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Readable Space and Practice

OCD in *Fun Home* and in *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*

Sigrid Thomsen (Wien)

Introduction

In Alison Bechdel's 2006 comic *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* and Justin Green's 1995 comic *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, we see the protagonists scribble over their own writing, doing incantations and painstakingly weaving their way around buildings so as to protect themselves from so-called »penis rays«. These instances point us to what unites these two otherwise very different works: Both autobiographical comics discuss young people navigating OCD, and this focus on coping strategies is explicitly noted by both Bechdel and Green. Bechdel starts her chapter on OCD with the line »My actual obsessive-compulsive disorder began when I was ten« (*Fun Home*, 135) and Green prefaces his *Binky Brown Sampler* with a foreword saying: »O, my readers, the saga of Binky Brown is not intended solely for your entertainment, but also to purge myself of the compulsive neurosis which I have served since I officially left Catholicism on Halloween, 1958« (*Binky Brown Sampler*, 10). Though the two kinds of OCD depicted in both comics are quite different, they do share some characteristics. OCD, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, »is a common, chronic and long-lasting disorder in which a person has uncontrollable, reoccurring thoughts (obsessions) and behaviors (compulsions) that he or she feels the urge to repeat over and over« (*National Institute of Mental Health*, n.p.). In *Binky Brown*, the disorder appears mostly in the form of obsessions, namely uncontrollable visions of penis rays, and constitutes the main focus of the work. In *Fun Home*, meanwhile, the disorder consists mostly of compulsions related to writing and counting and is portrayed as merely one aspect of Alison's childhood.¹

In this paper, I will analyze the ways the comics (*Fun Home* and *Binky Brown*) and the types of OCD depicted are spatial and creative practices, as they involve negotiating the relation between the interior and the exterior, between the body and other exterior objects, and between words and what they signify. After discussing OCD and comics in broader terms, I

will first look at *Fun Home* before discussing *Binky Brown* in order to compare the depiction of OCD in these two works. If, as Doel and Segrott argue, »[t]he problem that faces those who endure OCD [...] is that sometimes life does not slip into place, but that it slips out of place« (Doel/Segrott 2004, 611), comics is perhaps more fitted than any other medium to show some of the places where life slipped out of place: Because of its simultaneity of images and words and the placing of panels right next to each other, comics can depict the places where the inside of one's mind and the exterior world don't easily fit together. This is the case when the OCD alters one's perception of outside events, and when the minutiae of daily life is punctured by flashes of obsessive thoughts.

Space in Comics

Tensions between the outer and the inner are a characteristic strength of comics even when it doesn't deal with OCD. As Harry Naylor, a somewhat obnoxious character in Daniel Clowes' *Ice Haven*, states,

While prose tends toward pure ›interiority,‹ coming to life in the reader's mind, and cinema gravitates toward the ›exteriority‹ of experiential spectacle, perhaps ›comics,‹ in its embrace of both the interiority of the written word and the physicality of image, more closely replicates the true nature of human consciousness and the struggle between private self-definition and corporeal ›reality‹ (Clowes 2005, 4).

At least since Descartes, this tension of interiority and exteriority has figured prominently in Western thought, and that comics can do this tension justice is, as Naylor says, one of the medium's general advantages. Accordingly, comics have often been discussed in spatial terms – in »The Architecture of Comics», Catherine Labio writes about the »architectural unconscious of the comics page«, arguing that »[t]his architectural precedence [...] turns the page into an identifiable and measurable space« (Labio 2015, 317) for the reader. This spatial aspect of comics is linked to its depiction of time: In *Anatomie des Comics*, Stephen Packard makes the case that time can only be depicted in comics through space (cf. Packard 2006, 180).

