

Alison Bechdel: Fun Home (Chapter 2: A Happy Death)

"There's no proof that my father killed himself... His death was quite possibly his consummate artifice."

Fun Home's second chapter delves deeper into the mysterious circumstances of Bruce's death. Although there is no proof that her father killed himself in 1980, Alison can't believe otherwise. Almost like a detective combing a crime scene, Alison revisits her memories and pieces together the clues that point to her father's suicide: a book he was reading about deceiving loved ones, Bruce's obelisk collection, his preoccupation with the dead bodies at the family funeral home, and Helen asking him for a divorce two weeks before he died.

Alison was at college when her father died, and she explores her strange reaction to the news of her father's death. Despite one brief, tearful episode, Alison reveals that she found it hard to experience feelings of grief and she struggled to mourn. In fact, on seeing her brother again, both of them broke out in absurd grins! Bechdel wonders if working in such close proximity to death made her father morbidly curious and begin to question why he should go on living.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know this chapter?

1. The title of Chapter 2: 'A Happy Death' alludes to a novel written by which author?

- (a) F. Scott Fitzgerald.
- (b) Ernest Hemingway.
- (c) Albert Camus.
- (d) James Joyce.

2. How did the author's father die?

- (a) By hanging.
- (b) He drowned.
- (c) He was shot.
- (d) Hit by a truck.

3. How long prior to his death did his wife ask him for a divorce?

- (a) 2 days earlier.
- (b) 2 weeks earlier.
- (c) 1 week earlier.
- (d) 2 months earlier.

4. In what year did Bruce Bechdel die?

- (a) 1975.
- (b) 1980.
- (c) 1977.
- (d) 1991.

5. Where was Alison when her father died?

- (a) On holiday.
- (b) At college.
- (c) Working in an office.
- (d) At home.

6. What shape is the author's headstone?

- (a) A cross.
- (b) A stele.
- (c) An obelisk.
- (d) A star.

7. What is Bruce's brother's name (according to the map of the town on page 31)?

- (a) Ed.
- (b) Ted.
- (c) Ned.
- (d) Fred.

8. To which television family does the author compare her own family?

- (a) The Munsters.
- (b) The Addams Family.
- (c) Sly and the Family Stone.
- (d) The Dunphys

9. What is the 'Fun Home'?

- (a) A playground.
- (b) A primary school.
- (c) A church.
- (d) A funeral parlour.

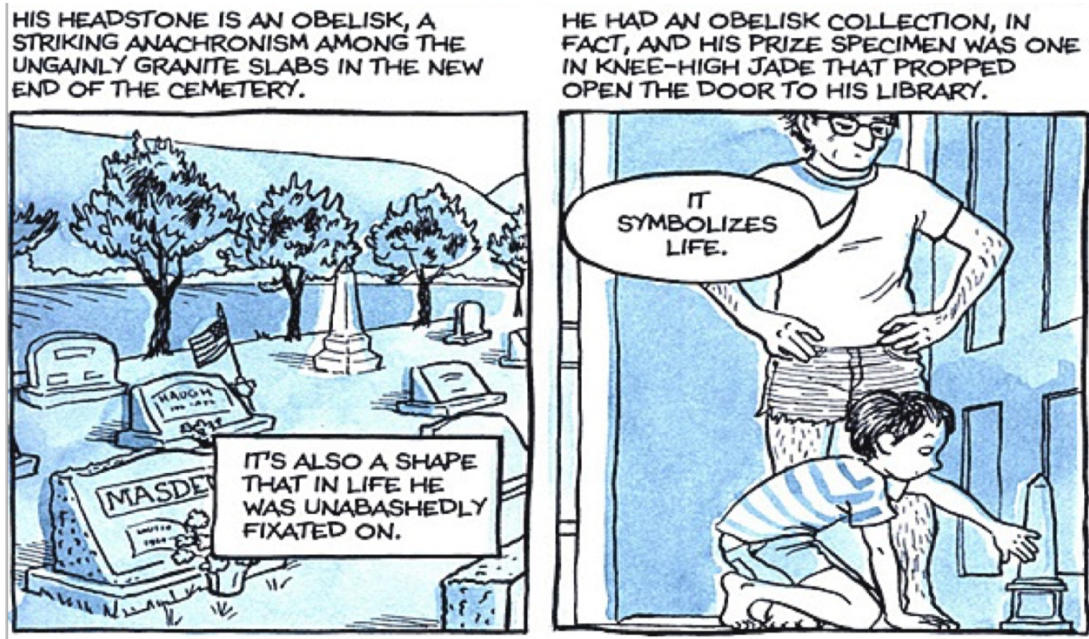
10. What is the name of the mailman who helps Bruce when he is stuck in the mud?

- (a) Carl.
- (b) Andy.
- (c) Mort.
- (d) Gus.

