

# CHILDHOOD TRAUMA IN THE GRAPHIC MEMOIR

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# INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I examine why the graphic memoir has become such a popular platform for authors to explore their childhood, and how these authors use graphic memoirs in an attempt to understand any trauma that they experienced during their formative years. Graphic memoirs in this context allow for a dual outlet to express these complex traumatic events, both through vivid illustrations and descriptive text. To illustrate how graphic memoirs are used as an outlet for traumatic experiences I have selected the following three works: *Stitches* by David Small (2009), *Epileptic* by David B (1996-2003) and *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel (2006). These three graphic memoirs share common themes that relate to the lack of communication within the family, particularly concerning the trauma that they have experienced in their childhood. The medium plays an especially important part in all three texts as the authors share an inability to express verbally what they are feeling and instead are able to find release through non-verbal forms of communication such as drawing. All three texts give insight into different ways that trauma can affect the mind, and what an impact it has on the victim. In all three graphic memoirs, there is one family member that has a particular significance in their lives and who plays an important part in their memoir, notably on the topic of trauma, and this relationship will be particularly explored.

In my thesis, I will argue that the graphic medium is particularly suited for the treatment of trauma because of its combined use of words and illustrations. Because graphic novels do not rely on words alone to impart meaning, but also images, graphic novels can illustrate what the mind cannot easily put into words. An essential point in understanding traumatic experiences is the way in which the mind cannot process the events after they have occurred. The victim is unable to narrate the event in a traditional manner, because the event is encoded in "...imagery and bodily sensation, and in their absence of verbal narrative, traumatic narratives resembles the memories of young children" ( Herman 38). In essence, when words are no longer sufficient to express what the author has experienced, images can enhance, and help fill in the gaps, and through this interplay can create a unique insight into the mind of a trauma victim.

In this introduction, I will present the three graphic memoirs I have selected and give some background information on these texts. I will then discuss the medium that these authors have chosen to narrate their stories, by examining the graphic novel in general, and the graphic memoir in particular, as a sub-genre of graphic novels. Finally, I will address graphic memoirs from the perspective of my main theory, which is based on trauma theory. I will give a short introduction to trauma theory and in what ways it can help shed light on the three graphic memoirs. The memoirs deal with themes and topics that center around traumatic events and all three memoirists have chosen the same platform, the graphic novel, to explore their experiences. This suggests an interesting and important link between trauma and the graphic novel, as it seems to be a particularly effective way of translating trauma into narrative.

The three graphic memoirs are set apart both in time and space, but they still share commonalities in their experience of trauma that relates to family members. All three have chosen to work through their trauma by use of the graphic medium as a way to revisit their past, and more specifically focusing on the authors' childhood, and their relationship to their families. All three authors have experienced and struggled with traumatic events that have shaped their lives afterwards, and as a way of coming to terms with their trauma have used the graphic memoir as a way to address and work through their recovery. The themes that are touched upon in the three memoirs are rarely shared to the public, as there is often shame and guilt tied to trauma that relates to family. The private sphere is not open to public debate and particularly not when it concerns abuse and trauma.

There are many graphic novels that could have been interesting to explore such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. *Maus* is perhaps one of the most renowned graphic novels, winning a Pulitzer Prize in 1992 (Duncan and Smith 1). It touches upon many themes that would have been interesting to explore, but thematically he does not touch upon his childhood much. Furthermore, *Maus* is one of the most widely read graphic novels, while I wanted to focus on some that were a little less known, which is why *Persepolis* was not taken into consideration. Craig Thompson's *Blankets* was one such graphic novel I considered and which would have served well in my discussion, but it had to give way for the three others as they had themes that were more closely tied together. One of the major concerns for Thompson is that of religion, but none of the other three memoirs touches much upon religion, if at all.

David Small's graphic memoir *Stitches* is the most recent of the three memoirs, published in 2009. It is perhaps not the most widely read, but it has nonetheless received considerable attention and praise. Small revisits his childhood years in the 1950s with his dysfunctional family. He must contend with a family who are uncommunicative and distanced from each other. A family in which nothing seems to be able to bring them together, not even the severe illness of David, who gets cancer, and as a result of removing the tumor loses his voice completely. He has a particularly turbulent relationship to his mother, who is unhappy and distanced to her children. Her unhappiness is largely attributed to her own difficult life, as she is a closeted lesbian living in a heterosexual relationship. She also struggles with poor health and has a past that suggests a difficult childhood.

*Epileptic* by David B was originally published in France as a serial in six parts from 1996 to 2003 by his own publishing house L'Association, which has published works by other graphic novel artists such as Marjane Satrapi. *Epileptic* was translated into English and published in its entirety in 2005, and was well received, being compared to graphic novel greats such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Set in the late 1960s the memoir explores David B's childhood after his brother is diagnosed with epilepsy. Delving into how this comes to affect the family, and particularly David himself and his relationship to his brother, Jean-Christophe. The epilepsy slowly takes his brother away from David, and in fear of the same happening to himself, he becomes distant and cold, putting on a brave face for the world. David struggles with conflicting emotions concerning his brother and feels guilty that he himself is healthy, but also resentful that the illness has made Jean-Christophe the constant center of attention in his family.

Alison Bechdel published *Fun Home* in 2006, after 7 years in the making. *Fun Home* is perhaps the most widely read of the three memoirs, and has certainly gained a lot of respect and attention by literary critics and the population at large. *Fun Home* explores Alison's relationship to her closeted gay father, who immerses himself in restoration of their family home, with a great deal of attention to detail. However, his eye for detail does not include insight into his daughter's life, and her lesbian identity. Instead, he tries to fit her into the stereotypical gender role of girls with dresses and make up, which Alison herself shies away from. In coming to terms with her own sexuality, she examines her father's life and homosexuality more generally. In an attempt to understand herself she must try and piece together the truth about her father, but discovers that

the truth is hard to find because often it is hidden, and what one discovers is not always easy to come to terms with.

## THE GRAPHIC MEDIUM

The graphic novel has traditionally been considered a low-brow medium in the literary world, and has thus not been given much literary value. As a side-effect of this, the theory on graphic novels is far from substantial. Though recently, a few prominent figures, such as Will Eisner and Scott McCloud have theorized on the topic. They have in recent years explored and debated the genre in an attempt to give a definition that will help the medium to gain recognition. Thus, they have legitimized the genre, particularly by giving a platform to base one's literary reading on. McCloud's definition seems to be the more widely used and serves the purpose adequately: "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud *Understanding Comics* 9).

If the definition has been controversial then the name has sparked heated debates: whether it is a graphic novel or a comic or graphic narrative etc. With the attempt at gaining respect, many have chosen to move away from the slightly more juvenile word "comic" to the more sophisticated word "graphic novel" (Wolk 60-64). However, what all these discussions indicate is that in being a new medium, the graphic novel seems to be trying to find legitimacy within the field of literary criticism.

While the graphic novel is largely an unexplored medium within literary criticism, the increased attention and focus brought forth in recent years has to a large degree cemented the value and importance that graphic novels brings to the literary tradition. Today, it is more universally acknowledged that graphic novels have a lot more to offer, as Versaci says in his introduction to *This Book Contains Graphic Language*: "...I will be examining comic book representations of incest, homosexuality, cancer and other physical challenges, the Holocaust, The Palestine Conflict, World Wars I and II, the Korean War, The Vietnam War, and The Bosnian War, just to name a few" (Versaci 9). The graphic novel is no less adept at handling



serious topics than the novel, and there are similarly plenty of novels that are considered frivolous and that have little literary value.

The types of graphic novels that have received particular recognition by literary critics, and the public at large, in recent years, have been autobiographical graphic novels, or graphic memoirs, as they are more commonly named. It is worth noting that memoirs and graphic novels in general have not always been given high praise, often having to give way to the novel in terms of focus and attention. As McCloud argues in his book on comics *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, any new format has to struggle to gain respect and suffers under the judgment of the old standards. While neither the memoir nor the graphic novel are new, the graphic novel in particular, is still perceived as such, and certainly the memoir is a new genre within the graphic novel tradition (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 151).

It is appropriate to examine why the combination of autobiography and graphic novels has legitimized the genre of graphic novels, and as I will explain, I think it lies within the people's ideas of the genre and format.

Some argue that the autobiography is: "...the vice of a 'therapeutic' age or a 'narcissistic' culture". The implication is that the focus is on the author, and their lives, and that it somehow cannot transcend the personal level. With the shift away from biographical readings of author's works in literary criticism, it also brought along a distancing away from the autobiographies in general. Simplified, if one reads an autobiographical text, then the author's presence is impossible to ignore, the author and the writing have to be related. With a tradition that does not allow the author's life to be examined, it in turn becomes less desirable to read an autobiography, at least from a literary critic's point of view. The biography and the autobiography have certainly been considered largely secondary to the novel.

In turn, the graphic novel has suffered under the opposite tradition. The novel is accepted by most as a medium that can encompass any topic and that has little or no boundaries in relation to theme and topics. The graphic novel on the other hand is a format that has largely been considered childish and mindless entertainment and: "The assumption here is that the weight of the topic is simply too much for the medium to bear" (Versaci 8). This notion is probably closely connected to the graphic novels that were produced during the 1950s, a time when graphic novels

were mainly children's literature with garish colors and action filled plots. They were meant to be entertaining, but usually did not focus on the literary value, and this idea has somehow stuck. In some ways it was simply too fanciful and unrealistic, with super heroes and fantastical elements, a critique that the graphic novels shares with genres such as the fantasy and science fiction novels, both of which, alongside the graphic novel, are rarely given any attention by literary critics. When one in addition associates cartoon drawings or drawings in any literary work as juvenile it just strengthens the idea that graphic novels are works of silly fantasy (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 140-141).

Yet, when the two are combined the aspects that were considered weaknesses within the genre and format are cancelled out by each other. The unrealistic and mythical aspect of the graphic novel no longer holds any truth, because despite the fantasy aspects that may or may not be present, the essential story still has its roots in reality. Additionally, when the themes that are being treated in the graphic novel are of serious nature it is unreasonable to write it off as childish and unrealistic, though many still do. Similarly, if the memoir is somehow of less value because of the autobiographical aspect to the work, in that it is too personal, then this idea seems to be softened by the fact that it is drawn in a comic format. The comic or cartoon image is simplified and focuses our attention, but in addition, it makes the graphic novel more universal. A cartoon face can describe anyone; it is "an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it" (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 36). It immerses the reader in the story, and demands engagement as well as imagination. The dual aspect of both being universal and at the same time intensely personal and identifiable is a unique combination.

However, the many presumptions people have concerning the graphic novel genre need not be negative to an author, contrary they may use it for their own design. The connotation of children's literature, for example, can be useful to an author because it can create an interesting contrast within the graphic memoir. By playing with people's expectations, the author is able to contrast the more general happy childhood memories of classical comics, such as Donald Duck or super hero comics, to the author's own experience of their unhappy childhood. The reader's expectations of a light-hearted, loud comic with a lot of action are adjusted, as the reader realizes

that unlike many childhood comics, there are no bright colors, but only black and white and gradients of grey.

The traditional link to the juvenile is useful tools for authors who want to make the trauma of one's childhood seem less intimidating in relation to the reader. Through the drawings the trauma seems more accessible, and more easily relatable, because it becomes more general: "The more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to describe" (McCloud 31). At the same time, because it is a cartoon, there is a distance to the subject that allows the viewer to fully take in all the aspects of the memoir. If a testimony is too realistic it can have the opposite affect where the viewer or reader is overwhelmed by what they are experiencing, such as viewers watching testimonies by Holocaust survivors: "Viewing these videos has effects on people. The sound of the voices, the often agonizing looks on the faces have a powerful, at times an overwhelming, effect, and the impression may remain with the viewer long after the actual event. Different people are able to view these videos for variable but limited periods before they shut down and are unable to take more" (LaCapra 92).

While few graphic novels are quite so intense in their handling of traumatic events, as in the previous excerpt, it is nonetheless relevant, because it suggests that we as readers have a limited amount of agony that we are able to process, before it becomes overwhelming. The challenge for the author then becomes to engage us as witnesses to their stories, but at the same time not overwhelm us with too much information and details. The memoirists may have experienced a lifetime of trauma, but they have to limit themselves to the space of a memoir. The balance then becomes for the authors to adjust their story to us, the readers, while not undermining their own integrity. In the three memoirs I am exploring they have limited their story to evolve around the few, but important scenes that illustrate their trauma.

A point brought up by many graphic novel theorists is the reader engagement, the medium is like no other and that to fully comprehend the meaning of a graphic novel one must engage in the drawings on many levels. Eisner explains that: "In comics the reader is expected to understand things like implied time, space, motion, sound and emotions. In order to do this, a reader must not only draw on visceral reactions but make use of an accumulation of experience as well as reasoning" (Eisner 49).

To summarize, the graphic medium is a relative new-comer to the literary world, and while it traditionally has struggled with gaining respect from the community at large, the often serious topics handled in traditional autobiographies lend themselves well to the graphic medium as a multi-modal outlet and signify a move away from the main criticism of the genre, which is the tradition of often illustrating juvenile topics.

## **TRAUMA THEORY IN THE CONTEXT OF LITERATURE**

The main theory for this thesis is that of trauma theory, which is a topic used in many fields of academia, because of its interdisciplinary nature. Giving a definition of trauma is not so direct, as Caruth explains in her book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, as there is some dispute on the definition of the topic. However, most agree that: "... there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behavior stemming from the event" (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 4). The trauma is not defined by the event itself, as it can vary from person to person, but in the way the event is experienced: "The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the person who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 4.-5). In other words, the victim is not traumatized by the event itself, but in the way the event occurs, as such the traumatic event can vary from person to person, and it can encompass anything from: rape, war, apartheid, child abuse etc. (Adami 6). The event, will not, unlike most memories, enter into a chronological order, but instead function outside of time, haunting the victim as if the episode is being experienced repeatedly.

This way of experiencing traumatic events internally then complicates the process of using literature as an outlet to deal with their experiences. Trauma is in its nature difficult to communicate, as it is not a memory that functions chronologically, but instead appears involuntarily and overwhelms the trauma victim. This becomes a struggle that trauma victims attempting to narrativize their experiences frequently have to deal with, which Whitehead

recognizes in her book *Trauma Fiction*. Thus, the relationship between literature and trauma may seem conflicting, as traumatic memory, by its nature, resists representation and narration. It seems an impossible task to narrate a story that is difficult for the victim to access. Despite this, authors have been able to find an outlet, and Whitehead suggests that: “Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection” (Whitehead 3). The freedom that literature allows the trauma victim is unique in its way that it allows the victim to tap into their fears through fantasy, and seek an alternate reality that more readily displays their trauma.

Part of the healing process is being empowered by reconstructing the story and by doing so transforming it into an ordinary memory. However, this is not an easy task and one that can remain elusive as “traumatic memory is not adaptive, but inflexible, timeless and invariable: it consists of fixed images and sensations that are not placed in time, and thus not transformed into a coherent story” (Adami 26). If the memories are not encoded in words and in a chronological order it becomes extremely difficult for the victim to retell the event, because that is normally how the human mind functions when retelling a memory. However, that is why the graphic memoir plays such an important part in the healing process for these authors, because they can recreate the images in their memoir, whereas a purely verbal medium cannot access these images. Herman suggests herself in the recovery process that some patients: “may spontaneously switch to nonverbal methods of communication, such as drawing or painting. Given the ‘iconic,’ visual nature of the traumatic memories, creating pictures may represent the most effective initial approach to ‘indelible images’” (Herman 177).

The trauma in the three graphic memoirs we have selected relate to issues within the family. The family institution is deeply ingrained in our psyche and any disruption of it can make people deeply defensive. The image of the happy family is important and recognizable to most people; however, that does not necessarily make it true. Hirsch calls into existence: “familial mythology, of an image to live up to, an image shaping the desire of the individual living in a social group” and further argues that “it survives by means of its narrative and imaginary power” (Hirsch 8). What the three memoirs share in common is a break with the familial mythology and instead portrays the truth of how they perceived their families. None of the memoirs has a

romanticized view of family relationships, but instead calls into question the power we have over our family members. The authors are not only in danger of alienating their families by telling their sordid family secrets, but also exclusion from society for breaking with convention keeping family affairs private. That makes these narratives all the more important by shedding light on topics that are often avoided. The quiet trauma or private trauma is as important as trauma that relates to larger social issues.

What is essential for all three graphic memoirs is that the reader is able to read the graphic memoir and be a witness to their trauma. Testimony is a keyword in relation to the graphic memoirs. As with any trauma there is an inherent need to testify: “There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life” (Laub 63). In other words, for the authors to heal and move on there is an inherent need for them to write the memoirs to be able to move forward with their lives. They must go back into their past and explore the original trauma and confront their past experiences. But for their testimony to reach a level of reality there must be a witness to the encounter: “It is the encounter between survivor and listener that makes the very witnessing possible: ‘this joint responsibility is the source of the reemerging truth’. Testimony is thus a dialogue between the survivor and an audience, a ‘lived performance for witness and listener alike” (Adami 33). The responsibility becomes shared between the victim and the listener, and the responsibility and burden is no longer on just the victim’s shoulder.

However, revisiting the painful past is never an easy task, particularly because traumatic instances often remain elusive because: “traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images” (Herman 38). If these authors were writing purely textual memoirs, they would probably not have been able to convey the emotional havoc that they had to go through. The graphic memoir on the other hand has the ability to combine both the visual and the textual. Where words no longer are sufficient, the drawings supplement and even give meaning where there was none. Trauma victims revert to what is considered a more childish way of expressing themselves, at least in relation to the traumatic event: “In their predominance of imagery and bodily sensation, and in their absence of verbal narrative, traumatic memories resemble the memories of young children” (Herman 38).

When the memoirs are additionally concerned with childhood trauma, the need for visual aid becomes even more important, because all the memories, not only the traumatic ones are encoded in images, physical and emotional cues. The three primary texts are all concerned with the visual presentation, but in very different ways. Small is considerably more focused on the emotions that the characters portrayed, compared to Bechdel who has an obsessive eye for details, and recreates her childhood home with extreme care. David B is not interested in the reality of his childhood, but the images and the fantasy world he created to deal with trauma.

My thesis will contain three main chapters each addressing a graphic memoir. The first chapter deals with David Small's *Stitches*, set in the 1950s and the events recounted occurred earliest of the three memoirs. It also contains themes that are relevant to both of the other memoirs; illness relating to *Epileptic* and sexuality to *Fun Home*. As such, it seems a good place to start in order to later relate to the two other graphic memoirs. I will be spending time looking at the trauma Small experiences in his childhood, particularly in relation to his mother arguing that the trauma he is experiencing is closely related to the trauma that his own mother has had to go through. In this sense, his trauma can be read as an inheritance imparted by his family. However, Small himself claims that his memoir is not about his mother, but I will argue that to understand himself he has had to explore his own family history.

Continuing with the chronological theme the second chapter is concerned with David B's memoir *Epileptic* and themes that have been developed in *Stitches* will be further explored, particularly, the relationship between trauma, illness, and secondary trauma. David B spends considerable time exploring his own feelings concerning his brother and continually questions his brother's illness. David's memoir is the most fantastical of the three memoirs in form with ghosts and demons having a prominent place; it is perhaps also the darkest, visually speaking. The drawings intensify David's words and makes for an ominous read as he explores his darkest thoughts, putting no censorship on his drawings. The drawings seem to be David's way of coping with the trauma by pouring all the pain and frustration into the drawings.

Lastly, I will spend time on Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home*. Here the theme of sexuality, in relation to trauma, will play a larger role, than in the previous two memoirs. Bechdel struggles with her relationship to her father, because he has always been a distant and unapproachable figure in her life, however as she gets older secrets concerning her father start to

surface and she realizes that the cold and distant man has more in common with her than she previously thought. Bechdel is caught between truth and lies and this is reflected in her drawings as they are factual and closely related to reality, it is in her discussions and captions that her true emotions surface and where she can explore every aspect of her father.

To conclude, I will present the three memoirs in relation to trauma theory and the way in which the authors attempt to narrativize the traumatic events they experienced by using the graphic novel as an outlet, which allows them to visualize their experiences using both illustrations and text.



# CHAPTER 1: *STITCHES*

David Small has continued the relatively new trend within the comic medium of writing graphic novels that are autobiographical, more specifically in this case, a memoir. It has become an increasingly common way for writers to examine their life and invite readers into their good and bad experiences. Small explores the difficult and hard times that formed his life with an honest approach to difficult topics that are often ignored or avoided. Small's graphic memoir *Stitches* is concerned with his childhood, and his relationship to his dysfunctional family. Small explores his own family history in relation to himself and takes an honest look at his parent's failings when it came to parenting. The general feel of the graphic memoir is dark, with emotionally heavy topics that are not easy to put into words. Yet, in the writing of the memoir lies hope and resurrection. Signaling that although Small has experienced traumatic things both physical and psychological he was able to, despite this, work through it and become a whole person and create beauty where there was none.

