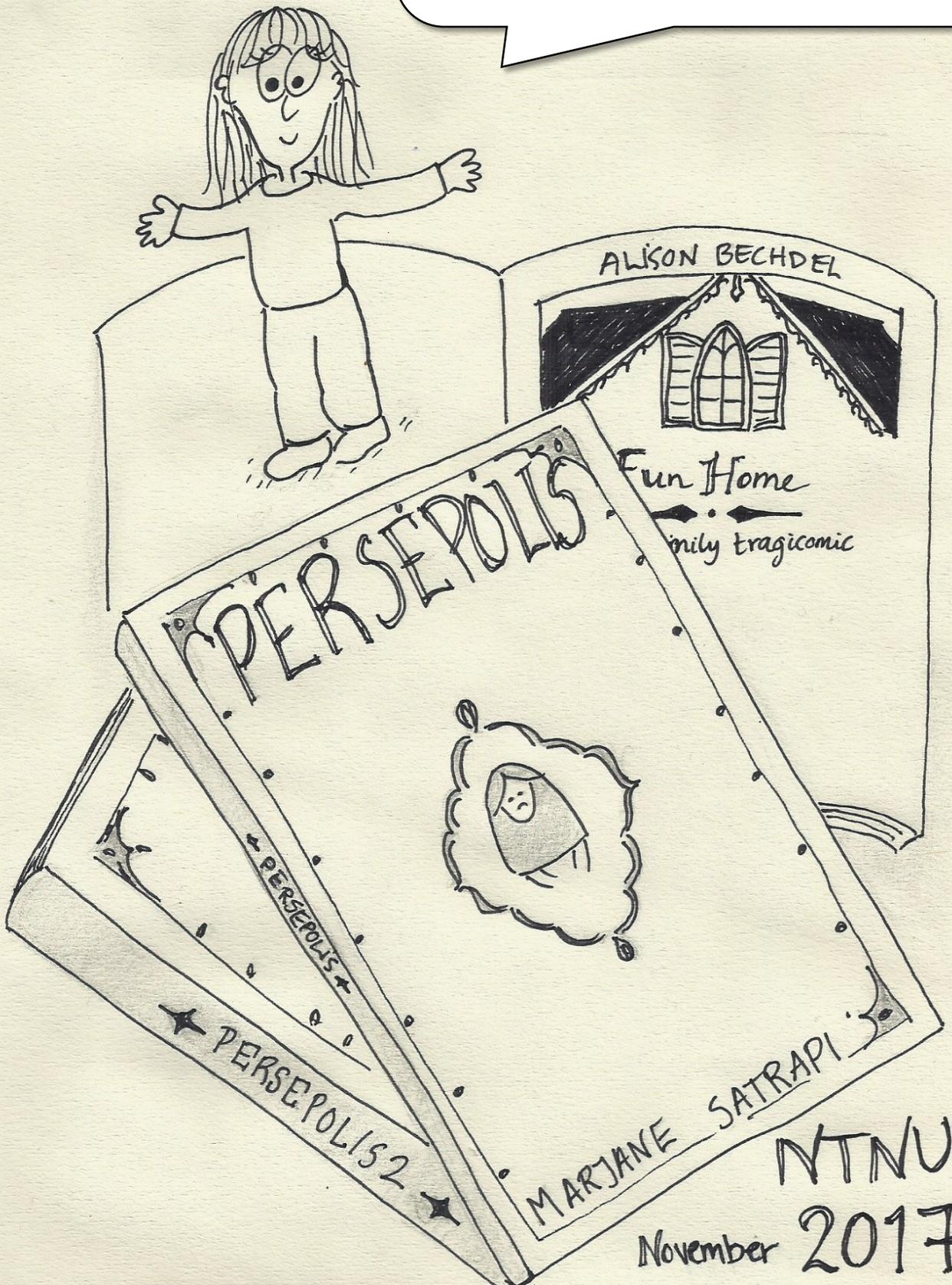


**Balancing on Borders:**

**Graphic Expressions and Female Realities  
in  
*Fun Home* and *Persepolis*.**





## **Acknowledgements.**

I first came across the graphic novel in 2015, when one of the professors at California State University of Monterey Bay brought *Persepolis* to class. I was instantly hooked, and my newfound fascination has, somehow, resulted in this master's thesis. Although demanding, writing this thesis has been an amazing experience for me. When I realized that I could write quite independently, I quickly decided to move from Trondheim to my parents' cabin in Rauland with my friend Agnes. I enjoyed writing in the quiet mountains and felt that it gave me inspiration and clearer thoughts. Although I have written much of this thesis away from NTNU (and society in general), I could not have done it on my own.

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## Introduction.

The graphic novel has become a popular format for the genre of autobiographies, exemplified by books such as Spiegelman's *Maus*, Winick's *Pedro and Me*, and Delisle's *Jerusalem*. Graphic memoirs lie on the border of fiction and non-fiction, and I will argue that sequential art is well suited for female memoirs of trauma because the form reflects human memories, as they are experienced as subjective fragments of real events. Also, artistic and graphic expressions evoke emotions in the reader and communicate messages efficiently. The form can efficiently communicate both humor and tragedy and is, therefore, well suited for stories of trauma. Further, the artists must balance on the border of familiar and alien elements, for instance through representations of familiar objects and everyday experiences. This balance can lead to identification in the reader and contribute to the creation of intimate relationships to communities of female readers. Because the graphic memoir lies on the border between private and public life and presents alternative views on history that are personal and subjective, the self-representation of the persona becomes reliable and powerful when revealing imperfectness. By presenting imperfectness, the artist can also create resistance and connect with her female readers.

Both literary scholars and people in general around the world have opened their eyes to the potential of graphic novels. One of these is Rocio G. Davis, who views comics as a "sophisticated and developed medium [...] in which the intersections of culture, history, ethnicity, and gender can be effectively negotiated by cartoonists and their adult readers" (267). *Persepolis* and *Fun Home* demonstrate the graphic format's potential regarding the kinds of issues and subjects it is well fitted to address, and on the back of the cover of *Fun Home*, it is said to be "like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, [...] a story exhilaratingly suited to graphic memoir form" (Bechdel). *Persepolis* and *Fun Home* are serious books dealing with childhood trauma, elaborating on Marjane's and Allison's coming of age and their search for independent, female identities. In both stories, we meet girls who are unorthodox in their environments. Both Satrapi and Bechdel convey stories by marginalized communities and demonstrate how sequential art is well suited for such narratives through their ways of connecting with their readers, communicating emotions, and graphically embodying resistance. Julia Swindells advocates that "autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual" (7). Thus, the graphic memoirs not only represent individuals but also the marginalized group they belong to.

For Bechdel, this means that the representation of herself also contributes to the representation of lesbians more generally, while Satrapi's personal voice can represent Iranian and Muslim women.

Just as Satrapi and Bechdel can be representative but not said to speak for *all* lesbians or *all* young Iranian women, I cannot claim to speak for all their readers in this thesis. Nevertheless, in order to make claims about why the graphic format is suitable for female autobiographies, I will have to make some assumptions regarding the readers' receptions of the books. This is not unproblematic, as Jonathan Rose demonstrates through his *receptive fallacy* (see Rose 64-67). To state something about the readers' experience is not only naive but also impossible. Readers are individual subjects who will interpret works differently, according to their background, experiences, and expectations, and not necessarily in coherence with the author's intentions. With this in mind, I will make suggestions regarding what the graphic memoir *can* communicate and how elements in the books might be received by some readers, without stating that these are, in any way, universal receptions. Also, when I present the readers of *Fun Home* and *Persepolis* through the pronoun "she", I do not intend to suggest that these are books to be read only by women, as men of course can (and will) enjoy reading these memoirs. Lastly, I will emphasize that when I talk about authorial intention, all my claims will be based on paratexts, not my own interpretations.

In this thesis, I will study the graphic format in relation to the autobiographical genre by referring to *Persepolis* and *Fun Home*. In chapter one, I will connect my claim, that sequential art is well suited for female memoirs of trauma, to theories on the graphic form and autobiographies. I will start by problematizing the genre and study how it is affected by visual and artistic expressions by referring to scholars such as Michael A. Chaney. Based on arguments by Will Eisner and Scott McCloud, I will also demonstrate how sequential art reflects our way of remembering and explain why the reader needs to fill in gaps and make closure. Further, I will question the authenticity of the genre and the artist's possibilities of creating authentic narratives. I will then discuss how the artists must balance between private and public life and consider their responsibility, by including statements by scholars such as Jonathan Rose, Nancy K. Miller, and Paul John Eakin. Later on, I will stress what is required from the readers of graphic memoirs by referring to Francisca Goldsmith, and discuss the role of words within graphic works of literature. By discussing theories by these scholars and others, I will emphasize the importance of recognition through the background and familiar objects, and identification through emotions and situations. I will further stress how graphic memoirs

communicate emotions and the importance of humor. Lastly, I will connect the female perspective to graphic literature by examining arguments by scholars such as Rita Felski and Alisia Chase, and highlight how the graphic form breaks with masculinist literary traditions. I will argue that its visuality leads to new possibilities of directness that can act as female resistance. Also, the artists must dare to present alternative female realities as well as everyday experiences in their self-representations to connect with her female readers and create resistance.

In chapters two and three, I will study *Persepolis* and *Fun Home* by relating them to the theory discussed in chapter one. My aims in these chapters are to examine how Bechdel and Satrapi manage to involve their readers and make them connect with their narratives and female characters. I will discuss how the combination of images and words makes such complex and rough stories become intriguing and accessible to the reader, and how they are influenced by their female voices. In chapter two on *Persepolis*, I will include theories by scholars such as Leigh Gilmore, Meghan Gilbride, Rachel Trousdale, and others to argue that Satrapi uses the perspective of the child witness to educate her readers, and performs resistance by portraying females as individuals and by revealing her own imperfectness. Moreover, the imagination of her child witness and her inclusion of postmemories reflect memories as fractions of realities. In chapter three, I will focus on *Fun Home* and with support by scholars such as David M. Ball, Julia Watson, and Rebecca Scherr, I will suggest that Bechdel portrays an alternative view on the American family. Through her graphic expressions and inclusions of intertexts and realistically drawn photographs, she reveals the queerness of her own family and criticizes gender expectations in society. Her use of photographs also highlights how the graphic form reflects memory practices, as they are frozen flashes of real events.



## Chapter 1. Theoretical Background.

### 1.1. Alternative Views on History.

First, I would like to define the terms “graphic novel” and “graphic memoir”. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). Admittedly, by having a sequence of images, the juxtaposition of images and words can create a continuing story, defined as comics. Both comics and graphic novels use such sequential art to communicate but “graphic novels are generally stand-alone stories with more complex plots” than the comic books (“What is a Graphic Novel?”). The graphic novel is not a genre but a format (it can be both fiction and non-fiction) and many use the term “graphic novels” when talking about memoirs such as *Persepolis* and *Fun Home*. Is this term suitable? “Graphic novel” might be misleading in connection to autobiographies because the term blurs the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. The books I will study in this thesis are narratives of real, lived lives and can, therefore, not be regarded as novels in the regular sense. Others have problematized this question and advocated for terms such as autographics (by Whitlock and Poletti i), and graphic memoir (by Miller 539). Since my thesis relies on the subjective, artistic expression as communicator of personal narratives, I could have used the term “confessions”, defined by Francis Hart as

personal history that seeks to communicate or express the essential nature, the truth of the self [...] The confessional text makes public that which has been private, typically claiming to avoid filtering mechanisms of objectivity and detachment in its pursuit of the truth of subjective experience. (qtd. in Felski 83)

This definition describes narratives such as *Persepolis* and *Fun Home* to a large extent but does not include the graphic format. Consequently, I will mainly hold on to the term “graphic memoir” when discussing autobiographies in the graphic form, which reflects my wish to highlight both the visuality of the format and the element of memory as real-life experiences.

According to Chaney, the development of the graphic memoir can be said to have started in the 1920s, when photographs were connected to autobiographies (4). Photographs represent identity and were added to claim historical accuracy and self-reflexivity, acting as documentary evidence, as a way of saying “I was there, this really happened”. When Bechdel talks about her use of realistically drawn photographs in *Fun Home*, she stresses how they “anchor the story in real life [...] It’s a way to keep reminding the reader, these are real people” (Chute, “An

Interview” 1009). Consequently, Bechdel confirms how (drawn) photographs function to guarantee authenticity. This focus on authenticity implies that memoirs emerge on the border of fiction and non-fiction. In his study on graphic subjects, Chaney acknowledges that

if painted autobiographies that include photographs highlight autobiography’s claims to historical accuracy and self-reflexivity, autobiographies told in the typically exaggerated visual style of the commix, by contrast, complicate those claims, juxtaposing them against autobiography’s other set of authorial promises – to portray experiences in a manner that is emotionally and psychologically true to the unique, often idiosyncratic perspective of the author-artist. (4)

Chaney problematizes the role of reality within the graphic memoir by including the authorial promises of conveying subjective truths. The reader of the graphic memoir is expecting and wants a personal perspective on history. The drawn images in graphic memoirs are not objective documentations of history but artistic expressions of experiences that communicate emotions and identity. As a result, the graphic format is suitable for autobiographies because the artistic expression expresses subjectivity. By artistic expression, I mean the individual artist’s ways of communicating graphically (both visually and verbally) with the reader. This expression can be illustrated by the stylistic contrasts in *Fun Home* and *Persepolis*. Satrapi uses simple, black-and-white comic strips with powerful and sometimes shocking images to convey her everyday experiences of the Iranian war and enforcement of conservative Islam, whereas Bechdel draws more realistic and slightly gothic images full of details, combining different styles to set the mood and highlight specific frames. For the reader, the style of the artistic expression becomes a part of the creator’s identity. Because *Fun Home* and *Persepolis* are examples of the bildungsroman, the format and their graphic expressions become highlighted as the readers are presented to the personas’ development as artists. The works not only give the reader insight in the creators’ lives but also, directly or indirectly, in the creation of the works. In other words, the reader can experience a new awareness regarding the form when reading graphic memoirs because the drawings become personal, and the graphic expressions are experienced as part of the specific author’s identity when the readers realize that the practice of drawing them is a part of the memoir itself. Thus, when seeing that Marjane studies art, we become aware of the fact that she created the work we are holding and that it represents not only her life but also is a part of it. This is prominent in *Fun Home* as well, for instance when we discover Alison’s pleasures of drawing (see Bechdel 170-171) or see how she scrabbles during lectures (see Bechdel 209).