Space, and how bodies move through it, are important aspects both of Alison's and Binky's OCD and of the comics which depict it. For those affected by OCD, »the relations between the embodied self and an affective environment« (Doel/Segrott 2004, 609) have to be constantly renegotiated and come to terms with; the body has to find its place among the invisible substances and the threatening rays that the OCD conjures up. Many of the compulsions depicted in *Fun Home* and *Binky Brown* are contingent on the body. Comics, too, is related to embodiment, as numerous scholars have argued both about comics in general and about *Fun Home* in particular. Firstly, a comic bears the imprint of the artist's

body – every artist has their own style, and in conjunction with coloring and lettering, looking at comics one is reminded of the different hands – and therefore bodies – that have contributed to it. In *Graphic Women*, Hillary Chute claims that, »[c]omics is largely a hand-drawn form that registers the subjective bodily mark on the page; its marks are an index of the body« (Chute 2011, 112). Secondly, while prose describes bodies, leaving the reader to imagine them as they wish, comics *depict* bodies. While some of the embodiment may be left to the imagination, since the reader is free to imagine a comic character as life-size and three-dimensional, there is already a version of a body, whole unto itself, on the page. As Warhol-Down writes,

[t]he images of the wide-eyed little girl, the grimacing teenager, the depressed college student [...] correspond to what in prose narrative would be called Alison the character, but in their pen-and-ink materiality they exist independently of what we mean when we talk about characters in prose texts (Warhol 2011, 3-4).

Thirdly, and not insignificantly, in many cases comics are still read as physical objects, thereby including the reader in an embodied relationship between the artist(s), the comic and the reader. In *Fun Home*, this is especially marked on page 100, where Alison’s hand is in the left-hand corner of the page, just where the reader’s hand most likely is, holding a photo of her father’s lover, and Alison’s babysitter, Roy. Here, Alison’s drawn hand and the reader’s overlap, holding the photo of Roy together (see fig. 1). In *Comics Form and Narrating Lives*, Chute writes that,

»if comics is about mapping, it is also about bodies – about locating them in space and time« (Chute 2011, 112), arguing elsewhere that *Fun Home* is »a profoundly bodily book« (Chute 2010, 195). The artist’s hand and the comic character’s body are entangled and fixed on the page, which in all likelihood is held, and further fixed in space and time, in the reader’s hands.

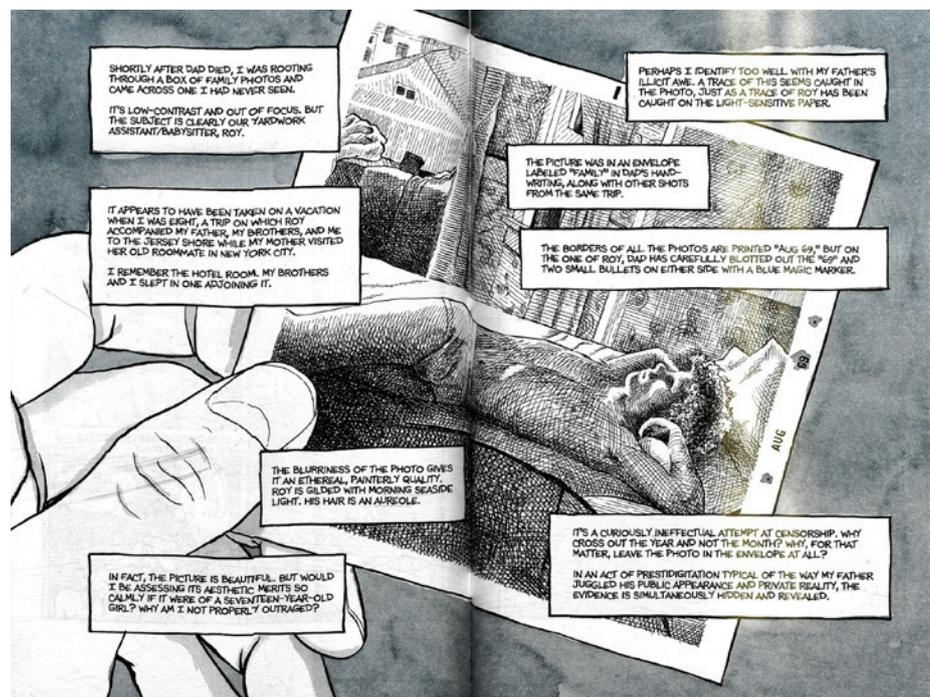


Fig. 1: The double-page hints at the reader holding the book (*FH*, 100-101).