On the surface, the family is much like any other family. His mother, Betty, is a homemaker and his father is a radiologist. As the memoir unfolds, it becomes clear that David and his brother are deprived of basic emotional support from their parents. The household is under constant stress and pressure, mainly caused by David's unhappy parents and a lack of communication among the family members. At the age of eleven, a lump is discovered in David's neck, and instead of having it removed immediately his parents choose to wait. The operation turns out to be more extensive than expected and when David wakes up from his final operation discovers that he cannot speak because the doctors were forced to remove one of his vocal cords in the process. David's unhappy and lonely childhood is further shaken when he accidentally discovers in a letter his mother is writing to his grandmother that the routine operation to remove a lump from his neck was in fact a cancerous tumor caused by his father's excessive use of x-ray when he was a child. Not only must David live in a household where nothing is communicated, but his voice is also taken away from him, perhaps most traumatic of all. His parents seem to prefer that he suppress his feelings and internalize negative emotions, much like the way they handle their own problems.

*Stitches* is in the traditional sense not a typical story of trauma, however I would argue that many aspects of trauma are transferable and relevant to *Stitches*. David's childhood is largely free of physical abuse, apart from the one instance with his grandmother, though one could perhaps argue that not removing the lump in David's neck is neglect of his physical wellbeing. There is no indication in the memoir that his parents physically abuse David, however, they do inflict psychological pain by neglecting his emotional needs, particularly in instances such as when he gets cancer and loses his voice, or even when he expresses a fear of his grandmother, who in fact is physically abusive. The main event that seems to be the breaking point for David, and one of the few scenes that is repeated, is when he wakes up from his operation and discovers that he has lost his voice. This greatly upsets him and over time he becomes increasingly affected and reaches a state of panic that escalates into a breakdown from the trauma that he has experienced, and it is only when he reaches that point that he receives professional help.

Despite the individual experience that Small describes in his memoir, it does not necessarily mean that his experience is unique, but is simply less visible to the public. David is able to function more or less normally for most parts of his childhood. Both of his parents are respectable and live up to the social norms and are seemingly good parents. There would be little or no reason to suppose that they were neglectful of their children, so if Small had never written the memoir his story would never have been revealed to the public. What Small, David B. and Bechdel suggest through writing their memoirs is that their stories are considerably more universal than what most people perhaps want to believe.

Trauma is not necessarily unique and far removed from our daily lives, but in fact it is happening within well respected families, such as in the memoirs, thus the quiet trauma is eerily close to home. The lack of acknowledgement may simply relate to people's fear of discovering the extent of human pain, and in acknowledging its existence it involves a form of witnessing that the public seems to shy away from. Herman claims that: "The knowledge of horrible events periodically intrudes into public awareness but is rarely retained for long. Denial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social as well as an individual level" (Herman 2). People are weary of entering into a discussion of quiet trauma as it demands an engagement and discovery of events that are very much immediate and close. It is easy to repress and ignore trauma that happened to

people who are long gone, or who live on a different continent. When it is happening in your own backyard it is harder to look past once it has been revealed.

## DRAWING SILENCE

Growing up in an uncommunicative family, Small has to find other ways of accessing and communicating his emotions and trauma. The graphic medium is, through its use of both words and images, ideal for Small to explore these aspects of his past. I will be looking at the connection between trauma and the graphic memoir, and the ways in which Small is able to express the trauma and the lack of communication in his family.

The ways in which David is able to work his way back to recovery is interesting as there are many interesting parallels to the stages of recovery that are described in Judith Herman's book *Trauma and Recovery*. I would argue that the memoir and the process of writing it, seems to have been an important step towards healing. As such, there seems to be an intrinsic connection between trauma and the graphic memoir. On the surface, it may not seem like a particularly obvious connection, but considering that "Traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images" (Herman 38). The experiences that David has gone through are difficult to access verbally and this is not helped by the family's attitude. Small's family is not communicative and anything negative happening in David's life is ignored as if unimportant, such as his cancer. When the cancer also affected his vocal cords and literally took his voice away it is unsurprising that Small chose a medium where he can combine words with illustrations. Even when he still had his voice, his parents still preferred silence from him, and so he his ability to express himself verbally has always been suppressed, therefore graphic medium is the ideal place to combine his talents and communicate his story.

There is generally a lack of communication between the family members in the memoir. The memoir gives an impression of silent and passive aggressive family relationships. This feeling is largely contributed by Small's sparingly use of both speech bubbles and caption boxes

in the memoir, particularly when compared to both *Epileptic* and *Fun Home*. The memoir is far from lacking in verbal commentary and dialogue, but it is often short and concise with little discussion and analysis of the situations and experiences. There is no indicator that the Small family were any different when Small was younger, the family dynamics have changed very little, in comparison to the Beauchards in *Epileptic* where there was a definite shift in the family relations after Jean-Christophe became ill. The silence was always a part of the Small family, unlike the Beauchards who had a tragedy strike the family and create imbalance. David has never known any other way of life. His life has always been silent and so the visual cues have always been where he could gain information.

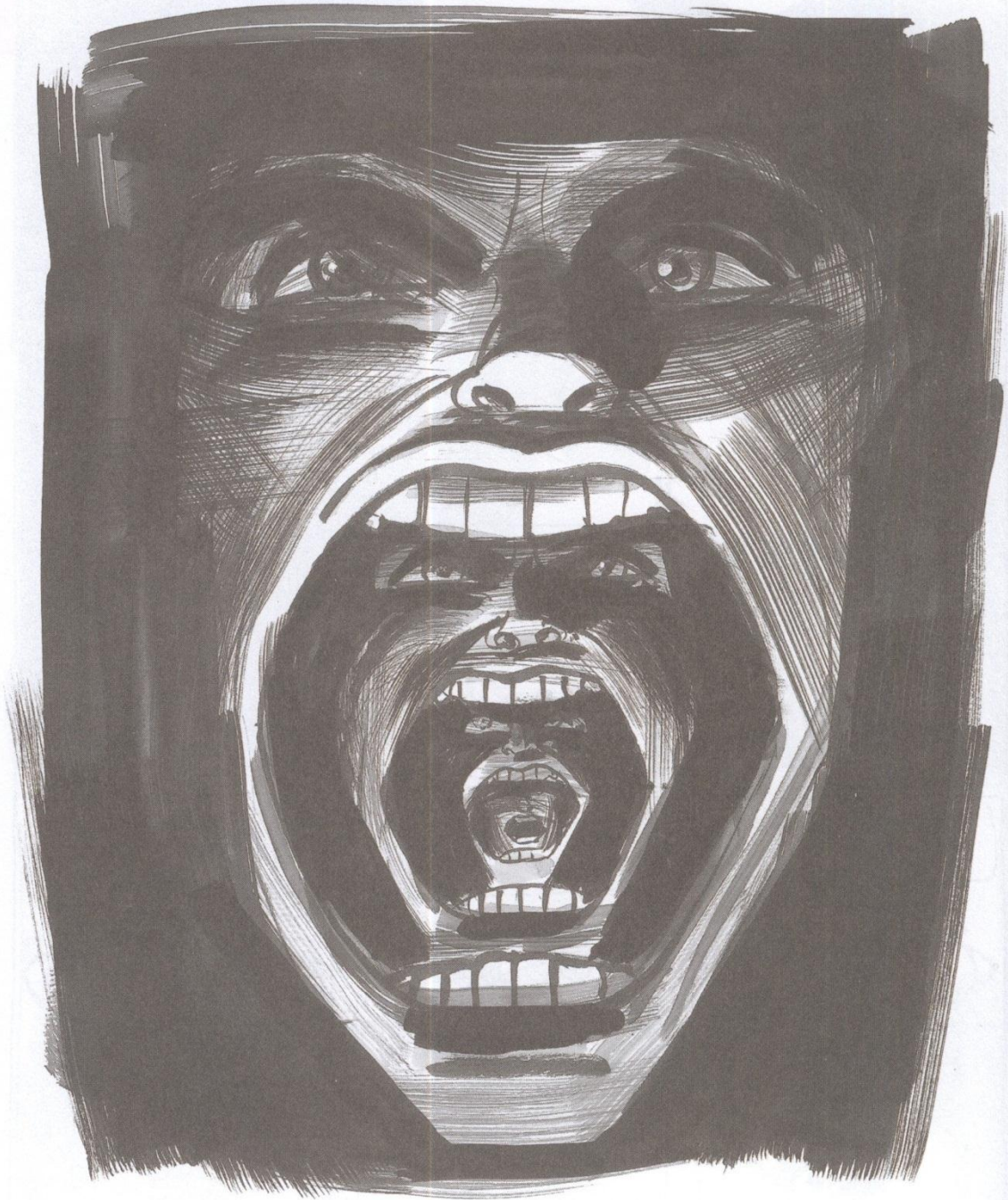
Generally, David's parents do not share much information with David, whether it concerns him directly or not. Small's childhood is often uncertain with little clarity. This continues through to his adolescence. The traumatic experience that seems to be the ultimate source of disconnection for David is when he, by accident, discovers that the initially small operation was in fact to remove a cancerous tumor, which resulted in the removal of his voice. What makes the shock even bigger is the fact that his parents have kept it a secret from him. David's parents create a void in his life by never giving him information. He must simply accept whatever is happening to him without being able to question what is going on. Trauma is often described as an informational void, empty of meaning. Similarly, David's parents create a void in his life, both literally and figuratively, when he still had his voice he was still unable to speak about what was going on because he was not able to access it. Caruth explains that trauma: "Not having been fully integrated as it occurred, the event cannot become... a 'narrative memory' that is integrated into a completed story of the past" (Caruth, *Explorations in Memory* 153). Similarly, David cannot forget events that took place in his life, such as the operation, because he was unable to comprehend what was happening caused by the lack of information given by his parents. This relates to many experiences in his life, such as the unprovoked experience of being physically abused by his mentally unstable grandmother, which I will look at more closely later.

Trauma does not register in the same ways a normal memory would Herman explains that: "Given the 'iconic,' visual nature of traumatic memories, creating pictures may represent the most effective initial approach to these 'indelible images'" (Herman 177). The traumatic memory become images that relay an overwhelming amount of negative emotions, which makes

the victim unable to process and communicate what they are experiencing in a regular manner. Therefore, it may be more fruitful to recreate the images themselves instead of attempting to access the emotions tied to the images. Small seems more comfortable with drawing his experiences than verbalizing them, which makes the comic a natural choice for his memoir. In Small's case, because of his uncommunicative childhood, his trauma may essentially be tied to images and less so to words. This would account for his lack of verbal communication in his memoir, compared to *Epileptic* and *Fun Home*.

Not only has he had to struggle with a non-communicative family, but the trauma in itself is hard to convey. Cathy Caruth explains that the traumatic memories are not easily accessible to those who experienced the traumatic events precisely because they are not a memory in the traditional sense, but a sudden reliving of a past event that overwhelms the person who experiences it. There is no temporal distance; instead, they relive it every time as if it were the first time. Regular memories are forgotten and stored into a chronological order that belongs to the past and called upon when necessary. A traumatic memory is always in the present or even timeless, and because of this, it is impossible to put into narrative because of the immediacy of the emotions and the images of the traumatic event (Caruth 4-5). David's frustration with not being able to express himself or access his feelings and thoughts are visually represented by his drawing below with David's face screaming all his thoughts and feelings are given a voice by his many faces coming out of each mouth like a Russian doll. It illustrates the many layers of trauma and frustration in David's life. His drawing style is also uncharacteristically harsh and dark, almost reminiscent of David B's drawings, with the primary color being black. His shading is scratchy and intense reflecting the anger he is portraying.

HOW I WANTED TO RESPOND:

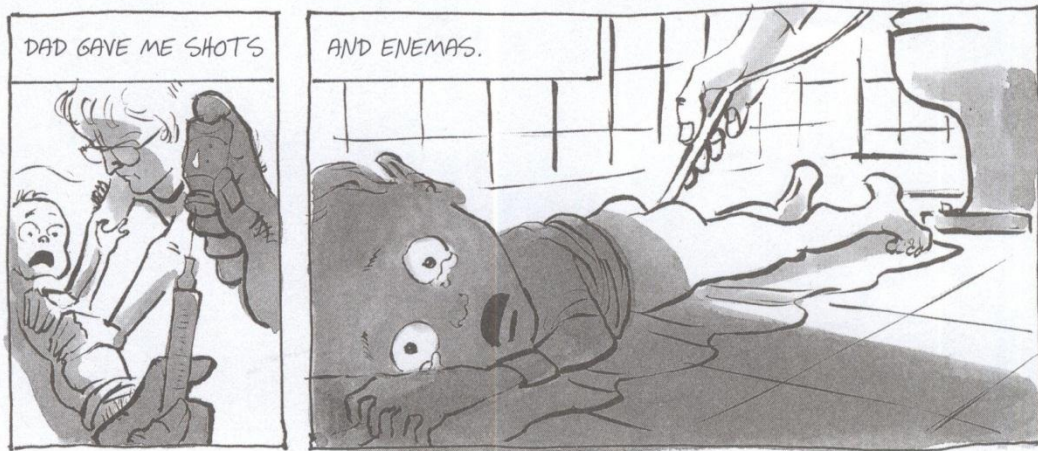


(Small 234)

David Small grew up during the 1950s in a decade that was defined by what seemed like mutually exclusive ideas and thoughts: “it was an age of great optimism along with the



gnawing fear of doomsday bombs, of great poverty in the midst of unprecedented prosperity, and of flowery rhetoric about equality along with the practice of rampant racism and sexism” (Halliwell 4). What seems to be prevalent during the 1950s was the great distance between the façade that was presented to the world and what was truly being felt and done by people. In a time wrought with paradoxes Small must live in a similar topsy-turvy world where he does not quite fit in.

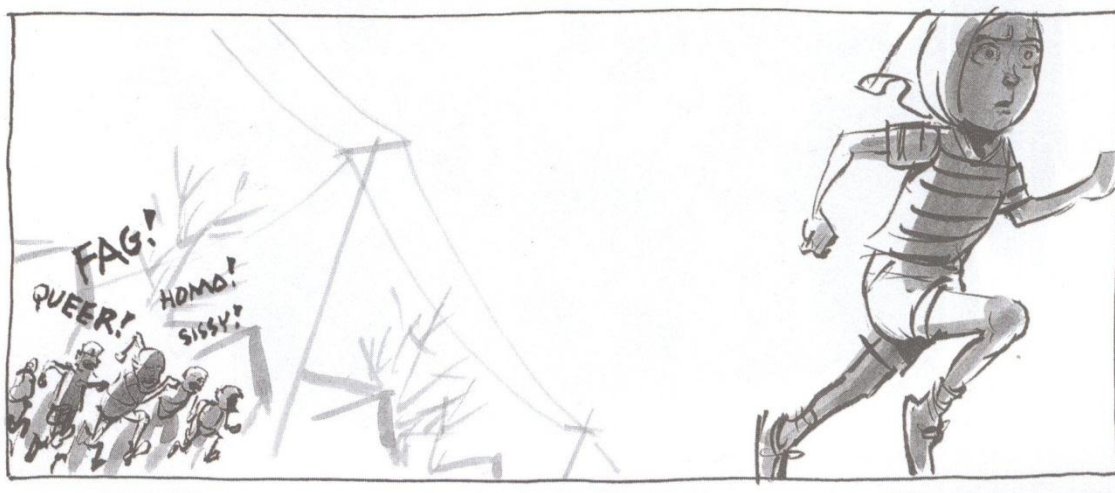


(Small 20)

David was a sensitive child, not only in his disposition, but also physically. Born with several conditions that needed to be treated on a regular basis, his childhood was continually interrupted by medical procedures, largely performed by his father, who was a radiologist. His relationship to his parents seems colored by the fact that he was sick so often, as there is a detached distance between himself and his parents as if he is a patient and not their son. The above panel shows one of the few times there is any physical contact between David and his parents, but instead of being affectionate, they are holding him down in order to give him a shot and enema. His parent’s hands are not associated with comfort and safety, but with force and power. David’s terror and helplessness becomes very clear as he clutches on to the towel with tears streaming down his face. The shadow that looms over David literally puts him in the dark and seems to be an appropriate visual representation of his parent’s approach to David in general when it comes to empowerment through information. David’s eyes are still drawn starkly white

in contrast to the shadow across his upper body. It gives a focus to the eyes and directs the reader's eyes to the emotion on his face. From a very young age loneliness and isolation were a part of Small's existence, and the only times he receives any attention from his parents is when he is sick, or when he has done something wrong.

While they treat his illnesses, they do not seem to address what implications this may have on his childhood or his mental state of mind. He has little or no positive interaction with children his own age. While his poor constitution is a contributing cause, his personality and background plays also a factor in the teasing he experiences by children in the neighborhood. David learns other ways in which to entertain himself, as a result he immerses himself in his favorite stories and imagines he is Alice in Wonderland, escaping into his own world. Putting on the yellow towel David transforms into someone else and escapes the real world; however, it also alienates him from other children as they recognize this as odd behavior. The mothers, who keep their children away from him, probably spur on the children's behavior (Small 57). He becomes socially an outcast, and finds little solace and connection in his social life.



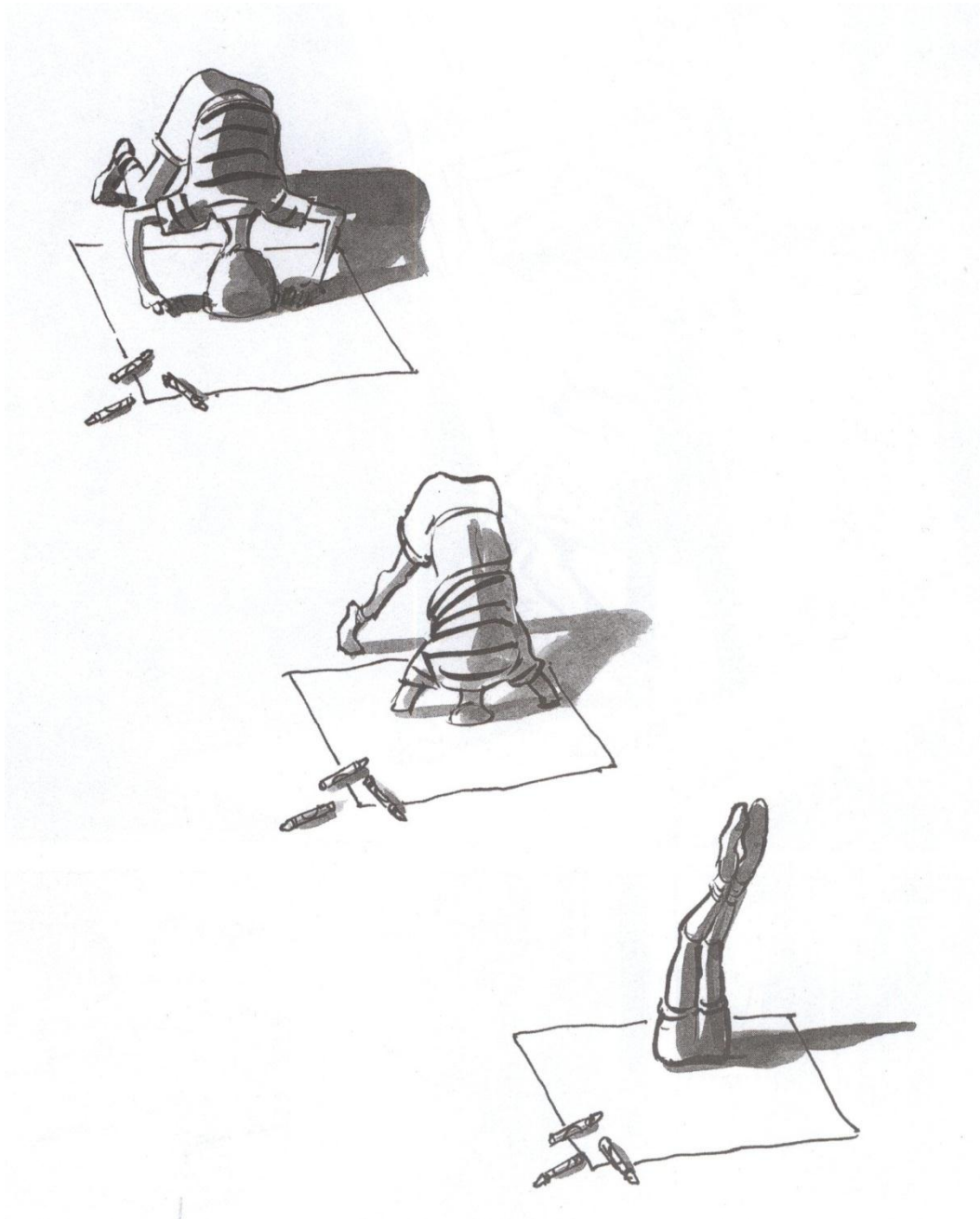
(Small 60)

His way of playing does not conform to the ideas surrounding what was acceptable behavior for a boy. In reaction to this, the children chase after him and call him names as seen in the above panel; it seems that they find his behavior feminine, which was deeply frowned upon. During the 1950s, there was a strong belief in traditional gender roles, and any form of deviation



was denounced (Miller and Nowak 169). In the panel, David is clearly singled out, and stands completely alone against the bullies that are running after him, something he grows accustomed to as he gets older. The children's reaction to David is spurred on by their parents' attitude towards him and is a reflection of the negative attitude towards gender deviation; hence the name calling that refers to homosexuals and those that deviate from the gender norm. However, it is not only David who seems to struggle with the gender norms but also his mother Betty, which we will come back to.