I have now stressed the importance of artistic expressions and the act of drawing in relation to graphic memoirs. Hillary L. Chute, interviewing contemporary cartoonists asks, “what does it mean to take a picture of something versus what does it mean to be drawing something?”, where cartoonist Joe Sacco responds that while photographs often fail to capture a moment, “when you draw, you can always capture that moment” (qtd. in Jacobs 796). In other words, photographs do not always communicate what the artist wants, while drawn images are easier to control and can capture moments of meaning in (and in between) each frame. This view is shared by Ariel Schrag, who claims that the link between the graphic form and autobiographies “has to do with visualizing memory. Every writer incorporates their past into their work, but that act becomes more specific when you are drawing” (qtd. in Chute, “Gothic Revival” 36). The statements by Sacco and Schrag support my view that sequential art communicates subjective experiences efficiently through artistic expressions.

Because graphic memoirs visualize memories through separate images in a sequence, we can say that the graphic memoir breaks memories into images. When we think about our past, we do not see whole events but selected fragments that our brain connects to the memory as a whole, so that the fragments become understandable. Thus, the graphic form reflects our way of remembering and, therefore, suits the retelling of memories especially well. Eisner emphasizes that the artist of graphic novels must “arrange the sequence of events (or pictures) so as to bridge the gaps in action. Given these, the reader may fill in the intervening events from experience” (38). Ultimately, the reader is required to use her imagination and fill in gaps between frames based on previous memories that make her recognize and comprehend different situations. This shows how the memoir becomes linked to our own experiences as we read. We could say that the graphic form is especially well suited for memoirs because it engages us to reflect on and rethink our own memories. This practice is connected to what McCloud talks about when stressing the need to make *closure* when reading graphic works of literature. McCloud explains this concept by saying that “the comic creator asks us to join in a silent dance of the *seen* and *unseen*. The *visible* and *invisible*” (McCloud 92). Although we often see only fractions of images or scenes, our brains complete these images based on our assumptions and conceptions of reality. As a result, by making closure and filling in gaps, the fragments of each frame are unified and the separate frames can communicate a continuing story. This practice relies on recognition in the reader, who can identify with the situations. I will come back to the importance of recognition below.

I have already mentioned that autobiographies lie on the border of fiction and non-fiction. When reading memoirs, one might be amazed by the authors' memory, and question its authenticity: Are the memories just made up in order to create an intriguing story? This issue is discussed by Rose, who says that we "must bear in mind that an autobiographer (like any other 'nonfiction' writer) is liable to forget, misremember, remember selectively, embellish, invent, and rearrange events in the interest of creating an engaging story" (52). Rose urges us to appreciate the freedom of the artist, that there is a blend of recollection and imagination in the creation of autobiographies, and that their authenticity (or lack of authenticity) can be both intentional and unintentional. Bechdel has shown through interviews that fidelity to reality is important to her as an artist. One can say that she commits to what Philippe Lejeune calls *the autobiographical pact*, a task the author takes on to "narrate his life directly in spirit of truth" (qtd. in Miller 538). Bechdel says that "the whole allure of the book, the reason it's interesting, is because these things really happened" (Chute, "An Interview" 1005). Accordingly, Bechdel views her story as nonfiction and she deliberately highlights this through visual tools, such as the inclusion of maps (see Bechdel 146). Another way of looking at the autobiographical pact is for the author-artist to be as true to the *subjective experience* as possible. This reflects Satrapi's view on life-writing, saying that "as soon as you write your story, it is a story; this is not a documentary. Of course you have to make fiction" (Root 150). This does not mean that Satrapi does not care about being historically precise, but that she wants to make a clear distinction between her stories and nonfiction (Root 152). Satrapi's point that all stories are fiction highlights the artistic expression and the freedom of the artists. This discussion demonstrates how both the reader's and author's perceptions on memoirs as fiction or non-fiction varies. In conclusion, I will argue that it is in the memoirist's task to portray experiences that are as true to the emotional and psychological author-artist perspective as possible in order to claim authenticity to reality.

It might be necessary for the artists of graphic memoirs to reveal the imperfect to be perceived as reliable narrators. Because graphic memoirs are subjective and personal, representing alternative views on history, readers want to meet true and complex identities typically obscured in both objective representations of history and fiction. In a self-representation that shows imperfectness, readers observe complex representations of experiences and characters. Also, the imperfectness reveals both a vulnerability and braveness in the narrator. Both Bechdel and Satrapi divulge themselves as well as their families. This demonstrates that divulgence is central to subjective representations of history, and shows that

memoirs are not only on the border of fiction and nonfiction but also of private and public life. This border can be difficult to handle for the artists. Eakin emphasizes that “because our lives never stand free of the lives of others, we are faced with our responsibility to those others whenever we write about ourselves” (159). The artist not only has to consider how much she wants to expose herself but also the people around her. This calls for tact in the artists who, according to Miller, must “judge how much exposure, of self and others, is appropriate” (541). Through interviews, Bechdel and Satrapi have shown a reflective view on this problem, confirming that the exposure of others is an issue that calls for sensitivity but also that is necessary in order to create authentic and personal memoirs.

## 1.2. Graphic Communication.

Since sequential art combines images and words, both containing meaning, the reader needs to develop new interpretative skills when reading graphic memoirs. Goldsmith elaborates on this, saying that

one must exercise multiple literacies. The text requires traditional decoding skills, while the images require the reader to interpret facial and body language as well as the use of white space and shading, and be oriented to the flow of panels as they carry the narrative forward. In addition, one must work within both literacies at the same time. (4-5)

Reading graphic memoirs is, put simply, a demanding task. When it comes to reading, sequential art and prose have in common that we need to fill in gaps in order to grasp the whole meaning of a narrative. According to Iser, the literary work consists not only of the text itself but also the experience of the reader (391), and his gap theory elaborates on how readers need to fill in blanks in literature. In relation to graphic novels, this means to fill in what pictures leave out, to interpret images, and make connections between both the text and pictures, and the separate frames of these pictures.

Illustrations in works of otherwise written literature act as the creator’s way of filling in gaps *for* the reader and directing her imagination. In this perspective, the graphic form leaves fewer gaps for the reader to fill in and, thus, less space for the reader’s imagination. Eisner argues that “in writing with words alone, the author directs the reader’s imagination. In comics the imagining is done for the reader” (122). Goldsmith presents a counter argument to this view, saying that “the reader must work with both visual and verbal literacies with this format; images

do not illustrate or repeat verbal content, but provide information and sensibility not communicated through the text” (3). Goldsmith shows that since words and images contain separate meanings, graphic works do not restrict the reader’s imagination but demand her to use it, and her interpretative skills, to an even larger extent. In addition, the concepts of closure and gaps require active readers who use their imagination, for instance in frames where images are cut off. The graphic form does not limit the reader’s imagination but we must accept that the imagination works in different ways when reading graphic works compared to prose, because we do not make up images in our heads in the same way as when reading words alone. Also, graphic works include fewer words than ordinary prose and the sentences may, therefore, include much meaning that need to be interpreted. In this view, the verbal element of the medium leads to more, rather than less, interpretation and imagination. Satrapi expresses her views on this in an interview by Robert L. Root, saying that “the comics is the only media in the whole world that you can use the image plus the writing and plus the imagination and plus be active while reading it” (Root 150). Satrapi claims that comics, in contrast to pictures or movies, demand active readers. In this way, she highlights how the reader needs to make closure but also uses her imagination through recognition, connecting images to her own memories and experiences.

Eisner claims that “lettering, treated ‘graphically’ and in the service of the story, functions as an extension of the imagery” (10). Ultimately, Eisner argues that the words are secondary to the communication in graphic works and, thus, that their contribution to the narrative is to set the mood and evoking feelings in the reader. One could say that in *Persepolis*, the language of Satrapi and her ironic tone is important for the mood of the story more than the meaning, as boxes of text often function to describe images and alien concepts to the reader. Still, I want to challenge Eisner’s view as it might seem simplified without further comments. Firstly, I will argue that it is the images and background art, more than anything, that set the mood of graphic narratives and we must, therefore, not regard this as a task for the words alone. Secondly, the text contains meaning separate from the images, as Goldsmith suggests, and is consequently important for the communication. By using *Fun Home* as an example, we see how the sophisticated and direct language of Alison contributes to the story, not only by being secondary but by revealing new elements for interpretation, especially through references to and reflections on other works of literature. At the same time, Ball refers to literary scholars who point out that “‘the power of graphic narrative as witness’ in *Fun Home*, figuring Bechdel as ‘consistently privileg[ing] drawing as a more direct mode of representation’” (5). Within the

graphic memoir, I regard the visual expression as a more direct communication than words because of its ability to convey emotions and identity, without undermining the importance of the verbal.

The grammar of comics is accessible and adaptable, making personal narratives of trauma able to be communicated across borders of cultures, nationalities, languages, and generations. If the author relies on the active reader to fill in gaps, this is especially challenging when books become global and readers do not share the same cultural references. In these situations, the creator risks that her readers are unable to fill in gaps and that the work is not understood. A way for the author to solve this problem is by relying on the verbal element. This can be done through explicit descriptions, where the narrator's voice goes out of the story and adds comments to educate and create understanding. For instance, Satrapi does this to make sure that her readers know that the tulip is the Iranian symbol for martyrs (*Persepolis 2* 127). This technique shows that to create recognition in the reader can be problematic. Eisner says that "comics communicate in a 'language' that relies on a visual experience common both to creator and audience" (7), showing how a common ground is essential for recognition and conveyance of meaning. The statement supports the idea that the reception of a memoir is linked to the reader's reflections on her own memories, and shows the need for the artist to understand and connect with the reader's life experiences (Eisner 13). *Persepolis* exemplifies this problem since it is a memoir mainly written for readers that are unfamiliar with the context of the narrative. To create recognition in unfamiliar surroundings, Satrapi includes Western images such as Nike shoes and posters of Western idols (*Persepolis* 131), hence making the reader relate her own memories to Marjane's experience of growing up. Thus, Satrapi highlights the importance of a balance between familiar and alien elements, as the reader relies on some shared references to fill in gaps and communicate with the text. Intertexts can similarly be used to create identification in the reader and communicate identity. Both Satrapi and Bechdel are influenced by their literary backgrounds and include references to other works of literature in their memoirs. For instance, Satrapi's inclusion of her mother reading Simone de Beauvoir (see *Persepolis* 21) or Bechdel's frequent references to the literary canon elaborate on their family backgrounds and let the readers identify through their allusions and experiences related to these books, if recognized.

An important element for the graphic memoir's way of communicating memory in relation to identification and recognition, is the background of the frames. According to Eisner, "background art is more than mere stage setting, it is a part of the narration" (23). The readers

need to pay attention to the background of sequential art because it is a part of the communication and influences the reader's experience of space and time. The artist can speak to the reader's memories through the background by including objects that are present in her memories without having to highlight them explicitly, for instance objects associated with specific historical periods. When Scherr argues that "things become facilitators of complex affective experiences for both creator and reader" (49-50), she demonstrates how the artist can connect with her readers through objects that create feelings and set the atmosphere. *Fun Home* is an excellent example when talking about the significance of background and the effect it has on readers. For instance, Bechdel's detailed depictions of beautiful objects in their Victorian-styled home are important for the mood of the memoir and the understanding of Alison's father, Bruce. Since objects can speak to the reader's own memories and create recognition, the background of the frames is an important element for identification: maybe the reader ate the same food, listened to the same music, or read the same books. The controlled drawings, presented as flashes of memories, can create bridges between the persona and the reader's memories and, in this way, create reader involvement. Chase stresses the use of feminine iconography and how this leads to recognition and feelings of communion in the female reader, saying that it "educes [sic] identification and empathy in the reader" (214). The element of recognition through shared allusions and objects has an especially great effect in relation to graphic memoirs by female writers because it makes the female readers connect and sympathize with the avatar based on their communal experiences as women.

