Representing the Unrepresentable

Representations of the unreal reality of trauma

in graphic narratives

Siril Sæther Færestrand

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Summary

This thesis examines the different ways in which the comics medium resonates with theoretical work on trauma. Trauma theory is applied to my subjects to examine how trauma is represented on the comics’ page. The chosen subjects for my thesis are the following graphic memoirs: Phoebe Gloeckner’s *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* (1998) and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2002), as well as Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) and *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012). The thesis observes how the comics medium is employed in each of the chosen subject to effectively represent the unspeakable reality of lived traumatic experiences. The thesis demonstrates the intimate connection between the structure of graphic narrative and the inherently fragmented nature of traumatic memory. Concepts such as closure, testimony and autobiography are explored with regards to my chosen subjects. Through close-reading and close-looking I will explore the tensions of the graphic narrative and argue that it is precisely in the “in-betweenness” of comics that the unreal reality of trauma becomes speakable and representable.
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I want to dedicate this thesis in memory of my dear friend, Benedicte. You will always continue to inspire me to be a better human being.

Siril Sæther Færestrand
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A word on panel size

I’ve come to understand, in a similar manner to Hillary Chute, that the use of colours and “the size of an image is constitutive of its meaning, of how it functions” and therefore, I have decided to include panels in their original colours and also, approximately, in their original size (Graphic Women ix).
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Introduction

“The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*” (Herman 1). Judith Herman’s words from *Trauma and Recovery* have echoed in my mind since I first came across them. The word *unspeakable* is often used with regards to the shocking horror of trauma. In Cathy Caruth’s renowned publication on traumatic experience, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, she explains how “trauma, a wound on the mind, is not like a wound on the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (4). While traumatic experiences come in all kinds of shapes, from sudden catastrophes to the repeated everyday trauma of domestic abuse, there is a shared idea of trauma as something which is fundamentally unspeakable, unrepresentable, and separated from our conscious mind. The notion that traumatic experience resists language and representation has become a familiar belief and is likely based upon the common difficulties trauma victims experience while trying to authentically narrate their story. Issues of memory, sequence, and narrative structure frequently arise when narrating traumatic experience, thus making it difficult to effectively represent the traumatic event. Herman observes that “people who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility” (1). As a consequence of the common difficulties in creating a coherent narrative, trauma victims often feel isolated and separated from the rest of the world. The issues of narrating trauma and the fear of simplifying or diminishing the horrors of traumatic experiences make it a particularly difficult subject to authentically represent in any art form. Nevertheless, there has been a wave of
autobiographical long-format comics that purports to do precisely this work of narrating and representing unspeakable experiences of trauma.

The explosion of graphic narratives of trauma has only just begun to catch the attention of academia. Likewise, academic publishing on the comprehensive area of comics is a rapidly developing field, and this thesis aims to make a contribution to our current understanding of the ways in which comics and traumatic experience interweaves. The strong connection between graphic autobiography and traumatic experience is indicated by the elevated number of graphic memoirs about lived traumatic experience that have been published the latter years: Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1991), Debbie Dreschler’s *Daddy’s Girl* (1995), Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* (2001), Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2003), and David Small’s *Stitches* (2009) are a few of the artists who show and tell what couldn’t have been communicated in any other form but comics. In their introduction to *Modern Fiction Studies*’ first special issue devoted entirely to the form of graphic narrative, Marianne DeKoven and Hillary Chute note how “graphic narrative offers an intricately layered narrative language – the language of comics – that comprises the verbal, the visual, and the way these two representational modes interact on a page” ("Introduction" 767). It is precisely this language – the language of comics – and how it performs in relation to representing traumatic experience that will be the basis for this thesis. I’ve become fascinated with the comics medium and specifically with how it distinguishes itself from traditionally verbal literature. There are two aspects of the medium that have become particularly interesting to me: Firstly, comics challenge our relationship with reality, a relationship we often take for granted. The (im)possibility of accurately representing reality has gradually received more and more attention within the world of verbal autobiography, but the issue seems even more crucial within graphic autobiography. Comics provides us with a whole new cast “to what we consider fiction and non-fiction, forcing us to confront the assumption that drawing as a system is inherently more fictional than written prose” (Chute and DeKoven “Comic books and graphic novels” 190). Secondly, I am intrigued
by the way comics as a medium offers a unique grammar of gutters, frames, spatial and temporal chronologies that may or may not follow a logical organisation, and a distinctive playfully creative attitude towards the medium as a whole. In *Disaster Drawn*, a work which examines the role of the comics medium within a history of conflicts and wars and their traumatic accounts, Chute writes about her fascination with how comics, “through its spatial syntax, […] offers opportunities to place pressure on traditional notions of chronology, linearity, and causality (4). Due to the visual nature of comics we as readers are forced to read differently, to literally read between the lines of the page. This might be the reason why the comics format is said to be a particularly “apt form for serious non-fiction,” as Marianne DeKoven and Hillary Chute suggest in their critical work “Comic Books and Graphic Novels” (193). Furthermore, they underline the so-called “iconic nature” of the traumatic image: “the fact that the intensity of trauma produces fragmented, imagistic memories” and thus argues that “trauma itself breaks the boundaries of form, and perhaps can be […] communicated viscerally and emotionally through the visual” (193). In its basic structure, the comics form is split between its panels and gutters, balancing on the edge of presence and absence, of the representable and the unrepresentable. This thesis will further explore the unique relationship between autobiography in the comics’ format and issues related to the representation of trauma. How are the distinctive features of the comics form used to authentically represent unclaimed experiences of trauma?

I have chosen four graphic memoirs which in their own unique manner demonstrate this intimate connection between trauma and graphic autobiography: Phoebe Gloeckner’s *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* (1998) and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2002), as well as Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) and *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012). These particular graphic memoirs were chosen due to their unique responses to the challenges of representing trauma. The four graphic narratives are autobiographical narratives that depict different sorts of childhood trauma. The selection demonstrates the
authors’ distinctive approaches to representing the unrepresentable and the wide range of traumatic experience. Gloeckner depicts a childhood involving a series of worrying father figures, a young mother unable or unwilling to provide a healthy environment for her two daughters, and the effects upon herself and her sister as they grow up in this chaotic family. Her work depicts the cruelty of sexual abuse and a subsequent destructive circle of drugs and alcohol directly on the page. Bechdel’s work presents itself as a dual project of firstly depicting a childhood of growing up with an emotionally and physically abusive father and a cold detached mother, and the aftermath of such an upbringing in her adult life, and secondly, of examining her father’s possible suicide, and her potential role in it. Each of the authors deals with childhood trauma, painful relationships with parents and parental figures, and the ambiguous limits between reality and non-fiction within graphic autobiography. Is autobiography inherently real? Is fiction never true? While the selected subjects certainly share many interests, there are also notable differences between them: One author describes a chaotic childhood with unreliable parental figures and the effects of a premature sexualisation of a young girls’ body; the other describes the result of growing up in a traditional nuclear family, where emotions remain unspoken, and physical abuse and emotional detachment is the norm. While their upbringings are utterly dissimilar, the artists share the urge to express themselves through drawing and writing. Their graphic memoirs are established upon the diary entries of the authors’ adolescent selves. Each of them makes radically different choices about degrees of exposure and explicitness, establishing two distinct approaches to the (un)representability of traumatic experience and memory.

Comics is a medium of dualities, of binaries, of a constant tension between seemingly opposed dichotomies such as words and images, verbal and visual narratives, presence and absence, the spoken and the silenced, reading and looking. This thesis will explore these tensions and put them in the context of trauma and memory, with Cathy Caruth’s notion of “the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” in mind (Unclaimed Experience 3). With a
focus on the zones of contact between these tensions, I argue that it paradoxically is precisely in the “in-betweenness” of comics that unspeakable trauma becomes comprehensible, speakable and representable.

**Trauma theory and the comics form**

In order to understand the complex relationship between comics and trauma, we must first have a general understanding the language of comics and the conventions of trauma theory. Cathy Caruth describes trauma in its most general definition as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Unclaimed Experience 11). She explains how “trauma isn’t locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Unclaimed Experience 4). In other words, what defines trauma is not the particularities of the event which produces it, but the long-term response in the person who experiences it. Trauma is produced and relived through our individual recollections of it. Thus, the understanding of memory becomes a key issue within the larger subject of trauma and will accordingly also be examined with regards to each of the graphic memoirs. Caruth’s ground-breaking examination of trauma determined the collapse of understanding as the essential foundation of trauma: “The pathology consists […] solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (Trauma: Explorations in Memory 4-5). At the moment of trauma, it registers as a non-experience, in turn causing our conventional tools of understanding, and thus narration, to weaken. This is reflected by trauma survivors’ common difficulties in relating the cause of their trauma. In Trauma and Recovery, Herman observes how “traumatic memories lack verbal narrative
and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images” (38). Caruth also emphasizes the imagistic nature of trauma: “To be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Trauma 5). In their introduction to *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg question how trauma and visual representation are entwined in modernity (ix). They argue that “the formulation of trauma as discourse is predicated upon metaphors of visuality and image as unavoidable carrier of the unrepresentable” (Saltzman and Rosenberg xi-xii). Each of these scholars emphasise the significance of the visual nature of trauma, in turn, pointing us towards the comics form: a medium which, in its very structure, carries out precisely this work of disrupting time and sequence. Furthermore, the graphic narrative can employ images that emphasise the “frozen and wordless quality of traumatic memories” (Herman 37). In order to represent the effects of trauma, and in particular the impact of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), simply describing the event causing trauma is not sufficient. With the aim of reconceptualising the relationship between trauma and literature, Anne Whitehead challenges the common notion that traumatic experiences resist language and representation in *Trauma Fiction* (3). We must rethink our ideas about the unspeakability of trauma. Whitehead writes that “the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection” (3).

The graphic narrative provides a space where precisely temporality and chronology breaks down; in fact, its very structure presents the signs of trauma. The comics’ page is fragmented into panels that are divided by gutters that disrupts time, space and sequence. It is important to recognise that the graphic narrative is not about illustration, it is rather a complex process of words and images that together move a narrative forward. Although comics scholars such as Will Eisner and Scott McCloud both emphasise the significant amount of cognitive work which is required by the reader in order to successfully read
comics, this work is often underappreciated or even overlooked. David Carrier's statement from his introduction to *Aesthetics of Comics* demonstrates how easily one disregards the complex, intricate relationship between the visual and verbal elements of comics: “when they are successful, [comics] have verbal and visual elements seamlessly combined (Carrier 4). This superficial “seamlessness” of comics, has the potential of hiding the substantial amount of work which comics forces upon its readers. To navigate the language of comics; its gutters, panels, frames, temporality, words and images that sometimes work together and other times pull in complete opposite directions, takes a particular kind of reading. In a very real sense, comics are nothing but lines on paper, and it’s up to the reader to make sense of it all. Already in the process of seeing an image form from these lines, our mind is performing extraordinary complex cognitive work. Thus, we see fragments of unconnected moments, but our work doesn’t stop there. In order to create a coherent narrative from these fragments, our mind needs to fill in the gaps and create meaning, a process McCloud calls *closure*; “the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63). Closure is the fundamental principle that allows comics to be meaningful: “Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (McCloud 67). The gap between these unconnected moments is called the *gutter*, and this space is the very location where “the human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (McCloud 66). The graphic memoir is then, due to its very form, filled with gaps or what Pascal Lefèvre calls *non-visualised space* (157) that the reader must interpret, make meaningful, by her own imagination. These gaps mimic the way in which traumatic experience is represented in narrative form. Whitehead’s claim that “the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its form and symptoms, so temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection” (3) comes into its full meaning with reference to the comics form, as this thesis will demonstrate.
The Subjects

Phoebe Gloeckner

_A Child’s Life and Other Stories_ (1998) is Phoebe Gloeckner’s first published book and it comprises a collection of more or less autobiographical narratives that have been written over a duration of more than twenty years. Some of the narratives featured in _A Child’s Life_ have been previously published in a variety of underground anthologies such as _Wimmen’s Comixs, Weirdo, Twisted Sisters_ and _Young Lust_. The anthology comprises 24 separate comics that are divided roughly chronologically into four sections: “A Child’s Life,” “Other Childish Stories,” “Teen Stories” and “Grown-Up Stories.” A fifth section contains a collection of single-page drawings and illustrations that demonstrate Gloeckner’s wide range of style, colour and focus. The narratives from the first section depict fragments of the life of Minnie Goetze, Gloeckner’s alter ego; “a child of approximately eight years old, who lives with her mother, sister, and stepfather” (A Child’s Life 10). The stepfather, Pascal, is portrayed as an unpleasant man with an excessive temper who often turns violent, and later it seems that he has a sexual interest in Minnie. While Pascal’s impulse is never acted on, _A Child’s Life_ covers material such as Pascal telling Minnie that “pretty or not, there’s something very sexy about you” (53), asking whether her friends have begun developing breasts, and a teenage Minnie having sex with her mother’s boyfriend.

Gloeckner’s second solo-publication, _The Diary of a Teenage Girl_, dives deep into the world of fifteen-year-old Minnie and depicts a whole year of her life, from March 1976 till March 1977. The memoir, like _A Child’s Life_, has the subtitle “an account in words and pictures,” but its design is quite different. Rather than the shorter graphic narratives from her first publication, Gloeckner’s latest memoir is an assembly of longer texts and shorter sections with illustrations and comic strips. _Diary_ is written in mainly four representational modes: written diary entries that are a mix of her original diary and sections that Gloeckner wrote at the time of creating the book; archival comic strips that Gloeckner drew throughout the year of 1976-77; short and longer comic strip sections that
replaces verbal narrative, drawn by Gloeckner at the time of creating to book; and a total of twenty-seven full-page and fifty-six in-text illustrations. The result of the various multimodal representational modes is an exciting form that even challenges the form of the graphic narrative. As we follow Minnie on her journey towards becoming an adolescent, we see how her traumatic childhood experiences lead the way towards a lifestyle which involves too much drugs, too much sex, and too much alcohol.

Alison Bechdel

Alison Bechdel began her career as a cartoonist with her queer comic strip Dykes to Watch Out For which ran from 1983 till 2008. In 2006, she published her first long-format comics, Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic, which became an immediate success on a numerous best-seller lists. The graphic memoir was named best book of the year by Time magazine, and received great feedback from numerous other sources such as The New York Times, Salon, and New York Magazine. The graphic memoir chronicles her childhood of growing up in a seemingly ordinary family in a small town in Pennsylvania. Bechdel describes a family where each of the family members live their lives in emotional isolation from each other, with a physically abusive father and emotionally detached mother. In a graphic narrative that is founded upon a range of documents such as old letters, diary entries, family photos, book pages, and newspaper articles, Bechdel provides her readers with a thorough examination of the dynamics of her family. Within the first twenty pages of the book she uncovers the two main mysteries of her life:

the fact that her father, Bruce Bechdel, enjoyed sex with teenage boys and the ambiguous nature of his death. Alison announces to her parents that she is a lesbian only months before her father jumps into the road right in front of a Sunbeam truck and the possibility of a connexion between these two events troubles her. Bruce’s greatest passion in life was the restoration of the old mansion they lived in and reading modernist literature. The author has employed her father’s favourite authors such as James Joyce, Albert Camus, Marcel Proust, and Henry James as framing devices for her graphic narrative. She retrospectively frames and re-frames her life narrative with her father’s, investigating how their lives, while seemingly disconnected, interweave.

Bechdel’s investigation of her family dynamics continues in her next long-format graphic narrative, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012). Her second graphic memoir is a companion piece to *Fun Home* and approaches Bechdel’s narrative from a new angle: by employing theory from psychoanalysis and her own therapy sessions, the narrator sets out to explore her complicated relationship with her mother, Helen Bechdel. The writings of theorists and authors such as Sigmund Freud, Donald Winnicott, Adrienne Rich and Virginia Woolf become the narrator’s tools in interpreting her own life. While *Fun Home* is largely focused upon Alison’s childhood up until her first year as a student, *Are You My Mother?* is dedicated to investigate Alison’s adult life. The graphic memoir examines how adulthood has altered the dynamics of Alison’s relationship with her mother and depicts Alison on her way to becoming an artist.

