

**[Via Electronic Mail]**

June 5, 2018

Elizabeth C. Jewett  
Superintendent – Watchung Hills Regional High School  
108 Stirling Road  
Warren, NJ 07059

Dear Superintendent Jewett,

Our coalition of advocates for freedom of expression in education is concerned by reports that the widely acclaimed graphic novel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, by Alison Bechdel has been challenged in your district.

We understand that the book – which was recently added to your 12<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum after a two-year review – contains illustrations that some parents have objected to, prompting a review per Watchung Hills District Policy 2240.

We write to offer our support as you perform this review. We urge you to base your decisions on pedagogical motives, rather than yielding to ideologically motivated pressures from some groups or parents.

Our legal system recognizes images, like words, as symbolic expression protected by the First Amendment. Removing *Fun Home* simply because some parents dislike a few illustrations in the book would be constitutionally suspect. *See Monteiro v. Tempe Union High School District* (9th Cir. 1998) (recognizing the First Amendment right of students to read books selected for their “legitimate educational value,” even if offensive to some parents and students). Rather, the Supreme Court has said that public schools should base curricular decisions on pedagogical reasoning, not to satisfy an “officially prescribed orthodoxy.” *See Board of Education v. PICO* (1982).

Graphic novels combine visual art with literary and cinematic techniques for educationally rich storytelling. Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* is an essential text that has been recognized with significant literary awards. The book has been heralded within the literary and arts community as “a pioneering work” in the comics and memoir genres. (*New York Times Sunday Book Review*). The inspirational novel chronicles Bechdel’s real-life struggles of sexual identity, emotional abuse and domestic strife while growing up in rural Pennsylvania with a closeted gay father. Bechdel’s memoir is resonant with many youth experiences and offers teen readers a safe place to examine questions related to personal identity, family relationships, and the need to face the truth in their own lives.

While the book does contain a few images that some may find sexually explicit, these images are an integral part of the larger narrative. *Booklist* has recommended *Fun Home* for young adult readers, noting that the “the very few incidental sex scenes” are “non-prurient” and

that “the family story rings utterly and movingly true.” The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund has produced a [discussion guide](#) to aid teachers in moderating discussions on these questions and Bechdel’s use of illustration. We hope your teachers will find the guide (attached) useful.

Some parents may still find their children are not yet mature enough to appreciate the literary and artistic value of *Fun Home*. We encourage you to offer them alternative assignments, rather than removing *Fun Home* from the curriculum and thereby denying all students the opportunity to read and learn from its pages.

We hope that your review committee will consider and prioritize educational qualities over the ideological objections of some parents and keep *Fun Home* in the 12<sup>th</sup> Grade curriculum.

Please do not hesitate to contact us for further guidance. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Chris Finan, Executive Director  
National Coalition Against Censorship



Charles Brownstein, Executive Director  
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund



Millie Davis, Director  
Intellectual Freedom Center  
National Council of Teachers of English



David Grogan, Director  
American Booksellers for Free Expression



James LaRue, Director  
American Library Association’s  
Office for Intellectual Freedom

# CBLDF Discussion Guide

## ***Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic***

by **Alison Bechdel**

Discussion Guide by Amanda Jacobs Foust, Electronic Services Librarian, Marin County Free Library, Marin, California



*Given their visual nature, comics are easy targets for would-be censors. CBLDF's Discussion Guides are tools that can be used to lead conversations about challenged graphic novels and to help allay misconceptions about comics.*

### **Synopsis**

*Fun Home* is Alison Bechdel's memoir about growing up in a small town, where her father was a high school English teacher and also ran the family business: a funeral home. Bechdel's father projected a carefully cultivated image as a dedicated family man, but as Bechdel comes of age and accepts her own sexuality, she discovers her father is a closeted gay man. Soon thereafter, her father dies by what many believe to be suicide, leaving Bechdel and her family to cope with their family secrets and the reality of her father's life and choices.

### **Themes**

Coming-of-age, gender roles, homosexuality, fatherhood, identity, death and loss

### **Reasons Challenged**

LGBTQ themes, sexuality

### **Suggested Age Range**

College and up

### **Discussion Questions**

#### **Remembering**

1. How did Bechdel's relationship with her father change as she became an adult and a self-identified lesbian?

#### **Understanding**

2. Bechdel relied heavily on first hand sources such as letters, journals, and photographs to document her upbringing. One example of this is the series of photos on page 120. How do these media contribute to the authenticity of the book and influence her art?
3. *Fun Home*'s narrative is non-linear and moves fluidly between the past and the present, revisiting central incidents over and over again. In what ways does this structure impact the story?

#### **Applying**

4. Dream sequences are frequently found in artistic expression. How does Bechdel's analysis and interpretation of her dreams and her emphasis on imagery enhance her storytelling?
5. One of the reasons that *Fun Home* has been challenged is LGBTQ themes. In what ways is this public discomfort with sexual identity similar to the discomfort of the characters in the memoir? How does it differ?

#### **Analyzing**

6. How does Bechdel's use of a limited color palette influence the story? Does it enhance or distract from the story? Explain your reasoning.

7. Appearances are important to the Bechdel family, even though they do not often reflect reality. What are some examples from the story in which appearance and reality did not match, and how do these examples illustrate the tensions among the members of the Bechdel family?
8. Bechdel has obsessive-compulsive tendencies, which began with a particularly intense onset at age 10. How did her obsessive-compulsive disorder contribute to the documentation of her childhood?

### Evaluating

9. Bechdel and her father connect over literature, and literary references are integral to *Fun Home*. Identify some of these references. How did Bechdel's various literary allusions impact her storytelling?
10. On page 125, Bechdel imagines how things would differ if her family told the truth. Is Bechdel telling the truth in her own memoir? Explain your reasoning.
11. Bechdel painstakingly drew *Fun Home* by hand, often reproducing actual photographs and journal entries. How do you think her reliance on drawing everything by hand versus using computer techniques impacts the narrative?

### Creating

12. Showing, which relays the action so the reader is experiencing it with the characters, and telling, which uses a narrator to fill in the reader about aspects of the story, are two tools by which creators relay action in their books. Bechdel uses both showing and telling in *Fun Home*. How might the story have differed if she used one and not the other? Is one method more honest than the other? Explain your reasoning.

## Activities

### Journaling

Keep a daily comic journal over the course of a few weeks or a month. Instead of writing prose about your experiences in your journal, use a multi-panel comic strip. Consider incorporating newspaper clippings, photographs, and other media into your comics. At the end of your journaling period, evaluate your memoir. How truthful were you in telling your story? Which topics were easier or more fun to relate than others? How did your artwork or use of media change with the types of things you shared?

### Writing

Research obsessive-compulsive disorder. Based on what you learn, write about how various aspects of *Fun Home*, from the topics covered to the very act of creating the book, reflect Bechdel's own struggles with OCD.

### Poster Project

Bechdel uses non-linear story telling throughout *Fun Home*, reflecting on past events throughout the narrative. Create a timeline for the action in the story. Reproduce key panels on your timeline and cite page numbers to create a linear version of the story. After your timeline is complete, examine how the story differs when told linearly.

For more about attempts to censor *Fun Home*, visit <http://cblddf.org/banned-comic/banned-challenged-comics/case-study-fun-home/>

**Comic Book Legal Defense Fund is a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection of the First Amendment rights of the comics art form and its community of retailers, creators, publishers, librarians, and readers. CBLDF provides legal referrals, representation, advice, assistance, and education in furtherance of these goals.**  
[www.cblddf.org](http://www.cblddf.org)