Creative Strategies in OCD Behavior and Comics

OCD and comics both involve and necessitate creativity from those who perform them. That this is the case in comics hardly needs to be said; for OCD this is a less obvious point to make. In *Disturbing Geography: Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder as Spatial Practice*, Marcus A. Doel and Jeremy Segrott argue that »whilst the disorder [of OCD] produces intense emotions of anxiety, fear and discomfort, it also frequently engenders creative forms of action« (Doel/Segrott 2004, 609). They go on to elaborate that compulsions are »creative in the sense that they compel the self to take some form of overt, covert or mental action« (Doel/Segrott 2004, 602). In *Fun Home* and *Binky Brown*, Bechdel and Green portray the creative mental and physical actions that their protagonists Alison and Binky, respectively, have to perform in order to gain momentary release from their OCD. In doing so, Bechdel and Green add another creative layer to their engagement with OCD: They depict the creativity of OCD via the creativity of comics.

Autobiography and the Problem of Author Psychology

In writing about an autobiographical comic such as *Fun Home*, there is a certain danger to descend into ruminations about the author's psyche, especially in the context of a psychological disorder such as OCD. This I want to avoid. But it is nonetheless important to keep the autobiographic layering in mind where it plays a role, such as in the juxtaposition of Alison at different stages of her life. In »The Canary-Colored Caravan of Death«, Bechdel switches between drawing college-aged Alison shortly before her father's death and young Alison struggling with OCD. Not only does this layering of depictions of Alison at different stages in her life point toward an adult Alison (mirroring Bechdel's own experiences), but it also hints at an underlying theme of *Fun Home*, and of this chapter in particular: Alison becoming an artist, which is portrayed through her engagement with literature and her own drawing and journal-writing as a child.

One manifestation of Alison's OCD is that she draws carets over her own writing in order to signify her existential uncertainty as to whether what she has just written is true. In order to depict these journal entries in the comic, Bechdel painstakingly recreates her younger self's diary entries: Not only the meaning of the words but, more importantly, their shape, their curves and tilts, her own handwriting from decades before (see fig. 2).

Alison draws the carets in order to mark her epistemological uncertainty. And Bechdel, too, drew carets over the words in the writing of the comic – this time not out of any compulsive fear, but in order to *re-inhabit* this fear. Much has been written about Bechdel's reinscribing and reembodying of her own past. In the diaries, »Alison's handwritten trace [...] is a mark of the (former) presence of her subjective body« (Kashtan 2013, 96), to which is

The following shows how the comics *Fun Home* and *Binky Brown* represent OCD as something that is not only superficially spatial due to its necessarily spatial depiction in comic panels, but spatial in complex ways which make it *necessary* for it to be depicted in a medium that does not rely on words alone.

Fun Home

In *Fun Home*, OCD appears most explicitly in Chapter 5, »The Canary-Colored Caravan of Death«. In this chapter, Alison likens her family home to »an artists' colony. We ate together, but otherwise were absorbed in our separate pursuits. And in this isolation, our creativity took on an aspect of compulsion« (*FH*, 134). In the very next panel, she switches the focus: From her family to herself, and from something with a hint of compulsion to an illness: »My actual obsessive-compulsive disorder began when I was ten« (*FH*, 135). As Barounis writes, »Alison's OCD is presented to the reader as a lived experience, interwoven into the mundane rituals of everyday life« (Barounis 2016, 145), and the next few panels show these rituals and their accompanying compulsions: Her compulsive counting; her feeling that »odd numbers and multiples of thirteen were to be avoided at all costs« (*FH*, 135); her difficulty in crossing thresholds due to her having to »tabulate the number of edges of flooring« (*FH*, 135) she sees there, »[t]he same convoluted and multi-layered interiors that serve her father's need for concealment threaten[ing] to paralyse Alison« (Lydenberg 2012, 64). Next, we learn about »the invisible substance that hung in doorways, and that, I soon realized, hung like swags of drapery between all solid objects« (*FH*, 135). In the first panel on the next page, Alison is walking towards the school. At first glance, nothing about the panel seems unusual, but then we see that Alison's hand is outstretched at an odd angle: »This [the substance] had to be gathered and dispersed constantly, to keep it away from my body – to avoid in particular inhaling or swallowing it« (*FH*, 136). Other panels depict her compulsion to kiss her stuffed animals goodnight, or to align her shoes perfectly and put her clothes on in the right order. All of these practices can be summed up in »Life had become a laborious round of chores« (*FH*, 137). Describing her obsession as chores alludes to the domestic space her rituals take place in. Alison's compulsive chores make the space of the house habitable.