Through close-reading and close-looking each of the chapters will consider the different manners in which the form of the graphic narrative is employed to challenge the notion of the (un)representability of trauma. The first chapter will examine how Gloeckner rejects the familiar silencing of sexual abuse, observe how she employs the grammar of the comics medium to accurately depict the complex process of remembering traumatic experience, demonstrate her techniques for creating a listener to her testimonial narrative,
and explore the complex relationship between verbal and visual self-representations of autobiographical experiences of trauma. The second chapter will reflect upon the different manners in which Bechdel employs the grammar of the comics medium to represent traumatic memory, to create a listener to her testimony, to represent a crisis of representation and observe how intertextuality is employed as an interpretative tool in *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother*? Thus, I will explore the specific tensions of comics, and see them in light of trauma theory. With a focus on the zones of contact between the verbal and the visual, between what is told and what is shown, I will demonstrate how it paradoxically is precisely in the spaces between that (un)representable experiences of trauma becomes narratable and representable.
On Account of Terminology

The vocabulary surrounding the comics form is a complex and unsettled territory, symptomatic of the newness of this growing academic field. I will employ the terms graphic memoir and graphic narrative interchangeably throughout this thesis with regards to my selected subjects. While the term graphic memoir is suitable to highlight their autobiographical nature, the term graphic narrative applies to their narrative character. I will also employ the term comics, as I have already done in the introduction, in reference to the medium as a whole. The term graphic novel is a label that has recently gained some popularity, however it will not be applied here. I find that the term graphic novel suggests a strong link with the traditional novel, a connection which is not necessarily valid. Novel implies fiction and fantasy; descriptions which don’t apply to any of my subjects. As Chute and DeKoven note, graphic narrative claims a broader designation than graphic novel and is consequently my preferred label (“Comic books and graphic novels” 190). Notably, comics is a medium and not a genre. Like the novel, the medium of comics carries subgenres of its own: autobiographical, superhero, and underground comics are only a few of the many genres of comics. I will employ terminology with reference to the grammar of the comics form such as gutter and closure from Scott McCloud’s thorough and boundary-breaking publication on the specific language of comics, Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.
Chapter One: “For All the Girls When They Have Grown”
Phoebe Gloeckner’s A Child’s Life and Other Stories (1998)
& The Diary of a Teenage Girl (2002)

In the foreword to Phoebe Gloeckner’s The Diary of a Teenage Girl (2002), Hillary Chute writes: “While it has become commonplace to praise a work for being “raw,” I can state truly that Diary is probably the “rawest” book I have ever read; I actually had a hard time reading some passages because of how unfiltered they feel … But the kind of discomfort one might feel reading Diary – say, about how much a fifteen-year-old loves getting fucked – is an important kind of discomfort” (The Diary of a Teenage Girl xiii). The notion of an “important kind of discomfort” is well-suited to describe the feeling one is left with after having read substantial parts of Gloeckner’s work, including her autobiographical anthology A Child’s Life and Other Stories (1998). The transgressive nature of her art pushes against the boundaries of society, often leaving her readers somewhat confused and distressed by the pages they have just read. Her art is confrontational, challenging, and tremendously fascinating. As this chapter will demonstrate, Gloeckner’s work is continually preoccupied with questions of truth and representation, and thus offers a great opportunity to further explore the relationship between trauma and autobiographical comics. Until now, there is only a limited number of critics who have written about Gloeckner’s work in the context of trauma theory.5 Instead, previous scholars have largely focused on Gloeckner’s explicit depictions of female sexuality as a way to complicate and

5 In Graphic Women, Hillary Chute employs trauma theory in her examination of Gloeckner’s work, but her overarching objective in her study is to provide a critical perspective on the ways in which women’s comics’ new cultural position today permits them to expand academic debates of sexuality, gender and self-representation. In his article “Working it Through: Trauma and Autobiography in Phoebe Gloeckner’s A Child’s Life and The Diary of a Teenage Girl,” Fredrik Køhlert also begins to examine the significance of trauma theory in Gloeckner’s work. This thesis purports to continue the work of applying trauma theory to expand our understanding of the comics medium.
challenge the continual production of visual pleasure for the male reader, with Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze in mind.

This chapter will demonstrate how Gloeckner engages with the comics medium to challenge the notion of trauma as unspeakable, unrepresentable and incomprehensible. I will examine Gloeckner’s work with regards to her choices of explicitness, her approach to the (un)represenability of traumatic memory, her creation of a listener to her testimony, and her approach to the complex relationship between herself and her avatar, Minnie Goetze.
Part One: “Violation in the frame”

“There’s a resistance to something that’s drawn that wouldn’t exist if it were written” claims Richard Grossinger, publisher in North Atlantic Books (Orenstein “A Graphic Life”). He links Gloeckner’s work to Dorothy Allison’s celebrated autobiographical narrative of sexual abuse and concludes that “If you’re talking about child abuse, “Bastard Out of Carolina” is in many ways harsher than Phoebe’s work” (Orenstein “A Graphic Life”). His words illustrate the power we appoint to images. Gloeckner’s drawings are confrontational, complicated, and unafraid. Fearlessly, her drawings depict our darkest experiences, taboos, and ask questions that make us feel awkward and uncomfortable. In Graphic Women, Hillary Chute notes that “Gloeckner’s images […], consistently informed by trauma, are darker; their combination of meticulous painstaking realism and their non-realism carries an intense foreboding” (61). A Child’s Life and Other Stories has provoked many reactions since its first publication in 1998. The book has been banned in several countries due to its explicit sexual content. While her work depicts a clearly abusive and incestuous relationship between a fifteen-year-old girl and her mother’s boyfriend, it has been called “pornographic” and a “how-to-book for paedophiles” (Orenstein “A Graphic Life;” “Case Study: The Diary of a Teenage Girl.”). A film version of The Diary of a Teenage Girl was released in 2015. However, the movie received an R rating in the US and an 18+ rating in the UK due to its many depictions of sex (Brown). Director Marielle Heller expressed her disappointment over the ruling, which ultimately prevented teenage girls, girls

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6 Here I employ the word “incestuous” to highlight the significance of the paternal role Monroe plays in Minnie’s life. Gloeckner describes the relationship in an interview: […] it’s more incestuous […]. It complicates the relationship between the mother and child. It ruptures it” (Collins “Phoebe Gloeckner on Reopening The Diary of a Teenage Girl”). While Monroe isn’t her biological father, he does represent a similar social role in the family dynamics, and importantly the relationship between Minnie and her mother becomes permanently damaged because of the incestuous nature of the relationship between Minnie and Monroe.
the same age as Minnie, to watch it (Brown). In an interview with Peggy Orenstein, Gloeckner was asked about her own reaction to the negative responses towards her art. Passionately, she responds that “there are children who experience this, who have the penis in front of their faces. They see it, so why can’t I draw it to make the impact clear?” (Orenstein “A Graphic Life”).

Gloeckner’s firm response, together with Richard Grossinger’s claim, alludes to the power we appoint to the visual arts. Tolmie correctly reminds us that “there is usually more buffering in the realm of words than in the world of images (xiv). She emphasises how brutal realities can more easily hide behind words than images. “Linda Williams, notes “The problem is that there is no getting around the ability of such images … to leap off the page to move viewers (Hard Core, qtd. in Chute 71). Gloeckner herself has also remarked how images affect an audience: “anytime you talk about sex … the galvanic skin response is triggered [and] when you combine that with something that doesn’t seem quite right, like [images of] a teenager having sex with her mother’s boyfriend, it kind of goes haywire. [Readers] feel uncomfortable. They’re a little bit turned on, but they’re supposed to be turned off, or they think they should be” (Andersen, qtd. in Chute 71). Some readers will experience a division between their physical and social response to what they are looking at. They might feel aroused and disgusted at the same time, resulting in a confused reaction and possibly perplex feelings about your own position as a voyageur. Chute links “the disgust and pleasure” that the visual carries to a “bodily rhythm of reading, further underscored, and prompted, by the rhythm of the visual-verbal page, a rupturing alternation between affects” (Graphic Women 71). In other words, the visual image of abuse is both aesthetically and emotionally challenging. Committing to a neutral position is difficult if not impossible when dealing with such controversial images.

“Minnie’s 3rd Love, Or: Nightmare on Polk Street” is one of the longer graphic narratives of A Child’s Life and Other Stories, and this twelve-page narrative is also the location for several of the most debated panels of the book.
The twelve-page story is the first story in the teen section, and brings us right into the world of fifteen-year-old Minnie Goetze. The year is 1976 and Minnie is becoming deeply fascinated with San Francisco’s Polk Street; with its LGBT community, drugs, alcohol, and prostitutes. The graphic narrative contains many explicit depictions of sexual exploitation, drug abuse and teenage girls heading down destructive paths. This graphic narrative was featured in the anthology *Twisted Sisters 2*, and was one of the main reasons why it was confiscated by British customs officials in 1995 (*Graphic Women 75*).
The officials found one panel particularly distressing, the panel known as “the laundry room panel” (see figure 1.1). This panel depicts Minnie about to give a blow job to her mother’s “all too present” boyfriend in the laundry room (see figure 1.1). She is kneeling before him, crying, and begging him to love her. Monroe is aiming his penis towards her face with one hand, while the other is holding her head down. Her tears are mirrored by a drop of fluid dripping from his erect penis. He responds “Of course I love you! What man wouldn’t give anything to be fucking a 15-year old? Tell me again how you love to suck my dick. You love to suck it – don’t you?” (see figure 1.1). Minnie is holding a bottle of “the kind of good cheap California wine that makes girls cry and give blowjobs to jerks” and next to her lies a Hello Kitty diary, making sure that the readers cannot ignore her young age (see figure 1.1). Monroe’s body breaks down the panel; his head, backside and feet violently break the frame and move into the gutter. In Understanding Comics, McCloud explains how “the panel acts as a general indicator that time or space is being divided (99). “The laundry room panel” shows how this memory cannot be contained within a specific time or space; Monroe cannot be contained within the familiar lines of a closed panel. By drawing Monroe’s body breaking the frame, Gloeckner is materialising the idea of a collapsing of time and space, a concept which will be further examined in the following section. The panel takes up more than three quarters of a page, and, with an overwhelming sense of inescapability, it demands the reader’s complete attention.

The left-hand page next to the “laundry room panel” narrates the story of Tabatha; a girl Minnie meets on Polk Street and immediately falls in love with. Tabatha’s mother was a heroin addict and to support her habit “she put Tabatha in porno films when she was a small child. Tabatha did not emerge intact” (A

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7 The identity of this character remains unknown in A Child’s Life and Other Stories; however, some scholars have made the mistake of assuming that the man in “the laundry room panel” is Pascal, Minnie’s step-father. The Monroe character plays an essential part in The Diary of a Teenage Girl as Minnie’s “lover” and her mother’s boyfriend.
Child’s Life 72). A large panel depicts Tabatha giving a blowjob to a transvestite, the narrator explaining that “sex was a commodity on Polk St., and even though Tabatha liked girls, she’d often give blowjobs (to gay guys) in exchange for drugs” (see figure 1.2). The two panels depict similar scenes: a young girl giving a blowjob to an older man. In both panels, the girls are dressed, while the men are partially naked. Both men have their hand firmly placed on the girls’ head, controlling her, and while both girls cling to an emotionally and physically sedative object; a bottle of cheap wine and a cigarette. Each of them is using sex in exchange for something she desires. However, one is performing fellatio in
exchange for money, the other in exchange for love. Both of them seem to be heading down the same destructive path: the next page shows Minnie gradually adapting to Tabatha’s drug habits. The result of Tabatha’s craving for drugs in combination with Minnie’s longing for love is perhaps the most disturbing panel of the graphic memoir: the very moment right before an unconscious Minnie is about to be raped (see figure 1.3). A faceless man named Gary is standing above her naked body, holding her bloody tampon in his hand and his penis ready to
penetrate the passed out fifteen-year-old girl. This moment is given a lot of physical space in *A Child’s Life*, taking up more than half a page, with Minnie, naked and unconscious, as the focal point of the panel (see figure 1.3). In the background, we see Tabitha and Lance chitchatting and watching TV, underscoring the massively absurd ordinariness of the scene. In this space, where “sex [is] a commodity,” does rape ever become ordinary? The same scene is depicted quite differently in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*. While *A Child’s* depicts intensely explicit drawings of sexual abuse, Gloeckner’s depictions of similar material are treated in a rather different manner in *Diary*.

In strong opposition to Gloeckner’s explicit depictions of abuse directly in the frame in *A Child’s Life and Other Stories*, this memoir takes a different direction. The most disturbing depictions of sexual trauma are not found in the numerous comics sections or illustrations, instead they are described verbally through the textual diary entries. The rape scene above (see figure 1.3) is written as a narrative absence in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*. Minnie has no memory of this situation, but is confused and worried that *something* has happened to her:

I woke up a while later and some of my clothes were off and I was tucked under the covers… I didn’t have any idea how long I was asleep but I still felt tingly from the Quaaludes…

[Tabatha said]: “Don’t you know what they did? They gave me [the Quaaludes] ‘cause I let them fuck you.”

I wasn’t upset because I didn’t believe her. I know if they had fucked me, I would have woken up. She said, “No way, you passed out.” I still didn’t believe her because I had my period and I had a Tampax in and they couldn’t have fucked me. She said they took it out and threw it in the trash. She said I could check for myself... I still didn’t believe her but I was confused... I checked but I didn’t have the Tampax inside and I kept trying to remember if I took it out myself or not, because I just didn’t believe Tabatha. But I couldn’t remember. (*The Diary of a Teenage Girl* 261 – 264)
The decision to depict this moment as a narrative absence has its natural explanation: Minnie was unconscious and doesn’t actually remember the episode, in turn emphasising the extraordinariness of the explicit depiction of the rape in “Minnie’s 3rd Love” (see figure 1.3). Clearly, the panel isn’t based upon a concrete memory, indicating that the author had other reasons for depicting it. In “Girlhood in the Gutter: Feminist Graphic Knowledge and the Visualization of Sexual Precarity,” Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall argue that Gloeckner’s refusal to hide rape in the gutter in *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* exposes its visual encoding as acceptable as long as unseen (96). They examine how Gloeckner’s choice to depict sexual violence rather than to imply it challenges visual culture’s investment “in hiding the sexual precarity of girls in plain sight through techniques of omission and oblique references that groom audiences to overlook the social fact of sexual violence against girls” (Gilmore and Marshall 95). By explicitly depicting blowjobs, sexual intercourse, and rape in *A Child’s Life*, Gloeckner moves the violation out of the gutter and onto the page. Gilmore and Marshall note that by making physical violation explicit on the page, Gloeckner enables the reader to imagine the “emotional truth” of sexual violence (107). There is no escaping from the cruelty of the images.

The intense explicitness of the discussed panels stands in great contrast with how the artist has chosen to draw the graphic narrative’s closing panels. “Minnie’s 3rd Love: Or, Nightmare on Polk Street” ends with a third rape. After Gary rapes her, Minnie increasingly takes stronger drugs, drinks more alcohol and finally, with nowhere to go, she decides to sleep at a stranger’s house. Before passing out in his bed, she says to the stranger, who has already placed his hand firmly on her waist, “but no sex I’ve gotta sl-sl-leep” (*A Child’s Life* 80). The last panel of the page is pitch black with the words “and so on…” written across the panel (*A Child’s Life* 80). This scene is depicted radically different from the previous scene. The panel doesn’t depict any explicit abuse, but most readers will conclude that Minnie is raped again. The empty black panel, a strong visual statement of her unconsciousness, and the unforgiving knowledge behind the
words “and so on ...,” in combination with the stranger’s hand on Minnie’s waist from the previous panel, leave us with little choice but to read it as another rape.

Gloeckner’s choice to depict abuse so radically different both within and between her two works, results in different but equally powerful effects. By depicting the last rape implicitly rather than explicitly, Gloeckner relies on the power of closure in order to depict the abuse. McCloud emphasises the role of the reader as a collaborator in the process of closure; the process where the reader creates a continuous narrative between the isolated panels of a graphic narrative (66). He observes how “every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice, an equal partner in crime known as the reader” (McCloud 68). Accordingly, the reader cannot understand the last panel of “Minnie’s 3rd Love” separately from the previous one and so becomes “a partner in crime” in Gloeckner’s representation of Minnie’s rape. Gloeckner’s choice to depict abuse implicitly in this case creates a different effect from the choice to depict the previously discussed rape (see figure 1.3) as a narrative absence in Diary. The pitch-black panel seems to be the result of the two previously extremely explicit depictions of abuse (see figure 1.1 and 1.3). The shock of the other scenes still ring loud in our ears and at this point a disturbing pattern has been created. We have seen it, Minnie has experienced it, and the story repeats itself. The panel effectively embodies a strong feeling of inescapability and numbness shared between Minnie and the readers.