The paragraphs above have demonstrated an emphasis on recognition and identification by literary scholars. McCloud claims that "storytellers in *all* media know that a sure indicator of audience involvement is the degree to which the audience *identifies* with a story's characters" (42). In this thesis, I suggest that identification is important for the reader's involvement, still I wonder if this element deserves as much attention as McCloud gives it. Is reader-involvement relying on identification with characters, or is it related to the creation of feelings such as sympathy, sadness, or fear? When reading for instance a crime-story, is it the reader's identification with the characters or the excitement of the plot that creates involvement? I will argue that McCloud's statement is too bald when speaking about narratives in general but that it, on the other hand, is relevant when discussing autobiographies that deal with personal, everyday experiences. Because the readers of memoirs seek subjective and private stories by individuals, we can assume that identification is especially important for the readers' involvement within this genre. This assumption is supported by Felski's claim that female

confessions rely on “an intimate relationship between narrator and reader” (87). If we assume that identification is essential for readers of memoirs, we need to question whether this identification is more accessible within the graphic memoir than within written autobiographies.

As the author-artist of graphic memoirs not only presents a photograph of herself but also creates a self-representing image that reflects her identity, the identity of the persona becomes available to the viewer. Although varying in styles, graphic novels are simplistic compared to photographs and, therefore, more general when it comes to appearance. According to McCloud, this simplified, drawn image of the persona makes the viewer identify with her, claiming that “when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face—you see it as the face of *another*. But when you enter the world of the *cartoon*—you see yourself” (36). If we accept this theory, it is more likely that a viewer will identify with a simplistically drawn image, meaning universal appearance, than with a picture of a face. In other words, the vaguer the outline, the more universal the identification. McCloud’s theory seems reliable, but we must also remember the statement by Sacco above when discussing the reasons for reader-identification. Maybe it is not (only) the simplified image that leads to identification but the fact that sequential art can capture moments and, therefore, emotions. In this view, it is the emotions related to experiences we relate to rather than the identity of the individual. I will further argue that emotions are more universal than appearances and personalities, and Satrapi herself says in an interview that “if I draw a man crying it means the same to everyone [...] There’s no need for cultural interpretation” (Zappaterra 12-13). If the reader relates more easily to emotions within graphic literature (rather than the protagonist as McCloud claims), this could explain why readers can identify with protagonists with other intersectionalities than themselves and, maybe, the graphic memoir’s ability to travel across borders of cultures and nationalities.

The idea that drawn images can capture emotions is supported by Chaney, who claims that the visuality of comics triggers emotional reactions in the reader (7). This means that both humor and tragedy can be more easily conveyed through the combination of images and words, which is why we often find ourselves both laughing and crying when reading graphic memoirs. Gillan Whitlock and Anna Poletti says that “contemporary autobiographical comics generally include narrative of trauma and crisis, yet at the same time, they share a humorous and ironic turn that is irreverent and, perhaps, confronting” (ix). Their comment demonstrates that the graphic memoir is typically tragicomic and shows that its humor often expresses attitudes in

the narratives. Such use of humor is prominent in *Persepolis*, where Satrapi uses this as a tool to criticize conservative Islam. Humor is also an important element in graphic memoirs of trauma (like *Persepolis* and *Fun Home*) because it leads to an emotional relief for the reader, who can relax in, as well as relate to, the more trivial scenes. In addition, since the graphic memoir is personal and the narrator is physically embodied in the text, this humor contributes to our understanding of the persona. To exemplify, we understand the humor in *Persepolis* as Marjane's humor and, therefore, it influences our conception of her identity. This illustrates how emotions can lead to reader-identification.

### 1.3. Female Representations.

Chase argues that the graphic form is especially suitable for female narratives because it is engaged in "liberating the female reader from traditional, linear, and thus masculinist method of reading/interpretation, as well as providing a site of resistance and agency for female creators" (215). Since the graphic form demands for ways of reading that are dissimilar to reading prose, it breaks traditional (masculinist) views on literature and liberates female readers as well as artists. I will argue that this liberation is connected to the directness of the graphic format, where visual shocks can give the creator power to engage and direct the reader. The visuality of the graphic form leads to new possibilities of directness because through images, female artists can act more rebellious, provocative, and visually shocking without necessarily being perceived as vulgar. This is because images communicate quickly, whereas verbal narratives need detailed, sensuous descriptions. Consequently, the medium is suitable for communicating female traumas, and the visual shock can act as an artistic resistance to patriarchal, male dominant cultures.

This resistance relies on female visual expressions that go against trivializations of female experiences and offer new representations of gender. They must dare not to be pretty but instead show an alternative reality, contrasting the girly, glittery-pink visions of growing up as a female, for instance by portraying the experience of getting one's period for the first time (see Bechdel 159). When Satrapi says "I don't even try to be perfect. I am nasty, yes. I am a human being" (Root 153), she opposes the unrealistic aspiration for female perfectness. By being personal and showing alternative, "nasty" female realities, she can connect to communities of female readers and their common experiences, often viewed as taboos by the male dominated culture. This shows that a divulgence of the personal self, as well as others, might be necessary for the graphic

memoir to reach its potential, to convey female memoirs, and connect with female communities of readers.

Satrapa and Bechdel are artists who dare to divulge themselves; an act that reflects their refusal of being female objects, willingly dominated by male cultures and expectations. Estelle C. Jelinek has found that men often portray success stories and idealize their lives in autobiographies while women, on the other hand, “emphasize personal and domestic details and describe connections to other people” (qtd. in Eakin 10). Jelinek shows the importance of a connection to female communities of readers through recognition of ordinary, everyday events experienced by women. Because female writers often want to speak to and be understood by their audience, Felski claims that “it is the *representative* aspect of experience, rather than those [aspects] that mark the protagonist/narrator as unique, which are emphasized in relation to a notion of a communal female identity” (85). This is not to say that all male autobiographers glorify themselves, neither to try and categorize differences between male and female autobiographies. It is, on the other hand, an interesting observation in relation to *Persepolis* and *Fun Home*, as the books highlight domestic details and everyday experiences as well as personal stories of imperfectness to connect with their female readers. When Bechdel and Satrapa presents “ordinary” experiences from their lives, such as smoking a cigarette for the first time (see *Persepolis* 117), they follow a trend by female writers, who often emphasize the link between their lives and female lives more generally, to highlight their communal identity as women. Also, because female problems and taboos are rarely unique, Felski claims that “the recognition that women’s problems are not private but communal is perhaps the most fundamental message underlying feminist confession” (92). This explains why female readers can recognize and sympathize with situations experienced by female protagonists. Even though Alison and Marjane stand out to the readers as unique individuals, portrayals of ordinary events and flaws make their lives and characters more accessible and familiar to female readers. This shows that identification is not only linked to the character of the personae, but also to events and feelings that the reader can relate to. Furthermore, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest that “women reading other women’s autobiographical writings have experienced them as ‘mirrors’ of their own unvoiced aspirations” (5), stating how memoirs often embody images of independent female characters (such as Marjane and Alison) that the readers can identify with and be inspired by.

This aspect on identification demonstrates that there is a link between the feminist perspective on graphic novels and the theory related to the borders of fiction and non-fiction,

personal and private life, and the familiar and alien presented earlier in this chapter. The possibilities of the graphic memoir rely on identification and the creation of intimate relationships between reader and narrator through artistic expressions of memories. Because memoirs are subjective representations of the past, a reliable narrator is important. This calls for authors who dare to divulge themselves when making their private stories public. This divulgence can also create resistance by revealing alternative female realities. The visual is highlighted in the graphic form because of its ability to convey meaning, capture moments, and connect with the reader. The element of identification has illustrated that the artist must balance the familiar and alien in order to reach the format's possibilities and connect to the reader's memories, but also that this relies on active readers that can read images, fill in gaps, and make closure.

## Chapter 2. Satrapi's Persepolis: Uncovering Femininity.

In *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, Satrapi narrates her childhood from the age six to fourteen and her experiences from growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. Through visual and verbal expressions, Satrapi conveys how she, her friends, and family experienced the war with Iraq and enforced Islam. In the second book, *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*, 14-year-old Marjane is sent away to school in Vienna to escape religious fundamentalism and war. In this story, Satrapi narrates her experiences from being caught between different cultures. The memoir graphically embodies her struggle to maintain true to herself and her heritage, while at the same time finding her place in new environments as a young woman. In this chapter, I will study *Persepolis* in relation to the discussions on subjective representations, identification, artistic expressions, and female imperfectness presented in chapter one. I will suggest that Satrapi connects with and creates sympathy in her readers through her developing child witness, and highlight how her artistic expressions include familiar, everyday experiences and humor to present alternative views on the Iranian history. This makes Satrapi able to educate her readers. Moreover, as a rebellious female, she performs resistance and connects with her female readers through portrayals of Muslim women as individuals and by uncovering female imperfectness.

### 2.1. Education Through Identification.

Nima Naghibi observes that one of Satrapi's "motivations for writing the book was to humanize a culture and people vilified as terrorists and religious fanatics in popular media representations, particularly since September 11, 2001" (171). *Persepolis* presents an alternative view on the Iranian culture and population through the experiences of Marji and her rebellious family. Satrapi herself says that "I *had* to write because I was so fed up and bored by all these misunderstandings" (Morehart n.p.). Her motivation is expressed in the introduction of the first book, which explains how even the title functions to direct the reader. Today, "Iran" is typically associated with fundamentalism and terror, while its ancient capital "Persepolis" refers to the country as an old and great civilization. Consequently, the title corresponds with Satrapi's intentions for writing the book, as she "attempts to challenge Western representations of Iranians as religious fanatics" (Naghibi 174). Satrapi challenges this representation of Iranians further by asking her readers to identify with distant individuals through witnessing. Gilbride observes that "*Persepolis* provides access to a collective history by means of personal

experience, memory, and a simplified visual medium” (138). As I have discussed in chapter one, the author-artist of graphic memoirs can express her experiences through simplified images that represent a personal perspective on history and, in this way, create emotions in the reader through identification and sympathy. Consider for instance the difference of reader involvement in the graphic memoir compared to a history book: In the history book, readers experience events and traumas as distanced and alienated from their realities. In the graphic memoir, on the other hand, the history becomes personal, and Satrapi demonstrates how the form includes the reader, making one death more emotionally disturbing than a hundred deaths in “objective” representations. Gilmore further emphasizes how the reader becomes emotionally involved in Satrapi’s representation of history by arguing that “*Persepolis* aims not only to teach these readers how to think about the Middle East [...] but also how to *feel*” (157). Satrapi teaches Iranian history, but she does it through the individual, presenting an alternative view. When Gilbride argues that “the role of *Persepolis* as an excavator of the archive is not to uncover an objective truth of historical events, for that does not exist, but rather to show what the archive was not able to say” (140), she demonstrates how Satrapi, through the personal life of a girl, presents memories that have been lost in seemingly objective representations of history. In this chapter, I will argue that both the simplistic style of sequential art and the child’s perspective are part of Satrapi’s affective strategy, as she is speaking to the feelings and sympathy in her readers.

In order to make the reader connect emotionally with her protagonist, Satrapi has to find a balance between familiar and alien elements. By creating bridges between the two, she makes the reader able to relate to the witness as well as open her eyes to new perspectives. As a result, both Iranian and non-Iranian readers can identify with familiar elements in the narration and simultaneously feel the same alienation towards elements that were enforced on the Iranian people as Marji did. This point is illustrated by the contrasting frames on page 102 in *Persepolis*, where the alienating image of war is juxtaposed with the familiar experience of going to a party for the first time. The frames portray the contrasts in Marji’s privileged life compared to the poor boys’, who were sent away to die as martyrs, promised a life in Paradise where there is “plenty of food, women and houses made of gold and diamonds” (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 100).

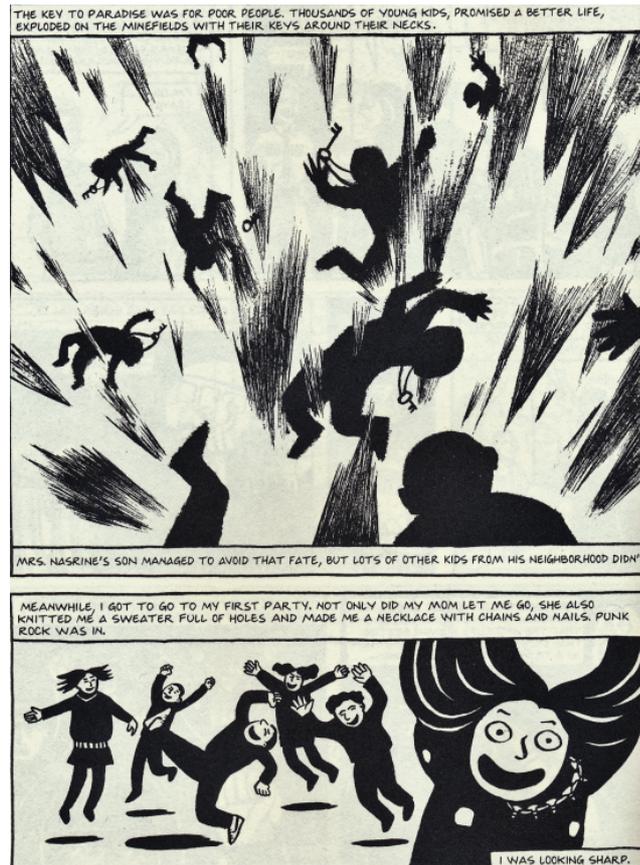


Figure A, *Persepolis* page 102.