Because of his health, and the treatment he gets from the other children in the neighborhood, he spends considerable time indoors, and there he finds an escape in drawing. Withdrawing into his drawings is where he finds a world in which he belongs; it seems to one of the few things in his life that brings him genuine joy. The complete abandonment and exaltation he expresses in the panel when he literally dives into his drawings, illustrate what an important role it plays in his life, and it is a good indicator of what it will mean to him in the future. It is also one of the few panels where there are no borders, the picture bleeds out past the page, in others words; there is nothing to contain him. There is nothing to hold him back particularly not his home and family as the background is completely white his reality literally disappears. All the regular indicators of time are removed by taking away the details. Removing the frames and the gutters, the usual indicators of time and space, makes the scene seem timeless and even set outside of space and this adds to the sensation of freedom (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 103).



(Small 62)

It is interesting that as a child, David draws cartoons to escape his life, as Wolk puts it: “the comic medium was built on the idea of escapism and the pleasure that goes with it” (Wolk 133). Although the circumstances for the escape are not cheerful, it still illustrates that many consider the comic as a getaway. The comics allowed David to avoid the conflicts that arose in

the family, by not being present, in other words he disassociates with his surroundings. The best would naturally have been to live in a functional family, where the negative things were discussed, yet because there is no allowance for that, David must create another way of protecting himself. However, as an adult he uses the graphic medium not as an escape, but as a way to access the truth that he worked so hard to ignore as a child.

While he may have his family, they are poor companions, as they seem to avoid each other's company. There is little or no connection between the family members, instead of interacting, as most families, they all seem to live parallel lives, without relating with one another beyond the superficial. The sense of not quite fitting in is a theme that is repeated in all three memoirs and closely related is the feeling of isolation, be it from their own families or the public sphere. In Small's case he is unable to find any true connections with his family, as there is an emotional distance between him and his family. He becomes more of a spectator than a player in his own life as he is set aside in the periphery of the household.

## **DAVID AND HIS MOTHER**

At the crux of the memoir is David's turbulent relationship to his mother and it is a theme that reoccurs throughout. David's mother represents a traumatic memory for David through her neglect and cold distant personality. However, in order for David to fully understand his mother's behavior towards him, he must also gain an understanding of her, particularly in the context of the 1950s and her sexuality. I will explore the relationship between David and his mother, and in turn Betty and her mother as a way to access their traumatic pasts.

His parent's lack of involvement in his life and feelings put them in an enormously powerful position, because a child will always seek out a safe haven in their parents, but instead David is met with a cold and distant mother who is emotionally hard to grasp. David is always in a vulnerable position with his parents, particularly his mother. This Small illustrates, in the scenes with his parents, by using a high-angle view. The high-angle view heightens the impression of David being small and weak in the presence of his parents. The reader sees that from David's

point of view we are looking up at his parents, giving the impression of them looming over David. (Duncan and Smith 143) This is further intensified in the ways they speak to David, as if he were inferior and worthless, such as when Betty is leaving David off at his first appointment with the psychologist her only comment on the appointment is that: “It’s like throwing money down a hole, if you ask me!” (Small 247) Her focus is primarily on how much money they are spending on him and not if it will help him.



(Small 233)

David’s mother seems to be a deeply unhappy housewife and in her frustration she slams cupboard doors and generally shows an aggression towards the world she is forced to live in, such as in the panel below. Many wives of the 1950s were deeply unhappy and uncomfortable in

the role of homemaker: “Many women found the wife-and-mother role not at all as fulfilling as the mystique had promised. They found themselves trivialized by spending all their time with children; they found themselves expanding housework into a major operation; they found the demands of their role not enjoyable but boring and humiliating” (Miller and Nowak 173). David narrates the memoir and so we never get any true insight into Betty’s world, but her aggression and frustration seems to indicate that she is truly unhappy and therefore is unable to care for her children and live up to the role that society expected of women during the 1950s.

Betty’s unhappiness is closely connected to her closeted life as a lesbian, not only is her physical heart on the wrong side, but her emotional and sexual needs are “wrong” by the contemporary standards she lived by. As previously mentioned there was little or no room for gender or sexual deviance: “Instead of regarding human sexuality as a thing as flexible as human personality, everyone had to measure up to a certain rigid rules. People had to pretend” (Miller and Nowak 170). Betty has clearly had to pretend that she was heterosexual in order to fit in to the cultural expectations. As Miller and Nowak expresses, in *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, there was no other viable option, for most people, than to live the normative heterosexual lifestyle, and so “Marriage no longer becomes a voluntary experience of joy and fulfillment. Rather it is a no-exit cage. Humanity’s condition is reduced to robot obedience” (Miller and Nowak 176). Betty seems to have followed the path of obedience, but in doing so, it seems she has given up her own identity. It is therefore no surprise that she finds it difficult to raise two children, when she in fact is living a life that is essentially based on lies. She not only struggles with the confines of the kitchen, but also the metaphorical closet. I would argue that she might even find her life painful and difficult to the point that it is traumatic, her own children being a representation of her hopeless state. She is, at her worst, resentful of her children, and in being in a constant state of lying has made her bitter. As is illustrated in her complete lack of sympathy and care for David when he finds himself ill, or even when he experiences traumatizing things such as being hurt by his grandmother. This disassociation with family is also a trait present in Alison Bechdel’s father, who similarly struggles with the heterosexual life.

David’s father does not seem any more invested in the family and marriage than Betty does, as he spends numerous hours at the hospital, and he escapes the household as soon as he can, as is visually represented below by him driving out of the driveway at such a high speed that

his tires screech. As an adult he can escape the tension in the household and because his main concern is as a breadwinner he need not concern himself with the children as that is Betty's job. His lack of presence in the memoir itself indicates his lack of engagement in David's life and it is not until later in the memoir when he confesses that he was the contributing factor in David's cancer that he shows much engagement at all. Social expectation dictated that it was entirely a mother's job to take care of the emotional wellbeing of the children, and the man's job was to be the breadwinner, so in that sense he is doing what was expected of him in his role as father and husband.



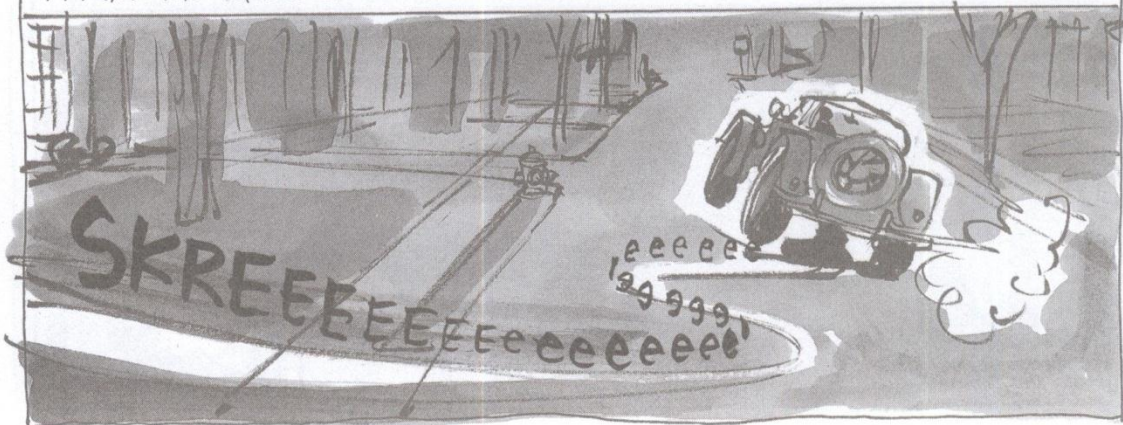
AFTER DINNER CAME THE SOUNDS OF MOTHER IN THE KITCHEN  
"TAKING CARE OF" THE DISHES . . .



. . . OF MY BROTHER SLAMMING AWAY AT HIS DRUMS IN THE BASEMENT . . .



. . . AND THE SQUEAL OF DAD'S TIRES AS HE PEELED OUT DOWN PINEHURST AVENUE.



(Small 188)

David's brother plays an even smaller role in the memoir, however Small suggests that he was no happier in the household, and so it is perhaps no surprise that he plays the drums as an

outlet for his emotions. The few interactions between the two brothers are largely those of an older brother teasing his younger brother. What the page below suggests and that is prevalent in all three memoirs is the lack of support and sense of familial bonds within the families. All three memoirists identify the loneliness as a contributing factor in their trauma and I would argue that an important part of family ties is the sense of someone listening and observing the pain, witnessing one's bad experiences. Herman identifies that the family support after experiencing traumatic episodes is vitally important for the victim's recovery, but David gets no recognition from his family at all. Betty seems too concerned with her own pain and unhappiness to be able to relate and sympathize with David's experiences. David's family does not acknowledge the fact that David had cancer, let alone that the operation and losing his voice as traumatic.

David becomes increasingly aware of how his trauma is not only invisible to his family, but no one around him seems to see what is going on. The trauma of discovering the cancer has revealed a world in which he no longer belongs. "Traumatic events, once again, shatter the sense of connection between individual and community, creating a crisis of faith" (Herman 55). The horrors of the discovery that he had cancer causes a break down, and complete loss of faith in his family, but also his surroundings. He becomes increasingly convinced that he is invisible and forgotten. If he is invisible to the world then there is really no hope in anyone recognizing his trauma. His existential crisis is illustrated below, with what appears to be a packed school hall with kids everywhere going about their lives. The scene is chaotic with drawings overlapping and crisscrossing over each other. It gives an impression of a noisy hallway during recess, but in the midst of the chaos there is an outlined figure representing David. He is completely blank, devoid of any detail or shading, simply an outline of a person lost in the chaos, a fitting reflection of his life in general. Not only has he lost his voice, but he has also become invisible, it is almost as if he does not exist. The act of witnessing become impossible as there is no one around to hear him, or see him.





(Small 212)

The relationship that weighs particularly heavy on him is his relationship to his mother. It is, unsurprisingly, particularly strained and is a large factor in his unstable childhood. When she is upset or angry, there is little or no verbal exchange; instead there is a terrorizing anger that permeates the home. David's mother is a ticking time bomb that can go off at any moment, and the two boys in the household have little or no indicators, beyond tiny cues such as the shifting of a fork. David therefore becomes highly aware and adept at reading any changes in mood. As Herman argues it is common trait among children, who grow up in an abusive environment, to become exceptionally good at reading facial cues in order to be able to respond quickly (Herman 99). Betty is unable to give her children a stable world to live in and instead her emotions

constantly confront her. There are indications that this is a reflection of the inner turmoil she lives with every day.

In Small's case, it seems to have made him able to depict body language and facial signals that are instantly recognizable. Small focuses mainly on drawings, particularly the facial expressions on the characters he draws. Growing up with parents who were mainly silent may have on one hand caused Small to be inept when it comes to expressing emotions verbally. On the other hand, he became very adept at reading people's emotions, particularly because of his mother's sudden change in moods, where he had to get out of the way or be swept away by them. There is little or no doubt, what the character is feeling, even without a speech bubble or a text box. As readers, we are instantly drawn in by his simple, but expressive style of drawing. He forces the reader to focus precisely on emotions by frequently using close ups of people's faces in the memoir. The face of the character will fill the panels and leaves little else to look at, giving the facial expression particular focus and high impact.

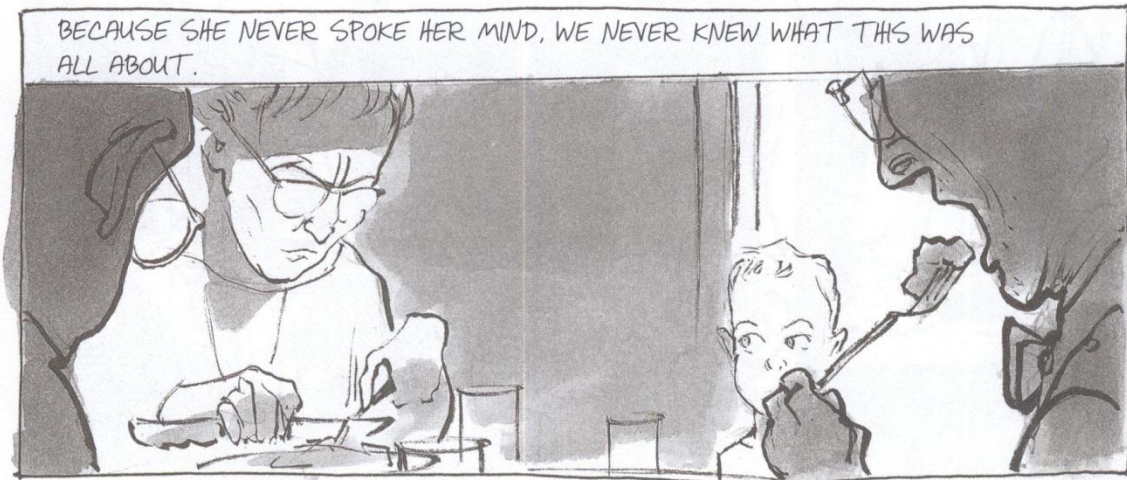
Unlike Bechdel and David B., Small seems largely unconcerned with portraying the scenery and background objects. Often Small leaves the background bare apart from a wash of watercolor, and when he does draw backgrounds it is sparse in details. Beyond the initial first page, that identifies Small's hometown as Detroit, the setting and scenery is simply not the focus of the memoir, and the real interest lies with the people. In drawing the backgrounds with little detail, the reader does not focus on that particular aspect and instead looks towards the characters in order to gain meaning from the memoir. In contrast, Bechdel is on the opposite end of the scale and is obsessed with detail, and goes out of her way to explain what things are, if her drawings are not detailed enough then she even supplies the reader with additional information on the objects. This contrast suggests two very different approaches not only to their own trauma and memories, but they ways in which the authors find themselves expressing trauma.

*Fun Home* is full of details and Bechdel often breaks the chronology making the reader confused and overwhelmed. She seems to want to mimic the ways in which trauma overwhelms and confuses the victim. In doing so, the reader loses some of the connection with the characters of the memoir. When everything in the memoir takes up so much space in the reader's mind, there will necessarily be aspects that are lost or leave less of an impact (McCloud, *Making Comics* 49). Small, on the other hand, has stripped down the memoir to the bare minimum.

Leaving very little for the eye to look at and linger. The story becomes linear and pulls the reader onwards. However, when there are details in *Stitches* they become even more intensified and accentuated because they appear in a void with nothing or little else to look at. McCloud says that there is: “One set of lines to see. Another set of lines to be” (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 43). The lines to see referring to the background and the lines to be is the character, but in Small’s case there is no lines “to see” or background, and so we become even more immersed in the characters. Small’s focus is on the emotional aspect of the memoir and so this is where the reader experiences most intensity.

However, the lack of context and place in David’s drawings can also be seen as another way of expressing the effects of trauma. Trauma has colored most of David’s childhood there are few moments in the memoir that are genuinely happy. David seems to associate most of his childhood with negative and traumatic moments and Whitehead suggests that places, in this case David’s childhood homestead, can carry the trauma of the past and: “suggest a connection between trauma and place, so that something of the trauma remains or inheres at the site of the occurrence” (Whitehead 28) . If so, it is natural that his memory of his surroundings and the details of his life are not easily accessible to him.

Generally, the memoir takes on a dream-like quality with the use of watercolors, which suggests something unreal or a lack of comprehension. There are parts of his childhood that are unbelievable even to David himself, they appear to him more like a dream or a ghost from the past. The whole memoir can be seen as ghost that has come back to haunt David. , which suggests something unfinished that needs resolving which supports the idea of the memoir being in its entirety a trauma memory. “In contemporary fiction, then, the ghost story is reconfigured to explore the nature of trauma as a psychological possession” (Whitehead 7). The form of the memoir is under the possession of trauma and so it is not entirely accessible to David, which results in the hazy ghostlike visual representation of his childhood.



(Small 16)

Small's ability to portray emotions has been used particularly to his advantage when he draws his mother. If it were not for the visual representation of Betty, it would be hard to realize the extent of her unhappiness. For large parts of the memoir, she is scowling, as seen above, and obviously, that is how Small remembers his mother. Her furrowed brows are particularly noticeable and a characteristic that is repeated throughout the memoir. Her unhappy disposition becomes even more pronounced when she is compared to other characters outside the family. Other characters are often portrayed smiling with pearly white teeth, when compared with Betty's scowling face it intensifies the reader's impression that she is an unhappy person. It is, however, not only Betty who appears sober the family in general are rarely drawn looking genuinely happy.

Another image that relates to the presentation of Betty is that often times Small does not draw Betty's eyes behind the glasses, but simply represents them as white blank space, as if there is a glare on her glasses that does not allow the readers or David to see her eyes, such as in the above drawing. It gives a slightly ominous feel to her character as people generally seek eye contact from others as a way to read their emotions, but in Betty's case we are not able to reach her. This seems to represent a distance between Betty and the outside world. It is Betty's armor against people, much like David's in *Epileptic*, who draws himself with armor in order to represent the distance he has to those around him. In Betty's case the glass is a barrier between



her and everyone else, and it is only when she is overwhelmed by her emotions or completely relaxed that we see a glimpse of her eyes and therefore what Betty is feeling.



(Small 273)

It is therefore fitting that the only time we see Betty exposed, both literally and figuratively is when David finds her in bed with Mrs. Dillon. Her hidden secret has been revealed and it is only when she no longer is wearing her glasses that David is able to see his mother as her true self. The close up on her face gives a very different experience of Betty, she is certainly recognizable, but at the same time an entirely different side of her is visible to the reader. The vulnerable look on her face is entirely different from the harsh and angry expression the reader usually sees. The main emotion that comes across to the reader is sadness, and not surprise or shame or even anger, as one would perhaps expect in that particular situation. Betty has spent her life living a lie as a closeted lesbian, and suddenly the truth is revealed to her son. Betty's long

kept secret is suddenly revealed and the anger and frustration that she has been carrying with her gives way to the sadness in the realization that her son knows the truth about her. Despite the memoir being about Small's trauma, at that moment in the memoir it is not his trauma we are witnessing, but Betty's trauma. The image that gives the most impact is close a up panel of Betty's face staring directly at the reader and not the emotional havoc that David must be experiencing, although we learn his confusion through the caption, our eye is more naturally drawn towards Betty.

Betty does not always seem unhappy, it is particularly in social functions that we as readers see another side of her, but even David himself is surprised by the difference he sees in her. In David's own words: "She became someone I hardly recognized" (Small 114). The smile on Betty's face in the panel is genuinely happy, and the taciturn woman that we have come to know is suddenly glowing with happiness. Even the frown lines on her forehead have disappeared. On one hand, it allows David to see a different side of his mother, where she seems genuinely happy and carefree. Obviously, she finds joy in entertaining her friends. On the other hand, it just confirms what an unpredictable person she is to relate to, but also accentuates her poor relationship to her children and family. David seems therefore to feel conflicted about his mother's sudden burst of joy.



(Small 113)

## THE INHERITED TRAUMA

I find the term that Kaplan uses to describe the trauma that affects the private sphere: “quiet trauma” as particularly appropriate for *Stitches*. The trauma does not relate to a larger catastrophic event, but a family tragedy. As such, the trauma that occurs in *Stitches* cannot be seen in isolation, but is an inheritance dealt down through generations. I will be looking at the nature of the inherited trauma as Small depicts it in the memoir, but also look at the larger social implications of trauma that relates to the private life. Lastly, I will round off the chapter and tie *Stitches* to the following memoirs.

Betty’s unhappy situation is a complex matter with many aspects that factor in, but a factor that seems to play a particularly important part, aside from her closeted sexuality, is the relationship to her own mother. During David’s stay with his grandmother it becomes clear that Betty’s childhood may not have been an easy one. In a fit of rage, David’s grandmother scalds his hands as a form of punishment, the incident seems largely unprovoked and tells a story of an imbalanced person, who executes power over children as she sees fit. When Betty realizes that something has happened with David while she was gone, she seems unable to react to the incident. While she is worried, her own fear seems to take over and she is unable to act upon the information. David’s trust in his mother is sorely tried, which Herman identifies as such a basic element in human development: “The sense of safety in the world, or basic trust, is acquired in earliest life in relationship with the first caretaker... The original experience of care makes it possible for human beings to envisage a world in which they belong, a world hospitable to human life” (Herman 51).



(Small 97)

The instance is so shocking to David that his own consciousness seems to alter in order to handle the situation, and he “doublethinks” as Herman calls it in which he is able to hold to opposite ideas in his head at the same time. On one hand he realizes that what his grandma did was wrong, on the other hand he seems to think that she was justified in her actions, as if seen from her point of view (Herman 87). This dual experience of the situation is represented in two panels with identical drawings of David’s face, but mirroring each other giving the impression of two young David’s looking at the reader. The two faces seem to represent his mind holding the two opposite thoughts at the same time. The angle Small has drawn the two faces makes it look like the two heads are sharing the same body adding to the sensation of oppositions meeting in one person. His expression is neutral in both panels, in contrast to the event that has just taken place. Perhaps, where young David is unable to get emotionally involved in what he has experienced, he must ask the reader to experience it and witness the traumatic event for him.