Contrastingly, the juxtaposition of the two depictions of the rape scene from figure 1.3 in her two graphic memoirs, show the great diversity in Gloeckner’s work. Not only is the same scene described verbally rather than visually in Diary, but the words that describe it don’t even belong to the protagonist: it is Tabatha’s words who eventually describe Minnie’s trauma rather than her own voice. In recounting the conversation with Tabatha rather than “the actual event,” Gloeckner is making her readers feel the same uncertainty that Minnie is feeling. The readers share Minnie’s desperate hope that there is another explanation of the missing Tampax. McCloud’s notion of the
reader as an accomplice is clearly also significant in this case. We’re forced to visualise the scene ourselves, in correspondence to how Minnie must also imagine it. Glöckner recognises the power of words and how this power is different from the power of images. The two moments take up completely different focuses: the panel from A Child’s Life concentrates upon the horrors of rape itself, while the section from Diary focuses upon the impact the rape had on Minnie and on her ambiguous feelings of the reliability of Tabatha’s words. Both depictions are equally effective in representing the unreality of trauma. Glöckner masterfully demonstrates the unique effects of verbal and visual depiction of traumatic experience. Glöckner seems to have found a space within the verbal/visual tensions of comics to effectively represent her trauma. The next section will examine how Glöckner employs the structure of comics to represent the fragmented nature of traumatic recollection.
Part Two: “Remembering trauma”

In the first chapter of Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History, Shoshana Felman observes: “As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding and remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference” (Felman 5). Naturally, one must ask: how are we to comprehend these events that are outside of our usual frames of reference, these acts that cannot be assimilated into consciousness, these occurrences that have not been settled into understanding? Next, Felman affirms that testimony in fact cannot offer a completed statement, a totalizable account of the traumatic events (5). An account of any kind of traumatic experience will remain fragmented and incomplete due to the way we remember trauma. In Unchained Memories: True Stories of Traumatic Memories Lost and Found, Lenore Terr explains how traumatic memory tends to be more fragmentary and condensed than regular memory (203); a good description of the basic structure of comics. Cathy Caruth remarks that the inability to fully witness the event as it occurs seems to be something which inhabits all traumatic experience: “Central to the very immediacy of this experience, that is, is a gap that carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the expense of simple knowledge and memory” (Trauma 7). In Trauma: A Genealogy, Ruth Leys describes how the notion of an experience outside of awareness is essential in the American Psychiatric Association’s official description of post-traumatic stress disorder: “[the mind] is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed. As a result, the victim is unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories” (my emphasis, Leys 2). Thus, the notion of a memory that has not settled into understanding, a wound which the mind is unable to register, seems to be a shared interest between different trauma
theorists. This section will examine how Gloeckner manages to depict these bits and pieces of a memory “that have been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding” (Felman 5) in her work. I will look closer at the three-page narrative “Fun Things To Do With Little Girls” from *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* as well as appropriate sections from *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*.

In “Fun Things To Do With Little Girls”, Gloeckner uses visual and verbal elements to represent the cognitive processes that occur during the process of remembrance. It is the last of Gloeckner’s so-called “childhood stories,” placed right before the “teen section,” suggesting some sort of a connection between them. In the first panel, she explicitly identifies herself, “Phoebe "Never gets over anything" Gloeckner,” as the narrator of the story (*A Child’s Life* 66). Although “Fun Things To Do With Little Girls” is a rather short graphic narrative, it narrates several stories and shows multiple layers of narration and cognitive work in a small amount of space. The first and last panel of the graphic narrative act as a framing device for the story that is told in-between. The narrator explicitly refers to the framing story as a “bonus story” which ends with the fifth and penultimate panel on page three (*A Child’s Life* 66). The characters that are portrayed in “Fun Things To Do With Little Girls” remain unnamed, but we recognise Minnie, her sister, their mother, and their stepfather, Pascal from the previous narratives. The first panel shows Phoebe “Never gets over anything” Gloeckner in a supermarket, staring intensely ahead, not directly towards the readers, but into distant memories of a wounded childhood. The next panel makes a gigantic leap in time and space, showing an eight-year old Minnie and her younger sister being persuaded by their stepfather to share a glass of pinot noir with him. The girls are drawn very small, while Pascal’s head is drawn abnormally large. As Erving Goffman’s notes in *Gender Advertisements*, “relative size” solidifies gendered power relationships in images (28): “Indeed, so thoroughly is it assumed that differences in size will correlate with differences in social weight that relative size can be routinely used as a means of ensuring that the picture’s story will be understandable at a glance” (28). While Goffman’s
words are written with the world of advertisements in mind, his observations clearly ring true in the world of comics as well. By drawing the girls in the size of dolls or toddlers, next to a man with a head double the normal size, Gloeckner materialises the power relationship between them directly on the page. Not only does she show the power he held over them, but also, she manages to ridicule it. As Pascal pours the wine into the girls’ glasses, he almost looks like he’s having a tea party with his dolls. There is a bizarre combination of adult and juvenile symbols in the graphic narrative. The girls look even younger than six and eight-years-old; Gretel is wearing an Indian headpiece and Minnie has lost one of her front teeth. On the next page, Gloeckner continues with her creative use of relative size, Gretel’s face looks smaller than the glass of wine that is placed before her. Minnie, “anxious to please and wanting to appear sophisticated” drinks the wine, while her sister, “who was only six” refuses to drink (A Child’s Life 66 – 67). While the two succeeding pages follow a classic six-panel layout, there is a complex narrative structure with several on-going narratives, breaking with the immediate traditional mood of the pages. On the left-hand side, the panels depict how Gretel refuses to drink the wine, consequently infuriating Pascal who responds by wrestling her to the ground, and holding her down, forcing the wine into her mouth. On the right-hand side, other memories, or,
specifically, fragments of other memories are depicted: through these panels, we learn that Minnie’s drunken father killed his girlfriend in a car crash; that Minnie had sex for the first time with her mother’s boyfriend; that Minnie used to violently beat up her sister; and that her mother was unwilling or unable to be a mother (A Child’s Life 67).

By placing the similar images on the right-hand side of the page, Gloeckner creates a fragmented, yet sustained disruption of the narrative, reminiscent of the split consciousness of trauma; “wherein traumatic memories manifest themselves as intrusions into normal experience” (Køhlert 135). Noticeably, these fragmented memories are not depicted chronologically; I will rather suggest that their organisation on the page reflects upon the narrator’s trail of thoughts. Three of the panels are visually disturbingly similar (see figure 1.4, 1.5 and 1.6): two bodies intimately positioned towards each other, one dominantly holding the other down. In The System of Comics, Thierry Groensteen coins the term general arthrology to describe how the visual resonances across the layout of a comics page can create correspondences of meaning, a term which seems to be suitable to explain not only how these panels are connected by the narrator, but also how we, as readers, are able to link them (22). While general arthrology displays some similarities with McCloud’s notion of closure, Groensteen’s theory emphasises more explicitly the connections panels make.
beyond their juxtaposed neighbours, thus filling a small gap in McCloud’s theory. Within Groensteen’s theory the braiding of different panels explains this phenomenon of how additional layers of meaning appear outside of the linear sequence within a graphic narrative (Groensteen 22). By drawing these memories visually alike, Gloeckner accentuates the connection she herself makes between them. Køhlert suggests that Gloeckner, in these panels, “links her own aggressive behaviour with both the violence of her stepfather and the sexual exploitation by her mother’s boyfriend, and also suggests the potential for a causal relationship between the various manifestations of power” (134).

However, the psychological connection between these panels is not only made explicit through visual echoing, but also through a verbal echo. On the first page of “Fun Things To Do With Little Girls,” Phoebe explains the mind-set of her eight-year-old avatar, Minnie: “Anxious to please and wanting to appear to be sophisticated, I drank some wine” (A Child’s Life 66). On the next page, the same phrasing is echoed: “Years later, the first time I had sex was with my mother’s boyfriend. I was eager to be sophisticated and wanted nothing more than to please” (my emphasis, A Child’s Life 67). By repeating this phrase, Gloeckner verbally links the two memories together, but also expresses a connection between being encouraged to drink wine for the first time by a father figure at
the age of eight and having sex for the first time with her mother’s boyfriend, another father figure, at the age of fifteen.

The presence of alcohol is a repeated element, both verbally and visually in “Fun Things to Do with Little Girls.” The background of the first panel shows a scene from the grocery store: a mother is stealing a bottle of Scotch, while her daughter asks for a box of cereals. The sight of the Scotch whiskey seems to be what triggers Gloeckner’s flashbacks of her childhood. The next panel narrates how the stepfather, who was born to Scotch peasantry, demanded the young girls to drink wine (A Child’s Life 66). Throughout the rest of the panels, alcohol and its effects are continually present; visually, verbally, or both. Even the panel that depicts Minnie beating up her sister becomes marked by alcohol, as Pascal’s glass of wine cannot be contained within his own frame (see figure 1.5), indicating that there is a link between the alcohol abuse and the fighting between the sisters. The multiplicity of memories suggests a generally abusive environment throughout the girls’ upbringing, a destructive atmosphere that in turn might have led the girls to reproduce the abusive patterns they had learnt from their stepfather.

Interestingly, two of the panels (see figure 1.4 and 1.5) are inserted into the narrative before the event that they are remembered by takes place, thus breaking the linear temporal progression into a fragmented space-time, resonant with the notion of trauma as a visualisation of repetitive frozen images brought to awareness through flashbacks (Køhlert 134 – 135). The fragmented and non-linear narrative structure of “Fun Things To Do With Little Girls,” repeats Anne Whitehead’s notion that “trauma carries the force of a literality which renders it resistant to narrative structures and linear temporalities” (5). Thus, Gloeckner’s work breaks with conventional linear sequence and, in its very form, embodies the notion that “if trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formulation, then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence” (Whitehead 6). In its very structure, comics are by nature fragmented, consisting of a multiplicity of panels that are separated and connected by the space of the gutter. As a form where time is perceived spatially, comics presents us with the
capacity of continually fragmenting and materialising time, space, and causality directly on the page. Leonore Terr emphasises how temporal perspective, including sequence and causality, is often lost in trauma, while “we remember terrible events with a marked spatial sense” (199). Thus “we can literally map out on paper or mentally follow our childhood selves” (Terr 232). This process of spatially mapping our memories is reminiscent of the specific materialising of memories that we have seen in Gloeckner’s work. Chute explains how “the basic structural form of comics – which replicates the structure of traumatic memory with its fragmentation, condensation, and placement of elements in space – is able to express the movement of memory. It both evokes and provokes memory: “placing themselves in space, authors may forcefully convey the shifting layers of memory and create a peculiar entry point for representing experience.” (Chute Graphic Women 114). Accordingly, in “Fun Things To Do With Little Girls,” Gloeckner maps a process of remembrance – materialising memories directly on the page – through the form of comics. The next section will examine Gloeckner’s work as a testimonial narrative, observing how the fragmented narrative presents itself as a testimony in relation to Dori Laub’s notion of a witness with regards to the issues of traumatic narrative.
Part Three: “Witnessing Minnie”

In Testimony’s third chapter, “An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,” Dori Laub recognises three distinct levels of witnessing: the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience, the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others, and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself (75). With regards to the first level of witnessing, that of being a witness to oneself, Laub describes his detailed memories of his experience as a child survivor of the Holocaust: “I have distinct memories of my deportation, arrival in the camp, and the subsequent life my family and I led there… But these are the memories of an adult…It is as though this process of witnessing was of an event that happened on another level” (Laub 76). Furthermore, Laub notes that “these memories are like discrete islands of precocious thinking, and feel almost like the remembrances of another child, removed, yet connected to me in a complex way” (my emphasis, 76). Laub’s reflections in this chapter are specifically directed towards survivors of the Holocaust, an event that should never be generalised too quickly, but nevertheless, his particular reflections about the act of witnessing trauma are indeed transferable to other traumatic experiences. With these words, as Caruth rightly notes, Laub touches on this something that seems strangely to inhibit all traumatic experience: “the inability fully to witness the event as it occurs, or the ability to witness the event fully only at the cost of witnessing oneself” (Trauma 7). Caruth’s words seem unquestionably significant as they emphasise this paradox of trauma: the full witnessing of the event can only take place at the cost of witnessing oneself in the event. The following will observe the different manners in which A Child’s Life and Other Stories and The Diary of a Teenage Girl are founded upon distinct acts of witnessing.

This section will begin with Gloeckner’s perhaps most explicit take on witnessing in her work. The act of witnessing is, literally and figuratively, an essential part of Gloeckner’s third graphic narrative “Hommage à Duchamp” in A Child’s Life. This three-page story narrates a scene in which Minnie and her
sister accidentally witness Pascal masturbating in the bathroom. The first one-page panel depicts the sisters next to the bathroom door with a broken pane of glass. The readers observe the girls as they peek in through the shattered glass. The next panel shows Pascal, naked, with his penis in his hand, and, judging by the look in his face, he is getting close to an orgasm (see figure 1.7). The third and last page depicts the girls as they are running away, nervously giggling, not sure what they have just seen. “Hommage à Duchamp” is the first explicit depiction of sex, the first of many exposed penises, and the first depiction of adult sexuality in A Child’s Life, and consequently, the readers, like the girls, are startled when they realise what is behind the closed door. Readers who come across Gloeckner’s work without pre-existing knowledge about its explicit sexual images are likely to be just as shocked as the girls. As the sisters open the door, the readers turn the page, and involuntarily they must witness Pascal masturbating together. Tolmie reminds us of “the very real danger of traumatization” and of how “the image can force a reaction in ways that perhaps the word cannot” (xiii). Gloeckner forces the readers to look and to share Minnie and Gretel’s feelings of shock and confusion. Although she does provide some clues of what we should expect on the next page, they are likely to be overlooked by most readers. The French subtitle reads as follows: “Or, “Étant Donnés: le bain, le père, la main, la bitte,” which roughly translates into “Or, Given: the bath, the father, the hand, the cock” (my translation). The multi-layered second page of “Hommage à Duchamp” (see figure 1.7) appears to be inspired by Marcel Duchamp’s sculpture “État donnés,” as indicated by both its title and the layout of the page. Duchamp’s sculpture is created by different components that together transforms into an installation in which one needs to look through the peeping holes of a wooden door in order to see a naked female body, lying on her back with her legs spread wide open (Duchamp “État donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage”). Her face is hidden, unlike Pascal’s. Gloeckner replaces the naked woman with her naked stepfather as the focus of attention, and in the process also replaces the absence of her face with the presence of
Figure 1.7 (A Child’s Life and Other Stories 28)
Pascal’s. Like Duchamp’s sculpture, Gloeckner’s panel is constructed in three layers: The sisters, the broken glass door and Pascal are each drawn on separate levels (see figure 1.7). Not only do the different layers of the panel accentuate Gloeckner’s abilities to transfer the complexity of our multi-dimensional reality onto the flat space of a page, but she also emphasises the role of witnessing in her work. As we watch the girls, who watch Pascal, we straightway become extremely aware of our own positions of witnesses. Thus, we identify with the girls, sharing their tangled emotions of disgust and excitement, repulsion and attraction (Chute Graphic Women 72). Pascal’s naked body, particularly his exposed penis, is the centrepiece of the panel, as indicated by both the composition of the panel and by the direction of Minnie’s, and consequently, the reader’s gaze. Pascal’s head and penis are drawn abnormally large in this panel, standing out from the rest of the page which is drawn more realistically. Køhlert argues that Gloeckner’s representative drawing style adds “realism to both the characters and their environment” (Køhlert 130 – 131). The choice to exaggerate Pascal’s head and penis size might indicate “their importance to the visual memory of the scene” (Køhlert 132). Minnie and Gretel’s eyes are wide open, a signal of the explicit visuality of the memory of this scene. The panels before and after this scene include dialogue between the girls and motion lines, two visual indicators of movement in time and space that lack in the bathroom scene (see figure 1.7). The size of the penis, the size of the panel, and the lack of indicators that time is passing by, create a moment frozen in time. Time slows down, almost stopping, before the pace of the narrative rapidly shifts as the girls run away. The panel might not depict an openly traumatic memory, but it is an essential piece in Gloeckner’s section of narratives of a lost childhood and an adult consciousness which is known too soon. Caruth’s claim that “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” effectively places this panel in a series of panels that show graphic narrative’s ability to represent the visual nature of traumatic memory (Trauma 4-5).
Noticeably, this is not the first time this panel appears in *A Child’s Life*. On the very first page of the book we find the first version of this panel. Minnie and her sister are looking through the broken glass frame, but in this version of the panel, rather than their naked stepfather, the words “A Child’s Life and Other Stories” hover within the broken glass frame (*A Child’s Life 1*). This peculiar doubling of a panel immediately gives it a larger significance. By depicting the girls in the exact same position, only substituting Pascal with the title of the graphic memoir, it is almost as if the girls are inviting us to join them in peeping through the broken frame. The broken frame is significant in creating a sense of secrecy and privacy both with reference to Pascal’s masturbation and to the invitation to listen to the girls’ personal life story. Groensteen’s concept of *general arthrology* explains the mechanisms behind this creation of meaning. The *braiding* of the two panels creates additional layers of meaning outside of their sequence in the graphic narrative. The significance of the first panel only becomes clear after we have read “Hommage à Duchamp,” thus illustrating how re-reading and re-looking is essential to truly understanding graphic narratives. I believe that Gloeckner here suggests that the girls’ encounter with Pascal’s sexuality becomes their first step away from childhood. *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* is not narrating childhood stories, as might have been implied by the title, rather it depicts a premature breach with childhood and the protagonist’s difficult road into adolescence. The first panel (*A Child’s Life 1*) invites us to watch Minnie’s journey as she grows up, becoming listeners of her testimony.