The upper frame stands out by its dramatic style and demonstrates Satrapi's diverse artistic expression. Here, the martyr-boys are portrayed as black contours without identities to emphasize their quantity, and the black lines pointing down function to illustrate the boys' fall. The key is highlighted to stress its surreal significance to the boys, who were brainwashed to believe that it was a key to paradise. Although the reader, as well as Marji, has trouble with understanding the act of sending away poor boys to die as martyrs, she can relate to and identify with the memory and excitement of dressing up in new clothes and dancing at a party for the first time. As a result, Satrapi balances the memoir by toning down the trauma of the Islamic regime and war through representations of such experiences.

Personal and domestic details of familiarity are important for reader-identification, and especially Western objects are present in the memoir to bridge the narration to non-Iranian contexts and to produce feelings of comfort rather than distress in the reader. Gilbride's argument that "*Persepolis* activates personal and collective memories through the physical objects of everyday life as well as through sensory and bodily knowledge" (138) supports the idea that objects or experiences that are familiar to (Western) readers, such as a Michael Jackson pin or the experience of her first kiss, make the readers relate these objects or experiences to

their own memories. Even though Satrapi herself says that she is bored by Western misunderstandings, the idea of Western identification might seem Eurocentric here. My arguments regarding identification does not imply that otherwise alienated, exotic Iranians are made “like us” by drinking Coca Cola. I believe that Satrapi is trying to convey the specific history and culture of Iran, not just show that Iranians are “ordinary people”, but she also relies on identification to create understanding and an intimate relationship with her Western readers.

In chapter one, I argued that because we remember fractions of events through objects and senses, the graphic form suits memoirs as they tend to break up events into such fractions. According to Gilbride, Satrapi invites “the viewer to connect his or her own material worlds, cultural lifestyles, and everyday experiences to hers” (141). Hence, the reader bridges her own memories to Satrapi’s when reading. Personal and domestic details can not only create recognition but also work as an emotional relief when connected to the reader’s memories, becoming a comfort as something familiar in otherwise alien settings. For instance, Satrapi’s remembrance of jasmine flowers in her grandmother’s bra (see *Persepolis* 150) creates a feeling of comfort in the reader, who can relate this scene to her own memories of smells (just think how powerful odors are to memory, as the “Proust phenomenon” suggests (see Toffolo)) and in this way, maybe by remembering how her own grandmother smelled, identify with Marji’s relationship to her grandmother. Although identification can let the reader understand Marji’s situation and sympathize with her, it does not overshadow her traumas and the historical context. I will argue that *Persepolis* is not a universal story about a girl’s adolescence; it is highly connected to its historical and cultural context, but by laying on the border of the familiar and unfamiliar, Satrapi is able to educate her readers through a personal voice that her readers can relate to.

## 2.2. Expressing Traumatic Experiences.

Compared to Bechdel, Satrapi is more minimalistic and simplistic in her style. With clear lines, she draws in black and white, often leaving big spaces in her frames to be filled with these colors. Her style emphasizes the tension and seriousness of the memoir, and her simplified, artistic expression conveys emotions efficiently. By example, the depiction of families escaping Northwards in fear of being bombed (see *Persepolis* 89), demonstrates Satrapi’s artistic representation of events, as she dramatically draws black and white lines to illustrate families in lines of cars, followed and swallowed by flames. The medium’s possibility of more abstract

portrayals of events leaves room for Satrapi's artistic expression and opportunities of directing the reader, who must interpret these images. I have discussed how the reader must fill in gaps when reading sequential art, both within the frame and in between them. Naghibi comments on this complicated process, saying that "the fact that comics are 'a gutter medium' contributes to an open-endedness within the text itself that enables multiple and even contradictory interpretations of the narrative" (165). In other words, when Satrapi creates images that are more "artistic" or abstract, the reader can interpret these in different ways. This shows how it is a challenge for the artist to make her message clear to the reader without underestimating her. The background and small details, such as different objects, can be important for the interpretation. In contrast to Bechdel, Satrapi includes few details in her frames but simultaneously gives the details she does include great emphasis, for instance the keys in the image above (see figure A). This can be seen as a strategy to direct the reader. Furthermore, Satrapi often uses verbal explanations to convey meaning but also includes some pages where words are totally absent (see *Persepolis* 154-55). These pages suggest that Satrapi trusts her reader's interpretative skills, as she dares not to rely on the verbal to fill in gaps for the reader.

The portrayal of body language and facial expressions is important in relation to interpretation of the visual, as it communicates meaning and emotions effectively through the simplified style of the medium. Also here, Satrapi differs from Bechdel by being more "cartoonish" in her style, arguably making the emotions more accessible to the reader: Eyebrows as straight lines angled downwards express anger, a teardrop on the cheek is read as sadness, while a wide mouth pointing upwards in a smile expresses happiness. Eisner argues that we must learn to read body language and human gestures when reading graphic literature (Eisner 101). He regards the face as important since "the surface of the face is [...] 'a window to the mind' [...] works as an adverb to the posture or gesture of the body" (Eisner 111). Arguably, the face communicates emotions effectively and elaborates on the emotions expressed by the body. For instance, there is no doubt whether Marji is happy and emotionally distanced from the war when dancing at her first party (see figure A). Both her body and face suggest so. However, imagine if the face was portrayed with a mouth pointing down and closed eyes; we would interpret the scene differently, believing that Marji could not be happy and forget the martyr-boys despite the dancing. I believe that the artist can communicate more efficiently through facial expressions because we generally are better at reading faces than body language, both within sequential art and in real life. When observing a person (real or drawn), we automatically pay attention to the face and start looking for clues regarding what kind of

state that person is in, trying to understand what she is thinking and feeling. Facial expressions are arguably a part of Satrapi's affective strategy, as she relies heavily on close-ups. On the last page of *Persepolis* (see Satrapi 153), we are exposed to an emotional scene where Marjane and her parents' facial expressions are essential to the visual interpretation. In the front, we view the father carrying the mother who has fainted, his face covered by a black shadow to express the sadness of the situation. In the background, we see Marji who views them in frustration through the window glass at the airport; her eyes wide-open as in shock, her mouth open and pointing down in sadness and desperation, her hands reaching for them but being stopped by the glass. This scene illustrates that literacy in relation to graphic works of literature is, to a large extent, connected to interpretation of images and understanding of non-verbal communication.

Satrapi also demonstrates how the graphic artist can convey events and emotions *without* visualizing them. Gilmore explains that through the child witness, "she chooses not to draw something she witnessed and thereby expands the repertoire of trauma's representation to omission, silence, and a depiction of void" (161). By relying on the verbal and the imagination of the reader, Satrapi can choose not to visualize experiences that are too horrible to bear and re-experience for the witness/artist. Gilmore acknowledges this when stating that "Satrapi navigates trauma within the space of visual autobiography by drawing what can and cannot be seen. She draws both the unrepresentable violence and the challenge of witnessing" (160). In other words, in Satrapi's portrayal of events, artistic expressions, and balance of showing and hiding, she also includes the witness' experience. On page 142 in *Persepolis*, Satrapi includes a frame that is completely black when narrating the memory of finding the dead body of her friend. The empty, black frame conveys the effects of trauma in an efficient way and reflects how Marji experienced it; as too horrible to relive. Consequently, Satrapi demonstrates how graphic memoirists have the power to choose just how much they want to show visually and how provocative or direct they want to be. By not drawing the scene, Satrapi frees the reader from a grotesque, visual shock and leaves a gap for the reader to fill in herself instead. This contrasts the discussion on directness in chapter one, as the silenced, black frame illustrates how the visual do not need to be shocking in the sense of visually direct in order to make great impressions on readers.

Satrapi communicates postmemories, meaning memories that are not directly her own. Through the indirect witness, she both draws the events she imagines and her experiences of imagining these scenes, for instance of torture (see *Persepolis* 51). Gilmore explains this

practice, saying that “Marji was not the eyewitness, but the account of torture entered her consciousness and memory, and Satrapi’s drawing testifies to what she heard and what those who were released from prison knew” (160). In other words, even though Marjane did not experience the events herself, they are present in her memories and, therefore, Satrapi portrays other character’s experiences based on how she imagined them as a child. The child perspective and her imagination are highlighted by the verbal element of the frames, for instance when the narrator comments on the use of an iron for torture, while at the same time looking anxiously at the iron in their home saying, “I never imagined that you could use that appliance for torture” (51). Through defamiliarization, Satrapi demonstrates that we understand differently as children: As children, we often make up images in our minds based on fractions of what we have heard and understood. These images are often incorrect and sometimes simplified, not able to capture the whole situation. I will argue that the graphic form goes hand in hand with the postmemories of children because the child perspective suits the simplified style, and their limitedness is reflected in the fractured images of the separated frames. The reader needs to fill in gaps to grasp the whole image of the situation, just like the witness needs to fill in gaps in her postmemories.

Satrapi portrays a limited understanding that is naive and where, as Gilmore argues, “the adult autobiographer knows more now than the child self she represents” (162). As readers of memoirs, we understand that the child’s narration is told by an adult version of the protagonist, whose knowledge is greater. Marji’s limitedness is also seen in Satrapi’s style, which emphasizes the witness’ degree of maturity. Satrapi herself says that “the first book is about my childhood, so I draw like a child” (Root 154). By drawing immaturely, Satrapi can reflect the child’s imagination and ways of thinking or experiencing. This limitedness and imagination is exemplified in the portrayal of Marji’s understanding of her family history, where she imagines her grandfather as a prince.



Figure B, *Persepolis* page 22.

The frame emphasizes the child's perspective through its style and the inclusion of unrealistic elements (such as the lion holding a sword and the face of the sun) as well as the reconstruction of her handwriting. In total, the immature style makes us experience this as little Marji's drawing, as we imagine her proudly drawing her grandfather and fantasizing about his life. The impression that Marji is unable to grasp the whole picture is seen in the context of this frame, where her father tries to explain that her grandfather was the son of the overthrown emperor of Iran, that he became a communist, and later imprisoned for his politics. The drawing of her grandfather shows how she has trouble with understanding this reality. Thus, the fraction of the story that she understands (that he was a prince) and her fantasy of that idea overshadow her father's tale. Consequently, the reader understands that the narration in the panels surrounding it reflects the mature artist's understanding, not little Marji's. This shows that the emphasis on the child perspective is a conscious strategy for Satrapi in order to connect with her readers. Simultaneously, it demonstrates that the perspective changes through Marjane's development: gradually, the text and drawings become more mature and reflected, as we follow her development and understanding of herself as well as her environments. When Marjane's transformation and development is seen in the style of the drawings, it emphasizes *Persepolis* as a bildungsroman. In the image on page 127 in *Persepolis 2*, Satrapi stresses this further by including her hand (a technique frequently used by Bechdel) to present the act of drawing during her exam at art school. Through this inclusion, the reader becomes aware of her development as an artist, her style, and her ways of communicating through the visual.

Satrapi directly addresses Marjane's limited understanding as a child when the narrator states that "I realized then that I didn't understand anything" (*Persepolis* 32) while depicting Marji reading a book on the revolution. The child perspective is important in relation to Satrapi's ambition of educating her readers. Because the child has a limited understanding of the Iranian revolution, just like the unfamiliar reader, the child and reader can gradually and parallelly develop their understanding through defamiliarization. As a result, the perspective makes Satrapi able to convey the history without seeming like a lecturing history book, nor like she is underestimating her reader's knowledge. While the understanding of the young witness is arguably naive, she also shows reflection by recognizing the hypocrisy of adults (for instance that her parents are Marxists but simultaneously upper-class, driving a Cadillac (see *Persepolis* 6)) and female oppression. By revealing these elements in society through the defamiliarized eyes of the child, the reader gets to know both the context of her trauma and Marjane's personality. The memoir takes Marjane through her years of education and experiences, which

make her grow intellectually and become able to not only observe injustice in society but also criticize it in a reflected and sophisticated way. Gilbride claims that “as *Persepolis* reflects upon the formative years of its young protagonist, it is necessarily a story of transformation and of how perceptions change as one grows older” (139). Hence, the memoir not only transforms the reader’s perceptions on Iran but also follows Marjane’s transformation and understanding of her own country, as well as herself.

A reader describes her experience from reading *Persepolis*, saying that “she made me emphasize with the sufferings towards horror by presenting herself as a naive child narrator” (Manrique 104), supporting that Satrapi is able to connect with her readers’ sympathy and feelings through the perspective of young Marji. I have claimed that the innocent, confused perspective of the child is part of Satrapi’s affective strategy because of its ability to convey emotions, be it humor or tragedy. Humor is an important element in *Persepolis* because it makes the reader able to grasp and relate to Marjane’s experiences. Humor is universal (though differences in taste, all people laugh and turn away from the seriousness in life from time to time) and, therefore, it connects the reader to Marjane’s life in Iran. Consequently, humor lets the reader relate to the story and the everyday elements in the larger context of the Islamic revolution. Satrapi herself expresses the need for humor and its advantage in relation to the medium, saying that

with drawing I had the possibility to make it lighter. Humor is important because it’s a different level of language. If you laugh with someone, you have understood the soul of this someone, and then everything becomes easier. If people laugh with me, then they can easily cry with me and understand my call. (Morehart n.p.)