Betty does not seem surprised that David’s grandmother has scared him, and her reactions alternates between being genuinely frightened and angry. The word “crazy” seems to particularly trigger a reaction. Betty’s reaction is an indicator than the grandmother’s irrational behavior is not something new; presumably, Betty has experienced similar situations growing up. Later in the memoir we learn that she is so mentally unstable that she tries to burn the house down with her husband locked inside. Betty’s fear of her own mother seems to be so indoctrinated in her that she is unable to stand up to her mother, even when her own son suffers under her irrational behavior. She is obviously concerned for her son as the look on her face attests to, but perhaps



out of an ill found sense of loyalty to her mother she overrides her concern and instead becomes angry. It is not uncommon for children who have experienced abusive parents to become irrationally protective of them.

The fear that she exhibits suggests that she has experienced some trauma growing up in her mother's household that she has not addressed. Betty is affected by traumatic events that relate to several aspects of her life; to her mother, her sexuality and even her illness. Her traumas have been left disregarded, and in doing so has not only affected herself, but also those close to her. This raises the question of how trauma affects not only the victims directly, but also those close to them. David's trauma is closely related to his mother's trauma because in her inability to cope with her own trauma she has contributed to her son's trauma. All three memoirists seem to suggest a similar sense of shared trauma with their family members. Betty does not seem to seek out and purposefully hurt David, but her inadequate dealings with her own trauma has left her cold and distanced, which had afflicted David with traumatic events closely linked to his mother. In other words, no trauma can be seen in isolation because the pain an individual experiences will always be felt by those close to them. Furthermore, the trauma does not belong to one person alone, as explained above David's trauma is inextricably linked to his mother's trauma. The quiet trauma no longer belongs to one individual alone, but one must see it in a historical context of several generations of family members who have struggled with their own experiences of traumatic events and who have left their trauma as inheritance to the next generation.

The trans-generational trauma, as Whitehead calls it, is relevant to all three memoirs. In *Stitches* it becomes apparent in the last chapter, or epilogue, that David perceives that the past will affect those that come after. His grandmother's mental illness was a curse that his mother was always expecting to find in David. The burden of David's ancestors are carried on to him and yet despite this he is able to make a choice of facing the trauma that haunted those before him, and through his courage is able to confront the trauma through the memoir .

As I discuss in the introduction, trauma theory seems often to be associated with texts that concern holocaust, rape, war and physical abuse, however trauma can encompass considerably more. What the memoir challenges is the focus on trauma that is larger and catastrophic in scope such a holocaust, war and natural disasters. In a general sense these events are perhaps easier to address because the cause is larger and more encompassing to a larger amount of people and

therefore more easily dissected in an objective manner because it is easier to generalize around the event. Although it is a personal and individual experience of the events it is easier to generalize because the traumatic event is larger in its scope in the amount of people who are affected, the perpetrators are also numerous. Additionally, although trauma itself lasts for years after the traumatic event, the event itself is usually easier to pinpoint in terms of time span. In the case of both Spiegelman's *Maus* and Satrapi's *Persepolis* the trauma that is being explored can be seen in a larger historical context. Their stories are as much about personal experience as well as observations of the Holocaust and the Iranian Revolution.

There seems to be gravitation towards trauma that touches upon these more general topics because the focus is not only personal, but also public because it is acknowledged as a historically relevant and therefore concerns everyone. When the traumatic event takes place in the private sphere or on a personal level, affecting a few individuals, it becomes harder to observe because the trauma is often hidden from public view and is in its nature accessible usually to the victim and perpetrator alone. It becomes only visible if the perpetrator or the victim comes forth. Small's traumatic childhood would never have been accessible if it had not been for his courageous exploration into his childhood. There would be no reason to suspect emotional neglect in the Small household as both his parents, on the surface, were living up to social expectations. It was all too easy to blame David of being a juvenile delinquent, who was ungrateful to his parents. David's side of the story would probably never have been heard.

The objective approach to trauma is therefore often lost when it is discussed in relation to the quiet trauma because it becomes necessary to understand the victim's background in detail in order to understand the trauma. The objective approach must be lost in order to comprehend the trauma. The quiet traumatic event rarely relates to a specific event, more often it is many smaller reoccurring experiences that develop over years, such as physical abuse or even more abstract abuse such as emotional neglect, as is the case in *Stitches*. In some cases, the victim may never have known any other way of life, and it is not until they become old enough to reflect upon their lives in relation to others that the person realizes that their situation is harmful. Some might argue that the quiet trauma is particularly important to discover and shed light upon because of its private aspect. In trauma that relates to family, as all three memoirs in this thesis, the experiences are not universal or accessible by means of general knowledge. The memoirists therefore have to

build an understanding of a complex situation, sometimes a lifetime of trauma, in a fairly short amount of space.

David's own growth is beautifully illustrated when he visits his mother on her deathbed. David's exploration into his own emotions and his confrontations with his feelings concerning his mother gives him the power and strength to go to his mother's deathbed and say one last goodbye to a person who he realizes he never could get close to. Betty is weak and unable to speak, and David has lost his voice, but words would not be able to bridge the gap between the two. Appropriately the panels are devoid of words, much as their relationship was. The contrast between the weak person lying in the hospital bed, and the angry person David knew growing up is considerable. The scene illustrates the power shift in the relationship, David no longer is the one being looked down upon, but instead he is looking down at his mother. The difference being that Betty used her power to distance herself from David, he on the other hand is finally able to reach out to his mother. His hand caressing her face looks soft and gentle, betraying an unsaid connection between the two. Her eyes behind the glasses are clear and visible and the tear streaming from her eye suggests what an emotional goodbye it is for Betty.



(Small 307)

David's reaction to his mother's death is not particularly clear and Small seems to have purposefully left out his own facial expressions from the pages after he enters his mother's hospital room. He focuses the reader on Betty and her face and the emotions that she is feeling. It seems odd for Small to focus on his mother's emotions when she passes away as he adamantly

claims that it is his story not hers. Yet, what it seems to illustrate is that he does not possess the access to his emotions concerning his mother's death. Having a turbulent relationship to his mother, he could not experience her passing away, because there are so traumatic memories tied to her, which were left unresolved at the time of the death, even as he wrote the memoir. In many ways she is a traumatic memory in herself and so she cannot go away, and instead reappears and lives through the traumatic memory.

In an interview, Small was asked he ever forgave his parents and his reply was:

The whole idea of forgiveness of my parents always struck me as absurd because they had done unforgivable things. But, to jump ahead, now that I've done *Stitches*, I find that there really is a kind of forgiveness that means something. It's not a hollow declaration. To understand somebody else as a human being, I think, is about as close to real forgiveness as one can get. I would say that's probably true of the way I regard my family now. I just see them as people bumbling through life, doing what they thought was best. They had no idea how they were scarring their children, in my case quite literally. (Weich)

The act of writing the memoir may not have accumulated in the forgiveness of his mother, but the key word Small uses in the interview is "understanding" which in relation to trauma suggests a comprehension of the trauma. The writing of the memoir as Herman explains is a form of empowerment because David is able to take control of his past and write it the way he perceived it (Herman 134). The trauma was in David's case closely tied to his parents, particularly his mother. His parents cut him off from information and an understanding of events in his past causing further trauma to events that were already painful. He could never own his childhood. In order to gain control over the traumatic memories and be able to register the emotions without being overwhelmed he had to reach a level of insight into his mother's life. While the story is not about Betty, she is still important to the recovery process.

The next graphic memoir, *Epileptic*, is also concerned with illness and family relations. The main character and author, David B is a healthy young boy, with a loving and close family but when his brother, Jean-Christophe starts having epileptic seizures things change drastically for the family. David sees his older brother slowly degenerate, while his parents desperately try to find a cure. The pain that epilepsy brings to the family particularly affects David, but not wanting to burden his family, he suppresses his emotions. The epilepsy becomes a secondary trauma for David and the epilepsy forces its way into the memoir consuming the heart of the story. The emotional journey David makes is similarly thematically important as in *Stitches*, but is visually represented very differently.

## CHAPTER 2: *EPILEPTIC*

French author David B explores his childhood years in France in the mid-1960s. David's life is turned on its head when his older brother, Jean-Christophe, starts getting epileptic seizures at the age of seven. David's family is much like any other family in their neighborhood, raising three kids and working hard. Before Jean-Christophe's seizures the family lives a regular life. Both of David's parents are art teachers, who allow their three children, Jean-Christophe, Pierre-Francois and Florence to explore and play with the other kids in the neighborhood. As one would expect of children, they are happily unaware of the atrocities in the world; playing with other children, but oblivious of the war that France has just ended with Algeria. When Jean-Christophe becomes ill David in particular must grow up quickly, and see the world from a grown up's perspective and not a child's. The family are cast aside as they are no longer considered "ordinary"; they are forced out into the periphery of the community and their lives are completely changed. The family are met with skepticism and even fear, largely contributed to by the epilepsy, which historically speaking has been an illness that has been met with a great deal of superstition. David is confronted with his often negative feelings concerning his older brother as it becomes clear that he will never recover from his illness. While it may be Jean-Christophe who suffers from epilepsy, his family must also become accustomed to a life in turmoil, confronted with not only Jean-Christophe's outbursts, but also their own feelings and emotions surrounding the illness.

David explores in particular his relationship to his brother and struggles with the implications of having a sick brother. The trauma that occurs in *Epileptic* is slightly different in nature from the two other memoirs, as it is caused by a chronic illness with no cure. There is a clear shift in the family dynamics after Jean-Christophe becomes ill. The trauma can more easily be traced to a specific cause. The memoir is as much about David as it is about Jean-Christophe. David B's memoir is very much a testimony of his lost and often difficult childhood, but in telling his own story, he also has to tell the story of his family and their struggle with his brother's epileptic seizures. David's fate is intertwined with Jean-Christophe's, and when Jean-Christophe

becomes increasingly ill, his pain equally affects David. Any trauma that David has experienced through his childhood, is directly connected to Jean-Christophe and his epilepsy, one could even argue that Jean-Christophe is, in a sense, a traumatic memory for David.

### **WITNESSING IN *EPILEPTIC***

Central to David's memoir is the idea of witnessing and the relationship between the trauma victim and the witness. Witnessing is explored in many different ways throughout the memoir, challenging the ways in which people relate to trauma and illness. David takes on the role as witness to his brother Jean-Christophe at a young age watching the ways in which the epilepsy affects his brother for the worse. I will start by observing the ways in which David's witnessing affects him and the ways in which he deals with the trauma that he has seen, but also resists help from those close to him. I will then look at the role witnessing has in society and the degree people are able to accept trauma victims. Lastly, I will look at the role the reader has as a witness of the trauma in *Epileptic*.

The impact that *Epileptic* has upon the reader is considerable with the exploration of David's and Jean-Christophe's trauma. In exploring his own childhood, David must access his brother's epilepsy in an attempt to understand the mechanisms that have made Jean-Christophe the person he has become. In doing so, he uncovers a world of pain and disappointment, not only for Jean-Christophe, but also for himself. David witnesses, in other words, his brother's trauma and gives Jean-Christophe a voice when he becomes unable to express it himself. In turn, David creates a graphic memoir, where the reader becomes a witness of his own trauma. David demands a lot of the reader, such as breaking chronology and drawing dark twisted drawings in order for the reader to fully comprehend the trauma that the epilepsy has caused in the Beauchard family. David must ask the reader to enter into his world whole heartedly.



(David B 1)

The initial idea that seems to provoke David into writing the memoir is the first pages of the memoir where David meets his brother in the bathroom and is unable to recognize him. It starts in 1994, with a grown up David at his parent's house talking to his brother. We get a short, but important insight into what Jean-Christophe will turn into and the drawing is not pleasant with Jean-Christophe covered in scars and missing his front teeth, his way of expressing himself is childish. The first page of the memoir sets the tone for the rest of the memoir; David chooses to let the readers know how the story will close. The rest of the memoir shows us how Jean-Christophe came to look the way he does, we expect in a memoir of childhood to see growth, but instead we are presented with a young man who slowly degenerates and loses touch with the world.

It allows the reader to speculate on how Jean-Christophe came to be the way he is, but also shows how little Jean-Christophe has changed in terms of mental growth, at the same time his physical transformation is considerable, so much that David has problems recognizing him. It is not a good transformation, but one that clearly shows how much he has had to endure in his life. David seems jolted by his brother's looks and it seems to catalyze a revision of his past view of his brother, because he must recognize that he is in fact sick, hence the writing of the memoir.

The chronology of the story is disrupted by showing the "ending" first. Trauma in its nature will affect people by upsetting how we relate to time: "In its disturbed and disrupted temporality, trauma is inextricable for Freud from the ghostly or the spectral, and it testifies to the profoundly unresolved nature of the past" (Whitehead 13). Clearly, the scene above confronts



David with his unresolved past with his brother and this confrontation forces him to return to his past and access his painful childhood. Jean-Christophe is in many ways nothing more than a ghost in David's life. Jean-Christophe is so far gone that he can barely talk, there is no way for David to access Jean-Christophe and so he becomes David's trauma.

Herman brings forth family members as primary source of comfort and support for trauma victims and it is fair to assume that they will often be the ones to share in trauma with the victim and as such be a witness to their trauma. However, Jean-Christophe's epilepsy becomes all-consuming for the whole family, and most of their existence revolves around finding a cure for Jean-Christophe, or catering for the illness. David's parents seem to have enough on their plate, at least seen from David's point of view because he never confides in them about the inner turmoil he feels in relation to his brother. Instead, he bottles up his emotions and internalizes them. David's outward attitude versus the way he truly feels are two polar oppositions, we as readers are privy to his inward thoughts, but at the same time are able to see the disconnection between what he expresses to those around him and what he feels. David employs different ways of keeping people at a distance, with his parents he puts on a brave face and jokes everything away. In an effort to make the family life run as smoothly as possible he avoids any conflicts and takes on a joker persona.

He plays the role so convincingly that his parents do not realize how much the Jean-Christophe's illness has affected David until he started publishing the memoir. David seems to view it as a way of protecting his family, as they have enough to contend with Jean-Christophe and his epilepsy. This is probably related to his "survivor" guilt, as a healthy member of the family he does not want to burden the family with more problems, and so his own feelings must take a back seat, hence his silly way of acting. His parents are surprised to discover his true emotions when reading the memoir, similarly the reader is surprised by the admission that David acted as if he were unaffected by Jean-Christophe's illness. In the memoir David is very clear about the struggles he experiences relating to his brother. Yet, his parents reaction and the panel below illustrates that the way he acted during his childhood gave no indication of his inner turmoil. It does not make David's testimony less true it just illustrates how radically different people perceive things and the ways in which people are able to hide their feelings. It also highlights what a unique insight the reader is given into David's mind.



(David B 168)

The figure in the above panel looks suggestively like a court jester his hair in clustered waves coming off his head, similar to the hat a jester would wear with his utensils held in the air as if waving a bauble. The character in the drawing is nothing like the David in the narrative his tiny beady eyes look soulless and silly compared to the sad eyes of the true David the reader experiences elsewhere in the memoir. It indicates what a unique position the reader has as we realize how much we have learned of his inner most thoughts. For the reader it modifies the memoir as a whole because it breaks with the reader's assumption that the David we meet in the memoir is the same way outwardly to those around him. We realize that the memoir is inherently tied to David's view of the past, and that there is a distance between the public David as he appeared to those around him and the private David that we encounter in the memoir. We the readers are witnessing the emotional childhood that David kept hidden from public view, such as his parents.



(David B 311)

However, David does attempt at sharing his pain during the memoir. When David spends time in Paris, he is tries to finally open up to those around him and tell them about Jean-Christophe and the epilepsy. After having opened up David acts and feels like a different person the burden lifted off his shoulders and makes him feel like he is literally floating. In the panel, words no longer are important and their words are simply represented with squiggly lines in contrast to the laughter, which is written out. Laughter is rare in *Epileptic* and so it becomes even more prominent when it happens here. The contentedness David is feeling is even more compelling in the drawing of the sleeping cat, which bears a likeness to David with the markings similar to his glasses. A sleeping cat is an image of being content and relaxed, and illustrates what a change it brings to David's state of mind. When we see how elated David feels skipping across the rooftops we realize what a great relief it is for him to discover that people are willing to listen to him.

The ability to talk and be heard is essential to David's sense of peace. The experience of finding resolution through sharing is important for all trauma victims. The realization that people are willing to listen and share in the trauma victims experience is: "a liberation which allows him for the first time to experience feelings both of mourning and of hope---and as a transfiguring illumination, a transforming insight into the extent to which this burden---and this silence---has in fact affected, and reshaped, his whole life" (Felman 47). Difficult though it may be to share trauma, it is also rewarding for the victim, as David experiences. It allows him to examine and put words on the emotions that have plagued him, an experience he has not allowed himself

before. The freedom of being able to put words on his emotions is short lived as David makes clear it is not always simple for people to listen to a trauma victim's pain.

The fall from this happy state of mind is therefore all the greater when his friends are overwhelmed by his outburst of emotions and withdraw from him, unable to handle the trauma that David is relating. The burden of witnessing David's trauma is too much for those around him and they choose to withdraw from him in order to save themselves from the pain. Coping with someone else's trauma is not an easy task and is clearly overwhelming for David's young friends, which is no wonder as "...the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma himself" (Felman and Laub 57). Taking on the pain that is not your own is a lot to ask of a person. The witness is given a choice of opting out of experiencing the trauma, something the trauma victim cannot.

People's reluctance to help trauma victims is understandable and it is a struggle that many have to deal with. It is a struggle between self-preservation and helping others and it is a balancing act that many find difficult. Over-identifying with the victim is always a danger and the secondary trauma of over-identifying or vicarious trauma can be destructive to both parties. LaCapra is particularly weary of such identification, but having lived with the trauma ones whole life and furthermore have seen what it has done to a family member makes it all the more difficult. Arguably, David suffers from vicarious trauma in relation to Jean-Christophe. David problematizes this relationship to his brother, but what makes David's situation particularly difficult is the sense of obligation he has to his brother. He is therefore caught between helping his brother and helping himself, some might argue an impossible choice.

Ethically speaking one may argue that everyone has a responsibility to share in someone's trauma and help them any way they can, because in order to heal trauma there must be a witness. Yet in order to help a trauma victim one must be completely committed to the act. If there is any hesitation or lack of participation one can do more harm than good as Laub explains: "...if one talks about the trauma without being truly heard or truly listened to, the telling might itself be lived as a return of the trauma---a *re-experiencing of the event itself*" (Felman and Laub 67). When David loses a friendship because of his trauma, he seems to feel that what he shared with his friends was meaningless. The short-lived freedom is destroyed and David accepts this as a confirmation that he is cursed to carry the trauma alone without anyone to share it with. David's

state of mind after the incident is dark and he seems emotionally unstable and depressed. He seems to lose all hope.

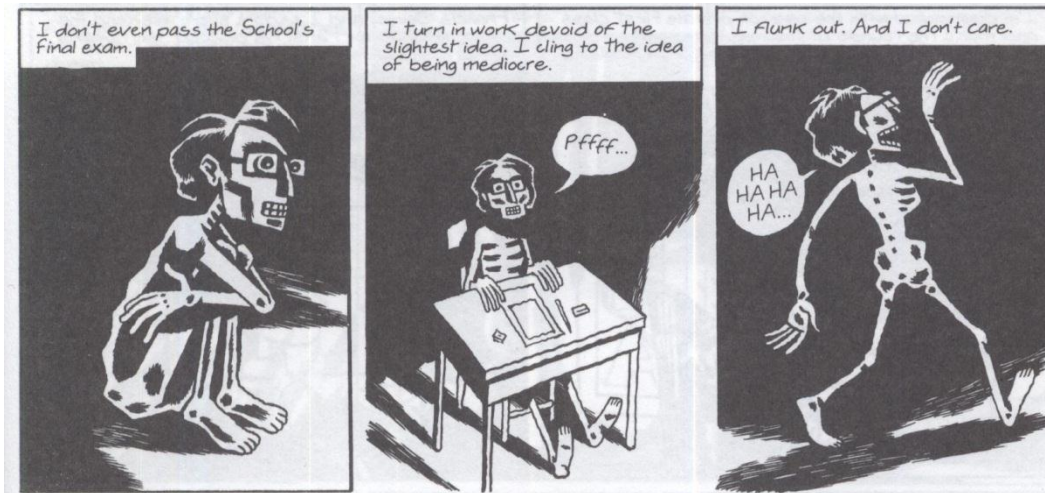


(David B 313)

The emotional state of David is beautifully illustrated by the black void enveloping him. He sits in complete darkness hugging himself and hiding his face behind his hands, his distress emanates off the pages. Jean-Christophe's huge head floats above mocking David by telling him that he must share in Jean-Christophe's curse. Jean-Christophe is drawn in the scratchy drawing style that David employs when depicting something negative. The contours of Jean-Christophe's face are accentuated and this gives further emphasis to the terrible nature of the Jean-Christophe spirit. David represents Jean-Christophe's epilepsy as a dragon in the memoir, a curse that follows him around and ruins his life. The way in which David has drawn Jean-Christophe is reminiscent of the dragon, as a spirit that sabotages David's life.