Understanding and Interpretation

1. Why might Alison compare her own family to The Addams Family from television? What is appropriate about this comparison?
2. Describe Bruce's life in the funeral home. What effects does Alison suggest working in the home had on her father?
3. What was Alison's favourite childhood story, that her grandmother used to tell? What might be significant (or symbolic) about this story?
4. Alison experiences different reactions upon the death of her father, both in the immediate moment when she first finds out, through the rituals of his burial, to her reaction several weeks later when she visits his grave. Describe her reactions:
5. What visual elements of chapter 2 stood out for you? Can you comment on an aspect of the artwork or the graphic novel style of a page or panel in this chapter?

Literary Context: *the influence of Sigmund Freud*



Sigmund Freud has been called the ‘father of modern psychology.’ Although Freudian psychology is an entire field of study in itself, in a nutshell Freud believed that people disguise disturbing impulses by substituting acceptable symbolic objects to stand in for latent thoughts and fears, such as nakedness, birth, death and a few others. The richest collection of symbols, according to Freud, were substitutes for sexual thoughts. For example, the penis (also called the phallus) can be represented by long and upright objects such as trees, sticks, poles – and obelisks.

In chapter 2 of *Fun Home*, we see that Bruce’s grave is marked with an obelisk which, as Alison Bechdel pointedly remarks, is highly appropriate, as this is a shape he was fixated on in life. Can you explain the **irony** of this observation?

Discussion Point: *grandma’s story*

As kids, Alison and her brothers would sometimes spend the night at their Grandmother’s place. At bedtime, they would beg Grammy to tell them the story of when Bruce, no more than three years old, wandered off into a neighbours’ muddy field, and got stuck. Eventually, the neighbourhood mailman, Mort DeHaas, came along and spotted Bruce; when he yanked him out Bruce’s shoes stayed stuck, but he was fine. The story ends with Bruce at home, being stripped, wrapped, and dried in the oven by Grandma.

While listening to the story, Alison and her brother interrupt to ask questions (which Grammy ignores) and, on reflection, Alison wonders why she always pictured the mailman as ‘*a milkman, all in white – a reverse grim reaper*’ (page 41). She also admits she cannot picture the oven as anything other than a modern oven, even though she knows that her Grandma’s old stove was not the same.

What does this episode reveal about the line between fantasy and reality, and about the reliability of memory? What should the reader remember from here on, as they continue to read Alison’s graphic memoir?

Important Theme: *attitudes to death*

'My brothers and I had lots of chores at the Fun Home, but also many interesting opportunities for play.'

Although Bruce's death and funeral form the backbone of chapter 2, Alison's flashbacks to her time of working and playing in the family funeral home allow the reader to reflect on attitudes towards death in a wider sense. Even the way the children nickname their family funeral home 'The Fun Home' suggests that death does not always have to be a serious business. Alison and her siblings often fool around and occasionally sleep over in the Fun Home, eventually causing them to have what she calls on page 35 a '*cavalier attitude*' towards death. She believes that constant exposure to dead bodies has caused her to become desensitized to the realities of death. Therefore, when a death of someone close to her occurs, she is unable to process her emotions, letting them out in unpredictable ways. This reaction is not unique to Alison: for example, the first time she sees her brother after learning of her father's death, the two greet each other with '*ghastly, uncontrollable grins*' on page 46, representing how they are unable to feel the typical sadness associated with losing a loved one.

Interestingly, Alison wonders whether constant exposure to dead bodies has had the opposite effect on her father. She cites his reading of Camus as evidence that he was, instead of becoming desensitised, in fact developing an affinity with death. Just as he obsessively decorates and redecorates their Gothic house, so too does he meticulously make up cadavers in preparation for burial. She wonders whether his familiarity with and proximity to death could have prompted excessive curiosity about his own.

Furthermore, while Alison rejects Camus' ideas about death, Chapter 2 nevertheless presents us with a philosophical attitude to the notion of dying: that death is an absurd and incomprehensible experience. According to a famous Camus quotation (from *The Myth of Sisyphus* that is referenced in this chapter) we all live as if we don't know we're going to die. This means that when death strikes close to home, no matter what rites and rituals people engage in, the experience is hard to process.

Activity

What evidence can you find in chapter 2 (and beyond, if you have read on) that people think about death and react to a person's dying in different ways? Collect your thoughts and write 200 words or so about the subject of *coping with knowledge of death* in your notebook. For an extra challenge: link this theme to another literary (or non-literary) work you have studied.

Spot the Allusions

How many of the following allusions to other texts did you spot in Chapter 2? What does each allusion bring to your understanding of the characters, events, and themes of *Fun Home*? Have you spotted any that I have missed?

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| • A Happy Death | The title of this chapter is from Albert Camus' novel of the same name. |
| • Albert Camus | A French writer and philosopher associated with <i>absurdism</i> . |
| • The Addams Family | A macabre television sitcom poking fun at normal suburban families. |
| • Hansel and Gretel | A Grimm fairy tale in which the eponymous twins were abandoned in the woods by their parents and almost cooked in an oven by an evil witch. |
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