

# Portrait of the Artist as a ...

## Dyke To Watch Out For

BY BARBARA DOZETOS

The sun is shining far too brightly for a February day in Vermont and the climb up the mountainside in Bolton has rendered both my car and me warmer than either of us has been in weeks. I pull up in front of Alison Bechdel's home only to be dismayed by what I saw at there. Had I missed her? Did she forget? Did I screw up something?

There are two very well dressed women knocking at the door and their brand new Saab, second only to my own car in its inappropriate appearance for this setting, is blocking the driveway. One of the women approaches to inform me that there is a note on the door for someone. Before I can breathe a sigh of relief, she proffers two magazines, "Would you be interested in the latest issues of *The Watchtower* and *Awake*?" I assure her that I have someone at home who takes care of that for me and they move on, leaving me room to select a parking place.

The note on the door directs me to come in and down the stairs to the room where Alison creates the comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For*. I find her there on the phone and am greeted warmly by her lovely feline companion, Julia. The phone call finished, Alison removes the thin fingerless glove she wears when she draws and asks to hear about the Jehovah's Witnesses I have chased from her door. Apparently, this is a first in the year she has lived in this house. "I never thought they'd find me here," she laughs and offers me tea as a reward. The ice is broken.

Windows dominate the room we sit in; the design of the house brings as much of the outside in as possible. The desk, drawing table and computer platform are orderly and I get the feeling it is not just because company was expected.

Alison and I settle in to talk about the her latest project. *The Indelible Alison Bechdel* will be in stores late this month. "I think of *Indelible* as a sort of 15th anniversary book. It contains miscellaneous work I've done over the years that hasn't appeared in my regular *DTWOF* collections, along with my own commentary on some of the pieces," she says of the project she compiled, wrote and edited herself. *Indelible* also contains a timeline of the *DTWOF* strip and some letters from readers. She checks

her desk calendar quickly and says with a smile, "I should plug the signing at Peace and Justice on April 4th."

The cover of the new book sends a distinct message. Alison has drawn herself drawing the character Mo, from *DTWOF*, who is simultaneously erasing the artist. Ego and alter-ego, certainly, but there are absolutely two separate entities. The strip is not autobiographical and its author is adamant about the issue of the characters not being merely caricatures of real people. This notion bothers her on two counts, "A — I'd lose all my friends and B — it's a little insulting to say that's all there is to my skill. I don't just draw them, I create them."

Of course, real life incidents can serve as catalysts or background for some of the plots. For instance, several years ago, Alison and her then-girlfriend were, to their surprise, seated next to the girlfriend's ex at a concert. She laughs, "That was back in Minneapolis. Around here, that kind of thing is a given."

With particular glee, the Lambda award winner turns to her computer to show me the artwork for the cover of *Split Level Dykes to Watch Out For*, the eighth collection of her cartoon strip, due out in mid-October of this year. "I can do the coloring on the computer now. I hate working with the water colors and stuff."

The computer also aids Alison in her effort to keep the location for *DWTOF* and the daily lives of its denizens vague, allowing any reader to



photo by Amy Rubin

Alison Bechdel at home with her cat Julia.

identify with it. She regularly visits gay and lesbian websites and subscribes to a daunting stack of newspapers and magazines. Of the big name gay and lesbian magazines she says, "They are commercial vehicles. They sell ads; that's an automatic distortion. The smaller the budget, the more accurate the representation. *Out* enrages me on a monthly basis, but if you can wade through the perfume ads and the fashion layouts, they do some great reporting."

The thirty-something cartoonist says she has received surprisingly little flack from women over the years, belying the myth that a typical lesbian has no sense of humor. This bothers Alison sometimes, "Am I not doing challenging enough material? But the bottom line is, I'm a nice person and I don't want to offend anyone."

Although she does not

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consider herself to be an activist, Alison acknowledges her use of *DTWOF* to deliver political messages. "I've always had values — ways of being in the world and ways of understanding the world — that I want the strip to illustrate." She has a history of getting involved with extremely political women and she is impressed by their energy and dedication. However, she notes, "It never felt right for me to do that stuff; I've always been an observer."

These observations translate into the cartoon commentaries that are Alison's vocation. She counts herself fortunate to be able to support herself doing what she loves. "It's an incredible privilege to be able to rant in public."

She is startled when I asked how it felt to be a role model, a lesbian making a living at being a lesbian. Quickly repeating that she is not lead-

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