Laub emphasises that “bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener” (70), therefore, emphasising the reader’s role with regards to Gloeckner’s work is undeniably important. Without listeners, testimony cannot take place. *Diary* and *A Child’s Life* both show a strong fascination with people and particularly their faces. Most of Gloeckner’s graphic

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8 Thierry Groensteen’s notion of general arthrology was described in the subchapter “Remembering trauma” as an explanation of how visual resonances between panels that are not directly placed next to each other can create correspondences of meaning (22).
narratives in *A Child’s Life* are focused upon people; their bodies and their faces. The elevated number of panels depicting a character, in most cases Minnie, looking out of the panel and directly at the readers, suggests their own significance in Gloeckner’s art. I will propose that, in *A Child’s Life*, this is Gloeckner’s specific technique of highlighting the readers’ significant role as witnesses to her testimony. From the opening page of *A Child’s Life* Minnie looks at us, with a shy smile (*A Child’s Life* 9). While it is not unusual to begin an autobiographical narrative with a portrait of the protagonist, it is not so typical to continue this explicitly visual connection between the artist and the listener throughout the entire memoir. By visual connection here, I mean to emphasise that in *A Child’s Life* there is a specifically visual rather than textual connection between Minnie and the readers as our eyes meet. The panels depict a whole range of emotional scenarios; from a happy innocent child playing with her mother, to a devastated child with tears streaming down her eyes, or an artist looking audaciously right at her audience about to narrate probably one of the toughest stories of her upbringing (*A Child’s Life* 22; 46; 70). They all seem to ask the same question: “Do you see me?”

The last page of “Developmental Developments” consists of a full-page panel depicting Minnie in her bed, surrounded by various juvenile symbols such as a doll and a teddy bear. The tears that stream down her face are the tears of a lost childhood. Earlier in the day, she witnessed her friend Cheryl being beaten by her father with a dog leash, and although Minnie told her grandfather what happened, nothing seems to be done to help her friend. As she’s looking out on her audience, Minnie seems far older than her eight years. Her face tells a story without hope and filled with inescapability; she knows too much too soon about the brutality of the world. There is a gap between the premature wisdom of her eyes and the toys that surround her. As she looks directly at us, we’re urged to acknowledge Minnie’s substantial sadness.

Another panel most readers will probably notice is a panel we have already discussed: the panel from “Fun Things To Do With Little Girls” in which
Minnie is having sex with her mother’s boyfriend (see figure 1.3). She’s lying on her back with a large grown man thrusting himself at her. Minnie’s eyes meet ours as she stares out on her audience. Her expression has changed. Her eyes that previously were filled with tears and sadness are now empty, without meaning or purpose. Her blank eyes meet ours, challenging us to look. We, as listeners to her testimony, have no choice but to feel the weight of responsibility as her eyes meet ours.

Figure 1.8 (A Child’s Life and Other Stories 70)

In the first frame of “Minnie’s 3rd Love, Or: “Nightmare on Polk Street,”” Minnie’s empty eyes from figure 1.3 have been replaced with a new emotion. The first panel is, contrarily to the two previous examples, an explicit self-portrait of Phoebe Gloeckner, as explained by the “information-bubble” next to her: “Artist
is shown wearing a luscious head of artificial hair furnished by Rosalie’s New Look of San Francisco (see figure 1.8). Staring intensely, and daringly at her readers she makes us extremely aware of our position of witnesses of her trauma. With a sly smile and large bold eyes, it’s almost as if she’s asking her readers: “Are you tough enough to listen to my story?” By continually drawing herself looking at her audience, Gloeckner engages her readers, making them aware of the importance of their roles as witnesses for her testimony.

In *Diary*, Gloeckner shows a different approach to the creation of testimony in her work. The graphic memoir is founded upon the form of diary entries, comic strips, poems, and illustrations. In contrast to the visual connection between reader and protagonist in *A Child’s Life*, in *Diary* this connection is to a larger degree verbal. From the very first page of the book, the narrator explicitly speaks to her readers, warning them about reading her diary: “Dear Dear, Please, do never read this unless and until I am dead and even then not unless it is twenty-five years from now or more... If you do read on, don’t you dare ever let me know that you did or I swear to God I will kill myself or run away or do any number of self-destructive things. I beg of you, for my sake and yours, do not do not do not” (xix). Readers must disregard Minnie’s wishes and actively choose to continue reading her diary if they want to know her story. From its very beginning, *Diary* makes the readers participants in the violation of Minnie’s rights. As the story continues, the readers effortlessly embrace the role of Minnie’s diary. Frequently, the diary entries directly address a listener: “Am I bad?” (*Diary 17*); “Oh oh oh guess what!” (*Diary 21*); “I seem better, don’t you think? But how would you know?” (*Diary 35*). The readers essentially become her diary, her conversation partner, and her listener.

While the verbal diary entries play a significant role in the creation of an active listener to Gloeckner’s testimony, the graphic memoir is also filled with comic strips and illustrations that also have their role in the testimonial narrative. Køhlert describes how “the images in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* bear witness to a case of sexual abuse in a way that the words alone do not” (138). In other words,
the verbal elements of *Diary* show that which the words cannot tell. The illustration below from “Spring” shows the discrepancy between the verbal narrator who describes how she “love[s] Monroe to touch [her] affectionately” (*Diary* 84) and the drawing which shows an unsettling image of a young girl and an older man fooling around (see figure 1.9). The young girl intensely longs to be touched “because then I know he cares about me” (*Diary* 84). The drawing is able to both acknowledge Minnie’s pleasure and to show the disturbing nature of their relationship. Monroe’s unrealistically large hands and unpleasant face tells a story that the verbal Minnie cannot. The verbal narration continues below the illustration: “My mother doesn’t touch me much if she can avoid it. Some mothers touch their children a lot, in a natural way” (*Diary* 84).

![Illustration of a young girl and an older man fooling around.](image)

*I love Monroe to touch me affectionately.*

*Figure 1.9 (The Diary of a Teenage Girl 84)*
Minnie implicitly presents a reason for why she yearns so much to be touched. The short diary entry explicitly describes Minnie’s feelings about her mother’s reluctance to touch her: “I couldn’t eat or sleep. I was sure they thought I was disgusting. I was never ever so hurt” (Diary 84). Minnie’s raw account of her feelings differs strongly from Alison’s more detached attitude towards expressing feelings. The comic strips and illustrations almost seem to interrupt the long sections of verbal narration. Diary shows how Minnie’s witnessing cannot be contained within one form; she must patch her narrative together through the different forms, thus resonating with Felman’s observation about the fragmentation of witnessing: traumatic experience “is conveyed precisely by this fragmentation of the testimonies, which enacts the fragmentation of the witnessing” (223). The compilation of diary entries, poems, illustrations, new and old comic strips, the work of other artists, and scanned photographs shows the fragmentation of witnessing in Minnie’s testimony. A Child’s Life and Diary gather fragments of witnessing, thus refusing the possibility of a complete narrative, echoing Felman’s rejection of a whole frame “that might claim to contain the fragments and to fit them into one coherent whole” (Felman 224). Within the space of a comics’ page where each panel is strangely separated from, and connected with the next, Minnie has found a space where her fragmented testimony can emerge.
Part Four: “Minnie is you, too”

While the previous sections of this chapter have examined the different effects of explicit and implicit representations of abuse, observed comics’ numerous tools to accurately represent the mechanisms of traumatic memory, and reflected upon the role of the reader in listening to Gloeckner’s testimony, I will now turn my attention towards the ambiguous and complicated boundaries between artist and avatar; self and other, truth and fiction, in Gloeckner’s graphic memoirs. I’m fascinated by the intricate relationship between the artist’s subjectivity and the creation of an avatar, an other, the spaces between them, and how they function in autobiographical representations of trauma. Hatfield describes how the cartoonist-autobiographer, “through a form of alienation or estrangement, must regard herself or himself as other, as a distinct character to be seen as well as heard” (his emphasis, 114). Not only must the artist see herself from the outside, but her subjectivity also becomes split between a verbal and a visual self. In *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Ruth Leys describes how the American Psychiatric Association emphasises the splitting of the subject in its official designation of post-traumatic stress disorder: “The idea is that, owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events, the mind is split or dissociated” (2). In other words, a splitting of the mind or a dissociation of the self is a potential outcome of any kind of traumatic experience. Køhlert observes how “the split of the subject in the autobiographical project is [...] mirrored in the psychic fragmentation caused by traumatic experience, the memories which cannot be fitted easily into a life story because they create a gap within consciousness that defies narrativization and disrupts the formation of a coherent sense of self” (127). While Gloeckner’s approach to the (un)representability of traumatic recollection has already been examined, I will now focus upon traces of a disruption of a coherent sense of self resulting from these experiences that defies representation. The splitting of the subject resonates with the split of the subject within autobiography. Consequently, the following will explore the intricate
relationship between verbal and visual self-representations in Gloeckner’s autobiographical work and the particular effects traumatic experience has upon our understanding of self. I will argue that it is precisely in the spaces between, between the artist as subject and the artist as object, and between fiction and non-fiction, that we find a space where the complex processes that represent the unrepresentable of trauma can take place.

Lynda Barry asks an interesting question in her *One! Hundred! Demons!*: “Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?” (7). Barry’s rhetorical question challenges the familiar expectation that autobiographies are always true. In *The Limits of Autobiography*, Leigh Gilmore observes how “as a genre, autobiography is characterized less by a set of formal elements than by a rhetorical setting on which a person places herself or himself within [a variety of] testimonial contexts” (3). These testimonial contexts are repeated and reproduced, with the result that expectations of the form are established (Gilmore 3). In referencing the ambiguous limits between fiction and non-fiction in autobiography, it is important to emphasise the differences between verbal and visual autobiography. Køhlert describes how “in traditional prose autobiography the mimetic world of the work is constructed by the reader’s imagination, which creates its own reality and can elect to presuppose a corresponding externality, [whereas] the reality of the comics page is indubitably and self-evidently different from what it represents” (127). In other words, comics autobiography rejects any obligations to authentically represent a collective concept of reality. This disconnection from reality might be the reason why autobiography in the comics medium seems to be a suitable space to represent traumatic experience. Anne Whitehead suggests that when faced with “the demands of extremity” (Rothberg 14), writers of trauma narratives are pushing the realist project to its limits, “not because they have given up on knowledge but in order to suggest that traumatic knowledge cannot be fully communicated or retrieved without distortion” (Whitehead 84).
This essential distortion resonates with Gloeckner’s own explanation of her creation of autobiographical work: “There is a process of dissociation that takes place when I make a story. I make creative decisions in a fugue state that I could hardly describe to you, but the end result is, I hope, a story with some meaning or resonance, something created, with a beginning, a middle and an end, an encapsulation of feeling and impression, but in no way a documentary of anything other than an “emotional truth” (“The Phoebe Gloeckner Interview”). Similarly, she speaks of the mutability of memory and how it shifts with time and subsequent experience. Gloeckner explains how “sometimes you have to distort “reality” in order to express what you feel is the true feeling. A recounting of facts can carry little meaning” (“The Phoebe Gloeckner Interview”). Gloeckner’s words highlight the important tools of dissociation and distortion of reality in order to create what she refers to as “an emotional truth” (“The Phoebe Gloeckner Interview”).

Gilmore observes how “autobiography about trauma forces the reader to assume a position of masochism or voyeurism. [The reader is] invited to find himself or herself … or to enjoy a kind of pleasure in the narrative organisation of pain” (22). When the readers look at Minnie having sex with her mother’s boyfriend (see figure 1.4), when they see her lying unconscious and defenceless on a bed about to be raped (see figure 1.3), they must decide whether to adopt a position of voyeurism and enjoy a pleasure in the narrative organisation of pain, or select to identify with Minnie’s diminished position in the narrative. This explains perhaps partly the reason why these images are so difficult to look at, the choice between identification or a pleasure in witnessing someone else’s pain is not an easy one. Furthermore, Gilmore explains how “[i]dentification, then, marks a point of tension in autobiography for writers whose self-representational projects place them outside the most familiar operations of identification and sympathy. Such writers might seek to swerve from autobiography’s constraints as they find the figure of the representative man an image they cannot or do not wish, to project (23). Experiences of trauma remain outside of our most familiar
spaces of identification, thus autobiographical authors diverge from the limits of autobiography and create new spaces where they can represent such experiences. Gilmore’s notion of the need to create a new representational space for these experiences outside of our “normal” spaces of identification, resonates with Rothberg’s notion of traumatic realism: the term describes the range of innovative formal devices which are used in narratives of trauma to try to make us believe the unbelievable” (14). Similarly to Gilmore, Rothberg argues that traumatic texts [are in] search for a new mode of realism in order to express or articulate a new of reality (14). The graphic memoir seems to be such a space where narratives of trauma can emerge.

The previous section established how Diary’s multimodal form, its assembly of verbal and visual narratives, developed numerous channels that allowed witnessing to occur. These tensions between verbal and visual narratives generate the space where the self can emerge within autobiographical comics. Elisabeth Bruss, regarding autobiography in film, argues that visual self-portrayal poses an impassable barrier between the observer and the observed, a barrier which is absent in the realm of language (qtd. in Hatfield 116). She explains how in first person narrative, the narrative “I” easily allows the reader to become a part of her or his subjectivity, while in visual representation expression is divided from description (Bruss qtd. in Hatfield 116). In a similar manner, W. J. T. Mitchell breaks down one of the essential tensions between word and image in Picture Theory: that text is generally aligned with the speaking and seeing self, while the image is the viewed object, the other: “The “otherness” of visual representation from the standpoint of textuality may be anything from a professional competition to a relation of political, disciplinary, or cultural domination in which the “self” is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject, while the “other” is projected as passive, seen, and (usually) silent object” (157). In Gloeckner’s case, in writing graphical autobiography where she essentially is both the subject and the object of the story, this split is particularly exposed.
However, *Diary* is not only constructed upon a split between verbal and visual forms: the verbal diary entries also involve poems, letters from Minnie’s former stepdad, reproduced conversations, a postcard and numerous lyrics; and the visual narratives include comic strips that progresses the story line, comic strips that Gloeckner drew when she was fifteen, drawings that illustrate the verbal story, comics drawn by Gloeckner’s father, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, R. Crumb, Diane Noomin and Justin Green, a map of their apartment and neighbourhood in San Francisco and scanned photographs, drawings and diary entries from Phoebe Gloeckner’s personal archive. The multiplicity of Gloeckner’s multimodal forms resonates with the fragmentation of an autobiographical subject. Køhlert observes how “the plurality of perspectives, […], including the use of Gloeckner’s own diary as the raw material from which the narrative is shaped, creates an intricate structure containing different perspectives on the same events while […] undergrounding the idea of a single, coherent subject as the author of the autobiography” (137). Each of the categories presents individual perspectives, distinct contributions, to the creation of Minnie Goetze in *Diary*. While the diary entries are written from the perspective of a fifteen-year old girl, Minnie’s voice at times conceals her young age. She makes comments such as: “I don’t know where to direct all my sexual energies” (*Diary* 11); “I really like getting fucked” (*Diary* 26); and “I want someone to swing me around, someone who […] has an apartment and fucks good and hard” (*Diary* 160). Her comments reflect upon the mind-set of a sexually experienced person, together with her mature vocabulary Minnie often sounds older than she actually is.

The illustrations in *Diary* present a different perspective, a different aspect of the fragmented self. The full-page illustration in *figure 1.10* depicts Minnie watching Monroe sleep. The panel is drawn up close and like much of Gloeckner’s art, the drawing concentrates upon their faces. Monroe’s face is drawn disproportionally large and takes up much of the page (*see figure 1.10*).
Sometimes I watch him as he sleeps, and I feel so much love for him.

Figure 1.10 (The Diary of a Teenage Girl 143)
With Goffman’s notion of *relative size* and how power relations can be visually represented in mind, it becomes clear that Monroe’s large face not only shows their differences in age, but also the power he holds over Minnie. The caption “[s]ometimes I watch him as he sleeps, and I feel so much love for him” *(see figure 1.10)*, alongside the drawing of Minnie who tenderly looks at him in his sleeping, also contributes to describing a relationship where the power scales are imbalanced. This illustration *shows*, rather than explains, the effects of the split self. The mind-set of a young teenager is drawn by an adult, thus integrating their different perspectives into the drawing. The illustration acknowledges “a Minnie” that the fifteen-year-old girl perhaps does not recognise. Minnie begins her first entry in the diary by proclaiming her ugliness: “I don’t remember being born. I was a very ugly child. My appearance has not improved so I suppose it was a lucky break when he was attracted by my youthfulness” *(Diary 3).* The Minnie from *figure 1.10*, however, has a handsome face and flawless skin, underlined by Monroe’s facial hair and wrinkles. Chute describes Monroe as the cherished object of Minnie’s gaze; in her eyes an object of beauty, while the drawing depicts him as swollen, puffy, and “patently disgusting” *(Graphic Women 83).* The gaze of the young Minnie diverges from the perspective of the drawing.

Gloeckner herself emphasises that Minnie is not her either: “Although I am the source of Minnie, she cannot be me – for the book to have real meaning, she must be all girls, anyone … It’s not my story. It’s our story” *(Diary xv).* She emphasises that she aspires “to create characters who can be universally understood despite being constructed with details so numerous that they could only refer to a particular situation” *(Diary xv).* Gloeckner’s insistence that Minnie belongs to all of us, suggests a shared perspective, a space where identification, and thus a re-constructed subjectivity can emerge. Chute writes: “If her sexual abuse effaced her subjectivity, Diary’s insistent showing, the rhythms of its visual interruptions, re-establishes her as a subject: autobiography as re-facement.” Gilmore asks what is the language through which the self may re-emerge? (42).
Chute suggests that, “with Gloeckner, who is deeply aware of the power of the self as constituted visually, in part through a schooling in visual self-objectification, that language is graphic” (81). Moreover, I would like to propose that the language which allows the self to re-emerge, to regain agency and autonomy, is not only graphic, but
Chapter Two: “In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower”


“For nothing was simply one thing.”