Thus, humor is an important tool for Satrapi because it makes her able to connect with her readers. In several frames throughout the book, Satrapi replaces the feeling of anger and frustration with irony and laughter. Her humorous voice is introduced to us from the first page of the book, where ten-year-old Marjane and her friends are being forced to wear the veil at school. Satrapi chooses to portray this frustrating scene as humoristic, stating in an ironic voice that “we didn’t really like to wear the veil, especially since we did not understand why we had to” (*Persepolis* 3), while presenting an image of the girls running around in the schoolyard, playing with the veil for all sorts of games.



Figure C, *Persepolis* page 3.

The defamiliarized and ironic presentation of the veil brings out the message that Iranian children are not that different from children elsewhere in the world. By adding humor, Satrapi builds bridges between different cultures and readers of different backgrounds, who can relate to the story of a girl growing up. For the unfamiliar audience, such portrayals are important for creating understanding. By balancing the familiar and alien, her non-Iranian readers start to understand the experiences and diverse attitudes of the people in Iran. The laughter and irony also function as an emotional relief, where the reader can relax and enjoy the scenes that stand in contrast to dark situations and make the reader able to grasp Marjane's traumatic experiences of public life. Furthermore, humor can arguably make narratives of trauma more realistic because it makes the memoir resemble life to a greater degree, as life is tragicomic and placed in the borderlands of tears and laughter.

In addition, the humor and irony make us get to know Marjane and her personality, as the memoir expresses *her* humor. Her ironic voice emphasizes Marji as a rebellious and independent woman since it conveys her reflections on the experiences she is portraying. In a female perspective, humor can be perceived as resistance or as a way to fight oppressing (male) powers. The image above (see figure C) demonstrates how Satrapi ridicules the male-dominated system in Iran and, in this way, highlights its wrongdoings in a powerful way. Thus, Satrapi makes sure that her readers not only get mad at the injustice, but also laugh at the ignorance and hypocrisy of the authorities. Consequently, the oppressing powers quickly lose the respect of the reader. Satrapi is taking back female power through humor.

### 2.3. Female Resistance.

When we speak of the female perspective in relation to *Persepolis*, we must pay attention to the veil because of its dominance in the memoir and Marjane's experiences of the Islamic revolution. The veil not only had an impact on Marjane's everyday life but also serves as a symbol of the Islamic regime and female oppression. The veil is a public piece of clothing, and when Satrapi generally portrays uncovered women in private spheres, she highlights its enforcement. Fadwa El Guindi comments on the typically Western view of the veil, saying that "in Western feminist discourse "veil" is politically charged with connotations of the inferior "other," implying and assuming a subordination and inferiority of the Muslim woman" (110). Even though the female characters in *Persepolis* must obey the rules of the regime, Satrapi challenges this (Western) view on Muslim women as inferior or powerless through her rebellious protagonist, her critical and humorous voice, and her depictions of females as individuals. In this way, her artistic expressions (both verbal and visual) can contribute to the education of her readers, as she changes their perceptions (misunderstandings) of Iranian women. This view is supported by Marta M. Manrique, who claims that "with irony and a bright sense of humor [Satrapi] subverts the dominant Western image of veiled Iranian women as oppressed and abjected" (104). Throughout both books, Marji is not afraid to stand up for her rights. The frames on page 143 exemplifies how she speaks up to the authorities through a reflected voice, saying "why is it that I, as a woman, am expected to feel nothing when watching these men with their clothes sculpted on but they, as men, can get excited by two inches less of my head-scarf?" (*Persepolis 2*). Here, Satrapi dares to criticise her teachers and declare the link between state violence and gender. Her statements also highlight how female oppression is not just related to the veil but also expectations regarding behavior. El Guindi says that in the expected behavior of women, "modesty extends beyond her clothing to her subdued, serious behavior and austere manner" (110). Through her wild protagonist, Satrapi opposes this ideal. Marjane's denial of (female) modesty is highlighted by Trousdale, who claims that "*Persepolis* is a book about rebellions" (241). In *Persepolis*, we see how not only Marjane but also her parents are rebellious and oppose the authorities, for instance by smuggling forbidden (Western) posters for Marjane (see Satrapi 128).

Satrapi depicts a diversity of women and breaks down stereotypes of women as defenseless victims. Gilmore points out that "Satrapi makes visible and distinctive what the regime tries to render as group anonymity through its imposition of the hijab" (161). Satrapi

opposes this group anonymity in two ways. First, she portrays veiled women with individual, recognizable traits. Whitlock emphasize that

in *Persepolis* drawings of veiled women refuse that stereotype of the nondescript archetypal Muslim woman. Rather, Satrapi's female figures are human, and full of character and individuality even with the veil. The drapes are part of this characterization, and the distinctive art of cartooning [...] draws the veil as a part of the identity of these Muslim women. (974-975)

Through cartooning, Satrapi can capture female individuality and she uses this as female resistance and to change the view on Muslim women as anonymous. Marjane is easily recognized by the mole on her nose, and Trousdale observes that "Grandma Satrapi is one of the book's most consistently recognizable individual figures" (241). This emphasizes her importance as a strong female role model to Marjane. Their close relationship can also be seen in Satrapi's simplistic representation of their appearances, as grandmother and granddaughter mirror each other through their molds (see *Persepolis 2* 144). When Satrapi is able to make these characters stand out as individuals only by adding one dot, it makes me question the discussion on identification from chapter one. Maybe *Persepolis* shows that the reader can relate to the characters more easily through simplification, not because of more universal appearances as McCloud suggests, but because the specific identity and traits are conveyed effectively in the simplistic drawing. Consequently, the artist can both make visible and hide different individuals. She can choose to highlight some characters as distinct individuals by adding small but effective details and at the same time make other characters unidentifiable, acting as a mass or context for the narration. This idea reflects our memory-practices and shows how the portrayal of characters in the graphic memoir suits our way of remembering: When looking back at an event, we only remember fractions and a few particular individuals, while other people become unrecognizable and a part of the background of our experience.

Secondly, Satrapi uncovers female identities and opposes female group anonymity by adding frames that portray women without the veil. In these frames, she invites the reader into the women's private spheres and, therefore, includes them in a personal manner that can create an intimate relationship between reader and narrator. On page 151 in *Persepolis 2*, Satrapi shows the contrasts in the private and public appearances of Iranian women and highlights the relation between the veil and female oppression.



Figure D, *Persepolis 2* page 151.

The frames are presented as two photographs of the women, one with and one without the veil, and reveal the diversity of the female characters by presenting them both as modest and sexy. In the upper frame, some of the women are portrayed with a smile or maybe a flirtatious look, but they are generally depicted with more female traits, not only in their bodies but also in their faces and postures, when Satrapi uncovers them. The page demonstrates how the women had to juggle between and distinguish private and public behavior, or how they became “schizophrenic” as Satrapi herself says.

I will argue that both *Fun Home* and *Persepolis* presents a feminist critique that questions the sexual freedom of female protagonists, be it hetero- or homosexual. In both books, the authors strive for sexual liberation through visual representations of female sexuality and bodies. El Guindi argues that “the Muslim woman wears [the head cover] in order to desexualize public social space when she is part of it” (110). Muslim and veiled women are generally seen as non-sexual, because their bodies (which represent their sexual desires) are hidden. *Persepolis* shows that the hiding of the sexual body does not erase it, and that Iranian women are sexual beings, wanting liberation to different degrees. Graphic depictions of sexuality and embodiment resist the regime’s ideals of modest and desexualized women, as

their sexual desires are no longer obscured in the visual expression. This representation of women reflects Whitlock and Poletti's claim that the

mainstream culture [...] is sensitive to representations of sex, violence, and “immoral” behaviour which violate normative discourses of subjectivity, and these sensitivities are explicitly engaged, and provoked, in autographic narratives through the graphic depiction of sexuality, violence, and embodiment.  
(xix)

As we will see in chapter 3, *Fun Home* embodies this point, as it reveals taboos and “immoral” behavior through Alison's and Bruce's sexualities, depictions of naked bodies, and a general openness about sexuality and lust.

*Persepolis* frequently criticizes the lack of possibilities for females. Even as a child, Marjane realizes that positions of authority and power are reserved for men, as she imagines becoming a prophet. Trousdale acknowledges that “even at the age of six Marji is aware her gender sets her apart from earlier prophets” (245). On page 6 in the first book, we are invited to experience little Marji's imagination of her life as a prophet. In the scene, the previous prophets, presented as a group of bearded men with angry and critical eyes, react on her gender by exclaiming: “A Woman?”. By not including a speech bubble here, the statement hangs in the air and becomes more general, not only coming from the prophets but society as a whole. This implies an awareness of male domination and Marji arguably wants to turn this dominance by becoming a female authority. In this role, her veil is replaced with a halo of the sun, which both emphasize her supernatural powers and “removes her from the gendered realm of veiling” (Trousdale 244). Because the veil is associated with inferiority or subordination, Satrapi claims female power when replacing the veil with a glowing halo surrounding her face. Further, this challenges Satrapi's representation of the beard as a sign of authority, as men with power (be it in depictions of male fundamentalists or God and Marx (see *Persepolis* 13)) generally are presented with beards (Trousdale 248). Since the halo both replaces the veil and outshines the men's bearded faces, it reverses (though only in Marji's imagination, and maybe Satrapi's wishes) the roles of power in society.

*Persepolis* is not just a story about female oppression in the Islamic world but also a story about a young woman that is trying to find her identity. In Vienna, Marji searches for both a cultural and personal identity, as she is caught between different cultures. In her new life, restraints are not put on her by society and, therefore, she needs to find her own limits: How does she want to look? How sexually liberated does she wish to be? How many drugs does she

wish to take? Gloria Anzaldùà talks about the individual's inner dualities when living on borders of cultures and nationalities. She says that "we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, opposing messages" (378). In the process of finding herself, "she learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality" (Anzaldùà 379). In coherence with Anzaldùà's arguments, Marji is influenced by the cultures she is exposed to and juggles between them to adjust herself according to her surroundings. As a consequence, she has troubles with fitting in socially in both Vienna and Iran. In her struggle to find an identity on the border of a Western and Middle Eastern culture, Marjane remembers Grandma Satrapi's word of advice, telling her to "always keep your dignity and be true to yourself" (*Persepolis* 150). Even though Satrapi portrays the "ugly" or shameful periods and experiences of her life, where she seems to have forgotten her grandmother's words, the advice later becomes a part of Marji's philosophy, as she criticizes the double morality and authorities in her surroundings throughout the narrative. After she recovers her integrity as an Iranian woman, again she is able to act like the child who stood up to her teachers.

Marji is changed and transformed by her years in Vienna as well as her experiences in Iran. In her portrayal of these transformative events, Satrapi expresses a vulnerability that is important for the reader's reception of the memoir and the character of Marjane. In chapter one, I discussed the importance of the artist's ability to present imperfect aspects of herself, as a way to create an intimate relationship between reader and narrator. This is linked to how Satrapi uncovers both the character of Marji and her alternative view on history. Through her subjective experiences, Satrapi portrays the dark sides of history, the wrongdoings, double morality, and oppression. The history is not presented as "pretty" as an attempt to change her reader's views on Iran but calls for reliability and complexity. Furthermore, Gilbride praises Satrapi's divulgence of herself, claiming that her "willingness to present these periods of transition, the good, the bad, and the ugly sides of her life, recalling unpleasant memories and embarrassing moments with brutal honesty, provides her character with an accessible vulnerability" (142). As a result, the readers become able to relate to her character through this imperfectness, and because Satrapi does not glorify herself, she stands out as a reliable narrator who the reader can trust. In *Persepolis*, Marji is not only a courageous and rebellious female but also a human being with uncertainties and flaws.



### Chapter 3. Bechdel's *Fun Home*: Recovering the Truth.

*Fun Home* portrays an alternative view on the American family by revealing the queer truth behind the façade of the Bechdel family. The memoir narrates Alison's adolescence and search for identity in a home that is aesthetically rich but emotionally empty. When Alison realizes that she is a lesbian, she simultaneously discovers that her father, Bruce, is a closeted homosexual. In the backlash of the trauma of her father's suicide, Bechdel reveals the family secret and reflects upon her relationship to Bruce through sequential art. Her artistic expressions and a reflected view on the genre demonstrate the complexity and possibilities of the graphic form. By balancing on borders of the private and public, fictional and non-fictional, alien and familiar, she creates understanding in her readers, who are invited to experience emotional, subjective, and artistic representations of her past. In this chapter, I will suggest that Bechdel includes documents, such as references to other works of literature and realistically drawn images, to understand and portray her family, reveal its imperfectness, highlight its queerness, and to create an intimate relationship to her readers. This inclusion conveys the witness' experience in the search for her father's secret life. Simultaneously, it can both highlight and obscure elements in the memoir as well as challenge our view on its authenticity. Before discussing her realistically drawn photographs, followed by a section on queerness and the representations of gender roles in *Fun Home*, I will study the effects of Bechdel's use of references to literary works and discuss how intertexts are connected to the efficiency of graphic memoirs by female authors.

