

# The Dyke to Watch Out For

BY EUAN BEAR

It's late afternoon and the view is disappearing into gray along the dirt road whose verge is piled deep with recent snow in the hills of southeastern Chittenden County. A narrow path is neatly shoveled, down two steps from the tiny parking slot to the modest, well-planned house where Alison Bechdel and her partner Amy Rubin live, and where Dykes to Watch Out For is created in a basement studio.

Alison is, of course, *The Dyke to Watch Out For*, the creator of the comic that runs in our pages and those of 64 other publications. She's been drawing Mo, Lois, Sparrow, Ginger and the rest for 20 years as of this July. The lesbian cartoon chronicle has appeared in *OITM* since January of 1991, when Alison moved to Vermont. She'll be the keynote speaker at the R.U.I.2? Community Center dinner in Burlington in April.

Alison characterized herself (in a 1991 *OITM* interview) as having been a "full-time professional lesbian" since 1986, working at gay and lesbian newspapers until 1990, then making the leap into full-time cartooning and self-syndication and merchandising.

Some months, DTWOF is funny ha-ha. More often it provokes a snort of recognition or a drawn-out hmmm betraying thought provocation. Even though she draws a "comic" strip, she is a serious person. Erudite. Perceptive. Well read. Politically astute. A sharp-eyed observer and archivist of a particular milieu.

We talked about what assimilation would mean for that milieu. "All the things we've been fighting for — equality, visibility — once we get them, there will be no more queer culture. In a way, that's fine. In a way, I'm reluctant about changes, moving toward acceptance," Alison says.

"I heard the expression 'post-gay' the other day, and I am enraged by the concept! It seems so privileged, so smug. It could only be uttered by someone who lived in an urban, progressive place, [or by] some neo-conservative. But at the same time, I can see how that's coming true."

For example, she says, "I don't feel the same about Gay Pride as I used to. It used to be a sacrosanct event. I don't have the same visceral response."

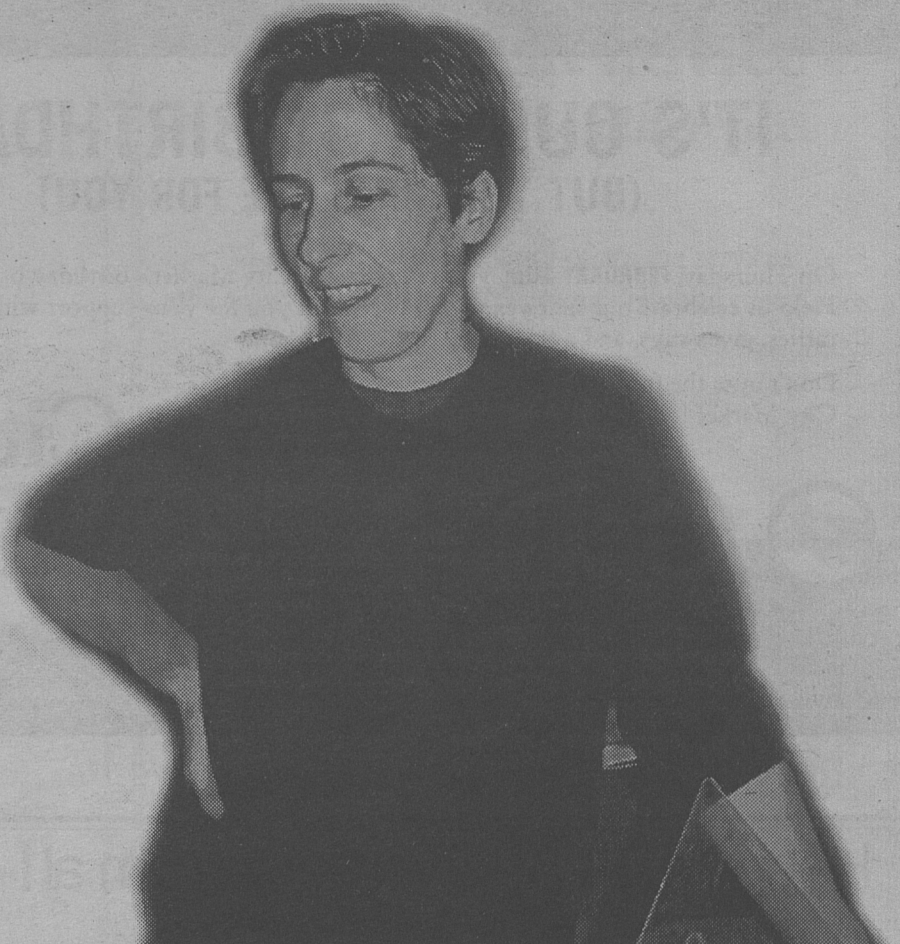
"The world has changed so much. I used to be so scared all the time," she adds, feeling that lesbians and gay men were threatened everywhere, and it was easy to tell what was "gay" and okay and what was not, whether someone was "in the family" or not.

Alison grew up in the middle of Pennsylvania, in the ridge-and-valley part of the state where the Appalachians make driving difficult, especially in the winter. It wasn't particularly Pennsylvania Dutch (Old Order Amish and Mennonite) country, until recently, when people started moving over the ridges from Bucks County. She was, she says, "very carried away" by the land.