Alison Bechdel’s most recent graphic memoir Are You My Mother? begins with these words from Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse (209). The words reflect upon a character’s recognition that the lighthouse he remembers from his childhood, a lighthouse with “a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened and closed softly in the evening,” is in fact the same building that he now sees before his eyes, a lighthouse surrounded by “whitewashed rocks ... [a] tower, stark and straight ... barred with black and white ... [with] windows [and] washing spread out on the rocks to dry” (Woolf 209). The enchanted lighthouse he remembers from his youth is no less real than the one he sees in front of him: “for nothing was simply one thing” (Woolf 209). Woolf’s words in the beginning of Bechdel’s graphic memoir resonate with her complex process of revisiting and re-picturing memories; in Bechdel’s world everything has multiple meanings. Her two graphic memoirs, Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic (2006) and Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama (2012) continually execute the work of re-narrating memories and persistently reconstruct the implications of her memories. Through the comics medium, Bechdel seems to have found a space where her story can be told. Gillian Whitlock observes the “potential of comics to open up new and troubled spaces” in her article “Autographics: The Seeing “I” of Comics” (976). Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home is a text that carries out precisely this work: it is a graphic memoir which opens up the unsettled issues of the comic’s form itself, as well as sexuality, family dynamics, mourning, and the notion of a single reality. By writing her memoirs in the medium of comics, Bechdel challenges our notions of autobiography and non-fiction. She battles with deep
psychological issues of her own queer sexuality alongside her father’s, of the
effects of growing up in emotional isolation, of how to mourn a father who
enjoyed sex with male high school students. As if this was not enough, Bechdel
also deals with essential questions of our own perceptions of reality and truth in
an autographic narrative filled with literary and graphic allusions. Her complex
narrative continues in *Are You My Mother?*. Her second graphic memoir sets out
to explore Alison’s relationship with her mother, and essentially with herself, in
an intriguing blend of psychology, literature and childhood memories. All of this
through the medium of comics, a medium “remarkably unconstrained by genre
expectations” (Chute and DeKoven “Comic books and graphic novels” 175).

Bechdel’s specific take on the graphic narrative involves a recursive
disjointed structure, a frequent re-visiting of traumatic memories, and words and
images that go in opposite directions. The graphic form is precisely what requires
readers to “read differently, to attend to disjunctions between the cartoon panel
and the verbal text, to disrupt the seeming forward motion of the cartoon
sequence and adopt a reflexive and recursive reading practice” (Watson 28). *Fun
Home* invites its readers to enter the recursive and incoherent pace of a
traumatised mind. By working on “the fringes of acceptability” (“The Alison
Bechdel Interview”), Bechdel reveals the true powers of comics to narrate the
unnarratable. Against a tradition of pronouncing traumatic experiences
unspeakable, unimaginable, unrepresentable, *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?
directly challenge these beliefs. Chute highlights the importance of graphic
narrative’s ability to tell and show stories that couldn’t have been communicated
in any other way (*Graphic Women* 2). Bechdel’s work demonstrates an ability to
employ this specific quality of comics to effectively communicate the
unspeakable trauma. In an audio-visual interview with Chute about *Are You My
Mother?*, Bechdel explains how she couldn’t have told her story in any other form
than the comics medium: “I can’t explain. I can’t talk about it. The only way to
tell this story is through this lengthy exposition of pictures and words together”
(Chute “Audio-visual interview”). Bechdel’s words resonate with Laub’s account
of the paradox of testimony, of the imperative to tell and the impossibility of telling; “there are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory and speech” (Testimony 78). While Bechdel’s words explicitly express the impossible task of narrating traumatic experience, Fun Home and Are You My Mother? demonstrate her ability to show and tell the unspeakable through a simultaneous fragmentation and merging of distinctive temporalities, spaces, memories and narratives.

This chapter will establish how Bechdel’s complex narrative structure in Fun Home and Are You My Mother? mirrors the nature of traumatic memory; demonstrate how the use of closure plays an essential role in creating a listener for Alison’s testimony; examine her crisis of representation, and observe how she employs intertextuality as a tool of interpretation of her testimony. By examining the different aspects of traumatic experience in Bechdel’s work, this chapter will demonstrate how Fun Home and Are You My Mother? are able to represent the notion of unspeakable trauma, not only through fragmentation of the narrative, of the self, and of temporality, but also through the spaces “in-between:” between the visual and the verbal narratives, between what is told and what is shown. Rather than regarding Fun Home and Are You My Mother? texts of dividing “splits,” as several scholars have done before me (as exemplified by Julia Watson’s “Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel’s “Fun Home”), I will demonstrate how they are founded on a multiplicity of narratives, of narrative selves, and of temporalities.
Part One: “The collapse of time, space and memory”

The temporal aspect of trauma is an essential feature of its complex definition as a delayed response to an overwhelming experience, an event experienced “too soon” (Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 11). Caruth explains how it isn’t too little access to a traumatic experience but the overwhelming immediacy of that traumatic experience that produces its belated uncertainty (Trauma 6). In a similar manner, Dori Laub writes that “trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction” (Testimony 57). Thus, traumatic experience essentially demands a disruption of temporality and causality. As we have seen in chapter one, Caruth emphasises the inability to fully witness the traumatic event as it occurs, the collapse of its understanding, as the force of a traumatic experience (Trauma 7). In a similar manner to Caruth, Laub writes:

The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of “normal” reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of “otherness,” a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery. (Testimony 69)

This complex quality of “otherness,” of an incoherent sense of time and space, of an intricate relationship between temporality, memory and trauma surfaces in Bechdel’s work. As Chute notes in her introduction to Graphic Women, images in comics are by nature fragmented and thus present an excellent opportunity for representing actual fragmented recollection, “a prominent feature of traumatic memory” (4). The following will demonstrate how Bechdel employs the grammar of comics, specifically its unique ability of collapsing time and space,
to effectively depict her experience as “outside the parameters of “normal” reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time” in Fun Home and Are You My Mother? (Testimony 69).

The fundamentally fragmented structure of graphic narrative provides the comics medium with suitable tools to effectively represent the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. The comics medium’s ability to merge time and space is described as one of its essential characteristics in McCloud’s Understanding Comics: “In learning to read comics we all learned to perceive time spatially, for in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same” (100). The content of panels, number of panels, closure between panels and the shape of panels are all different features that affect our experience of perceived time in graphic narratives (McCloud 99 – 101). Similarly, Chute and DeKoven argue that graphic narrative’s “fundamental syntactical operation is the representation of time as space on the page” (“Introduction: Graphic Narrative” 769). Thus, the comics medium provides its artists with infinite opportunity for depicting experiences that don’t fit within the boundaries of “normal” reality. The characteristics of the comics medium resonates with the description of trauma as an experience which destroys the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition and leaves the object unable to recollect and integrate the event into normal consciousness (Leys 2). The comics medium shows a distinct ability to tell narratives that are outside these ordinary mechanisms of consciousness. Although graphic narrative shows this distinct possibility for narrating such stories, each artist must discover their individual methods of how to narrate the unnarratable.

Bechdel’s Fun Home and Are You My Mother? demonstrate the perhaps most notable feature of Bechdel’s work: her remarkably complex narrative structure. Bechdel’s graphic memoirs reject the traditional linear progression of the standard novel. On the contrary, both of them are constructed upon an episodic, thematic and non-linear structure. Memories are re-examined, redrawn and re-presented throughout the graphic memoirs. Fun Home, in particular, is built upon a repetitive narrative structure where certain memories
are repeatedly re-presented. The moments that are repeated reveal their significance through their repetition: Bruce’s moment of death and two specific phone calls are frequently returned to throughout the graphic memoir: one communicates her father’s queer sexuality, the other his death. Bechdel’s insistence to depict these moments again and again, resonate with Caruth’s observation about the frozen quality of traumatic memory: “To be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Trauma 4 – 5). These memories stand out from what could initially be considered an overwhelming stream of incoherent memories. Through their frequent recurrence, these memories establish their position as traumatic memories. Bechdel provides her own narrative voice as our guide in this sophisticated labyrinth of recursive memories, literary references and an intricately structured life story. Chute proposes that the recursive compulsion to continuously picture and re-picture central traumatic events in Fun Home reflects, at the structural level, upon the recursivity suggested by the comics page itself, “which, by virtue of its sequential order of panels and its immediate visual “all-at-onceness,” often demands rereading and relooking” (Graphic Women 183). Likewise, Julia Watson emphasises how, in Fun Home, “its temporal sequence is punctuated by introspective acts that cast back into the past in spirals of reflection; thus the tendency of the page to impel us forward in reading the comic as a narrative sequence is repeatedly disrupted, spatialized” (37). Accordingly, the flow of the narrative is repeatedly interrupted, and consequently the readers are invited to re-read, re-examine, and actively pay attention to the narration. While the repetitive frozen quality of these memories establishes them as traumatic memories, they also coincide with Bechdel’s constantly fragmented non-linear narrative structure.

While Bechdel demonstrates her capacity to employ the grammar of comics, specifically its simultaneous fragmentation and “all-at-onceness” to mimic the fragmented nature of traumatic memory throughout her graphic memoir, we will now have closer look at a section from Fun Home’s second
chapter, “A Happy Death” (see figure 2.1). The chapter circles around the narrator’s thoughts about Bruce’s life and the ambiguous conditions surrounding his death. The top panels of the page are the last two of a series of panels depicting a young Alison helping her father in the embalming room of the Bechdel Funeral Home (see figure 2.1). Alison keeps her feelings concealed, revealing no emotion. The next two panels take us across time and space to an older Alison sitting at a restaurant with an acquaintance. She seems to have excelled so much in suppressing her emotions that she cannot access them at all any more: “For years after my father’s death, when the subject of parents came up in conversation I would relate the information in a flat, matter-of-fact tone…eager to detect in my listener the flinch of grief that eluded me” (see figure 2.1). The bottom right panel takes us to a different time and space; to the phone call revealing the death of her father (see figure 2.1). This page reflects a fragmentary non-linearity similar to Gloeckner’s structure of “Fun Things To Do With Little Girls.” By presenting her memories in a jumbled unchronological order, Bechdel is mirroring Felman’s affirmation that testimony cannot offer a completed statement of the traumatic events (Testimony 5). Rather, Bechdel’s non-linear structure repeats Anne Whitehead’s notion that “trauma carries the force of a literality which renders it resistant to narrative structures and linear temporalities” (5). This story is the kind of story that cannot be told except in a unique space of its own, a space unaffected by conventional chronological narrative and logical sequence. Bechdel emphasises the inherent disjunction between words and images in the form of the graphic narrative: “I love comics because of that built-in disjunction between the words and the pictures, even when they’re explicitly complementary and illustrating one another. I like pushing that space and being able to have two or three ideas going at once.” (Terzian “Family Matters”). The page from “A Happy Death” excellently illustrates Bechdel’s fondness for pushing this in-built disjunction between words and pictures in graphic narratives and of pushing multiple ideas at once. In this case the narrator combines a childhood memory of being in the embalming room
OR MAYBE HE JUST NEEDED THE SCISSORS.

I HAVE MADE USE OF THE FORMER TECHNIQUE MYSELF, HOWEVER, THIS ATTEMPT TO Access EMOTION VICARIOUSLY.

PRIVATE

IS THAT ALL?

MM-HMM.

FOR YEARS AFTER MY FATHER’S DEATH, WHEN THE SUBJECT OF PARENTS CAME UP IN CONVERSATION I WOULD RELATE THE INFORMATION IN A FLAT, MATTER-OF-FACT TONE...

MY DAD’S DEAD. HE JUMPED IN FRONT OF A TRUCK.

...EAGER TO DETECT IN MY LISTENER THE FLINCH OF GRIEF THAT ELUDED ME.

THE EMOTION I HAD SUPPRESSED FOR THE GAPPING CADAVER SEEMED TO STAY SUPPRESSED.

GOD, I’M SORRY.

EVEN WHEN IT WAS DAD HIMSELF ON THE PREP TABLE.

THERE’S BEEN AN ACCIDENT.
with her father, firstly, with a memory of telling someone about her father’s suicide, and secondly, with a memory of how she herself received the news of her father’s death. The different memories are entwined into a larger narrative that depicts Alison’s difficulties with expressing emotions. Time and space are merged into a space “outside of the parameters of normal reality” (Felman, *Testimony* 69). The page from “A Happy Death” shows how causality, sequence, place and time no longer obey the rules of normal reality. The discussion of Gloeckner’s “Fun Things To Do With Little Girls,” observed that two of the panels were inserted into the narrative before the event that they were remembered by took place. Similarly, Bechdel depicts Alison at the restaurant relating the death of her father, before depicting the phone call she received herself (see figure 2.1). Gloeckner and Bechdel’s merging of time and space, their disruption of causality and sequence, creates a new space, a space where there is “no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after” (Felman *Testimony* 69). Such fragmented stories that rejects the rules of normal reality demand specific narrative tools in order to create any narrative meaning.

The previous chapter established how the repeated visual and verbal references to alcohol and domestic abuse create a narrative thread in “Fun Things To Do With Little Girls.” The page from “A Happy Death” demonstrates a similar ability to create narrative meaning from apparent chaos. The narrative voice, detached from the painful events, acts as a guide, tying the narrative together by continually speaking of Alison’s inherited talent for hiding her emotions both from herself and from others. The verbal guide is a necessity in Alison’s reality, created beyond the traditional limits of time, space, and causality. Alison’s face also works as a verbal narrative of its own throughout the page, depicting the continuity of her repressed feelings. With Groensteen’s concept of general arthrology in mind, as it was explained in the previous chapter, it becomes clear how the repeated blank face of Alison helps the readers create narrative meaning. Not only does her blank facial expression create meaning in this specific page, but throughout the whole of *Fun Home*. Alison is continually depicted as quiet
and emotionless, reflecting upon her family of isolated people who are disconnected from each other.

The aftermath of growing up in this family of lonely individuals is one of the main issues depicted in *Are You My Mother?*. Chapter three “True and False Self,” provides us with another striking example of how Bechdel employs the grammar of comics to mirror the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. The chapter engages with theory from Donald Winnicott’s *True and False Self* to investigate Alison’s complicated relationship with her mother. The specific page of interest occurs within a section where Alison is telling her mother that she is considering to schedule an appointment with a therapist, only to be surprised to learn that both her mother and her grandmother also suffered from depressions. The page depicts three generations of women, Alison, her mother, and her grandmother, each struggling alone with their own depression (*see figure 2.2*). The page not only merges different moments in time into the space of their local church, but also unites memory with fantasy. The top left imagined memory of Alison’s grandmother in church is juxtaposed almost seamlessly with what could be Alison’s actual recollection of being in church with her own mother to the right. The slightly paler colours used to depict the imagined moment to the left are the only indication of a difference between the two panels. Similarly to the second page of “Hommage à Duchamp” (*see figure 1.7*), there is no dialogue and no motion lines which generates a strong sense of timelessness to the page, the moments seem almost out of time in due to the absurd similarities and differences between them. Felman’s notion of “a quality of “otherness,” a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences” certainly resonates with the page from “True and False Self” (*Testimony 69*). The examples from *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* effectively materialise the process of transforming experience, through fragmented memory, into an incoherent narrative. The non-conventional perception of time which we have seen in Bechdel’s work is typically emphasised with regards to traumatic experience.
Donald Winnicott's mother suffered from depression, too. Late in life he wrote a poem about her called "The Tree."

"The tree is a cross, and Winnicott is a Christ figure."

"To enliven her was my living" reads one line.

"As soon as I became conscious of the feeling, it would dissipate."

As I got older, I tried to describe it to myself. The best word I could come up with was "orphaned."

As an adult, I have continued to experience these brief spasms of melancholy—and worse—on some of the rare occasions I've attended church...