David is completely alone apart from the curse. When he closes his eyes, he seems to withdraw into himself locking away his humanity and when he opens his eyes, he has transformed into a skeleton. The symbolic value of the skeleton indicates the death of David's empathy, as he no longer cares about anyone, not even himself. He laughs aloud in the frame, but it seems forced and completely joyless as it is all in caps, in contrast to laughter he shared with his friends. There is nothing humorous about David's state of mind and his laughter is therefore terrifying.





(David B 314)

During the memoir there are several instances where other people watch David's and Jean-Christophe's trauma, yet do nothing to help or assist. They are clearly differentiated from witnessing through David's drawing style, which takes on different characteristics during these scenes. David identifies an important difference between simply watching trauma and witnessing trauma. Watching does not demand any interaction, but is simply for the watcher to satisfy a sense of curiosity. In some cases, it is obvious, such as when people stop up to watch David's epileptic seizures. There is no involvement in the victim and instead they simply stand by and watch without trying to understand. The crowd that gathers around to watch Jean-Christophe's epilepsy clearly do not participate in the family's trauma, but are passive watchers in an almost perverse fascination. David recognizes people's curiosity is not the same as wanting to help and comes to despise seizures that take place in public places because of all the attention it gets from people. His drawings reflect his negative view as the people who come to watch and stare. The people become inhuman in their appearance and stare with huge eyes, swarming closer to get a better look.

His shading technique gives the people watching a particular ominous appearance it also differentiates between David's family and the crowd. Whereas David's family are all drawn in David's usual style, with dense colors instead of the more traditional gradient shading; the people who are staring are shaded with a hatching technique, giving them a hazy unreal quality, as if ghosts. When David uses hatching to shade his drawings it always seems to indicate something negative. This technique is used when drawing Jean-Christophe having angry fits, which is an

instance when he seems to lose all control, which I will get back to later. The crowd is disconnected with the Beauchards and their struggles, unable to identify with the pain of having a sick son or family member. They do not empathize or understand the struggles.



(David B 235)

One might argue that we, as readers of the memoir, are no better than the crowd that gathered around Jean-Christophe when he had an epileptic seizure. We are passive onlookers who cannot engage in the family's struggles as we are set apart in both space and time. The readers can do nothing to relieve the family of their experiences. However, I would argue that the reader's relationship to the memoir is considerably more complex than voyeurism of the Beauchard's tragedy. What makes the reader more than a watcher is a unique engagement in the narration of the story. The process of reading is in itself bearing witness to the trauma: "In recording or writing the story...they create a community of witnesses which implicitly includes the reader, so that the very act of reading comprises a mode of bearing witness" (Whitehead 8). The author is able to through writing about their trauma to create a larger social awareness. Trauma literature should make the reader aware of experiences outside the reader's range and even have them question the ways in which they perceive the world.

David often employs use of fantastical elements as a way to engage the reader, a technique that is common in trauma fiction: "Trauma fiction often demands of the reader a suspension of disbelief and novelists frequently draw on the supernatural" (Whitehead 84). David is asking for the reader to see the world from his point of view and accept his often unbelievable

drawings as a form of truth. In David's case, this is largely seen in his drawings, which are riddled with ghosts, demons and other otherworldly creatures. The break with reality is according to Whitehead a way of accessing a reality that is in its nature distorted. Adami argues that "In trauma fiction, the novel's impact on the reader is often more important than the accuracy of the facts" (Adami 91). Realism and accuracy is not the focus of the memoir, but instead the emotional state of the memoirist.

## **EPILEPSY**

An essential part of the memoir is witnessing Jean-Christophe's epilepsy and how it affects him and the family. Epilepsy is examined closely by David in the memoir both as a witness to Jean-Christophe, but also how it relates to himself. We as readers are therefore witnessing not only Jean-Christophe's trauma in relation to his epilepsy, but also the secondary trauma it has on David. First, I will look at how the epilepsy affects the family both privately and socially and generally what people's attitudes are to illness and those who do not conform to social expectations. Then I will examine the ways in which epilepsy is depicted by David in the memoir from the actual seizure to the more fantastical forms David gives the illness and explore why he gives the presentation of the illness so much focus and attention.

People who have suffered from epilepsy have been shunned throughout history, as the origin of the seizures was often associated with the supernatural and the demonic or the sinful. The punishment for the person who committed sins was epileptic seizures and when one considers how sudden and often dramatic seizures were it is perhaps no wonder it was met with fear and superstition (Engelmann 50). However, one would expect that by the 1960s that the conditions for those who suffered with epileptic seizures had improved considerably, and that old and erroneous ideas had given way for more educated views, as David B illustrates in *Epileptic* these outdated views were still very much present during David's childhood.

The epilepsy changes the family and while initially the extent of his illness is not discovered, as time passes, Jean-Christophe's illness becomes increasingly an issue that needs to be dealt with. Their parents start looking for a cure "and thus begins the endless round of doctors,



for my brother and my parents” (David B 10). The restless search for solution envelopes their lives, much like the doctors circling them in the drawing, but with any game of "ring around the rosie", eventually, they must all fall. One after another the doctors fail in their attempt at helping them, and it becomes an increased strain, not only on Jean-Christophe and his parents, but also on David and Florence. The constant attempts at making him better and working so hard to improve his situation means that they are in a state of restlessness that ultimately does not lead to a cure.

What the panel below illustrates is the dizzying and confusing affect it has on the family having to continually relate to all these people who are unable to help. The doctors are in a circle and holding strong against the family, yet dancing around the question of Jean-Christophe’s illness. The doctors come and go in their lives and it involves having to go through tests and medical procedures. Jean-Christophe has suddenly become the center of attention for the family, and that the illness has taken time and energy from David and Florence. The family has gone from 5 to 3 members in the frame below as Jean-Christophe takes up most of their energy. David struggles with the feeling of not being heard and being distant from people and this seems to trace back to being pushed out into the periphery of the family.



(David B 10)

Jean-Christophe is sent off in every direction to doctors and psychologists, who either are clueless or who see Jean-Christophe as an opportunity on their rise to success. What makes the situation worse for the family is that highly educated medical doctors treat the family and Jean-Christophe as if the problem lies with Jean-Christophe, even implying that he has gotten ill because he has been bad. This is not uncommon reaction that people with a traumatic background or an illness have to contend with, as Felman and Laub point out: “When we meet a friend who has malignant disease, we often feel angry at that person. We are torn apart by the inadequacy of our ability to properly respond, and inadvertently wish for the illness to be the patient’s wrongdoing” (Felman and Laub 72). This reaction is something that even David himself struggles with, which I will get back to later. The doctors are faced with their own inadequacy with an illness that they cannot cure, neither can they do much to relieve the patient of the symptoms and so they seem to become cold and blame the disease on Jean-Christophe. However,

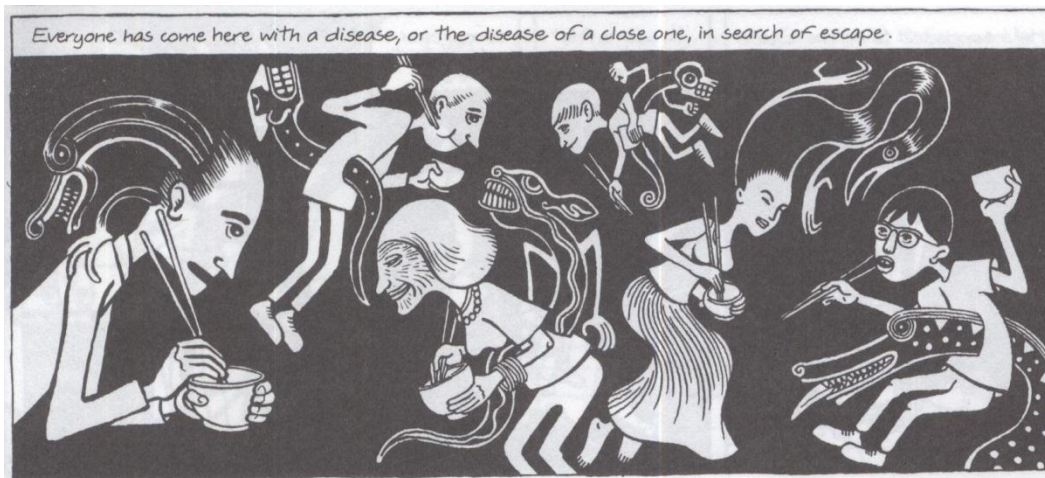
one does expect more from a medical professional, perhaps unfairly, but there is a certain expectation that they will rise above their feelings and instead approach the illness with an objective and open mind. Old, outdated, and ludicrous ideas surrounding epilepsy are still very much present. There is no support for the family, or for Jean-Christophe, who has been diagnosed with a serious form of epilepsy.

If those with medical background react poorly to an illness than the general public are even worse. The Beauchards have to cope with an illness that is in its nature unpredictable and therefore sometimes dangerous for the victim, but they must also contend with people's opinions of the seizures and their son. As a family with an incurable illness, what they need is support and understanding, but instead they are met with skepticism and even hate. Engelmann identifies that both brothers must contend with being alienated because of the disease: "Not only do the brothers live through a process of alienation, but also similar progressive marginalization takes place on a social level: the uncontrollability of the epileptic fits largely excludes them from central domains of social life" (Engelmann 49). What it demonstrates is a larger problem for anyone who is considered different. People's reaction to the unconventional is not always pleasant. This is also reflected in *Stitches* when David is chased by kids and called names for behaving in what was considered a feminine manner. Breaking with social conventions, no matter the reason for it, is often met with rejection, as the unconventional is often perceived as threatening to the norm.

When their son is considered abnormal, it is no surprise that they look for solutions in alternative places such as macrobiotic communes. The alternative lifestyle suggests people who are more likely to be accepting of people who deviate from mainstream society as they have come together to precisely find solutions in unconventional places. As David recognizes, the people who search out the commune are all looking for escape from their respective illnesses. It seems to indicate that they are searching for acceptance as well as a last resort when all else has failed, such as when conventional medicine is too invasive to be an option, as is the case for the Beauchards. What David is suggesting is that it is not only the Beauchards that experience being misunderstood and even cast aside because of their illnesses, but that it is a larger problem beyond the individual experience.

Memoirs that explore such a private trauma can easily be criticized of being too narrow in their scope as it only relates to one individual's experience. Yet what David is able to illustrate is

that his trauma can be relatable to anyone who struggles with an illness or in some other way deviates from the norm. In the panel below the people at the commune all struggle with their own demons, or illnesses. The illness is an integral part of them and the demons are all drawn differently indicating different types of illnesses. What they all share is a common search for an escape from the illness. The people he has drawn are all different ages and sex, showing that the people from all walks of life are affected. Having an illness is a struggle no matter who you are and what your own background is. What the commune seems to offer that mainstream society cannot is a sense of belonging and understanding from those around. In addition, those with an incurable illness will often struggle with the sense of loss of control due to their lack of options and choices caused by the restrictions of the illness. The commune is able to give the people the control back by giving them charge of their own illness by self-healing through what they eat, giving the sufferer a sense of power and control.



(David B 52)

Jean-Christophe struggles with unpredictable nature of his illness and the lack of control over his own life. Jean-Christophe becomes increasingly disturbed by the implications of his illness and degenerates slowly through the memoir. The epilepsy has considerable negative effect on his mental health and he seems to suffer from trauma relating to his illness. There are many interesting parallels between the two conditions. Epileptic seizures are in some ways similar to a traumatic flashback. The person who suffers from epilepsy has no control over when the seizure will happen, and falls completely under its control and often it will be onset by specific situations

such as settings that are experienced as stressful, which seems to trigger Jean-Christophe. The traumatic memory is similarly "...rigidly tied to the specific traumatic situation: it is evoked automatically in particular contexts, but it cannot be retrieved at will in normal conditions" (Adami 26). Jean-Christophe cannot willfully make a seizure happen and he cannot make it stop. He has no control over himself or the illness. Both trauma and epilepsy both involve losing control for the victim, which explains why Jean-Christophe desperately seeks power, and blindly admires those who have power and control, such as Hitler.

For a person with epilepsy the loss of control can itself be traumatic, as there is no indication of when it will happen, and so one must live with the knowledge that one may suddenly lose consciousness, leaving oneself vulnerable to the world. Herman explains that: "The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections" (Herman 133). The problem with epilepsy for Jean-Christophe and the family is that they desperately try to find a way of regaining the power over the epileptic seizures by eliminating them, but finding a cure turns out to be impossible. Giving Jean-Christophe back the control over his life therefore becomes unattainable, which is arguably why Jean-Christophe's recovery process seems so far out of reach.

The seizures are also similar in that they leave moments in their life that are blank and that cannot be fully integrated into their lives because of the victim's state of unconsciousness. During an epileptic seizure, the mind goes blank as the victim loses consciousness. Not knowing what has happened, or precisely because the victim is unable to experience the moment there is a lot of fear and uncertainty tied to seizures. In other words, it leaves the victim with a loss of memory that they cannot account for. Often the traumatic memory is described in a similar manner: "Trauma is wordless and cannot be expressed in linguistic terms: it creates 'a structural deficit, wound or "hole" in the mind the mind where the representation ought to be'" (Adami 27). Trauma creates a representational void where the content is inaccessible with words, but is more closely tied to feelings and images. The representation of both trauma and epilepsy is therefore important and interesting for the memoir, as both conditions are hard to represent.

Epilepsy is neurological illness and while people can see the epileptic seizure, it is hard to assess because of the lack of presence in the victim and the involuntary movement. The epileptic seizure is something David spends considerable time on perfecting visually so it looked as



accurate as possible. When David is asked to describe how an epileptic seizure looks, words fall short, and he finds he is unable to relate what it looks like, the seizures defy explanation. David seems to experience his brother's epileptic seizures as traumatic and is unable to put words on what a seizure is and looks like. For the David the seizures are tied to images and sensations and so putting words on it becomes impossible, instead he vows to someday perfect it through his drawings, which he does in the memoir. David learns to read his brother's facial expressions and after years of observing his brother going into an epileptic seizure, he becomes attuned to his brother's oncoming seizures. This ability to read his brother's facial cues becomes important part of the memoir, as he must find ways of visually representing his brother's illness.

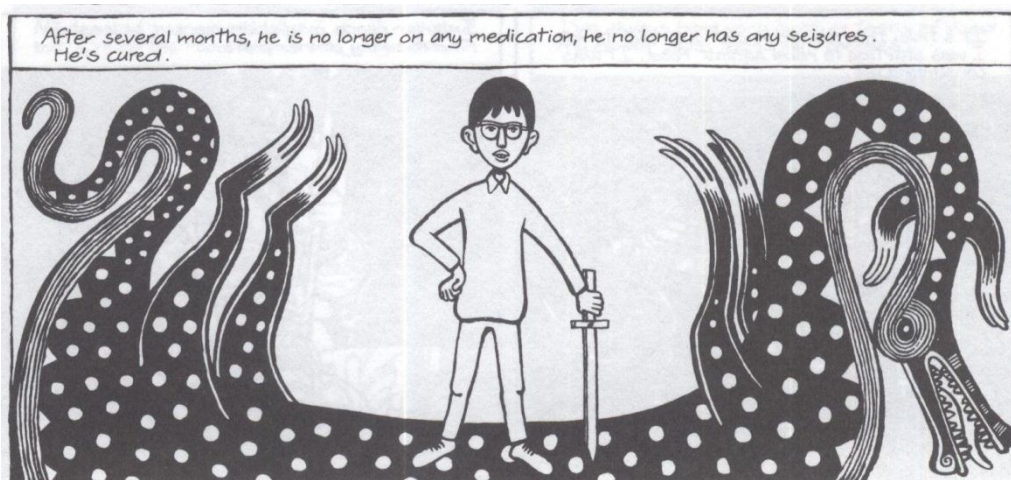
David depicts epilepsy many different ways and the first and the primary way we come to see epilepsy is through Jean-Christophe's seizures. David spends almost a whole page describing and drawing the evolution of the seizure from start to finish, almost like a reference book. He pays close attention to each stage drawing his face and in addition describing what Jean-Christophe's body is doing. The description comes early on in the memoir soon after Jean-Christophe gets the diagnosis. This allows the readers to become attuned to signs of an oncoming seizure and prepares us for the rest of the memoir to recognize a seizure without David having to explain what is happening. We recognize the glazed look and his head with his chin tucked in with his fingers spread out like claws and saliva running down his chin. It is an unsettling image of someone losing complete control of themselves; we can therefore sympathize with David and his inability to express what a seizure looks like as we see how violent and uncontrollable the seizures appear.



(David B 32)

However, it also gives a sense of hope to the memoir because we realize that there has been a considerable change to David during the course of the years as he explains that epilepsy defied verbal explanation when he was younger. The narrative distance between David in the memoir and David the narrator becomes clear in instances such as these. The young David expresses an inability to describe or to talk about epileptic seizures, yet the memoir deals with epilepsy continuously, which suggests that he has a transformation after the events of the memoir. David's solution to unlocking the traumatic memory seems to be by perfecting the drawing of a seizure, which gives access to the image and allows him to process through the emotions tied to epilepsy. On paper, it transforms into a regular memory instead of only being contained as a traumatic memory. However, this is not the only way in which David is able to concretize epilepsy.

Epilepsy is essentially abstract and therefore a faceless danger, particularly to the young David. In an effort to give the illness an embodiment and therefore something tangible that he can fight, he draws the epilepsy in the form of a demon creature that looks like a dragon. It follows Jean-Christophe around and becomes the physical manifestation of the illness in the memoir. The dragon appears in unexpected places and resembles a parasite that lives off Jean-Christophe. The role the dragon plays in relation to Jean-Christophe changes during the course of the memoir and this seems to be a reflection of Jean-Christophe's mental state.



(David B 51)

Early on in the diagnosis Jean-Christophe seems to be able to ward off the epilepsy through the help of Master N. who finds alternative ways of treating Jean-Christophe and becomes his companion in the fight against epilepsy. David seems to find comfort in Master N., as he seems to understand Jean-Christophe and the illness. He finds recognition and support, Master N. seems to function like a witness to Jean-Christophe's illness. Jean-Christophe gains control over the epilepsy and the illustration with the dragon show a Jean-Christophe that has won the fight with the dragon and has planted a sword in the belly of the beast, conquering the illness in a triumphant manner. Jean-Christophe's faith in his own recovery is encouraged by Master N. and his devotion and hope for his future and so the crush of losing his healer is destructive to his process of moving forward with his life.

With the departure of Master N. the dragon reappears. As the time passes, the epileptic seizures become more frequent and the dragon appears more regularly in the memoir. Often the dragon will appear in unexpected places and it becomes an omen of epilepsy, ready to suddenly strike. Initially the dragon simply lurks around Jean-Christophe and attacks him sporadically with epileptic seizure. As he becomes more discouraged with his life and prospects his condition worsens and the epileptic attacks become more savage. During those scenes, the dragon is depicted biting at Jean-Christophe and the violence of the epileptic attacks become apparent, more so than when David simply draws the seizure without the symbolic dragon. It gives a depth and increased awareness of how destructive a seizure can be to the victim.



(David B 76)



The indicator of a change in Jean-Christophe's mental state is the attachment between the dragon and Jean-Christophe. The condition increasingly defeats Jean-Christophe and the more he succumbs to that emotion the more he seems to accept the presence of the dragon. He gives up on living an ordinary life and accepts that he is a sick person. When he accepts that there seems to be no turning back and he forfeits the control over his life and allows the dragon to take possession of him. David illustrates this metamorphosis in the memoir with Jean-Christophe taking on the markings of the dragon and his body turning into a lizard form and eventually crawling away. His departure signals to David the loss of the Jean-Christophe that he knew. Epilepsy stole David's brother away and instead all that is left is the empty shell.



(David B 141)

## DAVID'S DILEMMA

Early in the memoir, it becomes apparent that David struggles with the implications of having a sick brother. Having to support and watch his brother takes a great toll on David. His approach to his own emotions are, as I suggested earlier, to simply keep them to himself and bottle them up. However, as Jean-Christophe becomes increasingly sick so does David's frustration and the anger and frustration that he was able to contain start bubbling to the surface. His violent emotions take form in many different ways in the memoir. I will examine the ways in which David expresses his emotions, looking at themes that reappear in the memoir such as war and mutilation.

At a young age, David was confronted with his brother's illness and the ensuing trauma that followed, it forced the young David to grow up quickly and to address questions considered far beyond the grasp of such a young boy. Felman and Laub identify in their book on testimony that as a listener or a witness of trauma that one must accept the heavy burden of the victim. Witnesses must also delve into and examine themselves facing often unanswerable questions that most people never dare to address. "The listener can no longer ignore the question of facing death; of facing time and its passage; of the meaning and purpose of living; of the limits of one's omnipotence; of losing the ones that are close to us; the great question of our ultimate aloneness; our otherness from any other; our responsibility to and for our destiny; the question of loving and its limits; of parents and children; and so on" (Felman and Laub 72). These existential and often painful questions are something most people are not confronted with on a regular basis. David suggests in his memoir that these questions were constantly brought forth in his childhood and formed him as a person. He must not only confront them in relation to himself, but also his brother.

