professionally, and psychologically successful.

Bruce Bechdel's life can be seen as a multifaceted failure. The bulk of *Fun Home* reveals the ineffective and often outright disastrous job that he did performing a variety of roles in both his personal and professional life. As a father, he screamed at and even hit his children; as a husband, he cheated on his wife; as a teacher, he seduced his students; as someone whose lifelong passion was Victorian architecture and décor, he did home restorations and interior design only as a hobby; and, of course, as a man who was attracted to other men, he never had the courage to come out of the closet. Even Bruce's seemingly greatest queer triumph—his pin-up style photograph of Roy—was also, ultimately, a failure. Whatever his motive was for blotting out the year "69," he was unsuccessful. As the drawing of this photograph that appears in *Fun Home* reveals, the digits are still clearly visible beneath the black dots of marker. It might be tempting to attribute this condition to the fact that many years

have passed and ink fades over time. However, it seems likely that this feature was always present. It is exceedingly rare for any magic marker, past or present, to be able to wholly obliterate text, especially characters that have been mechanically printed on a glossy photograph.

All this said, in these and other examples, Bruce Bechdel's lack of efficacy is not cause for lament. On the contrary, his multifaceted forms of failure paradoxically led to success. They inspired his daughter to live her life openly as a lesbian, and they also formed the basis for her resolve to be an artist as an adult. In some regards, in fact, the success of her queer, creative life was propelled by or made possible by the failure of his. As she asserts near the middle of the memoir, "[I]n a way, you could say that my father's end was my beginning. Or more precisely, that the end of his lie coincided with the beginning of my truth" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 117.1). With her father's death occurring only four months after her decision to come out, this event forms a powerful example of the need to live openly and honestly. After all, as she confesses in the very next panel, "I'd been lying too, for a long time" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 117.2). More than simply wishing to avoid making the same mistakes as her father, Bechdel uses his multitudinous failures as a starting point for building a life that is more personally, professionally, and psychologically successful.

Alison's decision to reject her father's choices and spurn the life that he led ironically does not signal an irreversible rupture in their relationship; rather, these acts queer both the connection that they have with each other and with time even further.

Alison's decision to reject her father's choices and spurn the life that he led ironically does not signal an irreversible rupture in their relationship; rather, these acts queer both the connection that they have with each other and with time even further. As aligned with what Binnie and Klesse (2012) say about queer futurity, Alison's decision involves "imagining new ways of living and being together, and envisaging new modes of intimacy" with him (p. 582). Even though Bruce Bechdel dies, and is thus physically gone from her life at age 20, he remains psychologically present as a creative figure and as a homosexual "antihero," as she calls him (Bechdel, 2006, p. 187). Alison muses on the penultimate page, "Is it so unusual for the two things"—spiritual paternity and physical paternity—"to coincide?" (p. 231.3). In the opening pages of *Fun Home*, she sees her relationship with her father as being akin to that of Icarus and Daedalus in Greek mythology. Alison revisits this analogy in the closing panels to the graphic memoir: "What if Icarus hadn't hurtled into the sea? What if he'd inherited his father's inventive bent? What might he have wrought?" (p. 231.3). On the following page, the cartoonist reminds readers, "He did hurtle into the sea, of course" (2006, p. 232.1). The drawing that accompanies these lines connects this event from Greek mythology to her own life; it shows the front of a commercial truck, presumably the Sunbeam bread truck that struck and killed her father (see Fig. 5, upper panel).

Figure 5. In two juxtaposed images, the cartoonist confronts her complicated relationship with her father.

The final panel to *Fun Home*, however, reveals how Bruce Bechdel's death was not the end of his presence or influence. As the cartoonist says about her long-deceased dad, "But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 232.2). The illustration that surrounds this exposition box shows the elementary-aged cartoonist at a swimming pool jumping off a low diving board and into her father's waiting arms (see Fig. 5, lower panel). Bruce was literally there to catch her in this moment, and he was figuratively there to catch her years later when she made the even more daring leap to live her life as a lesbian and as an artist. In this way, the closing panel exemplifies José Esteban Muñoz's observation about "the anticipatory illumination of art and its uncanny ability to open windows to the future" (2009, para. 2). Or, as Binnie and Klesse have said about queer futurity, "the act of 'looking back' can be a valuable resource in helping to imagine new political possibilities and queerer futures" (2012, p. 583). By looking back into her father's life, sexuality, and death, Bechdel is able to imagine new life possibilities and alternative queer futures, ones that were less repressive and more liberatory.