Figure 2.2 (Are You My Mother? 99)
Trauma, as a non-experience at the time of its reception, demands a disruption of time. Chute and DeKoven observe how Bechdel’s work presents the procedure and the object of memory, “through its composition, through its layers of verbal and visual narrations” (“Comic books and graphic novels” 191). In its very structure, Bechdel’s graphic memoirs express this disjointed, non-sequential sense of time, thus creating narratives that accurately depict the complex link between temporality, memory and trauma. By crafting her graphic narratives upon such a complex structure, Bechdel tests her readers’ ability to connect the gaps in her narrative. The reader seems to play an important role in creating meaning of Bechdel’s complex narrative. The following will further explore the role of the reader in Bechdel’s testimonial narrative.
Part Two: “Listening to Alison’s testimony”

Jared Gardner observes how graphic narratives open up (inevitably and necessarily) a space for the reader to pause, between the panels, and make meaning out of what she sees and reads, thereby serving as collaborative texts between the imagination of the author/artist and the imagination of the reader who must complete the narrative (Gardner 791; 800). The comics page, structured around panels and gutters, presents readers with an opportunity to pause, re-read, and recreate meaning in a co-dependent relationship with the artist. McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictoral and other images in deliberate sequence” (9). While such a definition stresses a controlled and deliberate narrative structure, the readers are also obliged to participate in the immense work of creating connections between the fragmented panels in order to create meaning. To use McCloud’s own words “no other art form gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well” (92). The reader must participate in the process of closure; “the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” so that meaning can arise (63). The reader’s compulsory responsibility of constructing connections between panels, of creating a sequential meaning, places the medium of the graphic narrative in a unique position with regards to involving the reader in the process of creation. The limbo of the gutter, the blank spaces between panels, is essential for the process of closure. It’s the space where “human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (McCloud 98). Whitlock describes the meaning that is created in the gutter as “a meaning produced in an active process of imaginative production whereby the reader shuttles between words and images, and navigates across gutters and frames, being moved to see, feel, or think differently in the effort of producing narrative closure” (978). Thus, closure is on all levels a dynamic process that encourages the readers to see, feel, and think both actively and differently.
As the previous chapter demonstrated, through Gloeckner’s challenging drawings of characters who transcend the page and make eye contact with the readers, reader involvement is an essential feature within the act of testimony. Laub explains how the act of bearing witness to trauma is never a monologue, it is a process that includes the listener, and “for the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other” (70). While Laub’s work specifically focuses upon the interviewer’s role in listening to the testimonies of Holocaust survivors, I believe that his work also sheds light upon the reader’s role, as a listener of testimony, in reading autobiography marked by traumatic experience. This section will demonstrate how Bechdel’s work relies heavily on the process of closure and reader participation to create narrative meaning and thus to create a witness to the testimony of a traumatic childhood.

Through an extraordinary high degree of closure, Bechdel strongly involves her readers and establishes her work as testimonial narrative. This “phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” fundamentally marks her graphic memoirs. The readers become actively engaged in the narratives by creating meaning between panel to panel, between word and image and by closely interpreting a continuous range of intertextual references and visual symbols. Accordingly, she invites her readers to become active listeners of testimony. As was established in the previous section, Bechdel’s work is marked by a controlled fragmented, non-linear and recursive narrative structure. For Bechdel, closure becomes a necessary tool in “filling the gaps” of her story which in its very narrative structure mimics the nature of traumatic recollection. Thus, panel transitions are essential in creating the decidedly complex narrative structure that constitutes Fun Home and Are You My Mother?.

In a post on his blog Parabasis, Isac Butler displays an estimated overview of the panel transitions in Fun Home. His work is interesting as it explicitly reveals the great amount of closure required in Fun Home. Butler’s analysis is based upon McCloud’s work on panel transitions which establishes that most Western
comics artists follow the same transition pattern: a high degree of action-to-action transitions, with a much smaller degree of subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, and aspect-to-aspect (74). This pattern was discovered in the material of a wide range of both ground-breaking and mainstream artists such as Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, and Carl Barks (McCloud 75 – 76). Butler’s analysis, however, reveals that the panel transitions in Fun Home differs from the norm. Rather than having a high degree of action-to-action transitions, Bechdel’s graphic narrative shows an elevated degree of scene-to-scene transitions. According to his analysis, approximately 59% of all transitions in Fun Home are scene-to-scene transitions (Butler). McCloud describes scene-to-scene transitions as transitions that often require “deductive reasoning,” as they transport us “across significant distances of time and space” (71). Thus, these panel transitions can easily appear incoherent and fragmented, mimicking the cognitive processes behind a testimony of trauma. Butler’s analysis does not investigate the reasons why Bechdel’s work differs so much from that of many other artists. Nevertheless, I will suggest that by forcing the reader to become actively involved in creating meaning from panel to panel, from one memory to another, Bechdel establishes her work as testimonial, thus requiring an active listener. The author herself has expressed concern that “those connections were not going to happen. Even now I’ll pick it up and start reading and it seems like a series of non sequiturs. But my hope is that somehow these different strands cohere” (Terzian “Family Matters”). Are You My Mother? shows the same tendency of a high degree of scene-to-scene transitions, as illustrated in figure 2.3. The previous pages recount Alison’s trouble with sleeping and her nightly walks to gaze at her therapist’s home, while the page from figure 2.3 suddenly shifts to a panel which displays a highlighted quote about transitional objects from Donald Winnicott’s paper “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena.” Next follows a panel of an adult Alison looking at her old teddy-bear and a panel dedicated to the observation that “The similarity of “beezum” to “bosom” is perhaps notable” (see figure 2.3). The two next panels depict Helen breastfeeding a new-born Alison, to the objections and
may appear a 'word' for the transitional object. The name given by the infant to these earliest objects is often significant, and it usually has a word used by the adults partly incorporated in it. For instance, 'baa' may be the name, and the 'b' may have come from the adult's use of the word 'baby' or 'bear'.

The similarity of "Beezum" to "bosom" is perhaps notable.

Mom had breastfed me over the objections of everyone around her. We were living temporarily with my father's parents in the family funeral home, a tense arrangement.

Three Goddamn Solid Bronze Caskets?

You'd let that salesman talk you into anything, you dumbshit.

My father's boisterous older sisters didn't understand mom's need to be left alone.

Don't look in the back seat, Ed!

Helen's Nursing Her Baby!

Mom later told me that she would wake me to nurse if I was asleep, in accordance with the custom at that time of feeding infants on a rigid schedule.

Figure 2.3 (Are You My Mother? 59)
entertainment of the people around her (see figure 2.3). It is not an easy story to navigate and the reader must pay close attention in order to follow the narrator’s line of reasoning. The panels abruptly shift in time, space, and subject thus the readers must listen carefully to notice how the narrator employs Winnicott’s quote to interpret the nicknames Alison and her girlfriend Eloise use for each other: “Beeze” and “Beezum,” and how Helen’s unsuccessful attempt at breastfeeding might carry a deeper meaning for Helen and Alison’s future relationship.

In addition to creating meaning between panels, the reader must also understand the reserved narrator’s comments; a process which seems to, at times, require just as much imagination and deductive work as the act of closure in the gutters between Bechdel’s panels. McCloud separates between seven distinct categories of word and picture combinations: word specific, picture specific, duo-specific, additive, parallel, inter-dependent combinations and montage (153 – 155). In Bechdel’s work most of her picture – word combinations are either parallel or inter-dependent, demanding an overall high degree of reader involvement to connect word and image. In this fragmented testimony, the narrative voice acts as our guide in the ever-changing visual landscape of memories. However, the correspondence between word and image more often than not demands a large amount of deductive work from the reader. When the narrator spends approximately one and a half pages describing Daedalus’ role in the creation of a minotaur, “a half-bull, half-man monster” who is hidden in a labyrinth, it is up to the reader to create the link between the myth and the associated images that depict Bruce beating one of Alison’s brothers and the resulting consequences (see figure 2.4). This example clearly belongs to the category of a parallel combination of word and image. The narrator tells one continuous story, the images another. The reader becomes (to use McCloud’s terminology) an accomplice in the narrative, in order for the narrative to reach its communicative purpose, the reader must collaborate in Bechdel’s story telling.
Indeed, the result of that scheme—a half-bull, half-man monster—inspired Daedalus’s greatest creation yet.

He hid the Minotaur in the labyrinth—a maze of passages and rooms opening endlessly into one another...

...and from which, as stray youths and maidens discovered to their peril....

...escape was impossible.

Then there are those famous wings. Was Daedalus really stricken with grief when Icarus fell into the sea?

Or just disappointed by the design failure?
Bechdel also employs numerous visual indicators of testimony. Whereas Gloeckner draws characters who make eye contact and demand the readers to actively acknowledge their experience, ultimately, Minnie’s experience, Bechdel’s work show a different visual approach to achieving the same goal. The reader’s role as an active listener of testimony and as a spectator of Bechdel’s graphic memoirs is emphasised not only through her high degree of closure, but also through repeated depictions hands and cameras in *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?*. Bechdel redraws photographs from the family album on several occasions throughout *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?*. Several of the redrawn photographs are placed in the fourth chapter of *Fun Home*, “In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower.” The double page panel that depicts an intimate photograph of an undressed Roy is deliberately placed on page 100 in *Fun Home* and has received much academic attention, especially due to how the image distinguishes itself from the rest of the graphic memoir with a larger-than-life sized hand holding the photograph, echoing the hand of the reader holding the book, and the page also presents *Fun Home*’s only record of a bleed (McCloud’s vocabulary). However, I would like to focus upon a slightly different aspect of Bechdel’s panels that echo her readers.

Bechdel has spoken about her unusual method for creating her graphic memoirs on numerous occasions over the years. She describes her work process as a process that importantly involves “posing for all the characters in the book” (Terzian “Family Matters”). The artist recreates her memories by posing as the character, taking a photo of the re-enacted memory via self-timer, and then working with the photography as her model for redrawing the scene. This peculiar working method enables her to physically recreate her memories, a process that enables her to literally embody the different people of her life. Bechdel explicitly draws attention to the creative process behind her graphic memoirs in *Are You My Mother?*. In a section of “Mirror” Alison and her mother

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9 Examples of panels which focuses upon hands are found on the following pages of *Fun Home*: 77, 100, 102, 120, 156, 205.
are arguing on the phone. Alison finally understands that “whatever it was [she] wanted from [her] mother was simply not there to be had” (Are You My Mother? 228), and hangs up the phone. A large panel depicts Alison crying in a foetal position, a panel which is reminiscent of previous depictions from Fun Home (see figure 2.4). A couple of pages later, the same memory is returned to again, but this time with a different agenda in mind. As is shown in figure 2.5, the left panel shows a smaller version of the previously discussed panel, whilst the right panel takes a step back, revealing the camera. The readers immediately re-picture the previous panel in their mind, now they see the author posing for the camera, rather than a character in pain. The difference between the two is highlighted by also emphasising how the two also wear different clothes.

Figure 2.5 (Are You My Mother? 229)
By including her working process directly into the graphic narrative, Bechdel is reminding her audience that they are active listeners of her testimony. It becomes a metanarrative, somehow the Alison that is drawn in the panel from *figure* 2.4 is different from the Alison from the panel of *figure* 2.5. Not only does she remind them of their position as listeners, but she also participates in the testimony of other’s through her special working method. By embodying not only her own character, but all of them, Bechdel is essentially not only asking someone to listen to her testimony, but also becoming a listener herself of the testimony of other’s. In positioning herself as her father, embodying his experience, she ultimately takes upon herself to simultaneously be a witness and a listener of his story, his narrative that otherwise could not be heard. Bruce Bechdel’s life and death is literally and figuratively an event without a witness. Caruth emphasises that testimony can only take place through the listening of another, and Bechdel takes this job upon herself (*Trauma* 11).

Bechdel’s particular use of closure, benefits from the strong link between author and reader, speaker and listener, in order to create her testimonial narrative. Laub accentuates this imperative to tell and “to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory* and *speech*” (78). The two authors’
need to create more than one graphic memoir indicates their imperative to tell their narratives. Laub notes that “it is essential for this narrative that could not be articulated, to be told, to be transmitted, to be heard” (his emphasis, 85). This notion of a narrative that could not be articulated, could not be voiced, will be further examined in the next section that centres on Alison’s crisis of representation.
In Chute’s introduction to Graphic Women, she emphasises the important role of the comics medium to proclaim the value of presence, however complex and contingent, against a common valorisation of absence and aporia in the face of trauma: “The force and value of graphic narrative’s intervention, on the whole, attaches to how it pushes on conceptions of the unrepresentable that have become commonplace in the wake of deconstruction, especially in contemporary discourse about trauma” (2). She rightly considers the graphic medium’s ability to challenge the common conception that trauma is unspeakable and unrepresentable to be its most important feature. I want to return to Caruth’s accurate observation about traumatic experience as an experience in which “the inability fully to witness the event as it occurs, or the ability to witness the event fully” can only occur at the cost of witnessing oneself (Trauma 7). Caruth, together with scholars such as Laub and Felman, recognises that the force of the traumatic experience arises precisely “in the collapse of its understanding,” at the expense of simple knowledge and memory (7). Chute’s introduction continues to suggest that the dominant tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility that have tended to characterise trauma theory needs to be reconsidered (Graphic Women 3). The essential question here seems to be whether Chute’s claim that the form of the graphic narrative challenges the unrepresentability of trauma, and Caruth’s notion that traumatic experience arises precisely in the collapse of its understanding, are compatible? This section will demonstrate how Bechdel employs the visual and verbal tensions of comics to truthfully represent a crisis of language and a crisis of representation in the face of trauma. Ultimately, by replacing absence with presence, by representing a crisis of language and a crisis of representation, Bechdel challenges the notion that traumatic experience is unspeakable, indistinguishable, and unrepresentable.

In the fifth chapter of Fun Home, “The Canary Colored Caravan of Death,” Alison describes what she refers to as “an epistemological crisis” that she went
through when she began writing a diary at the age of ten: her narrative voice declares: “It was sort of an epistemological crisis. How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true?” (Fun Home 141). She is beginning to sense the vagueness and ambiguity of language, in turn, making her question her own perceptions: “My simple declarative sentences began to strike me as hubristic at best, utter lies at worst. All I could speak for was my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those” (Fun Home 141). To acknowledge this doubt that she feels towards her own remarks, she begins writing “I think” in between her observations of daily life in Beech Creek. The narrative voice explains how these “I thinks were gossamer sutures in that gaping rift between signifier and signified” (Fun Home 142). In her realisation that words cannot be trusted, she turns to the visual for comfort. Gradually, in order to save time and keep evil away from her subjects, the “I thinks” turn into a “shorthand version,” a symbol that Bechdel describes as a “curvy circumflex” (see figure 2.7). This symbol becomes the visual double of the verbal “I think,” a symbol which she draws at the end of her sentences, next, over certain words, and finally, across whole pages. Alison has established that words are unstable, so she protects herself and the people she loves with a visual symbol (Chute 189).

![Figure 2.7 (Fun Home 142 – 143)](image-url)
Alison makes references to this childhood phase of OCD and her “tendency to edit [her] thoughts before they even took shape” in chapter two of *Are You My Mother?* (49). Whilst the curvy circumflex symbol seems to be a symbol of protection from the instability of language in *Fun Home*, a quote from Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* presents Alison with a whole new explanation for her compulsive behaviour:

> “Nervous persons afflicted with compulsive thinking and compulsive states, who are often very intelligent, show very plainly that superstition originates from repressed hostile and cruel impulses. The greater part of superstition signifies fear of impending evil, and he who has frequently wished evil to others, but because of a good bringing up, has repressed the same into the unconscious, will be particularly apt to expect punishment for such unconscious evil in the form of a misfortune threatening him from without.” (Freud, qtd. in *Are You My Mother?* 50)

With Freud’s notion that superstition and compulsive behaviour originate from repressed hostility in mind, Alison’s obsessive journal entries not only suggest repressed hostility towards her father, but perhaps more importantly towards herself: “By far the most heavily obliterated word is “I”” (*Are You My Mother?* 49). Although the penultimate page of the chapter depicts Alison on her way to recovery from her compulsive behaviour, with the recursive pace of Bechdel’s narrative structure, the final panels depict an earlier memory of Alison dictating her diary to her mother, firmly anchored in her OCD. Seemingly, by giving up her penmanship to her mother, Alison’s crisis is overcome to some extent, and *yet*, as Yaël Schlick notes in “Selves and Texts in the Autobiographies of Alison Bechdel and Lynda Barry,” *Fun Home* itself is continually marked by the same haunting question of the adequacy of writing to represent reality, “as the narrative questions its own assertions and tests its affinities against some truths potentially diverging from them” (30). The last page of the fifth chapter shows
Alison dictating her diary entries to her mother, too overwhelmed by her compulsive writing scheme to write them herself, a clear indication of the persisting continuity of her tense and neurotic relationship with writing. In this sense, Alison’s crisis of language in effect becomes an echo of the overall crisis of *Fun Home*: to create a complete map of “life’s attendant chaos,” closing the gap between signifier and signified, between word and meaning, while knowing that this is an impossible task (*Fun Home* 149).

Although Alison’s epistemological crisis and scepticism towards words’ ability to objectively depict reality is explicitly described and discussed in the graphic memoir, there is another crisis which is perhaps more hidden; Alison’s crisis of representation. As we have seen throughout this chapter, while Alison’s childhood is ultimately a combination of several complex issues, the narrator establishes her father’s sexuality and the possible causal relationship between her own sexuality and his unexpected death, to be the core of Alison’s pain. I would like to suggest that both *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* imply that the absence of emotions and the inability to express emotions is both the core of Alison’s trauma and a strong symptom of it. The unsettling absence of emotions is present throughout both graphic memoirs, but perhaps mostly so in the face of death. Chute describes *Fun Home* as a “profoundly bodily book” but in a much different way than we have seen in Gloeckner’s work (*Graphic Women* 195). Bechdel’s sexually involved bodies are “earnest and sweet” in comparison to Gloeckner’s sexually engaged and engorged bodies “that leap confrontationally off the page” with eyes that demand to be seen (Chute, *Graphic Women* 195). Chute rightly claims that *Fun Home’s* “most shocking bodies are dead” (*Graphic Women* 195). In the face of death, loss, and grief, *Fun Home’s* true crisis of representation arises.