Alison's relationship to space is also mediated through her relationship to the objects around her: It is the way they are positioned that she finds jarring and even unbearable. It is this arrangement of objects in space that determines whether, and how, she can move through that space. As she is constantly counting, everyday objects gain additional meaning by being connected to a numerical system in which odd numbers and multiples of thirteen are to be avoided. The edges of flooring in the threshold have to be an even number so that she can pass, and she has to keep including additional subdivisions in her counting until the

number is even. Alison has developed a heightened awareness for these details in the objects around her; the threshold necessarily looks different to her because it is so visible and so closely looked at, and an odd number of plates is of a different visual quality than an even number of plates. Accordingly, it looks different for the reader as Alison zooms in closer. In the panel in which we see Alison's feet standing in front of the threshold, we see exactly what she would see looking down. In the next panel, only the tips of her shoes are visible, along with the panel; within that panel, Bechdel overlays the threshold with a magnifying glass, which shows part of the paneling in even more detail. It would be physically impossible for Alison to look at the threshold so closely unless she bent down, of which we see no indication in the panel, but by showing us the threshold with gradually more detail, Bechdel is drawing us into Alison's altered perception of objects due to the OCD: It is not enough to look at an object just once, or even twice, in order to feel certain about its properties and the OCD-required response to it; its details demand oft-repeated and vigilant attention.

CROSSING THRESHOLDS BECAME A TIME-CONSUMING PROCEDURE SINCE I HAD TO TABULATE THE NUMBER OF EDGES OF FLOORING I SAW THERE.

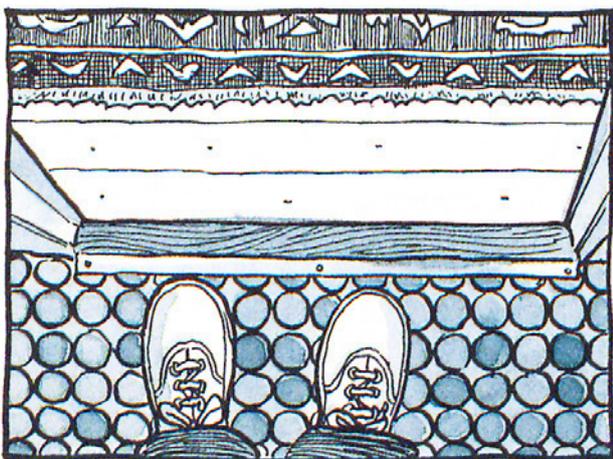


Fig. 3: Alison in front of the threshold (*FH*, 135).

IF THESE FAILED TO ADD UP TO AN EVEN NUMBER, I'D INCLUDE ANOTHER SUBDIVISION, PERHAPS THE SMALL GROOVES IN THE METAL STRIP.

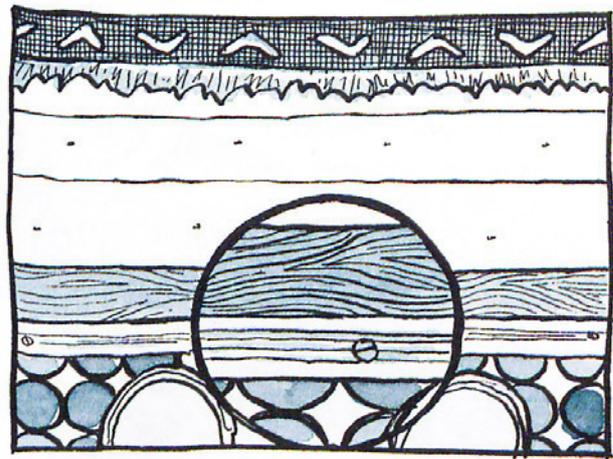


Fig. 4: Alison zooms in (*FH*, 135).