Fun Home as a Platform for Classroom Conversation about Millennial LGBTQ Life

In September 2010, longtime gay journalist Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller uploaded a video to YouTube that discussed how difficult life was for them when they were young and how much it has improved as they have gotten older. The video was prompted by the growing number of queer teens and adolescents who had been committing suicide after being socially teased, verbally taunted, and physically threatened by their peers. Savage and Miller's testimonial quickly went viral. Moreover, it inspired a variety of other LGBTQ adults to make similar videos directed at queer and questioning youth. As a result, the "It Gets Better Project" was born.

As the "About Us" page on the website explains, the endeavor sought "to inspire hope for young people facing harassment," especially for LGBTQ youth who were being bullied at school because of their gender expression and/or sexual identity ("What Is the It Gets Better Project?," 2010, para. 1). The videos produced under the auspices of this mission and housed on the website "create a personal way for supporters everywhere to tell LGBT youth that, yes, it does indeed get better" (2010, para. 1). In the years since its founding, "The It Gets Better Project has become a worldwide movement, inspiring more than 50,000 user-created videos viewed more than 50 million times" (2010, para. 2). Indeed, as the website for the Project reveals, "ItGetsBetter.org is a place where young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender can see how love and happiness can be a reality in their future" (2010, para. 2).

The graphic memoir offers a powerful demonstration that a life that does not follow the expected chronology or conventional trajectory—from either a heteronormative standpoint or an emerging homonormative one—can be not only feasible, but fulfilling.

The LGBTQ young people who are drawn to Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* do so out of a similar interest in queer futurity. However, the portrait that the graphic novel gives them of the past, present, and future of LGBTQ individuals and identity is more complicated than the simple teleology of "It Gets Better." *Fun Home* provides queer and questioning youth with an important opportunity to see their lives represented candidly and without censure. From the struggles, difficulties, and hardships to the possibilities, accomplishments, and inheritances, LGBTQ teens can witness both the problems and the pleasures that accompany nonheteronormativity. *Fun Home* demonstrates that just because their lives don't follow heterocentrist chrononormativity doesn't mean that they will lack a rich futurity.

This message is even more important in light of the Supreme Court ruling in January 2015 legalizing same-sex marriage in the United States. While this event is a major victory in the fight for LGBTQ rights, it has a secondary and unexpectedly negative ramification: it endorses or at least gives added credence to a certain type of teleology for nonheteronormative individuals. Whereas gay men and lesbians had previously been exempt from the expected chronological

benchmarks of an individual's life—namely, getting married and having children—because they were legally precluded from them, they are now able to and, by extension, increasingly expected to conform to them.

An understanding of the ways in which queer temporalities work in Bechdel's text—and, in turn, help to make the narrative itself work—allows educators to introduce new intellectual ideas, alternative interpretive approaches, and different analytical perspectives into their classrooms.

Judith Halberstam (2003) has written about "the new 'homonormativity'" that has emerged amidst "the recent lesbian baby boom" (p. 331). Timothy Stewart-Winter (2015) echoed these remarks in a newspaper article that appeared in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling legalizing same-sex marriage. His essay, while it celebrated the obvious judicial victory, also lamented it. This "joyous moment for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans," Stewart-Winter noted, came at a very high price (2015, para. 1). Not only did the push for marriage equality take time, resources, and attention away from the plight of more marginalized members of the LGBTQ community—such as "transgender people, homeless teenagers, victims of job discrimination, lesbian and gay refugees and asylum seekers, isolated gay elderly or other vulnerable members of our community" (Stewart-Winter, 2015, para. 5)—but it also inadvertently stigmatizes those who wish to live according to a different teleology. By legalizing a more conventional life chronology for LGBTQ individuals, the Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage made life choices that resisted or even rejected this trajectory less viable or, at least, even more unconventional, atypical, and inconoclastic. Phrased in a different way, it made queer temporalities even more queer.

This development causes the messages embedded in *Fun Home* to assume added narrative importance as well as cultural urgency. The graphic memoir offers a powerful demonstration that a life that does not follow the expected chronology or conventional trajectory—from either a heteronormative standpoint or an emerging homonormative one—can be not only feasible, but fulfilling. Furthermore, Bechdel's employment of queer temporalities in telling the co-joined stories of her father's homosexuality as well as her own plays a key role—both in the appeal that this book has for adolescents and in its sociopolitical importance. Whereas the videos connected to the It Gets Better Project present the experiences of LGBTQ individuals as linear progress narratives—times are difficult when you are young, but they get steadily better as you grow up—the graphic memoir offers a much-needed and more accurate reminder that life doesn't always work out this way. On the contrary, echoing queer temporalities, life more commonly has twists, turns, reversals, and delays. Conditions may improve only to deteriorate again; a new sociocultural freedom might be eventually lost; a hard-won political gain may later be revoked or—in the case of same-sex marriage—simply not utilized or even desired by all members of the community.