The second chapter, “A Happy Death,” focuses largely on the life and death of Bruce, specifically describing everyday life in the Bechdel Funeral Home. This chapter contains several of *Fun Home’s* dead bodies: Firstly, Alison is shown at age three, next to her dead grandfather, asking to be held closer. At this
age, curiosity and interest in what she doesn’t understand seems to be the only emotion expressed. The vast contrast between this episode and the following portrayal of Alison facing a dead body is obvious. The next occasion is depicted only a couple of pages later, but years have passed in Alison’s life: Alison is asked to assist Bruce in the embalming process of a deceased man, an event out of the ordinary in the Bechdel Funeral Home. This moment is interesting because it sets the stage for Alison’s subsequent encounters with death. The first panel completely conceals Alison’s immediate reaction to the dead body on the embalming table. Her presence is nothing but a silhouette, hiding any reaction or emotion (see figure 2.8). In a similar manner to how the reader follows Minnie’s gaze towards Pascal’s erect penis in Gloeckner’s “Hommage à Duchamp,” (see figure 1.9) the reader here also follows the gaze of the protagonist. In this case, the object of our gaze is the deceased man on the operation table, an upsetting sight for the average reader. However, the narrative voice calmly explains how “the strange pile of his genitals was shocking but what really got my attention was his chest, split open to a dark red cave” (see figure 2.8). Several scholars have paid attention to the narrator’s description of “the dark red cave” as the ultimate gap in the narrative rather than the uncovered penis, in contrast to Gloeckner’s “Hommage à Duchamp,” where the exposed erect penis is the disturbing focus of attention (see figure 1.9). Chute asserts that “the absence at the center of the body – its gapingness – is what shocks” (Graphic Women 198). However, I would suggest that Alison’s pitch-black silhouette is in fact more gaping than the man’s chest. The nothingness of the black silhouette creates a vacuum, a gap; in contrast to the dark red cave which shows the contours of intestines and the inside of the man’s rib cage, there is literally nothing there. The visual image is certainly shocking, but if the open chest is the source of trauma for this particular memory, as the narrator claims, then the black silhouette shows its effect on the young girl. The absence of the silhouette contradicts the presence of the dark red cave.

The third panel exposes Alison’s face, but, as the narrator explicitly relates, she, like her father, whose face is hidden beneath his facial mask, “studiously
THE MAN ON THE PREP TABLE WAS BEARDED AND FLESHY, JARRINGLY UNLIKE DAD’S USUAL TRAFFIC OF DESSICATED OLD PEOPLE.

THE STRANGE PILE OF HIS GENITALS WAS SHOCKING, BUT WHAT REALLY GOT MY ATTENTION WAS HIS CHEST, SPLIT OPEN TO A DARK RED CAVE.

THERE WAS SOME PRACTICAL EXCHANGE WITH MY FATHER DURING WHICH I STUDIOUSLY BETRAYED NO EMOTION.

HAND ME THOSE SCISSORS OVER BY THE SINK.

IT FELT LIKE A TEST. MAYBE THIS WAS THE SAME OFFHANDED WAY HIS OWN NOTORIously COLD FATHER HAD SHOWN HIM HIS FIRST CADAVER.

OR MAYBE HE FELT THAT HE’D BECOME TOO INURED TO DEATH, AND WAS HOPING TO ELICIT FROM ME AN EXPRESSION OF THE NATURAL HORROR HE WAS NO LONGER CAPABLE OF.
betrayed no emotion” (*Fun Home* 44). Alison’s facial expression remains alarmingly unaffected throughout the whole scene. Furthermore, as we have seen in a previous section, the subsequent page also depicts the same emotionless facial expression on a grown-up Alison. Not only does she hide her emotions from her father, but also from her readers. Rather than verbally describing her feelings about the exposed, deceased man, the narrative voice focuses upon Bruce’s motives for asking her to be present at this specific embalming process.

While the traditional Western graphic narrative is read from left to right horizontally, the layout of this page also suggests a possible vertical structure, reminiscent of the structure we saw in Gloeckner’s “*Fun Things To Do With Little Girls:*” the presence of the open chest, with its exposed ribs and intestines (ultimately repeated in the poster on the wall in the bottom panel) continually keep to the left, while depictions of Alison are kept to the right. One side shows Alison’s act of *looking*, the other depicts the *object* of her gaze. Like the poster echoes the shocking presence of exposed intestines on the left-hand side, Alison’s t-shirt echoes the absence of her silhouette on the right-hand side. The layout of the page creates a rhythm of absence and presence, resonating with the tensions of the comics page, and thus, with Caruth’s notion of “knowing and not knowing” (*Unclaimed Experience* 3). Bechdel clearly links this memory from the embalming room with her father’s impending death, as indicated by the insertion of the panel depicting the phone call that revealed his death on the very next page. Likewise, Chute notes how the thread Bruce is pulling through the deceased man’s chest essentially links the two men literally and figuratively (*Graphic Women* 197).

The actual depiction of Alison’s physical encounter with Bruce’s death occurs a couple of pages later. The top panels depict Alison, with her back towards us, looking at her dead father in the casket. Her face is completely hidden, as it was in her encounter with the deceased man from *figure 2.8*. The narrative voice is not able to express any emotions, except Alison’s doubt that it
His wiry hair, which he had daily taken great pains to style, was brushed straight up on end and revealed a surprisingly receded hairline.

I wasn't even sure it was him until I found the tiny blue tattoo on his knuckle where he'd once been accidentally stabbed with a pencil.

Dry-eyed and sheepish, my brothers and I looked for as long as we sensed it was appropriate.

If only they made smelling salts to induce grief-stricken swoons, rather than snap you out of them.

The sole emotion I could muster was irritation, when the pinch-funeral director laid his hand on my arm consolingly.

Figure 2.9 (Fun Home 52)
actually is her father lying in the casket in front of her. The panel is split in two, splitting not only Bruce’s body but also Alison’s with the infinite limbo of the gutter (see figure 2.9). The left panel expresses disbelief and unrecognizability, whilst the right panel comes to the conclusion that the body has the same ink tattoo that Bruce has. Noticeably, both Alison’s encounter with the deceased bearded man and with her own father resonates with the impossibility of looking and the impossibility of not looking, a paradox which Laub examines in his “An Event Without a Witness” (75 – 92). The left panel exposes the faces of Alison and her brothers as they look at their dead father, only to show that they aren’t really looking. While they stand side by side next to the body of their deceased father, their eyes are visibly turned away, not looking. But as she leaves the room, Alison cannot help but turn around and look. This action is the visual representation of Laub’s paradox, of the “imperative to tell” (78) and “the impossibility of telling” (79); of the impossibility of looking and of not looking. The characters remain silent for the entire page, expressing nothing, the only words present are the words of the narrator: “The sole emotion I could muster was irritation when the pinch-funeral director laid his hand on my arm consolingly” (see figure 2.9).

Alison’s hard struggle in the face of death culminates into a panel towards the end of the fifth chapter, “The Canary Colored Caravan of Death” (a chapter title which in itself indicates the graphic memoir’s preoccupation with death). Bechdel refers to this chapter as her “cartooning manifesto,” suggesting its overall importance (“The Alison Bechdel Interview”). The chapter contains material depicting a whole range of issues such as the emotional isolation caused by creative solitude in the Bechdel family, Bruce and Alison’s conflicting artistic views, Alison’s compulsive issues and numerous maps that in the narrator’s own words became a “mystical bridging of the symbolic and the real, of the label and the thing itself” (Fun Home 147). Apparently, Alison finds a space where the gap between the signifier and the signified is filled in the map from the Wind in the Willows colouring book. Chute links Bechdel’s maps with McCloud’s notion of comics as a procedure of mapping: mapping time into space (McCloud qtd. in
Thus, the medium of the graphic narrative seems to be a space where the endless gap between the label and the thing itself can be resolved. However, the very next page after the panels with maps from *Wind in the Willows* contains a panel that simultaneously challenges this idea and presents Alison’s significant crisis of representation. The page consists of only two large panels, dividing the page equally between them: the top panel depicts Alison and her brothers looking at their cousin who died in a car crash; the bottom panel shows a reproduction of Alison’s diary describing the event (see figure 2.10). The dead boy mirrors Alison; he is a distant cousin “exactly [her] age” (*Fun Home* 147). Bruce is lifting the sheet, revealing the dead boy, while his three children look. Bruce’s unaffected face is the only complete face we see. Alison and her youngest brothers are positioned with their backs towards the readers, keeping their reactions hidden. In a similar manner to the description of the previous embalming scene, the narrative voice blocks any references to subjective emotions and focuses solely upon accurately describing the details of the dead body: “His skin was gray, which gave his bright blond crewcut the effect of yellow tint on a black- and-white photograph” (see figure 2.10). The narrator subtly hints at the penetrating impression the episode has made upon the young Alison by describing the diary entries of that weekend as “almost completely obscured” (see figure 2.10). The diary reports: “We watched cartoons. Dad showed us the dead people. They were cut up and stuff. Mother took us to a party” (see figure 2.10). The narrative voice who throughout the graphic memoir has worked as an interpretative guide remains disturbingly quiet about the event. The next page quickly moves on to narrate Alison’s “recovery” from her compulsive behaviour and her feelings regarding her dead cousin remain unspoken. The page demonstrates, quite literally, the failure of both verbal and visual language in the face of death. As Chute notes, the shape of the sheet that Bruce holds up is reminiscent of the shape of the curvy circumflex etched across Alison’s diary entries (*Graphic Women* 193). Consequently, if the symbol of the curvy circumflex suggests Alison’s suspicion of language’s ability to depict an
DAD EXPLAINED THAT HE HAD DIED FROM A BROKEN NECK.

HIS SKIN WAS GRAY, WHICH GAVE HIS BRIGHT BLOND CREWCUT THE EFFECT OF YELLOW TINT ON A BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPH.

MY DIARY ENTRIES FOR THAT WEEKEND ARE ALMOST COMPLETELY OBSCURED.

Sat. September 18
A.M.
We watched cartoons.
Dad showed us the dead people. They were cut up and stuff.

P.M.
Mother took John to a party.

Sun. September 19
A.M.
We didn't go to church.
John looked at the Sears catalog.
Dad had the funerals today.
Mother went to the funeral home.

Figure 2.10 (Fun Home 148)
objective truth, by integrating the same shape into her panel, Bechdel seems to suggest a distrust of the image’s ability to represent reality. Importantly, the narrator does not explicitly recognise the verbal or the visual repression of Alison’s feelings in this scene. Thus, the scene from figure 2.10 emphasises its clear contrast from the embalming room scene from chapter two (see figure 2.9), in which the narrator openly acknowledges that Alison is repressing her feelings. Is the narrator unaware of the absence of feelings at this moment or is it too painful to even suggest that there is an absence?

Figure 2.11 (Are You My Mother? 282)
Towards the end of *Are You My Mother?*, Bechdel depicts another encounter with death, this time as an adult. After having finished writing *Fun Home*, Alison intends to send a copy of the book to her former therapist, Jocelyn, only to discover that she passed away from a rapid-growing cancer ten months earlier. Alison writes in her diary how she wanted Jocelyn to be her mother after spending only two hours with her (*Are You My Mother?* 51), indicating the strong relationship she immediately felt with her therapist. The panel that depicts Alison after having received the news of Jocelyn’s death is a large panel, taking up three quarters of the page (see figure 2.11). Alison is in her office, staring at the computer screen that has delivered the bad news. She is surrounded by the narrative voice, filling a total of seven white boxes. The white boxes that surround her are in this panel reminiscent of thought bubbles and perhaps suggest that Alison had a lot on her mind at this point. However, none of them reveal what Alison felt about Jocelyn’s death. After years of therapy, Alison still can’t allow her emotions to reach the surface, neither verbally nor visually. Her face, while visible, reveals nothing. By inserting this panel at the very end of *Are You My Mother?*, a moment that essentially expresses Alison’s on-going struggle with expressing her emotions, both verbally and visually, Bechdel makes clear that the crisis of language and the crisis of representation are both continuous struggles in her life. By representing her crisis of language and her crisis of representation, Bechdel is ultimately able to represent the unspeakable of trauma. The next section will continue the work of examining how Bechdel’s work ultimately destabilises the concept of a single reality, of a tangible self, and of the artist’s way towards autonomy.
Part Four: “An intertextual mise-en-abîme”

In *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead highlights repetition, a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice, and intertextuality as key stylistic features that tend to occur in trauma narratives (84). These kinds of stylistic features interrupt the text, by creating gaps and making new connections, as they intrude upon the narrative, “mirror[ing] at a formal level the effects of trauma” (Whitehead 84). The following will examine how Bechdel employs intertextuality as a key feature in her work and the effects of her frequent intertextual comparisons. Ken Parille describes how “autobiography is a record of life once removed from life itself;” it is an objective experience that is filtered through the author’s subjectivity (“Six Observations about Alison Bechdel’s Are You My Mother?”). However, Bechdel’s graphic memoirs do not openly reflect upon this idea of filtering an objective experience through the writer’s subjectivity. Both *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* are extremely personal life narratives. However, as was established in the previous section, Bechdel rarely reveals her personal feelings about the events she describes. Instead, she structures her work around intertextual references of different kinds. Rather than filtering her experiences through her subjectivity, Bechdel employs other texts as tools of interpretation of her trauma. Whitehead explains how “the intertextual novelist can enact through a return to the source text an attempt to grasp what was not fully known or realised in the first instance, and thereby to depart from it or pass beyond it” (90). Noticeably, her words resonate with Caruth’s remarks that the inability to fully witness the event as it occurs seems to be something that inhabits all traumatic experience (*Trauma* 7). Through intertextuality, an opportunity to understand that which “cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition” arises (Felman and Laub 5). With Whitehead’s words in mind, Bechdel’s persistent use of other texts as framework for her own narratives might indicate that the intertextual elements of her text are employed with a kind of therapeutic purpose in mind. However, as the following will demonstrate,
Bechdel’s use of intertextuality in *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* also indicates an urge to interpret and re-interpret with the deconstruction rather than re-affirmation as a result.

In *Are You My Mother?* Bechdel explicitly employs the work of different psychoanalysts such as Freud and Winnicott to shed light on her understanding of herself and her relationship with her mother. Likewise, *Fun Home’s* chapters are each structured around a main text and a main writer, in addition to a continuous stream of other more or less significant references to a range of authors and texts. The overwhelming range of intertextual references range from ancient myths from the old Greece, to lesbian literature, and modernist writers such as James Joyce, Albert Camus and F. Scott Fitzgerald, has gained the attention of numerous scholars such as Ariela Freedman and Ann Cvetkovich. However, I agree to Schlick’s affirmation that “the use of intertextuality [in *Fun Home*] must be read into and against the text’s own signalling of the foundational aporia between language and the real, explored so compellingly in the fifth chapter” (34). While Bechdel’s continual comparison between her father’s life and numerous authors or fictional characters seems like a way to firmly control and to make sense of his life and his death, the actual effect of this work is not affirmation but deconstruction. In fact, by continually drawing parallels between an actual life and fictional characters or the lives of deceased authors, Bechdel’s memoir is destabilised. A significant number of panels make either explicit or implicit references to various kinds of literature. This stream of titles and covers that hover in the background of Bechdel’s narratives have a peculiar effect of suggesting that her story has already been told by another author, in another life.

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The very first page of *Fun Home* illustrates how the presence of Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* suggests that the narrative of an unhappy family is in no manner unique. Furthermore, several of the texts Bechdel includes in her graphic memoir do not seamlessly mirror her lived experience. In the myth of Daedalus and Icarus, Bruce Bechdel is cast as the Daedalus of décor (*Fun Home* 6), Icarus who plummets from the sky (*Fun Home* 4), and the Minotaur that lies beyond the next corner (*Fun Home* 21). In chapter two, Bechdel acknowledges that she doesn’t actually have her father’s copy of “A Happy Death,” and that the highlighted quote which would have suitably explained and made her father’s suicide certain, isn’t highlighted by him but by herself: “I wish I could say I’d accepted his book, that I still had it, that he’d underlined one particular passage” (47). While the idea of Bruce highlighting the quote only days before committing suicide is interesting, the narrator is explicitly aware that this is not the case. The intertext does not correlate with reality. Similarly, the narrator is explicitly aware that the man who rescued her father from the mud as a child was a mailman, yet she chooses to depict him as a milkman: “I know Mort was a mailman, but I always pictured him as a milkman, all in white – a reverse grim reaper” (*Fun Home* 41). Likewise, in *Are You My Mother?* the narrator explicitly admits that she doesn’t actually remember conversations between her and her mother: “I don’t remember the particulars of our play. I’m inventing this dialogue wholesale” (287). Schlick describes *Fun Home* as “both highly and rigidly structured, yet also implicitly critical of its own structuration” (30). When the narrative voice explicitly explains how “[her] parents are most real to [her] in fictional terms,” she immediately contradicts her own statement by claiming that “[perhaps [her] cool aesthetic distance itself does more to convey the arctic climate of [her] family than any particular literary comparison” (*Fun Home* 67).