David's relationship to his brother and the illness is very complex and often times intensely violent. Conflicting emotions, particularly concerning his brother, seem to constantly interrupt David's life. His own emotional havoc is reflected in David's drawing style, which is arguably dark, but takes on an aggressive and harsh look when he is swept away by his emotions. Particularly as he gets older and he becomes more aware of himself and the events that have taken place in his life. David has to support his brother already from the first seizure Jean

Christophe has while playing on a motorcycle where he suddenly collapses and David catches him before he falls off. David must stand there and hold his older brother up, while his younger sister runs to get their father, when standing there supporting him, the caption reads: “He’s heavy. It feels like I’ve been holding him up forever” (David B 9). It is indicative of what he must have felt at the time, but there seems to be a duality of not only what he felt as a young boy, but also as an adult and his relationship to his brother. His anger and resentment has been heard through the years of the memoir, from the young boy who held his brother up, to the older David who narrates the story. It resonates throughout the story and it gives a sense of continuation and narrative continuity between the character David and the narrator.



(David B 357)

David is resentful of the fact that he lost his older brother to the illness, and had to step up and take his place as the older and wiser of the two. In a dream sequence, David dreams that Jean-Christophe steps up and saves David from the dragon, and rides off on a horse together. Instead, David has had to deal with an older brother who became increasingly infantile in his behavior. What is left to him and the family is an empty shell where his brother once was. His development is arrested in a childish way, he is held back by his epilepsy. Reverting back to a more childish behavior is not uncommon for trauma victims, and Jean-Christophe’s trauma started at such an early age that he was never able to grow up: “[the victims are unable to] resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts” (Herman 37). Because he never gets a chance to pick up the pieces of his life and move on, he instead becomes passive. David on the other hand cannot give up and simply surrender to despair. Instead, he seems to harness the anger in order to move on with his life.

The themes that David touches upon are dark and sinister and this seems reflected in the form of the memoir. David's drawing style is oppressive and somber primarily because of his unique use of black and white. Most artists will use black on white in order to shade and give shape, but David seems often to do the opposite and uses white on black by highlighting and accenting the lighter parts. The general impression the reader gets is that of darkness, as the primary color in the memoir is black. David further amplifies the starkness in the memoir by his use of high contrast through sparse use of shading. This in combination with his use of colors gives his images a severe quality that sets the tone for the memoir at a first glance. It also matches David's fascination and connection with spirits and phantoms. During the course of the memoir he has different spirit friends who come out during the night or in the forest behind his house to talk to him. The company of the ghostlike creatures suit well the visual presentation of the memoir, but also suit the theme that reappears in the memoir of war and death.

David revisits the theme of war, fighting, ghosts and death continually in the memoir and it is the first indication of David's aggressive feelings and emotions. As a young boy, he often imagines himself in a battlefield fighting alongside warriors in huge armies. His frustration is accumulated into the armies and David himself relates it to his brother's epilepsy: "I'm not any one person, I'm a group, an army. I have enough rage in me for one hundred thousand warriors. I relate my brother's seizures to this rage" (David B 19) While it is not uncommon for children to imagine themselves fighting in a war, the image of a young David fighting alongside Mongol warriors with his dead opponents heads hung on his saddle is unsettling. The connection that he makes between the his rage and the epilepsy shows how violently he feels about the epilepsy, both in relation to what it has done to his brother, but also himself. David must contend with a chaotic illness such as epilepsy and so it is natural that the chaos of war seems to an appropriate parallel.



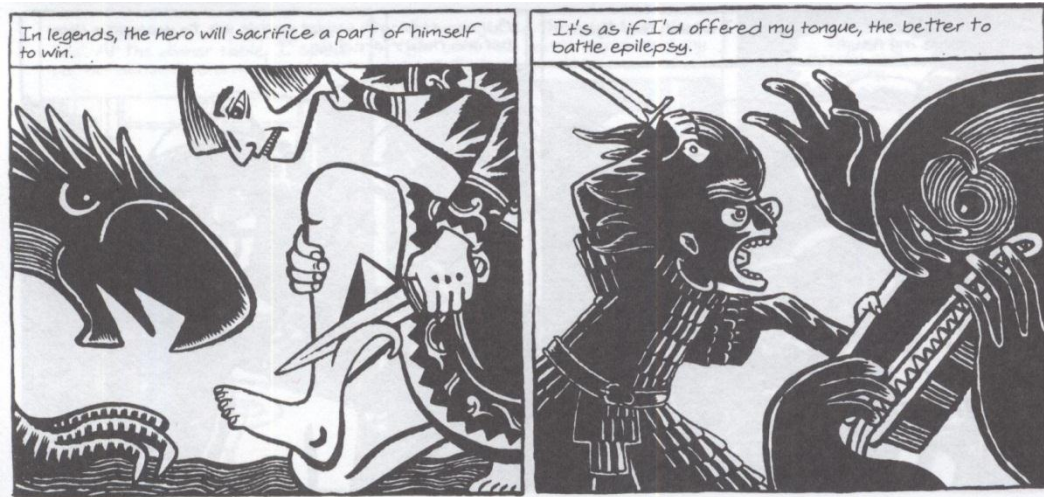
(David B 19)

David's preoccupation with war may suggest that it is an escape into a world where he can let out his frustration. However, the repetitive nature of David's attraction suggests that it is more than simply an escape. It takes on the quality of a traumatic memory that is forcefully repeated in his life on several levels. It is not only the acting out of war that is the repeated in the memoir, but several aspects surrounding wars are repeated, such as the appearance of swords, death, and armor. War is by nature traumatic in itself and so it is an appropriate image if David's own trauma relating to epilepsy. The images of war seem to plague the pages, much the way trauma does to the victim: "trauma assumes a haunting quality, continuing to possess the subject with its insistent repetitions and returns" (Whitehead 12). The war and the fighting seem repetitive in the memoir and interrupt the flow, such as when David interrupts the chronology by telling the story of his grandfather's engagement in the First World War. However, it suggests that trauma interrupts all flow of time, including the time in the memoir.

The image of armor becomes particularly important in relation to David. David represents this emotional distance to the world more elaborately through the image of his armor that he dons early on in the memoir. As his brother's epileptic seizures become more violent and take up a larger amount of time and energy in the family, David finds himself cutting off his emotions from the world. His visual representation of his disconnection is that of an armor that becomes increasingly elaborate during the course of the memoir. The armor is an appropriate image of blocking out the world, while also illustrates that the emotions cannot escape and be verbalized. It becomes a double-edged sword. (Wolk 140) David finds solace in his inability to communicate



his trauma by comparing it to a form of sacrifice in order to fight off epilepsy. If seen in relation to trauma theory, David's loss of ability to express himself in relation to epilepsy suggests that it has become traumatic to him.



(David B 166)

The emotions that David bottles up cannot be contained forever and they slowly appear during the course of the memoir. Jean-Christophe's passive attitude provokes David and he tries to bring the fighting spirit into his brother by pushing his buttons, but instead he becomes increasingly aware of how little hope there is of his brother ever improving. On one hand, David seems fed up with his brother and resents him of "leaving" and not fighting harder against the illness. "The chronically abused person's apparent helplessness and passivity, her entrapment in the past, her intractable depression and somatic complaints, and her smoldering anger often frustrate the people closest to her" (Herman 115).

This aggression towards his brother seems closely connected to David's own survivor guilt. This is particularly felt by those who have had to watch someone else suffer, and they survive: "To be spared oneself, in the knowledge that others have met a worse fate, creates a severe burden of conscience" (Herman 54). In David's case he has had to watch the epilepsy take over his brother's life and there is nothing for him to do, and so with a feeling of helplessness he takes on some responsibility for the pain his brother has had to go through. He dreams of taking over his brother's illness, and with a newfound strength fight off the seizures, and cure his brother. The dream sequences where he destroys the epilepsy dragon seem to give David a sense

of escape and control.

This feeling of helplessness also takes form in self-mutilation or suicide. David is able to tap into his emotional state mainly through his drawings, which are often scary and even grotesque. The impact upon the reader is considerable because it sends such a clear message of what he is feeling, through the double impact of both words and images. The words alone do not convey what he is feeling, but the words give emphasis and focus through his drawings. Such as below, David imagines committing suicide by cutting his own head off. By doing so ending all his frustration and built up anger. He dreams of simply letting go, much like Jean-Christophe does when he gives into the illness. This focus on emotions and feelings also justifies David's extensive use of fantasy drawings to explain his emotional state because his emotions are so extreme that not even words can express what he is feeling.



(David B 288)

As Jean-Christophe slowly degenerates and becomes possessed by the epilepsy, so does David's own hatred grow, and it becomes so severe that he wishes his own brother dead. David often refers to his own brother as dead and it seems that in David's own eyes, his brother's spirit has been long gone, and what they are left with is a demon creature. Jean-Christophe turns into a giant that looms over his family members, and David draws him with harsh angry lines running across his skin giving him an eerie almost skeletal look. Jean-Christophe's aggressive behavior becomes an increased burden on the family, and his physical outbursts are even dangerous, such as when he punches his own father or runs around with knives threatening to use them.

As his brother's anger grows so does David's drawings become increasingly frightening as he becomes more angry and upset with his life situation. He internalizes his rage and he rarely lets anyone see how he is feeling, but the readers are given insight into his mindset through his aggressive drawing style in addition to his captions. His drawing style is for most part of the book very clean with high contrast by the use of juxtaposing black and white, it seems very and controlled. However, when he becomes increasingly upset towards the end of the memoir his style takes on a different mood, and he goes from his clean lines to scratchy lines that look messy and almost forced in a repetitive manner. The David we have come to know turns into a colossal brute, fuming with anger and repressed emotions, his every fiber is fighting against the injustice that he has had to live with his life.



(David B 280)

Similarly, the more aware David becomes of what a huge part Jean-Christophe has played in his life the more he consumes the pages and even starts taking over the frames of the memoir. If the gutters are the blood of the comic as McCloud describes them then the epilepsy and Jean Christophe are at the heart of the memoir. The regular act of closure in the gutter is interrupted by Jean-Christophe wrapping himself around the panels, alternate between being simply Jean-Christophe wrapped around the drawings or the epilepsy dragon as seen in the below panel. David's escape from his brother is through comics and drawing, but David cannot even have that



part of his life without Jean-Christophe creeping in on his pages and taking over. Jean-Christophe is so central to the memoir that even when David's sister tries to commit suicide it still only takes up a frame of the memoir. David realizes that despite attempting to escape Jean-Christophe he will always be with him, and haunt him. In his own words he is cursed along with Jean-Christophe: "They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts" (Herman 37).



(David B 317)

The solution for David is writing a testimony for Jean-Christophe and in doing so, writing one for him. Jean-Christophe has succumbed to his illness and in doing so has foregone the power to testify of the pain that he has experienced. David's legacy for both himself and Jean-Christophe is telling the story of the epilepsy and what it did to his family. David is one of the few people who can help Jean-Christophe in telling his story, because he was there with him for large parts of his life, it does not mean that he can fully grasp all the aspects of Jean-Christophe's trauma, but he tries to understand his brother to his best ability. Felman and Laub explain that in order to truly witness someone's trauma "The listener has to feel the victim's victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony" (Felman and Laub 58). However, David must also hold on to his own trauma and ask someone to witness the trauma that he himself has experienced and that is where the reader of the memoir must play their part in the reading of the memoir. Without the public platform of the graphic memoir, David would be unable to find someone to witness his own pain.

David's fears and anxieties can all be traced back to Jean-Christophe and his epilepsy. In order to understand the memoir as a whole it is important to understand the cause. The whole memoir can be seen as witnessing the epilepsy and the havoc it creates in the Beauchard family. In the next graphic memoir, Alison Bechdel is also concerned with witnessing in relation to her father Bruce Bechdel, but Bechdel has a more realistic approach. Whereas David B is concerned with portraying his emotional life by use of fantasy drawings, Bechdel seeks to find the truth and therefore portrays her surroundings very realistically. Bechdel struggle to get in touch with her own emotions and so she instead of accessing them herself she asks the reader to witness for her.

## CHAPTER 3: *FUN HOME*

The last graphic memoir that I will delve into is Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* a graphic memoir, or as she calls it “a family tragicomic”. Alison tells the story of her childhood years during the late 1960s in the family's Gothic revival house. Alison’s family lives an ordinary life in an “out of the ordinary” home. Alison’s parents were both working as teachers providing for their three children. Her father, Bruce Bechdel’s great passion was the restoration of the house. The exacting standards in which he rebuilt the house were also expected of his children and wife. However, as the story unfolds it becomes clear that Bruce Bechdel had more passions in his life and that their ordinary life was closer to extraordinary. The household carries a secret that puts a dark and sinister feel over the family. Bruce is often difficult to live with and is carried away by shifting temperament. The family is often careful not to provoke Bruce as his emotions emanate in the whole household. The reason for Bruce’s volatile mood is revealed as Alison grows older, and family secrets, which have been hidden for so long, start to see the light of day.

As a child, Alison often found her father’s behavior suspect and abnormal, as he was not like other men she encountered. Bruce’s marriage and children turn out to be a fabrication around which Bruce can hide his sexuality. Bruce Bechdel is a closeted gay man who accepted the role of a family man to satisfy social norms. His closeted lifestyle has not only affected himself, but also the family. The stress and tension that has taken place make Alison rethink her childhood and rediscover her own relationship to her own sexuality and her childhood obsessive-compulsive disorder. The stress under which she has lived has taken such a toll on her own sense of self that she has adopted several characteristics that are typical in trauma victims. Her family has all been prone to isolation and so she has been alone in her fears and struggles. Through the memoir, Bechdel is able to face her childhood, and particularly her father. As readers, we bear witness of the trauma of not only Bechdel’s trauma, but also the trauma of her father.

Her own mindset has for various reasons changed, as Adami points out: "...memory is not a straightforward process of the storage and retrieval: what an individual perceives as a memory of the past is in fact the subjective construction of past events in the present. The stories we narrate to others, and even to ourselves, are continually rewritten according to our needs and goals" (Adami 84) Essentially, Bechdel's goal seems to be to try and understand her father, and in doing so herself. As she starts digging into his past, she realizes how very little she truly knows him, and with his death she loses the possibility of getting to know the man who was always so distant to her. Her attempts at analyzing her father from different angles always seems to bring her back to his death, and reminds her of what she has lost. The sense of always being brought back to one point is also reflected in the narration of the memoir.

## **ALISON AND HER FATHER**

The first chapter identifies Bruce Bechdel as "old father, old artificer", which would seem to be a compliment, however in this case it becomes clear that Bruce's ability to create and transform the world around him is not entirely positive. The transformations are only skin deep, in Bechdel's own words: "He was an alchemist of appearance, a savant of surface, a Daedalus of decor" (Bechdel 6). His skills at making things appear differently than what they are extends beyond the material, but also applies to him. Bruce is living a life with wife and children that is congruent with social expectations. On the surface, he is an upstanding man who has lived up to his role as a family man, however the truth is that it is to satisfy social demands and not because of his own sense of fulfillment.

Similarly to Small's mother, Bruce decides to live a heteronormative life and their families are in both cases clearly marked by them oppressing their sexuality. The anger outbursts and cold distance that they both are guilty of, suggests that it is destructive, not only to themselves, but also to their families: "The dialectic of trauma operates not only in the survivor's inner life but also in her close relationships that fluctuate between extremes" (Herman 56). Naturally, having to live with someone who is prone to rages and irrational behavior is tough. Bechdel compares her father to a Minotaur that lurks in the house, and the varying moods make it hard for her to know how to relate to her father. His distanced attitude to his children is reflected

in the panel below. The low angle shows him as a powerful person, which is also what he was in Alison's life.



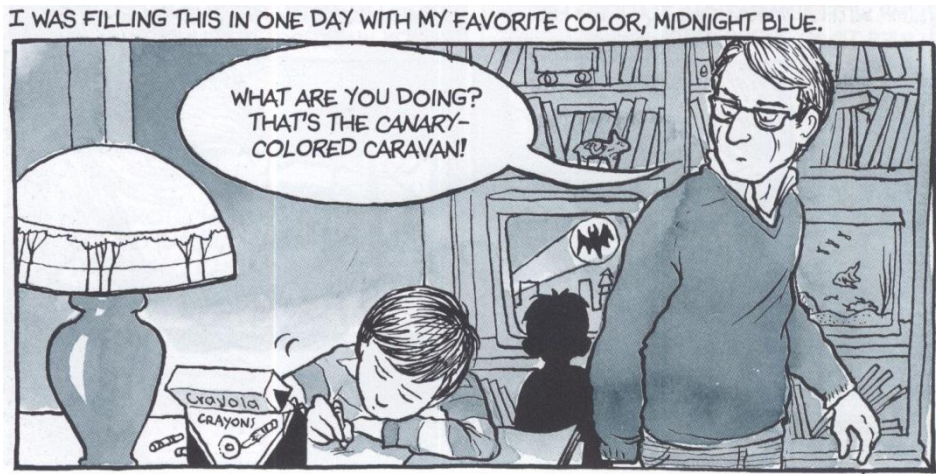
(Bechdel 179)

His distanced relationship to his family can certainly be attributed to his closeted sexuality in the sense that he feels guilty and shameful about his sexual orientation as a man who had lived during a time when homosexuality was considered horrendous: "Since Americans were unfamiliar with their sexual feelings, any anxiety about gays tended to externalized. It was blamed on the gay. Homosexual men were perceived as aggressive threats" (Miller and Nowak 169). This idea of being a threat could certainly have been something Bruce internalized, and in fear of affecting his children in a negative way kept his distance. Particularly, when he recognized tendencies in Alison that suggested that she, like him, was not living up to her gender role, which is why he tried to have her at least live up to her gender role through dressing her up in feminine clothes. His own inability to talk about his homosexual life with Alison is therefore not so strange. However, his distance to his children seems to have made him less of a person and more of a symbolic figure and that seems to make his death all the more unbelievable to Alison. She cannot comprehend his death and often she has a flippant attitude concerning his death.

Bechdel is obsessively concerned with her father and continuously searches for facts about the man she knew so little about. Bruce Bechdel's impact on Alison's life was considerable, yet her own knowledge of her father is lacking. Even the few things she thought she knew she later learns are lies or modifications on the truth. It seems to accumulate in a loss of trust to those around her and particularly her father. Yet, she persists in her search for the facts concerning her father seemingly in a vain attempt at peace. I will examine the relationship between Alison and Bruce while he was still alive. Then look at what ways his death affected her and how his death appears to her in the memoir.

Alison's relationship to her father, when he was alive, was both difficult and full of conflict. Their interactions were often of a negative nature. Alison and her father were polar opposites trying to pull each other in two different directions, which results in a constant tension between the two. Her father tried to force his own preferences on his daughter, who in turn resisted and fought every attempt at making her fit into the mold he had set for her. The conflict that often cropped up was in their preferences for the feminine and the masculine. While Alison found the traditionally masculine to suit her, Bruce preferred the feminine. As Bechdel herself says they were inversions of each other, at least in relation to traditional gender roles and ideals, neither lived up to their gender role or felt comfortable with it.

Herman explains that: "When a parent, who is so much more powerful than a child, nevertheless shows some regard for that child's individuality and dignity, the child feels valued and respected; she develops self-esteem" (Herman 52). Bruce however did not show much respect for Bechdel's own individual sense of self-expression, such as his disregard for her preference for the masculine instead of the feminine. Even in little matters such as when Alison is coloring Mr. Toads yellow caravan with a blue color in her own coloring book, is he unable to allow Alison her own approach. While, Bechdel's own comment suggests that she is able to imagine the scene with a somewhat comic distance, it still obvious that the lack of respect he had for her choices is something that upset her. Her lack of faith in herself may relate to her compulsive disorder.