Her type of OCD also changes the spatial reality of her world and introduces new objects into it: Alison sees all the things she's always seen, but in addition, she starts to experience the »invisible substance« (*FH*, 135) hanging between these objects: »Then came the invisible substance that hung in doorways, and that, I soon realized, hung like swags of drapery between all solid objects« (*FH*, 135). This leads her to visibly react to the substance by attempting to locate it with her hand, to shield herself from it and disperse it, thus confounding those around her by altering the visual reality of their world, too. When Alison can't disperse the »noxious substance« (*FH*, 136) to her satisfaction or is unable to »successfully

navigate a doorway« (*FH*, 135), she has to recite an incantation of her invention, and, if needed, repeat the incantation with accompanying hand gestures. The linguistic status of this incantation is dubious. In a panel on page 136, it is written within Alison's speech bubble, but as a reader we are not able to decipher it. The arcane words are beyond our understanding; the lines clearly resemble writing, but its content is not accessible to us. The bodily performed incantation, however, renders visible what has been illegible. What had been an odd, inconspicuous gesture on her way to school becomes a wiggling of both hands while doing an incantation, prompting one of her brothers to call out, »MOMM! She's doin' it!« (*FH*, 136). In her experience of her OCD, Alison cannot distinguish between the significance of the objects present at the table and the substance that she sees. In *Fun Home*, which depicts the world from Alison's point of view in some panels but not in others, the substance is paradoxical: The reader does not see the substance, but does see Alison's reaction to it, her hand raised, her expression unreadable. While in the preceding panels, the reader sees Alison's shoes by the threshold from her point of view, in this panel the reader sees Alison as if standing across from her. The comic switches between showing the reader what it is like to live with this set of compulsions and showing what it is like to live with someone experiencing them.

Not just in Alison's mind but in Bechdel's illustration in the comic, the substance is complexly linked to the space and objects around it. On page 137, Alison has drawn a border around her between the two poles of a swing set in order to ward off the invisible substance. The attempt is unsuccessful: »(After I cleared it away, the invisible substance would immediately replenish itself)« (*FH*, 137). The border visually mirrors both the jump rope in the background and the swing set's chains. But it is clearly a visual rendering of something Alison sees and feels rather than a realistic representation of an observable phenomenon. As such we are only one step away from filling in the gaps, as it would be possible to take up a pencil and draw the substance where Alison sees it.

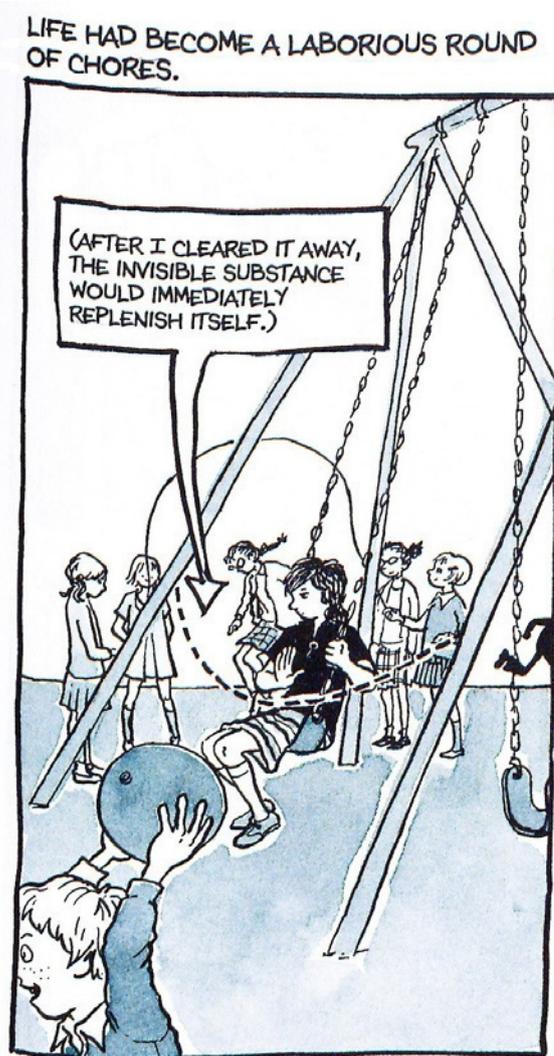


Fig. 5: Alison imagines the substance's reach (*FH*, 137).