During these moments, the message in *Fun Home* is that even when time loops, spirals, and folds back on itself, it is not cause for despair. As her graphic memoir powerfully demonstrates, sometimes the best way to move forward is, paradoxically, by going backwards. Especially for LGBTQ individuals who are not adhering to a heterocentrist life course, there are occasions when the past is, ironically, the pathway to the future. *Fun Home* not only provides an important commentary on the telling of LGBTQ lives, but on the twists, turns, loops, and delays that accompany growing up itself. As both the straight and the queer youth readership of *Fun Home* are acutely aware, the movement from childhood to adulthood is anything but simple and linear. Furthermore, in the same way that LGBTQ individuals have long existed outside of heteronormativity, Bechdel's graphic memoir affirms that so too can they choose to resist and even reject emerging twenty-first century notions of homonormativity.

When all of these elements are viewed collectively, *Fun Home* offers a powerful case study for how concepts in queer theory, which may initially seem too abstract to effectively incorporate into high school settings, can be utilized to good effect. An understanding of the ways in which queer temporalities work in Bechdel's text—and, in turn, help to make the narra-

tive itself work—allows educators to introduce new intellectual ideas, alternative interpretive approaches, and different analytical perspectives into their classrooms. These tools not only enable teachers to push their discussion of *Fun Home* in productive new directions, they can also be harnessed for the analysis of other texts, materials, and concepts. Indeed, some of the most commercially successful and critically acclaimed works upend conventional notions of chronology in ways that are in keeping with queer temporalities. Examples range from William Faulkner's classic novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) to Christopher Nolan's blockbuster film *Inception* (2010). Akin to Bechdel's *Fun Home*, neither of these works conveys stories in a clear, linear, and chronological way. Instead, both Faulkner's novel and Nolan's movie employ a temporality that loops, twists, and folds back on itself: events repeat, skip ahead, or start over again from the beginning. Indeed, the innovative use of chronology is one of the reasons why *The Sound and the Fury* is such a critically acclaimed text. Likewise, the way temporality is disrupted and distorted in *Inception* is a major reason why audiences found the film so thrilling.

As I hope this discussion of *Fun Home* demonstrates, it is not only logistically possible to fold in aspects of queer theory into secondary classroom settings, but pedagogically desirable. Students benefit from being introduced to these concepts socially, materially, and, of course, intellectually. Queer theory encompasses issues that extend far beyond gender and sexuality. As a result, it provides students with interpretive frameworks as well as with critical vocabulary through which they can examine classroom materials in new, complex, and innovative ways. In light of these benefits, incorporating queer theory into high school settings becomes, I believe, not so queer after all.

When Bruce Bechdel learns that his daughter will be reading James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in her college English course, he instructs her, "You damn well better identify with every page" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 201.7). Given the way in which *Fun Home* provides young adult readers with a chance to see alternative portrayals of coming of age as well as coming out, they will likely identify with multiple factors as well. By including Bechdel's graphic memoir in the high school reading curriculum, and especially by exploring the text's engagement with queer temporalities during classroom discussion, teachers can uncover how *Fun Home* speaks not simply *about* being a young person in past eras, but *to* adolescents and teens in the present day.

Endnote

The term "queer" has a long, complicated history both inside and outside of the LGBTQ community. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* ("queer," 2015) reveals, the term dates back to the sixteenth century to denote any event, act, or phenomenon that is "strange, odd, peculiar, or eccentric." For this reason, around the time of the First World War, the word "queer" came to be used as a pejorative for individuals who did not conform to conventional notions of gender and sexuality. In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the word "queer" was reclaimed and rehabilitated by the LGBT movement for the purposes of collective identity and of political empowerment. Queer is now widely regarded as an umbrella term that refers to a broad array of nonheteronormative gender and sexual identities, ranging from lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender to transsexual, asexual, pansexual, and individuals who engage in BDSM. For more on the etymological, cultural, and political history of the term "queer," see the Introduction to *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature* (2011), which I coauthored with Kenneth Kidd.

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