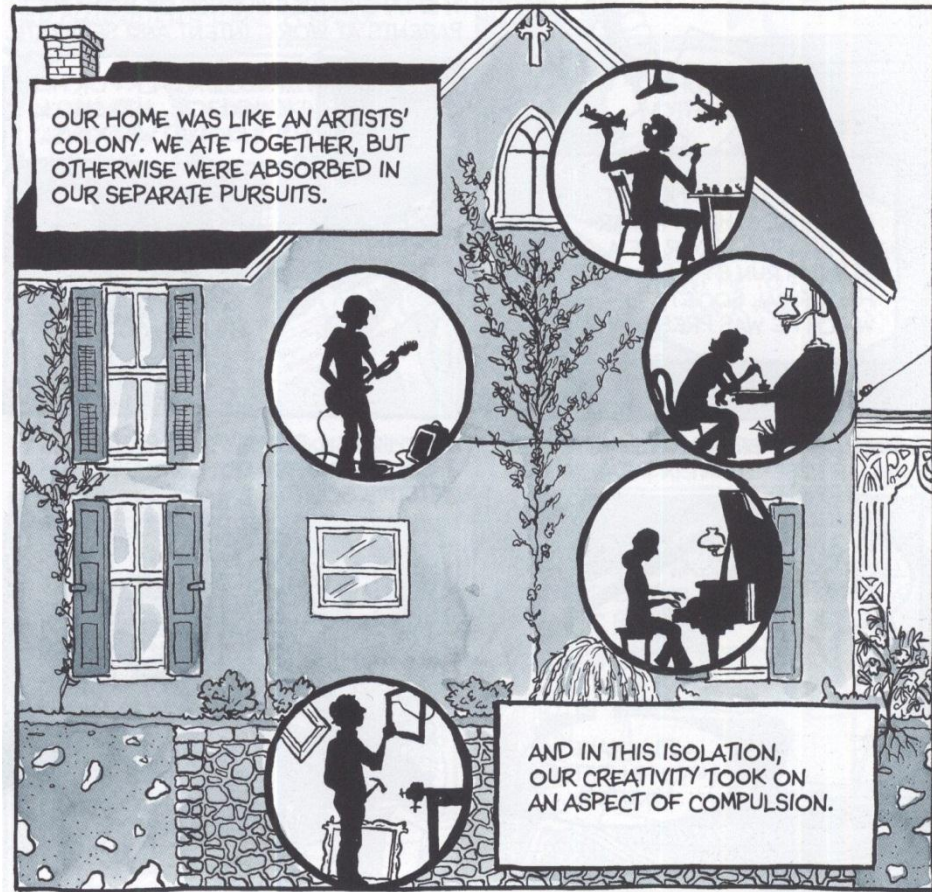
(Bechdel 130)

An aspect of Bechdel's life that her father certainly played a part in, and that she seems to struggle with even during the writing of the memoir is the obsessive compulsive disorder that began at the age of ten. Alison's life turned into constant chores and obligations where in order to make her life go smoothly she must follow all the rules and regulations. She enforced, in other words, a life full of rules with both negative and positive consequences to her actions. In a household with a father prone to irrational outbursts, the need for some stability seems to be particularly important. If nothing else, she can at least find a pattern in her own daily routines and actions. This forced sense of repetition is clearly a symptom of the stressful environment that she lives in, and the loneliness that she experiences in her family: "Repetition is the mute language of the abused child" (Herman 110). Her own unhappiness as a child took form in her compulsive behavior. As an adult, she still seems to have a compulsion towards repetition. The repetition of scenes in the memoir signals a sense of distress and lack of comprehension, which I will go into detail later.

A commonality among the three memoirs is the lack of unity within the family, and this can certainly be contributed to the difficult relationships between the family members, in Bechdel's memoir the strain that Bruce puts on the family. Bechdel recognized the tendency towards creative solitude that took place in her home as a form of self-preservation through the only things that sustained them, their art, however as Bechdel points out that "in this isolation, our creativity took on an aspect of compulsion" (Bechdel 134). She visually represents the isolation that took place in the household by drawing a sort of cross section of the house with



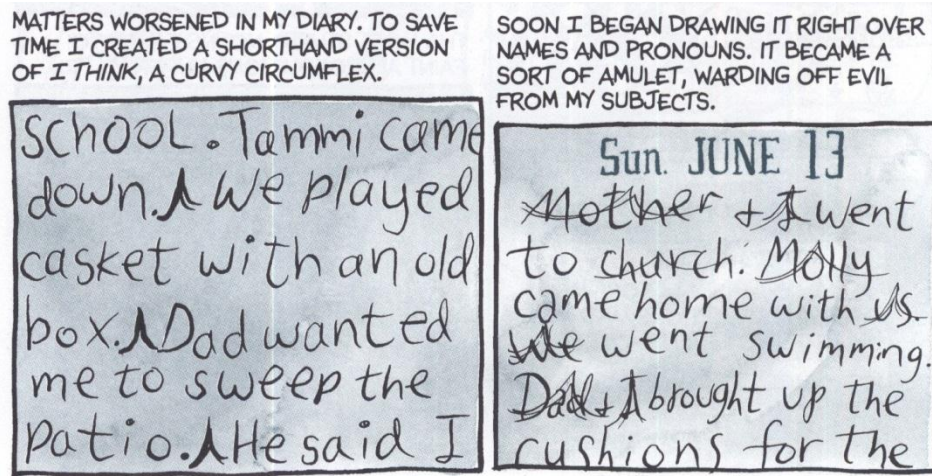
each member in their own private bubble, or circle, honing their craft. It is only the silhouette of the person visible, colored in black without any visible details. The isolation makes them flat and without depth, unlike the house that encapsulates them. Growing up in a household that was prone to compulsive behavior it is perhaps no surprise that Bechdel also took on this trait.



(Bechdel 134)

Alison's compulsions, however, take on a different form when she starts writing a diary. Whereas her first compulsions seem vaguer in their origin, the form in which the diary becomes a compulsion seems to clearly suggest a lack of confidence. Bechdel's diary is initially just descriptions of everyday events, but slowly her statements are always followed by the tiny lettered phrase "I think" (Bechdel 141). Cvetkovich suggests that "...Alison's efforts to witness in a world of silences, secrets, and repressions lead to various forms of writer's block, censorship, and unrepresentability" (Cvetkovich 121). She experiences a world that she cannot trust and so when she cannot trust what she herself is experiencing the diary becomes filled with modifiers. A

trauma victim cannot comprehend the traumatic event and so explaining the incomprehensible becomes impossible. Alison is attempting to find the truth, but it remains elusive and so she must similarly cancel all her observations in case they are false.

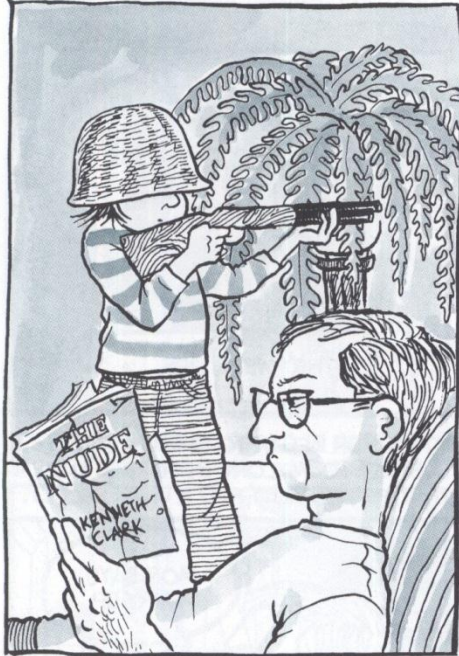


(Bechel 142)

Her inability to put words on the things she experiences are typical for victims of trauma, and in order to somehow express what she is feeling she must find a way to justify her words. What is interesting is that the “I think” turns into something more similar to an icon or a symbol. In other words, it carries considerable meaning to Alison; it becomes a summary of her traumatic feelings. As trauma is encoded in feelings and images, Alison has encoded her trauma in the “curvy circumflex”. (Cvetkovich 121) Alison is able to invent a new symbol for her emotions and it is a clear connection to the world of comics, and her later work with the medium.



I WAS SPARTAN TO MY FATHER'S ATHENIAN. MODERN TO HIS VICTORIAN.



BUTCH TO HIS NELLY.



UTILITARIAN TO HIS AESTHETE.



(Bechdel 15)

Bechdel is drawn to the traditionally masculine not only in manner of dress and attitude, but also in the sense of her taste towards the utilitarian and functional. Anything that she finds to her liking her father finds unacceptable and so she cannot trust her own preferences because her

father will always consider them inappropriate. Alison is a willful person and so she is somehow able to still assess and accept herself, but not without struggling and fighting her father along the way.

One of the memories that seem to play an important role in her life is her first meeting with a butch woman, and the sense of connection and belonging that she experiences in seeing a woman who dresses precisely how she herself would like to. It becomes a beacon of light, one that makes her feel at home and welcome: “But the vision of the truck driving Bulldyke sustained me through the years...as perhaps it haunted my father” (Bechdel 118). The image of little Alison watching the butch woman with a sense of longing, is contrasted in her father’s reaction, who seems fearful and displeased. The butch woman, unlike Bruce, is able to actively live out her preference, despite it being socially less acceptable, while Bruce chooses to hide that part of him. He seems to fear his sexuality and hides it presumably out of shame and propriety. The courage that the butch woman shows is threatening in the sense that she is not ashamed to break with social convention in order to be herself.





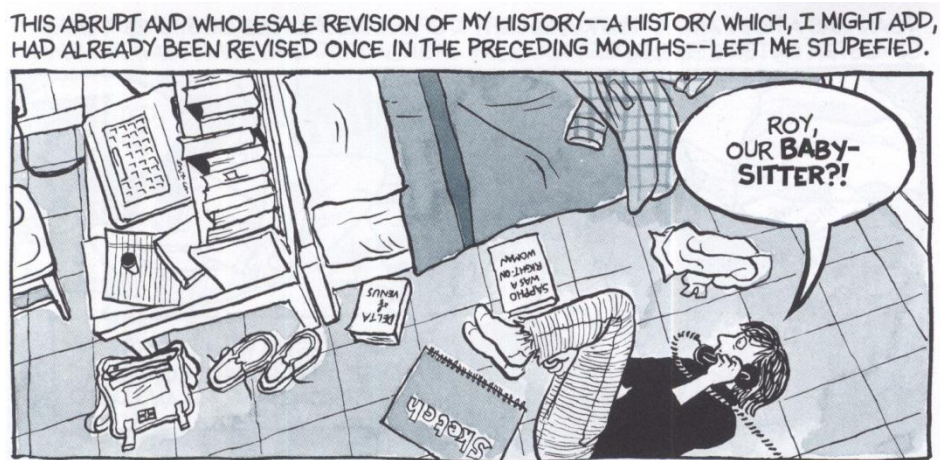
(Bechdel 118)

Bruce Bechdel, similarly to Small's mother, suppresses himself and his own identity in living a heterosexual life. Many aspects in Bruce's life are based on lies and illusions that he act out in order to be acceptable in society. However, in doing so, he conceals important aspects of himself and this is certainly a contributed factor in the anger outbursts and often irrational behavior. The sense of shame and sorrow of not being able to express you own sexuality can be traumatic because it encompasses every aspect of the person's life. Bechdel herself says in the memoir that: "Sexual shame is in itself a kind of death" (Bechdel 228). You lose a part of yourself that is so integral to your own existence and understanding of yourself.

When Alison uses "haunt" to describe what effect the butch woman has on Bruce it seems highly appropriate, because Bruce haunts Alison in much the same way.

The way in which Alison learns of her father's sexuality, is on the phone with her mother, after she told her parents in a letter that she was a lesbian. Alison's mother is initially unhappy

with the announcement, which devastates Alison and leaves her fragile. In her already upset state, the ensuing news of her father’s sexuality is a shock to her. In her own words: “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” (Bechdel 79). Her words echo the definition of trauma “as something disturbing that has not been fully apprehended” (Adami 7). Alison is unable to understand what her mother has told her because of the unexpected and life changing nature of the information. The implication it has on her life is something she continually revisits in the memoir and yet is unable to find any ultimate answers.



(Bechdel 79)

The scene in which her mother tells her about her father’s hidden sexuality is repeated several times in the memoir. The repetition indicates that the scene is important and that it is something that has stayed with her since the day the phone call happened. Repetition is an essential part of trauma fiction as “repetition mimics the symptoms of trauma: it indicates on a formal level the haunting return of the event and the disruption of chronology characterizes a traumatized individual’s mind” (Adami 74). The technique of broken chronology occurs in relation to several aspects of Alison’s past, most notably the death of her father, which I will go into detail later. However, the image of Alison laying on the floor talking to her mother about her father’s sexuality in a fetal position is repeated three times in the course of a fairly short memoir. As Adami explains that fragmented narration is necessary part of trauma fiction: “In traditional narrative structure, the reader experiences the gradual unfolding of the plot... The disruption of causality and continuity leaves the reader in the same condition as a traumatized individual who

cannot transform his or her traumatic memory into a coherent narrative” (Adami 78). Alison draws the scene meticulously each time, but with a slightly different angle, but always seen from above. This repetition interrupts the normal flow of the story and the image of Alison lying on the floor becomes the focus. Her position in the fetal position with her knees tucked into her belly suggests what a shock it is to her system. She repeats the same words from the conversation as if stuck in a loop, that she cannot get out of. Unconsciously, Bruce has stunned Alison into a state of shock and disbelief.

Bruce’s trauma, therefore, not only affects himself, but the whole family, and perhaps particularly Alison, because she must confront her own views on her own sexuality, but also about her father's sexuality. Her father's closeted homosexuality indicates a sense of shame and negative view of homosexuality that not only relates to him, but also to her own sexuality. As a lesbian, his choice to remain closeted his whole life, is a choice she struggles to accept, on one hand she would after all not have been born if he had decided to be openly gay and not married her mother, yet as a homosexual she cannot accept living a life where her own sexuality was kept hidden. In her memoir, she tries to understand her father’s choices, but as mentioned, the answers seem to stay elusive; as she could not grasp that her father was gay because of the violent and unexpected way she found out. Alison had only come to terms with her own sexuality a month before, and the realization had already left her vulnerable. The ensuing information about her father seems to have made Alison inherently connect her own sexuality with her fathers.

Alison has many unresolved issues relating to her father, particularly that of his sexuality. While Alison briefly spoke to her mother about her father, Alison was unable to take in all the aspects because of the shock she experienced. She even tries to speak to her father about it, but he seems set on keeping it hidden from her. Bechdel is caught trying to understand her father, but he is an elusive character that she is unable to fully grasp. She is on a restless journey shuffling through old photos of him, along with maps and passports and anything else she can find that gives an indication as to who he was. Essentially, she is trying to map out the man she never got to know. In never being able to know her father, he becomes a form of traumatic memory in himself that constantly interrupts her life even her memoir. Despite being a memoir about Bechdel, she cannot escape her father’s presence in the memoir; she herself recognizes what an important part he plays: “It’s tempting to say that, in fact, this **is** my father’s story” (Bechdel 196). Arguably, he is essential to her understanding of herself.





(Bechdel 221)

While he was still alive, he was never close to Alison, and there were few indications that his distanced relationship was going to change, despite attempts at getting closer, such as the scene that takes place in the car, where they attempt at closing the gap between themselves and where Bruce opens up to Alison about his homosexual experiences. Bruce tells about having always been attracted to boys and wanting to be a girl as a child, but the admission is not one of relief or emotionally charged, as one would expect. Instead, it seems an emotionally distanced reception of his experiences.

Yet, even during those scenes it seems to be largely Bechdel who is listening to her father and that there is very little exchange. Bruce stares intensely at the road, with no sideways glance at Alison, he does not seem to want to understand her struggles with her sexuality, such as when she points out that she wanted to be a boy when she was younger, just as he wanted to be a girl. Alison on the other hand seeks out Bruce's eyes for some connection, but she does not get the reaction she wanted. Alison becomes engaged and enthusiastic in the conversation, but her father is unresponsive. He seems unable to comprehend what she is telling him, and instead he seems to ignore her words. The caption boxes indicate the dark and stifled mood, whereas in the rest of the memoir, the background to the caption boxes are white, in the car sequence the background is black giving a dense and oppressed feeling to the words and indicates what a disappointment Alison felt at the lack of response.

## **BRUCE BECHDEL AS TRAUMATIC MEMORY**

The event seems to trigger particularly strong emotions is her father's death, despite her own

insistence on it having little or no impact on her life. I will be looking at in what ways her memoir reveals how important and emotionally affected she was by her father's death such as through formal indicators of repetition. Particularly looking at the ways she looks for connections with her father even after his death such as through photography.

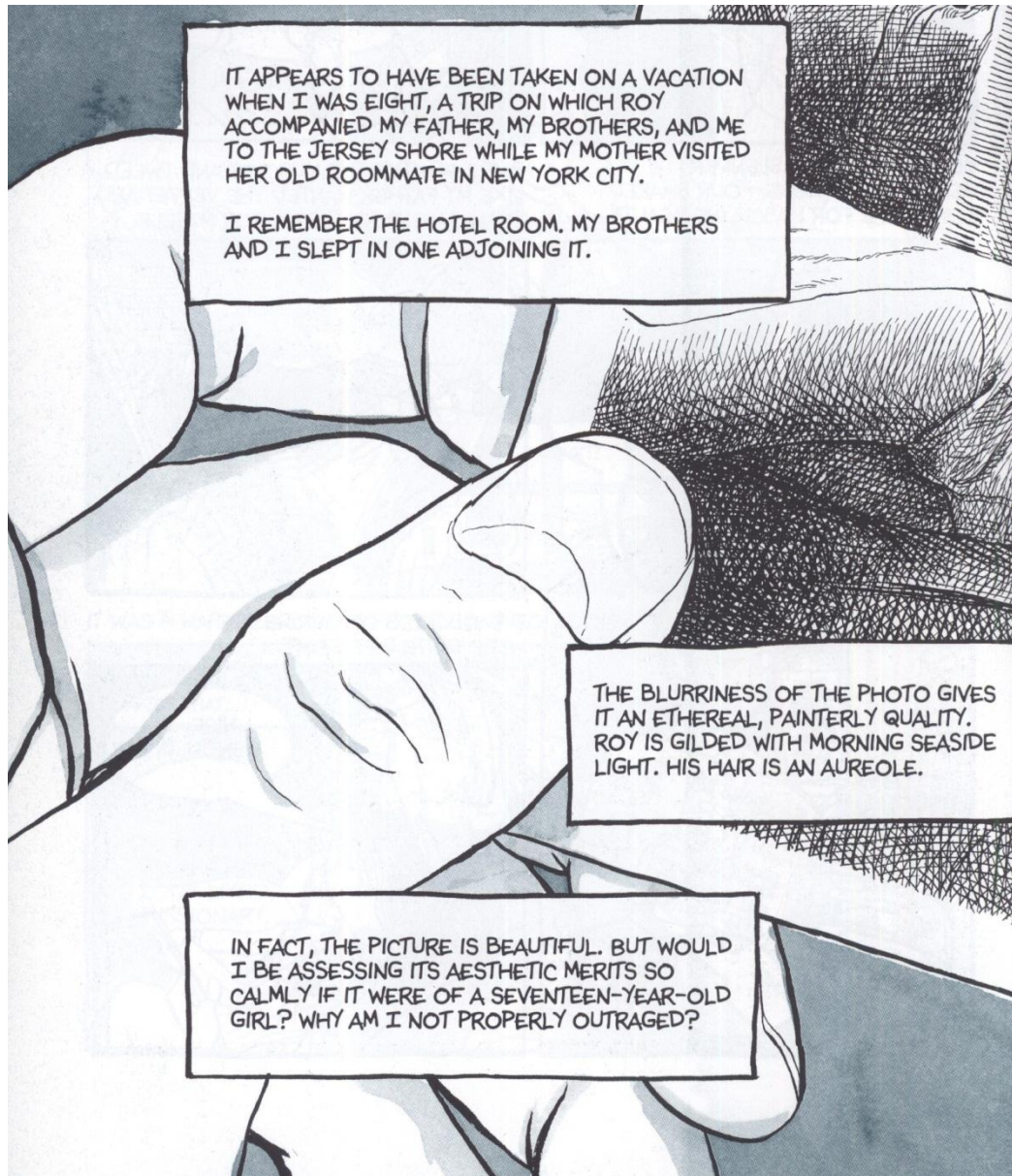
It is a nonlinear narration and she recursively goes back to the death of her father. This makes the chronology often confusing, and the cues that indicate when the events took place are largely through visual representation such as haircuts and the degree of maturity in the character's appearance. It would seem, Bechdel is unable to come to terms with her father's death, and in her inability to accept it, she is unable to restore it in its proper place in her own memory, hence, the memory keeps being brought back to the surface. Her father haunts her memoir and interrupts the flow of the narrative. I will be looking at Alison's reaction to her father's death and examining the ways in which he seems to be both present and gone in her life. Further looking at the ways in which she seeks and finds connections to him beyond death and how this relates to trauma.

Whitehead introduces the concept of trans-generational trauma in her book, and it is an aspect of trauma that presents itself in all three memoirs. The trauma of one person can be transferred to the generations that come after: "trans-generational trauma suggests that affect can leak across generations; that a traumatic event which is experienced by one individual can be passed on so that its effects are replayed in another individual one or more generations later" (Whitehead 14). Alison's trauma is closely tied to her father, and his shame concerning his own sexuality has left its marks on Alison. Trans-generational trauma is: "transmitted from one generation to the next when a shameful and therefore unspeakable experience is barred from consciousness or kept secret" (Whitehead 14). While Alison does not carry the same shame concerning her own sexuality as is made clear by her candid drawings of her sexual relationships, but the trauma surfaces in different ways, such as her compulsion.

In life, Bruce was never accessible to her and he seemed more like a character from a book, than an actual person: "I employ these allusions to James and Fitzgerald not only as descriptive devices, but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms" (Bechdel 67). As a fictional person, he was more than a mortal man, someone who always had existed in her life. His death seems all the more incredibly to Alison because his death never became real to her. He continually haunts her as if he were still a part of her life. He becomes a phantom she cannot grasp and therefore cannot lay to rest. He is simultaneously dead to her, but still present in her

life. Alison's obsession with photography seems to display this tensions she experiences.