Though it is impossible for us to see the substance, it becomes tempting to look for it in the pictures. The whiteness around objects that is characteristic of Alison Bechdel's style, in particular, can now suddenly be read as part of the substance. This paradoxical status of the substance – it doesn't occupy space but influences how Alison moves through space; we don't see it but we see the line Alison has drawn to keep it at bay – encourages the reader to look closely at the panels – and at »the white, emptied-out gutter spaces« (Chute 2010, 180) – to see where the substance might be, thus drawing us into Alison's experience while also showing us gaps in our empathizing with her.

In the panel in which we see Alison's hands arranging her two shoes, much of what I've said about comics and OCD comes together. In the gutter above the panel, it says, »It took several painstaking minutes to line up my shoes exactly, so as to show neither one preference.« Superimposed on each shoe is a textbox, one which says, »(The left one was my father.)« and one which says, »(The right one was my mother.)« (FH, 137).

Firstly, as a compulsion, this is one of the »creative practices and complex interactions with people and objects« (Doel/Segrott 2004, 605) that allows Alison to release some tension from the relationship that she has to her mother and father. Secondly, it negotiates the space between inner and outer, as an inner situation is turned into an outer, physical situation: the situation of having to arrange the shoes. The shoes serve as stand-ins for her mother and father in this instant,

and the arranging of the shoes becomes a metaphor for her relationship with her parents. Thirdly, it is about Alison's body. As Doel and Segrott write, »Living with OCD is a profound illustration of such a conception of the body as an articulation of affective relations. One's being-in-the-world is forcefully felt« (Doel/Segrott 2004, 609). It is her body that is arranging the shoes, and that is therefore also arranging her relationships to her respective parent. All of this applies just as much to Bechdel's depiction of it in this panel. The depiction is creative rather than, say, statistical, as she is turning her autobiographical experience into a panel in a graphic novel, turning it into literature and art. It is spatial because we are dealing

IT TOOK SEVERAL PAINSTAKING MINUTES TO LINE UP MY SHOES EXACTLY, SO AS TO SHOW NEITHER ONE PREFERENCE.

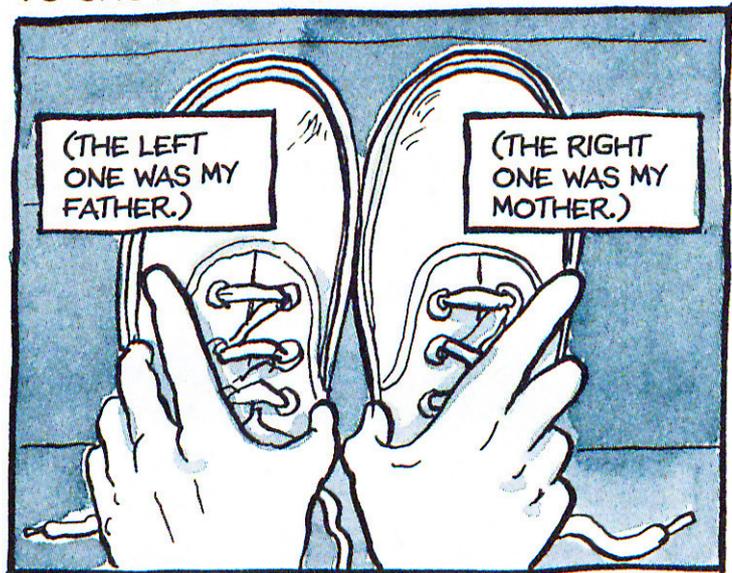


Fig. 6: Alison's shoes are metaphors for her parents (FH, 137).

with a panel on a page in a physical book, and because they take up physical, touchable space on this page. It is also still about Bechdel's body – there's »the presence of the body, through the hand, as a mark in the text« (Chute 2008, 457), as she is making this panel and simultaneously, inevitably, inscribing herself and her body in it.

