

Dykes to Watch Out For: The Slide Show

Sage Russell

On February 29 — Leap Day — Alison Bechdel, the noted cartoonist who lives among us here in Vermont, stepped out from behind Mo, Lois and all the other dykes to watch out for, to talk about her life and her work to an enthusiastic crowd of several hundred lesbians and a handful of men at Burlington City Hall. She was celebrating the publication of her latest collection of cartoons, *Dykes to Watch Out For: The Sequel*.

Bechdel says she was born a lesbian, and always wanted to be a cartoonist. For a long time these two major themes in her life were entirely separate. They did not begin to come together to turn her into a lesbian cartoonist until her junior year in college.

As one might expect, Alison Bechdel didn't just talk about "her childhood drawings, her frustrated adolescence, and her action-packed career as a lesbian cartoonist." She illustrated her themes with slides of her work. The first item in the collection was a pencil drawing of a cowboy done when she was about five on her grandmother's DAR stationery.

The most surprising thing about her work is that until she was in college, this com-

mitted chronicler of lesbian lives drew only men. "For a long time it kind of bothered me. I was afraid it was like some kind of weird psycho-sexual disorder or something. My mother would always be suggesting kind of nervously to me that I draw ladies too. I think it's important to note here that this isn't just an idiosyncratic thing that I did. I've talked to lots of other lesbians who only drew men as children. So now I see the reason I didn't draw ladies was in fact a psycho-sexual disorder — not mine, but this culture's."

Bechdel illustrated her point with a look at the misogyny in mainstream cartoons like *Blondie*, *Mickey Mouse* and *Beetle Bailey*. "It's amazing to me that as women we grow up and survive this kind of shit, this lack of representation of what we're really like, this fundamental splitting off from our humanity. But most of us survive with some kind of scars. I think it's because I was a lesbian that I was able to see all this stuff so clearly. So as a kid I was totally outraged by this unfairness that I was seeing everywhere.

But my method of dealing with it, and the scar that I personally carry, was to dissociate myself from being a girl. To be a

girl seemed like the worst, most humiliating fate in the world to me. So I kind of grew up thinking of myself as neither boy nor girl, but as something different. I kept up this protective dissociation all through my adolescence and late teens. And all that time, I drew mostly men."

This began to change in college, where "I had a kind of unofficial double major in art and coming out. For the first two years I just did the art part." Bechdel found she could draw women models in figure drawing class even if she couldn't draw women from her imagination. The big breakthrough came in her junior year when the event she had subconsciously been waiting for her whole life finally occurred — she came out.

"After I realized I was a lesbian, I realized, 'Oh, that must mean I'm a woman then'." With acceptance of herself as a woman came feminism, a political consciousness, and the ability to draw women — as long as she could think of them as lesbians. "I'd been shut off and dissociated from my femaleness for so long, for all those years, because it seemed like such a bum deal to be a girl, but now here was this great deal of being a dyke."

Dykes to Watch Out For just kind of evolved from this point: from drawings scribbled in the margins of letters, to single panel cartoons in the feminist newspaper *WomanNews*, to multi-panel strips featuring lesbians created for a particular strip and then discarded, to the development of the continuing characters we've become so attached to. When her first book of collected cartoons was published in 1986, Bechdel began to take herself more seriously as a cartoonist. And in August 1990, she quit her last part-time job to become a lesbian cartoonist full-time. Today, there is no distinction between her life and

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