#### 3.1. Intertexts and Authenticity.

Bechdel demonstrates a sophisticated use of intertextuality and "allusions to canonical literature appear on 129 of the memoir's 224 pages" (Ball 15-16). It is interesting to notice how much Bechdel has let references to other works of literature influence the memoir, as they even make up the structure of the book. When Bechdel jumps back and forth in time in her chapters, she reflects a more general trend for female confessions which are, according to Felski, typically "episodic and fragmented, not chronological and linear" (86). Felski shows how female writers, such as Bechdel, often choose to write according to their associations and emotions rather than chronology. As a part of Bechdel's artistic portrayal of her life, the structure in *Fun Home* is thematically decided and circles around the lives of Bruce and Alison. Each chapter is

thematically connected to a work of literature that is meaningful to the Bechdel story, and these works illustrate Alison's background and how the literary canon is linked to her reality.

This intertextuality is connected to identification because it, in the same way as objects, can lead to recognition in readers who are familiar with the literature. For instance, when Bechdel includes a coloring book of *The Wind in the Willows*, illustrated by E. H. Shepard, in the memories of her childhood (see Bechdel 130), it is likely that the reader will recognize either the original book or the drawing and connect it to the memories of her own childhood. Also, the reader not only recognizes the specific intertexts but also the experience of reading or drawing. This shows how intertextuality can create a fusion of the alien and the familiar, but also that this relies on the reader's background. If recognized, intertexts can create a bond and understanding between the reader and narrator. Also, when Bechdel highlights the illustrative aspect of this literary work, it reflects *Fun Home* as a bildungsroman, making the reader viewing Alison's act of drawing as a child as the first steps towards her development as an artist.

Furthermore, by referring to other works, Bechdel makes the reader able to grasp layers of meaning, development of situations, and depth of characters. Yaël Schlick simultaneously observes that "the combination of Bechdel's choice of certain, dominant intertexts, coupled with her insistence on their use to structure the narrative, inevitably obscures as well as reveals" (33). This means that by linking her life to other narratives, she can highlight specific parts of her life through associations in the reader but at the same time pay less attention to or hide other aspects of her personal experiences. This is why, as Ball claims, "allusions [to other works of literature] simultaneously sharpen the confessional themes of the text [...] and offer narratives separate from the specifics of the Bechdel family's drama" (12-13). Even though the intertextuality can function as a tool for Bechdel in her attempt to direct her readers' perceptions of the memoir and the characters' identities, we might question whether Bechdel's paralleling of literary works and her experiences leads to a simplification of her own reality, making it too connected to fiction. Because the memoir lies on the borders of both private and public, fiction and non-fiction, Schlick points out that throughout, we are reminded that the events that take place in the story are related to issues that "have been thematized already, by others, elsewhere" (26). The intertextuality can highlight elements in the story in a sophisticated way and aspire for new depths in the narrative, but also risks creating a distance by making the personal memoir more general. Consequently, when Bechdel combines elements that are anchored in both real life and already public literature, it problematizes our view on the memoir as authentic to real-life experiences.

The intertextuality in *Fun Home* not only affects the reader's perception of events but also the members of Bechdel's family. The chosen intertexts are connected to Alison's relationship to her father and based on the literature and authors he loved. Therefore, one can say that the intertextuality circles around Bruce. But how can the presentation of the other family members be authentic if they only reflect secondary characters in other works of literature? If Alison's mother is presented as a product of other literary characters, then who is she really, but a wife in an un-successful marriage? These questions illustrate how the intertextuality problematizes the portrayal of authentic identities. Bechdel explains the paralleling of her family with literary works by saying that "I use the allusions to James and Fitzgerald, not only for the sake of description, but because my parents are more real to me in literary terms" (Bechdel 67). Hence, she uses intertexts not only to reach out to the readers and their understanding but also to understand them herself. The construction of Alison's parents reflects both Bechdel's relationship to them and her literary background. Nevertheless, Bechdel risks that the readers become less involved when narrating her family in this way. Readers might even experience that they are distanced from the central character of Bruce because they do not really get to know *him* but several images of him through references to literary works. Arguably, because "she could best explore the lacunae in her knowledge of her father's character by reading his beloved authors" (Ball 16), our overall impression of the father becomes split, as it reflects Alison's own confused impression of him. Literature is mainly what father and daughter share apart from their sexualities, as they otherwise are presented as opposites, and the references to literature often reveal queerness. Bechdel not only relies on literature to understand her parents but also to understand herself. On page 74, Alison describes how she discovered her sexuality through literature: "My realization at nineteen that I was a lesbian came about in a manner consistent with my bookish upbringing" (Bechdel). Alison realizes that she is a lesbian at the library, and she generally highlights female and lesbian authors that have inspired her in her search for (sexual) identity. Such feminist icons can lead to recognition in Bechdel's (lesbian) readers as well as bring on a meta perspective on the reading of *Fun Home*, where Bechdel functions as a feminist (lesbian) icon herself.

Even though the intertextuality can provoke fictitious perceptions of *Fun Home*, interviews of Bechdel demonstrate that she is committed to make an authentic and reliable memoir. This is seen in her reliance on and reconstruction of different documents from her past. When describing the practice of copying her father's, as well as her own, handwriting she says that "I have a newfound respect for forgers [...] I don't even want to know how much time

I spent on that little exercise” (Chute, “An Interview” 1007). This practice illustrates just how important fidelity to reality is to Bechdel as an artist. Also, Alison develops an obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) at the age of ten (see Bechdel 135-41) and according to Schlick, the narration of her own epistemological crisis reflects Bechdel’s obsession with realism in creating *Fun Home* (30). Her diary, as presented in *Fun Home*, brings on a meta perspective on her writing and raises the question of authenticity and the possibility, or lack of possibility, of life writing. Nicola King says that “some contemporary self-representational works [...] leave ‘a residue of ‘uncorrected’ details and false clues’ to warn the reader that ‘memory is always provisional’ (132-133)”. This means that when Alison doubts her existence, the reader understands that factual accuracy is relative in relation to the work, seeing how diaries as well as memoirs are personal but not necessarily “true”. Ball says that “Bechdel is keen to make her readers understand the long-held positions of memoir scholarship: the unreliability of memory [...] and the multiple ways in which memoirs are ordered and construct narratives that complicate uncritical notions of facticity and testimony” (5). Because the artistic expressions of graphic memoirs are not objective representations, they leave room for reader interpretation, also in relation to the question of reality. In her memoir, Bechdel plays with this border both through her inclusion of documents and in her visual depictions. For instance, the image of Bruce’s obelisk in page 25 illustrates how the artist can make frames more or less fictitious and open for interpretation. Because the name “BECHDEL” is barely hidden by a wreath in this image, it is not necessarily the author’s name, and because the characters viewing the obelisk are portrayed as unidentifiable shades, it is not necessarily Alison standing at the graveyard. Since this image is visually portrayed as vague and, therefore, less specific for the Bechdel family, the reader can more easily relate to and identify with the situation. In other words, if the family name was not obscured and the characters were recognizable, the image would be specifically directed at Bechdel’s experience (not the reader’s) and represent a more non-fictitious than fictitious portrayal of the situation. With this fuzziness of it, on the other hand, it is as McCloud suggests like an outline that leaves room for reader interpretation and identification.

### 3.2. Interpreting Realistically Drawn Photographs.

In addition to using canonical works of literature to structure her memoir, Bechdel has included drawings of real photographs to introduce each chapter of the book. If the intertextuality leans towards a fictitious view on the memoir, the inclusion of realistically drawn photographs functions as documentation of reality and anchors the memoir in real life. Whitlock and Poletti celebrate Bechdel for her complex text and her use of photographs as artistic expressions, saying that “*Fun Home* anticipates a reader with advanced literacies who can read the translations of photographs into drawings that draw on realistic aesthetics, and which deliberately contrast to the cartooning style of the main text” (x). In this statement, Whitlock and Poletti confirm the need for active readers who have acquired the literacy of interpreting and translating images. The drawings of photographs stand out by their realistic style and contrast with the rest of the story which is (though more realistic than *Persepolis*) drawn in a more simplified, “cartoonish” style. This mix of styles creates breaks in the narrative and makes Bechdel able to direct her reader’s attention.

Like Satrapi, Bechdel includes postmemories in her memoir and the postmemory of Bruce is presented in *Fun Home* through Alison’s discovery and interpretation of old photographs and letters. Marianne Hirsch stresses that photos are especially important for memoirs of trauma, such as *Fun Home*, claiming that “photographs, ghostly revenants, are very particular instruments of remembrance, because they are perched at the edge between memory and postmemory and also, though differently, between memory and forgetting” (22). When Bechdel uses photographs to remember and trace the truth of her father, she demonstrates how important they are for her memories. Consequently, the inclusion of photographs highlights how the graphic memoir reflects our way of remembering, especially when connected to photographs. Because photographs are frozen fragments of the past, they contribute to the creation of memories as we fill in what the shots leave out. In other words, we can say that we make closure based on photographs when we create memories, just as Bechdel makes closure to understand the different fragments of Bruce’s past as they are presented in the photographs she finds.

But why has Bechdel chosen to draw the photographs instead of including their original form (a technique used in Spiegelman’s *Maus*)? Watson claims that through drawing photos as archival documents, “we can observe how she reinterprets the authority that photos as ‘official histories’ seem to hold, and opens them to subjective reinterpretation” (133). Hence, by drawing

the photographs, Bechdel's artistic expression is included in the subjective reinterpretation. This makes Bechdel able to express emotions, and Scherr argues that "the drawings of photographs communicate a kind of seriousness in their realism, and serve as a *momento mori* for the lost father" (43). In other words, the drawn reinterpretation of the photographs of Bruce leads to a sense of mourning and melancholic loss. In addition, the personal expression of the artist triggers the reader's imagination for interpreting the persona's affective situation. Therefore, the photographs communicate Alison's search for her father's secret life but we imagine, at the same time, Alison sitting with the photographs in her hands, mourning over her father. Thus, the photographs include both Bruce's postmemory and the experience of the witness. This reflects Scherr's argument, saying that by "not simply scanning such things into the text, Bechdel imbues these things with an intense emotionality that adds a kind of witnessing dimension to them" (42). The photographs become not only information with a documenting effect but also graphic expressions of emotion and identity.

The witnessing dimension that Scherr comments on is emphasized in the frames that include a hand holding a drawn photograph or letter. Watson explains the effects of the hand in these frames, saying that they "call the reader's attention to our voyeuristic looking at her intimately personal acts of investigating her father's hidden history and her own identification with it" (130). Watson explains how these images are important for the authenticity of the memoir, as the readers see how Alison investigated her family's secrets through the revelations in these photos. In addition, Eisner claims that "the viewer's response to a given scene is influenced by his position as a spectator" (89), thus, the function of perspective is to manipulate the reader's orientation and emotional states. By drawing the photographs and including the hand, Bechdel can manipulate the perspective and make the reader see the photographs in the role of Alison. As a result, Bechdel includes the reader in the experience of the witness, letting her become Alison as she views revealing photographs of her father. This argument suggests that the reader identifies with Alison through the realistically drawn photographs. In chapter one, I discussed how McCloud links the simplified expression of comics to identification. According to his theory, realistic images contribute to the creation of a character's individual identity, which is separate from the reader's. However, the inclusion of the hand holding these realistic images complicates this idea. Scherr explains that "faces, even the most abstract, are still other and distant. By drawing just a hand, Bechdel arguably allows us to place ourselves into the frame to an even greater degree, for there is no other we can definitely locate" (47). Since hands have fewer identifiable traits of identity than faces, the hand is effective for

including the reader in the narrative, making her identify with the character holding the photographs. Thus, the photographs make us identify with Alison’s situation to an even greater degree, even though one might assume that the consequence of the realistic style would have been the opposite in relation to McCloud’s theory.

Bechdel uses photographs to understand her father and says herself that “photographs were a huge resource for me. In many ways photographs really generated the book. In fact, the whole story was spawned by a snapshot I found of our old babysitter lying on a hotel bed in his Jockey shorts” (Chute, “An Interview” 1005). This image (pp.100-101) is located at the very center of the book, and Bechdel describes it as “the core of the book, the centerfold” (Chute, “An Interview” 1006).

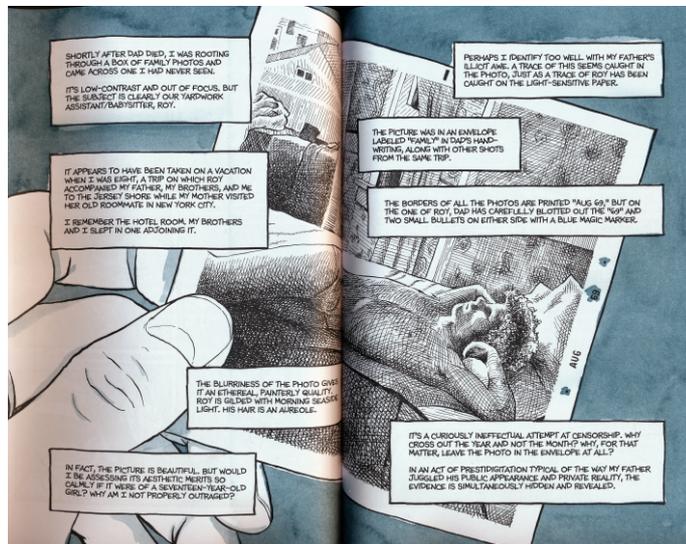


Figure E, *Fun Home* page 100-101.