Alison's compulsions are a quest for precision. Each night, she kisses every one of her stuffed animals good night, »and not just in a perfunctory way« (*FH*, 137). The panel shows us Alison's bedroom, in which she is bending over her trunk full of stuffed animals, with her eyes closed, almost as if in prayer, and tenderly kissing the top of a stuffed elephant's head. In the middle of the panel, there is a textbox that says: »Though it verges on the bathetic, I should point out that no one had kissed me good night in years« (*FH*, 137). This sentence not only retroactively explains why Alison compulsively kisses her stuffed animals, but also stages Alison as the mother, the stuffed elephant as the child. Alison is here enacting a scene missing from her own life. The comic's »immediate visual ›all-at-onceness« (Chute 2010, 183) enables us to see these things alongside each other: First, the tender scene between Alison and her toy, then, the explanation for this compulsion, and finally, the reader might look at the same scene between Alison and the toy again, this time with added knowledge. This back and forth mirrors memory, as our memories become layered with explanations and future memories over time. This ›explanation« is not part of young Alison's experience as she kisses the stuffed elephant, but it is knowledge provided by the older narrative instance's self-reflexive comment, making *Fun Home* also about »the process of memory« (Chute 2006, n.p.). While these different narrative and temporal levels are clearly delineated – both by the space of the gutter and by the temporal marking of the individual comic panel, the two strategies for conveying temporal differences that Lukas Wilde mentions in »Was unterscheiden Comic-›Medien?« (cf. Wilde 2014, 39) – they are placed alongside each other, which creates an impression of simultaneity: Looking back onto this scene, its content cannot be separated from the narratorial comment's analysis.

The compulsions most linked to precision and to which most space is given in *Fun Home* might be those related to diary-writing. One of Alison's main compulsions is based on the written word. During her »obsessive-compulsive spell« (*FH*, 140), she begins a diary, in which the phrase »I think« soon starts appearing in between her sentences. This later devolves into blots, and later becomes a curvy caret,³ »a sort of amulet, warding off evil from my subjects« (*FH*, 142). Similarly, as in the case with the ›noxious substance«, what works so well in the medium of comics here is the layers which are afforded by the simultaneity of text and image, and by the simultaneity of several images on one page. Alison Bechdel recreates her younger self's handwriting, which at first fills a panel: »It was pretty warm out. I got out a Hardy Boy Book. Christian threw sand in John's face. He started to cry. I took him in. We went« (*FH*, 141). This first panel gives us the impression of seeing a young Alison unburdened with anxiety. Triggered by an »epistemological crisis« (*FH*, 141) – how is she supposed to know whether the things she writes are »absolutely, objectively true?« (*FH*, 141) – Alison starts to add »I think« to

her diary entries, in small, nearly illegible letters. These are visually highlighted in the panels of *Fun Home*: there is a blank circle-shaped area around them. This circle is the absence of printed color on the page of the book as opposed to the greenish color that is used to signify the depiction of pages in Alison’s journal. They serve as spotlights for the reader’s eye: What is important to note in this scene of writing is not the words written per se but a spatial practice that seeks to alter what has been written. As this practice changes – biographically over time, and in the comic from panel to panel – there is no further need for this ›spotlight‹: Alison ›fortif[ies]‹ (*FH*, 142) the words ›I think‹ until they change into ›blots‹, no longer legible and no longer a strictly linguistic signifier. Over time, Alison’s untroubled diary entries become disfigured by the caret she invented to ward off evil. As a physical person in the world, she can protect herself against the ›noxious substance‹ by dispersing it with her hand; when she writes, she can ward off the evil that might come with writing something not completely accurate by drawing a caret on it. Seeing the panel with her diary entries, there’s a juxtaposition of the clear, crisp writing in the gutters and in the panels on one hand and the child-like scrawls on the other, but in a next step there’s also a juxtaposition of the happy-enough childish scrawls and the huge carets marring individual words and entire pages. Again, the practice demanded by the OCD is evolving: The caret that first serves to simplify the blotted ›I think‹, thereby creating a kind of meta sign system, soon starts to impair legibility once again. ›In September of my obsessive-compulsive year, there was a terrible accident on route 150‹ (*FH*, 147), then an otherwise empty panel filled only with words: ›One of the victims was a distant cousin of mine, a boy exactly my age‹ (*FH*, 147). This panel of meticulously lettered script is starkly opposed to the recreation of young Alison’s diary: In the gutter just above these panel depicting entries for September 18 and September 19, it says, ›My diary entries for that weekend are almost completely obscured‹ (*FH*, 148). The simple caret sign has become a surface again. On the one hand, the surface of these carets obscures the written word, but it’s also the site of Alison’s anxieties, as the surfaces mark of what is not to be harmed: ›We‹, ›Dad‹, ›people‹, ›mother‹, ›John‹, ›church‹, curiously also ›is‹ and ›dead‹, and not ›party‹ or ›funeral‹ and ›funeral home‹.