The instances she seems to feel most connected to her father are the instances when she looks at photographs of him or taken by him. At the center of the memoir, mimicking a centerfold in a magazine Alison recreates a photo of her babysitter Roy. The picture is taken by Bechdel's father while on a family vacation. Bechdel's drawing of the photo is similar to the other redrawn photos with a more realistic style. The details are very exacting, and her own observations of the photo suggest that it is something she has spent time studying very closely. The hand that holds the photo, however, is in the style that is present in the rest of the memoir, and as such, it is more iconic and therefore more universal. (McCloud 31)



(Bechdel 100)

In addition to the drawing there are captions covering the two pages with Bechdel's musings surrounding the photo. The captions scattered half-hazard across the page make it hard for the reader to know where to start and finish. In an interview, "Bechdel describes coming across the photograph after her father's death and being startled by this disturbing visual and material evidence of his parallel life taking place in the room next to where she and her brothers were sleeping..." (Cvetkovich 115) This shock and confusion mimics Alison's emotions in the scattered captions. The scattered captions also create a sense of being overwhelmed by the

information on the page, as if all the thoughts demand attention at the same time. This makes the reader have to work harder in order to engage properly in what they are reading.

In relation to trauma and witnessing this is an effective way of making the reader experience and feel Bechdel's trauma. The reader is very much an active reader and must share in Bechdel's emotional struggles, and this an important part of witnessing Bechdel's trauma. Felman and Laub identify that the listener, or in this case, the reader "has to feel the victim's victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony. The listener, however, is also a separate human being and will experience hazards and struggles of his own..." (Felman and Laub 58) Bechdel forces the engagement of the reader by making them puzzle out the captions, at the same time, they must struggle with the content, and what implications the half-nude photo has.

The conflict that seems to be at the center of his trauma is between a heteronormative life in form of the envelope marked as family, and his life as a gay man in form of the photo of a half-naked Roy. The two sides of Bruce are present in the envelope and the content. His heteronormative life is on display for the world to see through the envelope. The part of him that he cannot allow people to see is his homosexuality, and so must be hidden inside the more socially acceptable lifestyle of heterosexual family man. Cvetkovich identifies the same contrast between family lifestyle and homosexual lifestyle on the next page where Bechdel reveals the negatives of the photos: "...her father's capacity to inhabit different worlds simultaneously and shows how putatively innocent family vacation is closely shadowed by sexual desires that it excludes or renders invisible" (Cvetkovich 116).

The centerfold is however is not negative in nature. When looking at the photo of Roy, we are not only witnessing Bechdel's trauma, but we are watching Bechdel identify Bruce's trauma, we are witnessing the act of witnessing. A concern that is essential to Alison is to find a connection and understanding with her father. When she finds the photograph, she seems to connect with the man behind the camera taking the picture. Her shock seems connected to the fact that she is able to recognize him through the photo: "In fact, the picture is beautiful. But would I be assessing its aesthetic merits so calmly if it were of a seventeen-year-old girl? Why am I not properly outraged? Perhaps I identify too well with my father's illicit awe" (Bechdel 101).

Cvetkovich identifies Bechdel's language as "following in her father's path, Alison reads

the photo not in realist terms but in aesthetic and erotic ones” (Cvetkovich 117). Bechdel struggles with her relationship with her father because she seems to want to be outraged by what she is seeing, while simultaneously wanting to connect with him. Her attitude towards her father seems dissociated, perhaps as a sort of punishment to her father or even as a form of self-protection. She feels that although he was always present in her life she still wanted to be close to her father, but at the same time never felt that he let her in to his life beyond being “free labor” around the house (Bechdel 13).

The owner of the hand is cleverly ambiguous. Cvetkovich identifies the hand as Bechdel’s own hand, which is a logical as the captions are in first person, like the rest of the memoir. However, the angle of the hand also suggests a reader engagement. The angle of the drawing makes the reader literally take the place of Bechdel, it mimics the way the reader would hold the book, or the way Bechdel would hold the photo, suggesting a melding together of the two. There is also the added connection to Bruce. His presence is also there as the photographer of the photo. His eyes would be the first ones to see the image all those years ago. One could even speculate in the hand being his. There are no indicators of time beyond the ones that are in the photo. The panel takes up two pages and bleeds off the page giving the timeless feel that also occurs in *Stitches*. This heightens the sensation of non-specificity.

A part Alison’s healing process is therefore witnessing her father’s trauma through the few facts she can find about him. Despite, her complex feelings towards her father, Bechdel still chose to write a memoir that not only asks the reader to witness her own trauma, but also her father’s trauma. In understanding herself, she also had to explore her father’s hidden life. In doing so she tries to understand the choices he made, and the life he led. Her discoveries have given Bechdel a greater understanding and perhaps even sympathy with her father. Regardless of the quite negative tone that runs throughout the memoir, the last panel suggests that Bechdel is able to let the past go and embrace her father for what he was.

## **RECREATING REALITY**

Bechdel is far more concerned with representing reality accurately in her memoir than the two other memoirists and this seems to be relating to her relationship to her father. Many aspects to

her past are uncertain because of her father's lies and so when there are aspects of the content of the novel that are uncertain she can at least depict the world she grew up in as accurately as possible. This focus on reality can also be a symptom of her trauma as she her surroundings become, that which contains her trauma. I will look at the ways in which her compulsion towards reality takes form in her detailed drawings and through her use of formal language.

Bechdel's drawing style is the least fantastical of the three memoirists; her drawings are very much grounded in reality, as she used photographs of herself as reference for her drawings in relation to posture and stances in every single panel. She also recreates old family photos in her memoir, and maps and other artifacts that the family has kept. In comparison to Small and particularly David B. she is not concerned with the worlds of dreams and fantasy, at least not in her visual representation. Whitehead says that "The photograph itself represents a reconstitution: it shows us reality in a past state and at the same time evidence that what we see has indeed existed. By attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces in us a belief that it is alive; it uncannily suggests a return of the dead" (Whitehead 130). The photos, passports, letters, maps and so on that she recreates seem to be Bechdel's connection to reality and fact. The tangible artifacts are therefore true, unlike her father.

She seems to break somewhat with the graphic novel tradition: "graphic novel claims no objectivity because, in its visual representation, 'reality' is always visibly transformed, and authenticity can thus hardly be pinpointed in comics" (Engelmann 46). Bechdel's regular drawing style when she is acting out scenes versus her re-creation of letters and photos are clearly set apart. She is always painstakingly concerned with detail, but when she for example re-creates her father's letters in the memoir, it lends authenticity to her imagined scenes of her father writing the letters during his time in the army, scenes in which she obviously could not have been present. However, they cannot be perceived as real. The act redrawing something will impart a subjective voice into the photo. Bechdel's act of cartooning her reality makes, whether you have a realistic drawing style or not, the image inherently personal and subjective to the author.

Hirsch suggests, "photographs locate themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of the family life. Since looking operates through projection and since the photographic image is the positive development of the negative, the plenitude that constitutes the fulfillment of desire, photographs can more easily show us what we wish our family to be, and therefore what, most frequently, it is not" (Hirsch 8).



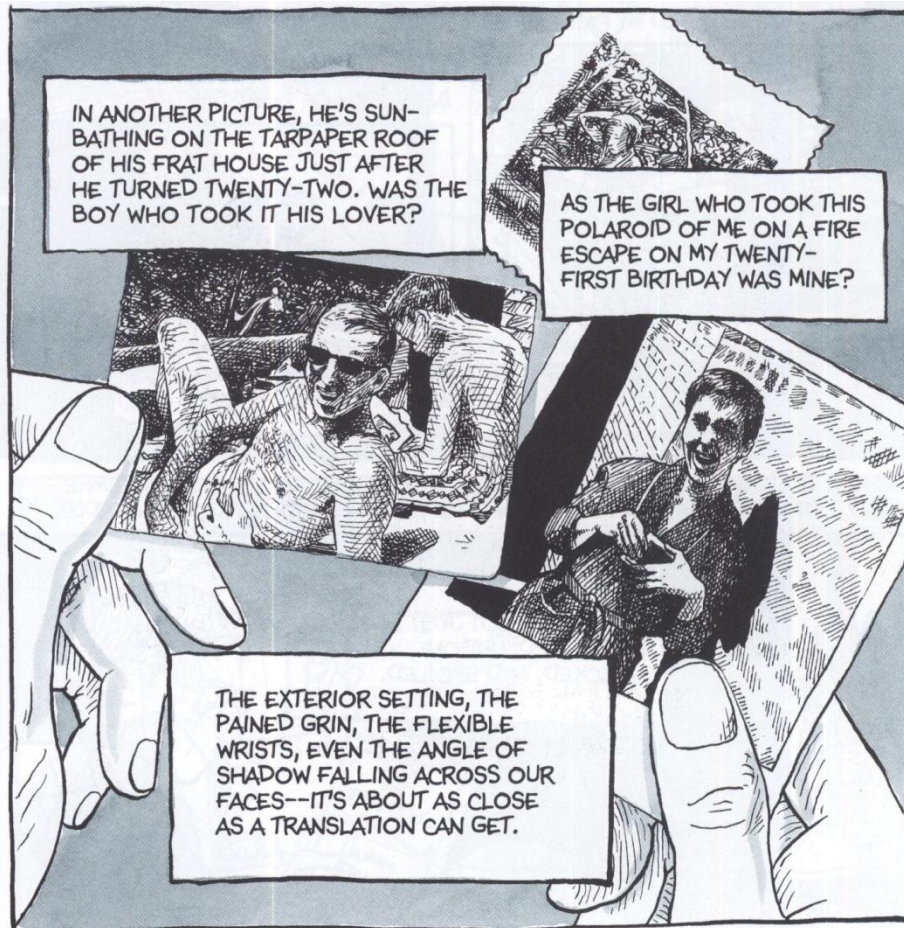
However, I would argue that in Bechdel's case she is unconcerned with the visual representation of a happy family and instead through the photographs looks for the unadorned truth. She is a harsh critic of her family, and does not try to make it appear any different from how she herself perceived it. Hence, her look into the family secrets and the unabashed look at her father's alleged pedophile tendencies. What would normally be attempted to be kept hidden from the public is put on display in the memoir. In order, for Bechdel to explore the trauma of her youth she has to be completely honest about her own experiences and she sees what an important part her own father has played in her trauma.

In Sontag's book *Regarding the Pain of Others* she argues that: "Ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death. Because an image produced with a camera is, literally, a trace of something brought before the lense, photographs were superior to any painting as a memento of the vanished past and dear departed (Sontag 21)". I would argue that Bechdel attempts at capturing this precise balance between fact and objectivity in *Fun Home*, where she is able to take facts like passports, maps and photos and interpret them subjectively. The objects that she recreates in the memoir, such as the photos are much more realistic than the rest of Bechdel's drawing style. It seems to be Bechdel's way of proving the authenticity of her memoir, she herself has said that it is to "remind the reader that her story is connected to actual lives" (Cvetkovitch 117). The realistic drawings are also more easily identified precisely because they are drawn in a slightly more realistic style. As McCloud indicates in *Understanding Comics* the realistic drawings are considered more objective and therefore more closely related to reality (McCloud 46).



(Bechdel 86)

However, in redrawing these photos and artifacts she is doing much more, she is engaging with the lost past. When she draws her father as a young man from a photograph, she is in a sense speaking with the dead and not just observing. Her own engagement in the recreation is as important as the photographer's was. She must make decisions as an artist and this makes the photo simultaneously subjective to Alison, while the objectivity of the photograph still is present. In the panel below, she goes even further; she recreates an image in which both she and Bruce are present. In life Bruce and Alison were unable to connect with each other and kept distance as represented in the panel above. The photographs below illustrate the subjects in the pictures are separated by time and space, which is in many ways exactly what they were in life, but all the same they seem closer together and more connected her recreation of the photos. Bechdel has found a way for the two photos to be unified and to occupy the same space and time, creating a tenuous bond between the two. For someone who is searching for a connection to her father the recreating of the photos can do precisely that.



(Bechdel 120)

Representing the visual aspects of her childhood as faithfully as she can seems to be particularly important for Bechdel. When she draws her father's library, she uses caption boxes to add further details, or explain what things are, such as below where she explains what fabric the curtains are, or who it is depicted on the lamp. Wherever she can validate the scenes she depicts, she adds any information she can, be it re-creation of an artifact or a comment on what a place smelled like. (Bechdel 60) Her father had an obsessive eye for detail and this personality trait Bechdel seems to have inherited from her father. However, "he used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not" (Bechdel 16). Bechdel on the other hand uses her attention for detail in order to recreate her childhood as exacting and truthfully, as she possibly can, yet she must recognize that she cannot access the truth. Essentially father's real identity will not be accessible to her. However, where her father was always actively



hiding the truth, Bechdel tried to find the truth, but still a subjective one.



(Bechdel 60)

Bechdel's eye for detail particularly concerning her home and past artifacts are an extension of her fascination with photographs. Whitehead suggests in her discussion on trans-generational trauma that: "In describing trans-generational trauma, Abraham and Torok notably evoke the metaphor of a building: the psyche of the next generation becomes a 'crypt', a container that houses the seemingly unthinkable and unrepresentable residue of the past." (Whitehead 14). Her house becomes a literal container of her father's memory, he poured his heart and soul into the house and so he haunts the house as well as Alison's memories. "Backgrounds can be another valuable tool for indicating invisible ideas...particularly the world of emotions" (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 132). The house and therefore the background holds a lifetime of emotions for Alison that she cannot access because of their traumatic content, both for herself and

her father. To her the repetitious details speak of trauma, as she cannot.

While one may argue that Alison continually verbalizes her trauma in the course of the memoir it seems emotionally distant. A unique aspect of *Fun Home* in relation to *Stitches* and *Epileptic* is Bechdel's use of language, which more literary than colloquial. Considering it is a memoir and personal issues one would expect a subjective language. Duncan and Smith suggest that "a comic book that tackles weighty moral or philosophical issues is likely to rely on words to carry most of the meaning" (Duncan and Smith 146). All three share in their weighty topics. Whereas both *Stitches* and *Epileptic* are informal in their use of language, Alison uses a language that is often more formal and aloof. In terms of their approach to trauma, David B and David Small are both very close to their emotions and often use a more personable and intimate language. Alison on the other hand seems to create a distance to the reader, but also her own emotions through her use of a more a literary voice.

In the memoir, she often refers to her lack of emotions, particularly in relation to her father's death. Alison seeks out ways to provoke an emotion in those around: "For years after my father's death, when the subject of parents came up in conversation I would relate the information in a flat matter of fact tone. . . . eager to detect in my listener the flinch of grief that eluded me" (Bechdel 45). However, this is where the form of the memoir seems to suggest otherwise, in order to somehow access her own emotions she must distance herself from the topics. Instead of having confronting her own emotions, she asks the reader to react for her as a witness to her struggles. If she were to become too emotionally involved in her own story, she may not have been able to tell it at all because of the overwhelming topics.

Her years of silence have been broken and the healing process of writing the memoir can start. What all three memoirs share is an inherent need to testify to their trauma "none find peace in silence, even when it is their choice to remain silent" (Felman and Laub 79). While, none of the memoirs conclusively have an ending that suggests complete closure the ambiguous nature of the endings suggests that their traumatic memories will always be a part of their lives, but not necessarily in the form of traumatic memory, but as a bad memory.

Bruce is pervasive presences throughout the homes that affect everyone both positive and negative. His presence after he passed away is no less felt as he has had considerable effect on Alison's childhood and grown up life. One of the major realizations is her father's life as a closeted gay man, and naturally, what that implies for her family, it seems to trigger a host of

conflicting emotions that pulls Bechdel in all sorts of directions. She struggles with her feelings towards her father as she realizes how little she truly knows him. It accumulates in a loss of faith in her father. The emotional stability is severely tried and she struggles to regain footing. Herman explains that in trauma victims: “The damage to the survivor’s faith and sense of community is particularly severe when the traumatic events themselves involve betrayal of important relationships” (Herman 55). Yet, her pain also connects to never getting to know her father. Her journey is one to find ways in which she can connect to her father and find closure in her life. She is able to do so through her use of re-creating photographs and through keeping an emotional distance to her past and instead asking the reader to witness the trauma for her through achronology and repetition.

# CONCLUSION

Trauma theory gives valuable insight into the three memoirs by shedding light on the ways in which the graphic memoirs explore pain through form. The three testimonies, through their drawings, use the visual language, as well as the verbal, to access trauma. This bi-modal form of expression functions well, as trauma resists a pure verbal form of representation, because of the fragmented way in which the memory appears to the victim. This is because the traumatic event is not experienced directly, but appears to the victim in images and emotions, which frequently have no chronological order. The three memoirs have found ways in which to represent these traumatic instances to share their trauma with witnesses, in this case the readers. The victim's act of testifying starts a healing process of installing the trauma memory back into a normal memory through narrating the events.

Witnessing is an essential part of all three memoirs and seems to be a prerequisite for wanting to write the memoir in the first place. To resolve trauma there must be a witness to the trauma and in all three memoirs, the readers of the memoir take on this responsibility. To engage the reader properly, in the act of witnessing, the authors employ different strategies that force the reader to struggle with the memoir the way they have struggled with their trauma. The intent of the author is to imbue in the reader a similar experience of the events in an attempt to induce an understanding of the author's experiences. McCloud argues: "Every act committed to paper by the comic artists is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice. An equal partner in crime known as the reader" (McCloud 68). Because the reader must more actively take part in the storytelling, one could argue that the reader has to invest in the narrative and the characters more fully. If a prerequisite for trauma fiction to be successful is the engagement of the witness then the graphic medium is the ideal place to explore trauma. "The effects of the inherent latency of trauma can be discerned in the broken or fragmented quality of testimonial narratives which demand new structures of reading or reception" (Whitehead 7).

David Small confronts the reader with raw emotions through stripping down the visual aspect of the memoir to the bare minimum and instead focusing the reader in on the emotions of



the characters. His accurate portrayal of human emotions is unique and allows him to rely more heavily on his own drawings.

In *Epileptic* witnessing is thematically and formally important to the memoir. The years of witnessing, Jean-Christophe's epilepsy has left David disillusioned with the world and has made him violently angry and frustrated, which is reflected in his emotional drawings that are often grotesque and dark. David B tests the limits of reality and through fantastical drawings asks the reader to believe the unbelievable trauma he has experienced. He also describes events in a non-chronological way to confuse and force the reader to work thoroughly through the memoir.

Bechdel also uses this technique, which Felman and Laub identify as an inherit quality of trauma: "trauma returns in disjointed fragments in the memory of the survivor, the listener has to let these trauma fragments make their impact both on him and on his witness" (Felman and Laub 71). Bechdel though appears to be seemingly less emotionally involved in her own trauma, though her frequent use of repetition suggests that she is more affected by her traumatic experiences than she is willing to let on. She seems unable to retell her story if she becomes too emotionally involved, and so she asks the reader to react to the trauma instead.

The three memoirs have very different drawing styles, yet they are all through the power of the medium able to mimic and enhance their trauma with their drawings. *Stitches* uses a very delicate style of drawing which may seem inappropriate seen in relation to the themes the memoir touches upon. However, if one recognizes trauma as a form of "ghost from the past" that haunts the author then his water color technique gives the memoir a ghostlike feel that runs throughout the memoir. The memoir as a whole is a haunting memory.

*Epileptic* and *Fun Home* use a more easily recognizable way of mimicking trauma through extensive use of detail that overwhelms the reader with visual information that imitates the way the traumatic memory will overwhelm the trauma victim. *Epileptic* uses dark and ominous colors that give the memoir a dramatic and emotional feel. This is very much congruent with the memoir's content that is highly emotional.

*Fun Home* on the other hand is also full of visual information with a compulsive attention to detail, but in her case it seems to be more importantly tied to facts instead of emotions. Alison relies on the form to be the anchor that confirms the truth and reality of the memoir, where the content is often unbelievable to her because of the traumatic events that she is describing. Alison seems to cling to the photographs because she cannot comprehend that her father is dead, yet she

cannot simultaneously believe the life that he did live. He appears to her therefore in a limbo. “The Photograph itself represents a reconstitution: it shows us reality in a past state and at the same time evidences that what we see has indeed existed. By attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces in us a belief that it is alive; it uncannily suggests a return of the dead” (Whitehead 130)

An aspect that is present in all three memoirs and that deserves a closer examination is that of family history. All three memoirs, to a varying degree, explore past generations. Small has a brief introduction into his mother’s family and his mother’s relationship to her own mother. David B spends considerable time exploring his grandparents and his grandfather’s ghost haunts him in the memoir. Bechdel briefly touches upon her grandmother, and naturally, her father plays an important part. In relation to trans-generational trauma, it is themes that can give a unique insight into the ways our family history affect us. It allows for quiet or private trauma to not only be seen as a personal experience, but also one that affects past and future generations.

Graphic novels have historically been marginalized by the literary community, due to their perceived childish nature. The portrayal of traumatic events has rectified this situation to some extent by providing a suitable platform for expressing complex, and often decoupled events. Exploring to which extent the graphic novel can, and has, provided an outlet for examining other societal challenges could provide further legitimacy to the genre.

To summarize, graphic novels have traditionally been considered an outlet for juvenile topics, with a strong perception among critics that the graphic novel is nothing more than a silly cartoon. Though in recent times, the graphic novel has proven to provide a suitable platform for trauma victims to express the complex and fragmented memories that they have experienced. The adaptation of graphic novels for expressing traumatic experiences is a result of the ability to express the emotions, not only through vivid text, but also through images. This bi-modal input provides the author with multiple outlets and facilitates the expression of more complex relationships, which otherwise would be hard, if not impossible, to express simply through words. By lending itself to this serious topic the genre of graphic novels has increased its virtue in the literary world, and is slowly becoming a respected addition.

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