The image stands out by its realistic style and through the inclusion of the hand portrayed in a realistic size, the readers are invited into the role of Alison as their hands overlap hers. Through the visual depiction of the photograph and Alison’s hand, as well as boxes of text elaborating on the situation, the readers take part in Alison’s experience of finding the photograph and reflecting on her father’s secret life. When talking about this photo, Bechdel says that

it was a stunning glimpse into my father’s hidden life, this life that was apparently running parallel to our regular every-day existence. And it was particularly compelling to me at the time because I was just coming out myself. I felt this sort of posthumous bond with my father, like I shared this thing with him. (Chute, “An Interview” 1006)

The image at the center of the book becomes a symbol of Alison and Bruce's relationship, their sexuality, and the parallelism of their lives. Consequently, Bechdel confirms the importance of photographs and how they are central to her alternative representation of a queer, American family.

When Bechdel chooses to draw the picture instead of an imagined scene between Bruce and Roy, she shows that even though she is the one to reveal the family secret, she "withholds information from her readers" (Ball 7) like Bruce withholds information from his family. Just as her father, she balances on borders of public appearance and private reality. The use of photographs instead of imagined scenes enacted out on the pages, illustrates how graphic works of literature can create and ask for imagination in the reader (rather than fill in gaps for her) as well as the creator's power to choose how graphic and provocative she wishes to be. This also reflects the responsibility of the authors, which I discussed in chapter one. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel delivers her family's deepest secret to the public. This coincides with Felski's description of feminist confessional literature and how it "explicitly seeks to disclose the most intimate and often traumatic details of the author's life" (83). Because Bechdel is not only revealing her own imperfectness but also her family's, she has a great responsibility towards them. Bechdel says in an interview that "this memoir is in many ways a huge violation of my family" (Chute, "An Interview" 1009), reflecting on this dilemma. On the one side, the divulgence of her family can make her memoir more reliable. Just like Satrapi does not glorify the Iranian history, Bechdel does not glorify herself or her father to create understanding or acceptance but reveals the imperfect truth behind the "perfect" family portrait to make a reliable, alternative representation of the American family. On the other side, she balances this revealing by withholding information in her graphic expressions. Her responsibility as an artist and her humility towards her family is directly expressed in the acknowledgements of the book, where she says, "Thanks to Helen, Christian, and John Bechdel for not trying to stop me from writing this book" (Bechdel). This statement reflects her awareness of the divulgence of her family's private life, and shows an admirable sensitivity towards this issue.

### 3.3. Bruce and Alison as Inverts.

*Fun Home* is a coming-out story that deals with both Alison's and Bruce's homosexuality. When studying *Fun Home*, the feminist perspective is linked to the queer. Though somewhat different in their approaches, both of these critical lenses deal with themes of gender and male,

heterogeneous norms. According to Scherr, the queer gaze is at the center of *Fun Home*, as she looks at the queerness, rather than just homosexuality, as a “particular artistic strategy”, observing that the “drawing of a hand grasping a photograph occurs at moments in the text when queerness is actively acknowledged” (48). Consequently, queerness is given emphasis through these images, and this highlights their importance in relation to Bechdel’s revealing of Bruce’s sexuality. I will argue that Bruce tries to control the outward images of the family and himself according to the stereotypical heterogenous family norm and that Bechdel breaks this illusion through the photographs including a hand. Bruce’s obsession with outward perfectness is expressed in the aesthetic appearance of the family home and family portraits. Bechdel reveals this aspect of her father early on in the memoir. On page 16 we are exposed to a scene where Bruce takes a portrait of the family, and where Bechdel demonstrates his obsession, saying that “he used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not” (16).

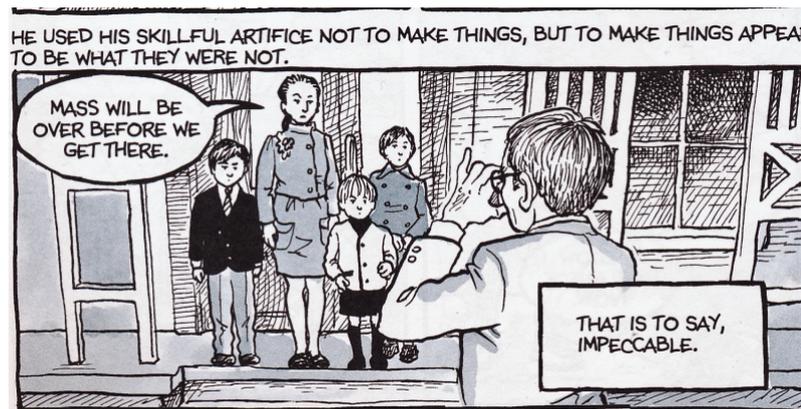


Figure F, *Fun Home* page 16.

In this frame, Bechdel shows how Bruce would typically try to document images of a perfect family by arranging scenes. Although perfect in postures, clothes, and context the imperfectness of this family portrait is revealed in the facial expressions, as none of the faces are joyful. Bechdel is not afraid of revealing this imperfectness in her alternative view on the American family. While Bruce tries to hide his identity, Alison is, as Scherr observes, “using comics to make visible what appears invisible in the family snapshot” (43). In this way, she is not only perceived as a reliable narrator but also reverses the more typical role of family photographs by revealing the queer truth behind them. When Scherr insists that traditionally, “family photographs are [...] used as a means towards the reproduction of heterosexuality, the familial gaze imploring one to continue the family line in an orderly (i.e.

straight) fashion” (46), she simultaneously states that queerness is generally excluded from family portraits, which are created by and reinforces the heterosexual family norm. While Bruce wants to maintain this heterosexual concept, Bechdel’s graphic expressions disclose the illusion of their family portrait and breaks its continuity in the future as she reveals her own sexuality.

Watson describes *Fun Home* as a “provocative exploration of sexuality, gendered relations in the American family, and Modernist versions of what [Bechdel] calls ‘erotic truth’ (Bechdel 228)” (123). When Bechdel is regarded as provocative in her portrayal of queerness, it confirms my previous claim that the medium has the possibility of being direct and shocking, according to the author’s wishes. The graphic form gives the opportunity of efficient messages, especially in relation to sexuality and taboos. Ball emphasizes that *Fun Home* is “‘graphic’ in every sense of that word” (9). Indeed, Bechdel is graphic through both visual and verbal expressions, as we will see. Furthermore, he says that “Bechdel’s representations [of lesbian relationships] are pronouncedly direct” (Ball 11), and her visualizations of naked or dead bodies (see Bechdel 44) illustrate how the graphic form is able to be direct and shocking through images. Watson reminds us that “in counterpoint to the focus on bodies in rigor mortis are the drawings of erotic bodies in action, in scenes of her father’s and her own sexual encounters” (131). Bechdel is not just talking about death or homosexual love but embodies it, so that her readers can *see* autopsies or two girls having intercourse (see Bechdel 214). One could say that the portrayal of naked bodies represents the revealing of the family mystery, as Bechdel undresses her family to the public: She is not afraid to show otherwise covered bodies nor secrets. Furthermore, in the disclosure of the family secret, we experience the female directness often found in graphic memoirs, for instance by Alison saying, “but would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?” (see Bechdel 17). Through such verbal shocks, Bechdel creates emotions in the reader who is taken off guard. Consequently, Bechdel reveals the family’s imperfectness through one graphic and efficient sentence, while simultaneously linking the family to queerness.

The queerness in *Fun Home* is highly linked to Bruce and is, according to Ball, seen in his “suspect performance of heteronormative masculinity” (18). Accordingly, we could say that Bruce’s queerness is revealed through the portrayal of the family home. Scherr supports Ball’s claim, acknowledging that “Bruce’s obsession with décor and household aesthetics more generally, a feminine and thus suspected obsession, always threatened to undermine his performance as a straight family man” (49). I agree that Bruce is portrayed as suspiciously feminine, and this becomes emphasized in his contrast to Bechdel’s self-

representation as a tomboy. Bechdel's artistic expression mediates her queer identity and rejection of femininity, and in her self-representation as a young girl it is actually hard to see whether she is a girl or a boy. There is a continuous struggle between Alison and Bruce when it comes to dressing, and this represents their opposite attitudes towards femininity. Watson suggests that Bechdel "presents Alison's rejection of femininity as a compensation for her father's lack of manliness, and his insistence on her dressing and acting 'feminine' as a projection of his own desire to perform femininity" (135-136). Thus, *Fun Home* reverses the traditional roles within the American family and shows how the expectations towards gender are not coherent with the identities of the family's individuals.

Watson highlights the paralleling of Bruce and Alison as a way to "question the social privileging of normative heterosexuality" (151). Alison's comments on Proust's description of his homosexual characters as "inverts" support this idea, as she says that "I've always been fond of this antiquated clinical term. [...] It's imprecise and insufficient, defining the homosexual as a person whose gender expression is at odds with his or her sex" (Bechdel 97). Though this statement can be read as a critique of gay stereotypes and gender expectations, she simultaneously illustrates how these stereotypes find their place in the Bechdel family by paralleling Bruce and Alison. As daughter and father dress up together for a wedding, Alison observes that "not only were we inverts. We were inversions of one another" (Bechdel 98). In this image, Bechdel portrays the family standing in front of an antique mirror. While Alison is clearly resistant, seen in her posture and critical facial expression, Bruce loves these situations and corrects his tie to look perfect. That this is typical behavior for Bruce is expressed by Alison's mother, who looks at her handsome husband without affection, only observing that he will "upstage the bride". Even though the scene suggests that the term "invert" is well fitted for Bruce and Alison, I will argue that Bechdel critiques the expectations towards normative behavior in relation to gender within the family through such scenes, as both father and daughter become marginalized people in a heterosexually-dominated, gendered society.

The paralleling of Alison and Bruce as inverts is also emphasized in the realistically drawn photographs. On page 120, Alison (and the reader) holds juxtaposed photographs of the two. Here, Alison is portrayed with short hair, wearing a "masculine" suit, while the photos of Bruce present him in female postures that contrast many of the other cartoonish depictions of his masculine body. Despite their contrasts, father and daughter also mirror each other in these

pictures and Bechdel says that “the exterior setting, the pained grin, the flexible wrists, even the angle of shadow falling across our faces—it’s about as close as a translation can get” (120).

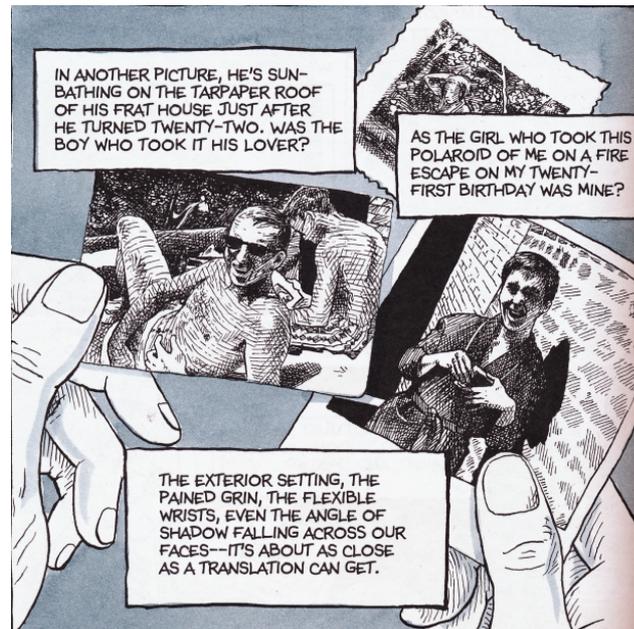


Figure G, *Fun Home* page 120.

This image demonstrates that the bond between Alison and Bruce is highly determined by their joint homosexuality and stresses that *Fun Home* is a coming-out story, if not for the character of Bruce, then for Alison.

On pages 220-221, the reader is exposed to a scene dealing with the queer bond between daughter and father. Though brief and not very heart opening it is, as Watson observes, “as close as they come to a moment of shared coming-out stories” (141). On these pages, Bechdel combines speech bubbles with separate boxes of text, speaking directly to the reader, and “the tightly framed, two page shots of their profiles dramatize a moment of intimate disclosure” (Watson 140). When reading this sequence, the reader fills in gaps and sees the frames as continuous, almost like an old film roll. The pages reflect Eisner’s theory on sequential art, saying that “when there is a need to compress time [like in this conversation of short time and limited space], a greater number of panels are used” (Eisner 30). Furthermore, the frames separate the images and act as punctuators (Eisner 28) and can, therefore, in the combination with blank textboxes, create a feeling of silence and awkwardness in the conversation. The scene illustrates the relationship between father and daughter but simultaneously stresses Bruce’s fear of coming out. Alison is the only one being liberated while Bruce, on the other hand, stays hidden behind the family portrait, pretending to be a normative family father in a beautiful home. Felski argues that “the depiction of one’s life and experiences as a woman, a

black person, a homosexual, can be a potentially liberating process insofar as it expresses a public self-acceptance and celebration of difference” (88). The death of Bruce shows, maybe not a moral but a strength in the female character versus the masculine, since the female is liberated from the bounds put on her by society while the masculine falls like “Icarus” (see Bechdel 4). This view is supported by Alison’s comment, saying that “in a way you could say that my father’s end was my beginning. Or more precisely, that the end of his lie coincided with the beginning of my truth” (Bechdel 117). Anzaldù argues that “men, even more than women, are fettered to gender roles. Women at least have the guts to break out of bondage” (383). Arguably, Bruce’s failure to be true about his sexuality and to challenge the norms of masculinity is the reason for his fall, supported by Bechdel’s statement that “sexual shame is in itself a kind of death” (228). Hence, when Bechdel is open about her father’s hidden life, it can be seen as a way to liberate him from his fears and social judgement. This idea illustrates how the revealing of alternative representations can be a liberating process for the artist.