Generally, the intertexts that together make Bechdel’s recursive, fragmented, strongly controlled narrative structure do not correlate seamlessly to life in the Bechdel family, and the narrator is explicitly aware of this. However, the text’s neat logic is at times so insistent, so convincing, that the danger of either
being completely satisfied with the narrative closure it provides, or overtly critical of its simplification of lived experience, arises (Schlick 31). Bechdel seems to want her experiences to successfully correspond with the intertexts, so that she can control them and find a coherent explanation for the ambiguous bond between herself and her father, their queer sexualities, and to ascertain whether or not there actually was a “cause-and-effect” relationship between Alison’s coming-out and his death shortly afterwards (Fun Home 59).

As was established in the second section, Bechdel’s particular use of closure is significant in her creation of a listener to her testimony. In a testimonial narrative that relies so heavily upon the reader’s ability to make precise connections, the narrative voice, our guide in this fragmented reality, plays an essential role, as is illustrated by the last page of chapter four in Fun Home. The page depicts several photographs of Bruce and Alison (see figure 2.4). The narrative voice explains how the photographs were found in the same box as the one of Roy, suggesting a larger connection between the two. The page is interesting in both its visual connection between the reader and the drawn hands, and in its verbal creation of a connection between Bruce and Alison. The page essentially illustrates how the narrative voice exerts control over the reader’s interpretation of the panels. The narrator describes Bruce as “lissome, elegant” in the picture where he wears a women’s bathing suit and explicitly comments “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” about the other photographs of Bruce and Alison (Fun Home 120). The photographs are verbally and visually juxtaposed, but without the comments from the narrator
WHAT’S LOST IN TRANSLATION IS THE COMPLEXITY OF LOSS ITSELF. IN THE SAME BOX WHERE I FOUND THE PHOTO OF ROY, THERE’S ONE OF DAD AT ABOUT THE SAME AGE.

HE’S WEARING A WOMEN’S BATHING SUIT. A FRATERNITY PRANK? BUT THE POSE HE STRIKES IS NOT MINCING OR SILLY AT ALL.

HE’S LISSOME, ELEGANT.

IN ANOTHER PICTURE, HE’S SUN-BATHING ON THE TARPAULIN ROOF OF HIS FRAT HOUSE JUST AFTER HE TURNED TWENTY-TWO. WAS THE BOY WHO TOOK IT HIS LOVER?

AS THE GIRL WHO TOOK THIS POLAROID OF ME ON A FIRE ESCAPE ON MY TWENTY-FIRST BIRTHDAY WAS MINE?

one would probably read other things into the photographs; I certainly don’t see a “pained grin” in either Bruce or Alison’s face. The narrator interprets the photographs, dictating how the readers should read them as well. The photographs are drawn in a different style from Bechdel’s other drawings, a cross-hatched, seemingly more realistic, yet highly impressionistic style, thus making it difficult for the readers to interpret the details of the photographs themselves. As a result of this, readers have no difficulty in allowing the narrator to interpret the photographs for them, taking control of the interpretation. Like Bruce, Alison seems to want to control her art. The narrator’s description of her father as a man who “used his skilful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not. – That is to say impeccable” (see figure 2.15), might almost have been a description of herself.

![Figure 2.13 (Fun Home 16)](image)

The narrator’s continual stream of intertextual comparisons, that never work seamlessly, are not so different from Bruce’s “skilful artifice” (see figure 2.15). As Chute notes, “The idea of replication — of generation, of reproduction, of repetition-only-maybe-with-a-difference — haunts Fun Home (“Gothic Revival” 36). Many before me have drawn parallels between the characters of Alison and Bruce, their creative artifice and imperative for artistic creation. If Bruce tried to
fill an absence within him with the presence of materialistic beautiful things, then Alison’s continual narrating of narrative upon narrative might also be read as an effort to “fill the emotional gaps.”

In an interview about *Are You My Mother?* Bechdel says: “[there are] so many big obligatory questions that I didn’t touch on in this book. Like, what has it been like for my mother to live with the pain of her husband’s suicide? I can’t ask her that. I can’t even raise that question in the book, because that’s too painful. So in a way the book is constructed around these big gaping absences” (Terzian “Family Matters”). While Gloeckner refuses the silent absence that commonly accompanies trauma by filling her graphic narratives with verbal and visual depictions of different kinds of abuse, Bechdel is filling her narrative not with raw depictions of traumatic experiences, but with other narratives. The most painful moments of Bechdel’s story remain absent. She repeatedly depicts different perspectives on the moments surrounding her father’s death (*Fun Home* 28, 59, 89, 116, 117, 232), but chooses not to represent the actual moment when the truck hits him. Similarly, there are no panels that illustrate Bruce being intimate with other men. The photograph of Roy on the bed (*Fun Home* 100) is the closest thing we get to seeing this side of Bruce. The rest of his story is told through verbal narration rather than images. Noticeably, Bechdel does not refrain from depicting other moments that she did not occur or that she did not witness, thus her decision not to depict these moments must be based upon other reasons. Ultimately, the moments that remain absent in Bechdel’s work are just as revealing as what is present.

By continually constructing stories like a spider web, where every detail is connected to another story, in search of “the perfect comparison,” Bechdel

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12 There are numerous panels depicting the time before Alison was born, especially in chapter three of *Fun Home*. One panel depicts an alternative reality where the truck does not hit Alison’s father (*Fun Home* 59). Another panel depicts an imagined moment where a young Bruce and Helen are walking down the street meeting an alternative Alison as “one of those Eisenhower-era butches” (*Fun Home* 108). Noticeably, Bechdel makes no visual distinctions between her actual memories and her imagined memories, perhaps suggesting her personal attitude towards the concept of truth and reality.
ultimately dismantles her own reality. Schlick employs the words “hall of mirrors” to describe the mechanisms behind the web of intertexts of Fun Home, how its tidy logic of narratives that work in parallels ultimately disrupt the logical of her project, creating an effect of mise-en-abîme (31). Noticeably, Are You My Mother? specifically includes an actual two-page panel of Alison standing in front of a mirror, creating the same effect (see figure 2.14). She becomes both subject and object in the endless row of mirrors: the front page, the first page, the title of the chapter, numerous panels depicting mirrors or her mother looking in the mirror; Are You My Mother? is overflowing with mirrors, thus mirroring its overall effect of as “self-reflexive mise-en-abîme” (243). The narrator seems to acknowledge the possibility of getting stuck in her compulsive need to interpret and re-identify: “In one way, what I saw in those mirrors was the self trapped
inside the self, forever” (see figure 2.15). However, significantly, the narrator also comments: “I am the one whose drive is being thwarted. – And I am the one who is thwarting it” (Are You My Mother? 245).

The previous chapter established the different manners in which Gloeckner’s work purports to re-establish Minnie’s fragmented sense of self. Similarly, Bechdel’s project also seems to be about re-establishing Alison’s autonomy. Both artists make a point of depicting themselves in the process of drawing\(^\text{13}\). Tolmie claims that “self-expression gives you power over your own memory – and over your own self /subject” (xviii). Likewise, Chute notes how the self-portrait at the beginning of “Minnie’s 3rd Love, Or: Nightmare on Polk Street” is a shift in the perspective of the subject/creator and “reminds us of the author’s creative and testimonial agency. Her self-representation is as literally marked by her productive act of drawing” (Graphic Women 67 – 68). Bechdel’s project is not only about re-production, but also about crafting, creating. Ultimately, the panel

\(^{13}\) Examples of panels that depict Minnie or Alison in the act of drawing are found on the following locations: Fun Home: 129-131, 168-171; Are You My Mother? 130-133, 142-144; A Child’s Life: 76, 88; Diary: 175, 203.
below becomes a symbol for Bechdel’s entire work. Bruce and Alison have
switched places, and while the art she produces might not be flawless, the result
is nonetheless striking.

Through a self-reflexive *mise-en-abîme*, the gaps are simultaneously filled
and left opened. The aporia between signifier and signified, the “I think” which
hangs over Bechdel’s narrative, a narrative in which its protagonist is still
troubled by the space between word and meaning, effectively speaks to the
unspeakability of trauma. Thus, Bechdel’s narrative is a reflection of fragmented
memory and of a testimonial narrative in need of a listener. Its depiction of the
ultimate crisis of representation in the face of death, and finally, its
deconstruction of self and of narrative, through a multiplicity and fragmentation
of selves and narratives, completes Bechdel’s impossible task of representing the
unrepresentable. Chute’s claim that Bechdel’s depictions of trauma is powerful
precisely because she “doesn’t claim to fully represent trauma, nor does [she]
sink into an “ethic of the inconsolable, the unrepresentable,” ultimately rings true
(*Graphic Women* 182).
Conclusion

This thesis has explored the different manners in which cartoonists Phoebe Gloeckner and Alison Bechdel employ the comics medium to represent the unreal reality of traumatic experience. My aim has been to show the multiple ways in which different features of the comics medium can be applied to accurately represent traumatic experience.

The two chapters were dedicated to exploring the different ways that each of the authors applies the grammar of the comics medium to enhance our understanding of the different aspects of traumatic experience. I began by examining Gloeckner’s multiple approaches to the (un)representability of sexual abuse in *Diary* and *A Child’s Life*. Through comparison of her two graphic memoirs, I found that each of them shows very different attitudes towards the representation of trauma: sexual abuse is depicted visually and explicitly in *A Child’s Life*, whereas *Diary* generally presents similar topics through verbal narration. Gloeckner’s understanding of the comics medium results in two very different approaches to reach the same goal: ultimately, *A Child’s Life* and *Diary* both demonstrate effective techniques for representing different aspects of the unreal reality of sexual abuse. Bechdel’s graphic memoirs show a different, more implicit approach to representing trauma. Bechdel’s trauma hides in-between the lines on the page, rather than the explicit approach of *A Child’s Life*.

Next, I turned my attention towards the ways in which Gloeckner employs the panels and gutters of a comics page to authentically represent the fragmented quality of traumatic recollection. Through close-reading and close-looking of Gloeckner’s “Fun Things To Do With Little Girls,” I found that the three-page narrative resonates well with Caruth and Felman’s notions about traumatic memory. Gloeckner’s narrative is simultaneously fragmented and sustained. Felman’s notion of traumatic experience as “outside the parameters of “normal” reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time” resonates well with both Gloeckner and Bechdel’s work. With regards to *Fun Home* and *Are You My
Mother?, I found that the fragmented, recursive and non-linear organisation of the graphic memoirs show precisely this collapse of time and space and successfully represents the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. Bechdel’s work is wholeheartedly founded upon this recursive non-linear narrative structure; memories are persistently re-presented and re-framed. While “Fun Things To Do With Little Girls,” shows related attitudes to the visual and fragmented nature of traumatic recollection, the multimodal form of Diary also shows similar features, although its organisation is completely different from A Child’s Life.

Furthermore, I examined the role of the reader with regards to establishing Gloeckner’s work as a testimonial narrative. Through a persistent visual connection between the protagonist and the reader in A Child’s Life and a more verbal connection between narrator and reader in Diary, Gloeckner warrants that her readers acknowledge their important role as listeners to her testimony. I found that Diary’s multi-modal organisation, with its diary entries, poems, illustrations and comic strips, resonates with Felman’s observation of the fragmented character of witnessing (223). Although Bechel’s work also presents itself as testimonial narratives, the tools for creating a listener to her testimony are rather different. I observed how the role of closure becomes a key feature in creating an active listener to Bechdel’s testimony. Her work distinguishes itself from other graphic narratives in its extraordinarily high degree of closure.

Moreover, a close-looking at Alison’s crisis of representation, showed that that the visual and verbal tension of comics were the foundation for representing a crisis of language and a crisis of representation in the face of trauma. By replacing absence with presence, the depicting the crisis of representation, Bechdel challenges the notion that trauma is unspeakable and unrepresentable.

Lastly, I examined the role of intertextuality in Bechdel and the complex relationship between Gloeckner and her avatar and found that the illustrations made by the adult Gloeckner shows, rather than explains, the effects of the split self. The distinct perspectives of Minnie and Gloeckner here find a space where
they can merge. With regards to Bechdel’s use of intertextuality, her continual comparisons between her father’s life and authors or fictional characters may seem like an opportunity to seek affirmation, but eventually carry out the work of deconstruction. On Bechdel’s mission to find “the perfect” comparison, she takes the risk of destabilising the reality of her life.

To write about verbal and visual representations of traumatic experience without discussing the cathartic aspect of writing and drawing seems almost impossible. The notion of writing as a therapeutic tool is exemplified in Køhlert’s “Working It Through,” where he describes how he considers Gloeckner’s Diary to be “a kind of therapeutic manoeuvre as the traumatic past has been sifted through, organized and made to cohere by the subjectivity of its adult author” (139). While this belief might seem persuasive, I find it to be a simplification of reality. Although some survivors of trauma will certainly find relief in writing about their traumatic experience, neither Gloeckner nor Bechdel shows signs of healing through their work. Contrastingly, each of the four graphic narratives ends with either a sense of a sustained pain or with happy endings that are too happy, too complete to be of a convincing quality. Gloeckner explicitly rejects the idea of healing through her work: “Art doesn’t seek a cure. Therapy does. I’m not trying to cure myself with my art. The idea seems ridiculous” (“The Phoebe Gloeckner Interview”). Similarly, Bechdel describes with reference to her family how “[she] had this fantasy that this book [Fun Home] was going to heal us and bring us together. I was going to tell the truth and everything would be out in the open ... That didn’t happen” (“I don’t know why I reveal these things”). Both authors seem to reject the notion of healing through writing. Rather I would like to suggest that creating verbal and visual representations of trauma will generate a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the event. By depicting traumatic experience, I believe the artists achieve a sense of control over their experience. Both authors also include panels that depict themselves in the process of drawing, thus showing the readers the significance of self-expression. Through self-expression, both artists seem to reclaim a sense of subjectivity and autonomy.
My close-looking and close-reading of the four graphic memoirs has revealed some of comics’ specific representational tools, tools that would be difficult if not impossible to recreate in any other known medium. With gutters, panels, verbal, and visual narratives that simultaneously combine and separate thoughts and ideas, conveys a complete narrative, or in many cases communicates a multiplicity of different narratives, layer upon layers of separate stories that together show a medium without limitations. While a few scholars have argued that the literary value and potential of the comics’ medium is no longer up for debate, I cannot help but disagree. Although scholars are beginning to open their eyes to the fascinating world of comics and eliminate embedded notions such as the belief that the medium merely applies to adolescents, there is still a long way to go with people outside of academia. In his introduction to Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*, Edward Said observes how “most adults [...] tend to connect comics with what is frivolous or ephemeral, and there is an assumption that as one grows older they are put aside for more serious pursuits” (ii). Throughout this project I’ve encountered similar attitudes, alongside a strong sense of confusion and bewilderment when describing the essence of my thesis to people outside of my academic field. Many have expressed difficulties in picturing comics as something else than manga, children’s cartoons, or satirical comic strips for adults. However, I strongly believe that when introduced to graphic narratives such as *Maus, Waltz with Bashir, Palestine, and Persepolis*, in addition to the work of Phoebe Gloeckner and Alison Bechdel, readers will immediately notice the medium’s potential to relate important life narratives in remarkably innovative ways. Graphic memoirs such as the ones above might play a significant role in expanding the target group of comics. Many of the comics that have made it to the best seller lists, have been precisely autobiographical comics. When graphic memoirs such as *Maus, Fun Home* and *Persepolis* reach larger audiences, a possible side effect of this is that the average person will be more

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14 See Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven’s “Introduction” (768).
open to reading other kinds of graphic narrative. Today, there is a new wave of popular comics, and while many of them belong within the superhero genre, maybe it will also open new doors for the other genres of graphic narrative? Hopefully, this thesis will participate in the work of spreading knowledge and awareness of the endless opportunities of the comics medium. Edward Said describes his own discovery of the possibilities of comics in these words:

“In ways that I still find fascinating to decode, comics in their relentless foregrounding – far more, say, than film cartoons or funnies, neither of which mattered much to me – seemed to say what couldn’t otherwise be said, perhaps what wasn’t permitted to be said or imagined, defying the ordinary processes of thought, which are policed, shaped and re-shaped by all sorts of pedagogical as well as ideological pressures. I knew nothing of this then, but I felt that comics freed me to think and imagine and see differently” (ii).

The feeling that the unrestrained medium of comics allows one to think, imagine, and see differently is certainly something with which I can relate. Gloeckner and Bechdel’s graphic memoirs involve themselves in important discussions of traumatic recollection, the role of self-representation in autobiography, the unreal reality of trauma and the (un)representability of traumatic experience. Without giving explicit responses to these debates, they expose and explore the complexities within them. While traditional literary devices may not be suited for rendering traumatic events, Whitehead argues that “the more experimental forms emerging out of postmodernist and postcolonial fiction offer the contemporary novelist a promising vehicle for communicating the unreality of trauma” (87). The comics medium offer precisely the promising vehicle for communicating the unreal reality of traumatic experience.
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