"Vermont is familiar in that way — mountains and valleys — but without the scary parts of people wanting to kill me. It was too scary to be an out gay person there," she remembers. The civil union backlash brought some of those fears back again.

She graduated from Oberlin College (where she first identified as a lesbian), didn't get into any of the graduate art schools she applied to, and went to New York City to work in "low-level publishing jobs."

Upon arriving in New York City, Alison went looking for a martial arts program. "I didn't know anyone. I wanted to know how to fight and be strong. I stumbled into it through the Women's Center Karate Club." The style was Shotokan, and it stuck with her long after she stopped going to classes. "I went to a reunion a few years ago, and I still remembered



## Cartoonist Alison Bechdel Celebrates 20 Years of DTWOF

the forms. It was exciting, learning that discipline, the control, feeling the power.

"My personal life has followed the movement pretty closely. I'm at a strange point in my life — there's less and less of that essentialist passion, but because of what I do for a living [drawing a lesbian — and increasingly gay, bi, and trans — strip] I find ways to reconcile those two things."

Dykes to Watch Out For began with "Marianne, dissatisfied with the breakfast brew": naked, angular, gritting her teeth, looking like she's about to throw the coffeepot in her left hand out the window. When she appeared in the margin of a letter Alison was writing to a friend, she was further identified as "Dykes to Watch Out For, plate no. 27," as if she "were just one in a series of illustrations of mildly demonic lesbians." The collection grew, until she offered one to the collective of *Womanews*, a New York-based feminist monthly, and it was published in the July/August 1983 issue, with more to follow.

The first DTWOF cartoons were single panels, with increasingly complex captions. Within the first year, the commentary outgrew single panels, and the first strip-format series appeared in 1984.

Before that, Alison drew cartoons as soon as she could hold a crayon. She drew men:

cowboys, cops, robbers, sailors, businessmen (with and without wings), gymnasts, boxers, men with beards and without. Coming out as a lesbian (more like embracing something she knew in retrospect was true from childhood), allowed her drawings of lesbians to flow more freely.

"My characters aren't all lesbians any more, so the title of the strip is dated. My new book is called *Dykes and Other Carbon-Based Beings to Watch Out For*," Alison says. "I don't want to erase lesbians, ever. It's more like subsuming everyone else under the lesbian standard, making lesbians visible as the standard, looking at being human from a lesbian perspective. I want to keep the specificity."

She explains that she learned her "visual grammar" in large part from Scott McLeod: "By that I mean the conventions that comic artists follow: time elapsing, transitions in location, ways of telling stories in a purely visual way. I'm really more focused on the writing part. I've gotten decent at the drawing, but I don't get a chance to improve a lot because of the structure of the strip."

But she's getting a chance now, working on a new project: a graphic (as in "mostly drawings," not as in "explicitly sexual or violent") memoir about her childhood and her relationship with her father. Her father was gay,

and she didn't know until shortly before he died.

"It'll be a regular, big book, maybe seven by ten, and I'll have whole pages to work with — a number of them — instead of a strip of small boxes, some real freedom! I'm trying to use the space creatively and be more experimental about writing and drawing. I'm working on not just illustrating the words, the story, but working as if it's two stories, like a film with a voice-over: together they create another level of meaning."

As a memoir, "it's not really a linear narrative, more like a collection of essays," she says. She's reluctant to say anything more about the content.

I ask Alison whether her politics come from her sense of being different. "Yes. No. Yes. ... I was apolitical until I came out — identifying as a lesbian radicalized me. [Until then] I didn't realize I wasn't part of society. When I found out I wasn't, it pissed me off."

She says she still feels like an outsider, a member of a "third sex": "I'm a girl, but I'm a boyish girl. I don't know any more — it's been a long time since anyone mistook me for a boy. Maybe I'm getting too old to look like a boy. I don't know how people perceive me, and I don't really care, though I used to like that people couldn't tell. The thing I don't like is when they say 'Sir' and then they get embarrassed and awkward."

It's tempting to link a sense of being an outsider to being a lesbian, but Alison isn't sure it's that simple. "I think it might be deeper, something about the sensibility of an artist. At first I was relieved when I came out, but when I still felt like an outsider, I decided it must be something else."

One of her favorite books is *Harriet the Spy*, in which 11-year-old Harriet writes down her unvarnished, unedited observations and perceptions of her family members, classmates and friends in a notebook. Some of those friends find the notebook and are chagrined or angered by what they read about themselves. Harriet, says Alison, is the perfect outsider.

"The writer/artist part of me may be inseparable from the lesbian part of me. The artist part is even more alienated than the lesbian part of me."

Wherever it comes from, the urge to observe from outside and record — habits, actions, events, relationships, politics, jobs, lives and deaths — stands in good stead both Alison Bechdel and the ever-broadening community she documents and reflects. ▼

For more information about Alison Bechdel and *Dykes to Watch Out For*, check out her website at [www.dykestowatchoutfor.net](http://www.dykestowatchoutfor.net), or her book, *The Indelible Alison Bechdel* (Firebrand Books).