Bechdel wants to create understanding but does she also confirm or reinforce gay stereotypes in her portrayal of Alison and Bruce? Felski claims that

it is certainly true [...] that feminist confession can at times reproduce images of women uncomfortably close to the stereotypes feminist theorists are attempting to challenge [...] however, it can also be noted that the dividing line between a repressive stereotype and an empowering symbol of cultural identity is often a very narrow one. (93)

One can say that Bechdel confirms gay stereotypes to a certain extent, but that the memoir simultaneously comments on how it is a freedom and a power to be able to be as masculine/feminine as one wishes to be. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel plays with the balance of portraying lesbian love as “normal” and holding on to a specific lesbian identity. She has been called “the representative Genie/Genius for those of us growing up lesbian” (McPherson n.p.), and by playing on the typical stereotypes, Bechdel can speak to a communal identity of gay people. This identity can create recognition in the reader and at the same time empower the lesbian community through Alison’s strong, queer character. When referring to Bruce and herself as inverts, she challenges the simplified view on homosexuals while at the same time admitting that the Bechdel family confirms it and, thus, turns it into an empowering symbol that highlights the uniqueness of her family rather than their suppressed or marginalized identities.

If we accept the argument that the graphic form conveys identities effectively and especially through simplistic, recognizable traits, it is possibly effective for portraying

stereotypes as well. This leads to opportunities and challenges for the artist: If the simplified image can make stereotypical traits accessible and more easily conveyed, this can lead to identification and sympathy in the readers. On the other hand, just like Satrapi is faced with the risk of presenting her characters as stereotypical Muslims, Bechdel might confirm gay stereotypes that overshadow the individual's personal traits beyond sexuality and gender. In this case, it will be difficult to create understanding and communicate uniqueness. When I highlight *Fun Home* as *lesbian* life writing, I might reinforce stereotypes as well, unconsciously stating that there is something distinct different in lesbian lives compared to straight female stories. Moreover, Bidy Martin remind us that this focus might hide the differences of lesbian lives and identities, assuming there is “something coherently same about all lesbians” (381). Such views might reinforce stereotypes of lesbian identities and obscure the individual by making sexuality the most important factor for the creation of identity. This might be said about female literature in general, because an emphasis on the female perspective might take away the reader's focus on other intersectionalities and personal traits in the persona.

In *Fun Home*, we are exposed to Bechdel's necessity to trace her father's secret and recover the truth in order to move on. The function of stories of trauma, dealing with the past (and storytelling in general) is according to Watson, “a process of retelling life experience of trauma and disappointment until the teller discovers some form of resolution that can both acknowledge pain and provide the closure of a happier ending” (149). The last frame of the memoir, which depicts young Alison and Bruce in a swimming pool, suggests a closure for a happier ending.



Figure H, *Fun Home* page 232.

This scene might lead to associations of childhood and recognition in the reader, as learning how to swim is a “typical” father-daughter experience. The frame evokes feelings of comfort, security, and parental love, and by experiencing this familiar situation with Alison, the reader is able to imagine Bruce as a father figure. We might question if this is an image of fantasy or memory. Bechdel might have taken advantage of her freedom as an artist and created this frame to make a happier conclusion for the story, by emphasizing on the warmth of the father-daughter relationship and how they were linked to each other. This contrasts the image above, also on the last page, portraying the truck that Bruce was run down by. Watson insist that “the conjunction of these opposed ‘tragic’ and ‘comic’ (happy ending) images is startling and demands that the viewers seek some kind of closure to resolve the paradox” (147). The combination of these particular images both highlights the title and refers back to the first frame of Alison flying in her father’s arms; simultaneously communicating parental love and Bruce’s fall. Watson observes that the juxtaposed images suggest that the “process of working through her own history, by narratively scripting the coming out that her father could not enact, and refusing to reject him as either ‘perverted’ or failed, rescues him by showing his arms-out gesture of willingness to rescue her” (148). Thus, the last frame reflects Bechdel’s ambitions with creating *Fun Home*, to communicate that, as Bechdel herself tells us, gay people are ordinary people.



## Conclusion.

In this thesis, I have argued that sequential art is suitable for female autobiographies. In short, this is because the graphic form reflects our way of remembering, and because alternative representations of history and graphic expressions can create intimate relationships between the reader and narrator. By making the reader identify with the narrator's personal experiences and emotions, the artist can create understanding and educate her readers. I have further argued that the graphic memoir lies on borders related to recognition, authenticity, and privacy. To sum up, I will briefly highlight my major claims regarding these borders.

First, the graphic memoir balances between familiar and alien elements to create recognition and communicate identity across borders. As a result, the authors can connect with their readers, create identification, and emotional reactions. Especially feminist memoirs rely on presenting ordinary practices and experiences as a part of their alternative history of the everyday, because they are typically less individualistic than male autobiographies and speak to communities of female readers. I have specifically emphasized Satrapi's inclusion of Western objects, her use of the defamiliarized and innocent child witness, and the portrayal of women as individuals to create sympathy, identification, and understanding. I have also stressed Bechdel's use of intertexts and photographs, as well as everyday female experiences that the reader can relate to. By including familiar elements, the artist can communicate both identity, context, and her personal background. I have also stressed how the form relies on both the reader's and creator's abilities of communicating with the text. While the artist needs to understand her readers to bridge the unfamiliar with familiar objects and concepts, the reader must be able to interpret the artistic expressions, fill in gaps, and make closure. The artist makes closure herself when reinterpreting memories and photographs, and this reinterpretation can be conveyed in the artistic expressions of the memoir. Consequently, the artist can capture the witness' emotions in the reinterpretation and make her readers identify with the emotional experiences of this practice. We can say that the format is tragicomic, as it communicates both humor and tragedy efficiently. Humor can work as an emotional relief, as something familiar in an alien setting, but also reflects the narrator's character and identity. In addition, *Persepolis* clearly demonstrates how humor can be used as a tool to express attitudes and resistance in the narrative.

Second, because the graphic memoir narrates memories that are real but also subjective, it lies on the border of fiction and non-fiction. The artists of graphic memoirs present artistic

expressions, not just images that are documenting. The possibilities of the format are highly linked to the visual expression of the artist, and Satrapi argues that “there are so many things that you can say through images that you cannot say with the writing” (Root 150). The artistic drawing communicates messages and emotions more effectively than photographs, because it can capture moments and be changed or adjusted according to its purpose. In addition, because the books are examples of the bildungsroman, the work itself is regarded as a part of the narration and identity of the artist. This makes the visual aspect even more prominent. This element is also highlighted through the inclusions of a hand, to change the perspective, imbued emotionality and subjectivity, and include the reader in the narrative. In my thesis, I have demonstrated how the artists can direct the readers through visual contrasts, inclusions of familiar objects in the background, changing the perspective, and making the readers create closure in the artists’ balance of revealing and hiding. When the artists use such tools to connect with their readers, they can include elements that might not have been present in real photographs of certain scenes, but exist in the memory of the artist. This idea is linked to my claim that sequential art reflects our way of remembering, as memories are experienced as subjective fragments of real events. These fragments can be related to pictures, objects, events, or postmemories. When Ball argues that “the memoir’s power to provide forms of truth that are emotional rather than factual” (5), he supports my statement that readers of memoirs seek personal representations of the past that communicate emotions experienced by the persona, and Satrapi herself says that “drawing is a very emotional thing” (Zappaterra 13). I have discussed how the simplistic image can make emotions, traits of identity, and stereotypes accessible to the reader. The typically simplistic and “unrealistic” style of comics complicates the view on the memoir as non-fiction but can simultaneously express emotional truths efficiently

Third, because the authors of graphic memoirs expose their private memories to the public, they balance on the border of private and public life. Within the discussion on authenticity, I have argued that artists need to be honest and reveal the imperfect to be perceived as reliable authors and to create authentic narratives that are as true to their subjective experiences as possible. *Persepolis* and *Fun Home* illustrate how the artist can present alternative and “nasty” female realities to connect with female communities, to express vulnerability, and create recognition. Both Bechdel and Satrapi challenge the views on women as perfect, pretty, or morally pure. As marginalized subjects, the artists can act rebellious on behalf of the group they represent through their artistic expressions. For instance, through her

rebellious character, Satrapi breaks down stereotypes of Muslim women as defenceless victims, portrays alternative views on the use of the veil, and uncovers female sexuality. Bechdel resists gendered roles within the normative American family by recovering the queerness of her family and exposing the reader to both visual and verbal shocks. She tears down her father's façade of outward perfectness by revealing private truths through graphic expressions. The visuality of the format makes it well fitted for personal stories by marginalized groups because quick, shocking images and familiar objects or situations can efficiently portray the private, everyday experiences of marginalized people and change the reader's understanding of the marginalized group or herself. The artist's choices in her communication are important in this regard. In her representation of trauma or resistance, she needs to decide how direct or provocative she wishes to be. *Persepolis* and *Fun Home* juggle between revealing and hiding in their visual expressions, leaving gaps for the reader's imagination. This also demonstrates the responsibility of the artist, who needs to consider how much she wants to divulge both herself and the people surrounding her when making her private memories public.

Both Satrapi and Bechdel wish to create understanding and educate their readers. They create acceptance through subjective representations of marginalized realities, by celebrating difference, and revealing imperfectness. By being perceived as personal and imperfect but simultaneously as independent women with plenty of backbone, both Bechdel and Satrapi can be regarded as role models for the group they represent, inspiring their readers through their alternative views on female realities. In conclusion, by visualizing memories and combining controlled, drawn images and words, Satrapi and Bechdel make their narratives of trauma intriguing and accessible to the reader, who can relate to the experiences and emotions of their witnesses.



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## **Appendix: The Graphic Memoir in a Didactic Perspective.**

The graphic form is suitable for the English Second Language classroom because it can contribute to the students' language learning and cultural understanding as well as function as a tool to adjust the teaching to different students and levels. Language teaching cannot be purely instrumental if one is going to motivate and engage the students, and I believe that the graphic memoir has potential in the classroom because it can motivate the students by making the teaching more exciting.

The graphic memoir can be used to improve the students' language skills, for instance in combination with teaching grammar and vocabulary. Moreover, because the graphic form contains fewer words than ordinary prose, the form can be used in diverse classrooms and still meet the different levels of students. While the weaker students can get support from the images and experience achievement by reading a whole book for adult readers in English, the students with developed language skills can be challenged further by developing their interpretative skills. Because the form communicates through both words and images, *Persepolis* and *Fun Home* can simultaneously be used as an approach to teach how to interpret visual expressions and explore how to produce messages through non-verbal communication.

Furthermore, books such as *Persepolis* and *Fun Home* can be used when teaching culture in its broadest sense. When the authors' aims for writing their memoirs are to create understanding and educate their readers, they demonstrate how such narratives are suitable for the classroom. Through these narratives, the students can reflect on different subjective representations of marginalized groups and concepts such as stereotypes and prejudices, as well as gain new knowledge about history, religions, and cultures. This overlap shows how the books can be used interdisciplinary to develop the students' understanding further. *Fun Home* is challenging because of its sophisticated language and frequent references canonical literature. This can be used as a tool though, as the teacher can employ the book to teach Culture with a capital C, for instance by letting the students explore the books and authors Bechdel refers to.

I regard the graphic memoir as well suited for second language learners. Because many students have difficulties with reading English, the form can be especially motivating. This is important because students who previously have felt failure can experience the enjoyment of reading, which I think, is the main goal of teaching literature.



## **Abstract.**

In this thesis, I explore the relationship between the graphic form and female autobiographies. By studying Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Bechdel's *Fun Home*, I explain why the graphic form suits autobiographies by women and demonstrate how the artists convey alternative views on history and communicate with their readers.

This thesis opens with discussing theories on the graphic form and the genre. I problematize the authenticity of memoirs, the possibilities of visual communication, the link between fractured images and memory, and the need for active readers. Next, I connect these discussions to *Persepolis* by highlighting Satrapi's use of the child perspective and her graphic representations of females as individuals to educate her readers, followed by a study on *Fun Home*, where I emphasize Bechdel's inclusion of intertexts and realistically drawn photographs to create recognition and reveal the queerness of her family.

My thesis suggests that the graphic form suits female representations of memories because subjective and artistic expressions communicate emotions and create intimate relationships between the readers and narrators. Moreover, I will suggest that sequential art is suitable for autobiographies because the form reflects human memories, as they are experienced as subjective fragments of real events.