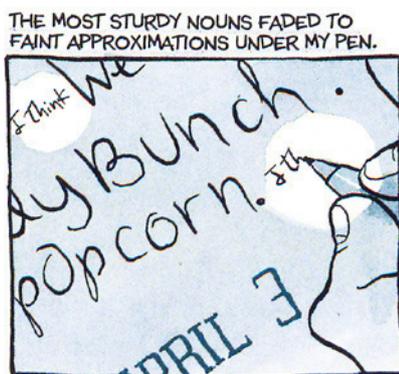


Fig. 7: ›I think‹ (*FH*, 141).

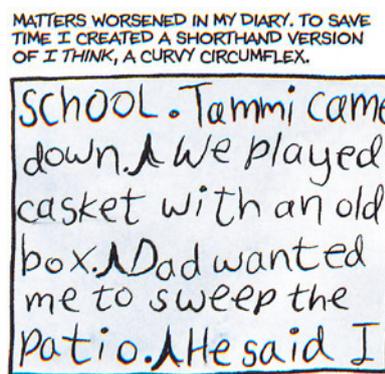


Fig. 8: Small carets (*FH*, 142).

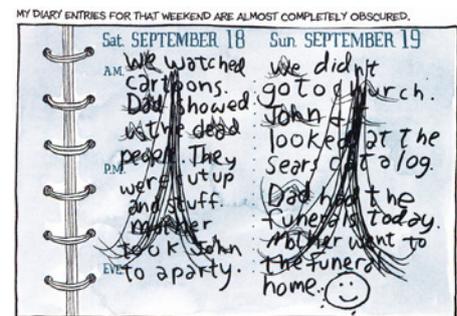


Fig. 9: Overpowering carets (*FH*, 148).

Alison’s OCD ends in a way befitting its depiction: with panels. She starts to dictate her journal entries to her mother so that she won’t be tempted to draw caretts, and later sets up a wall calendar where she sets herself »deadlines by which to abandon specific compulsions« (FH, 149), interlaced with encouragements: »Do English workbook out of order« and, »Don’t worry. You’re safe« (FH, 149). The individual days on the wall calendar are highly suggestive of panels both visually and in their functioning as individual, but linked, moments in time and space. These panels within a panel signify the end of Alison’s obsessive-compulsive disorder. They hint at the spatial re-ordering that is an integral part of OCD and of comic-making, but they also show the difference between a rearranging of space that is a helpful coping mechanism and one that perpetuates it: While counting plates until the number is even made the moment bearable without changing anything about the underlying pull of the OCD, Alison has here found a way to use the spatiality of her OCD against the disorder. The highly legible entries in the wall calendar are juxtaposed with two of Allison’s almost illegible diary entries just one page before. Whereas these latter entries bear Allison’s scribbled caret and are meant to doubly preserve the events they describe – first as memories by writing them down, then as uncertain truths by drawing over them–, the new ones point to a future to come. Filling these rectangles with writing fundamentally changes for Allison once it does not happen in retrospect but directed toward the future. This happens within a new spatial order which is the structure of a calendar whose pages cover an entire month, as opposed to the calendars that have pages for one or two days respectively (FH 148-149). This new spatiality produces an effect of relieve in Allison’s constant struggle with OCD.

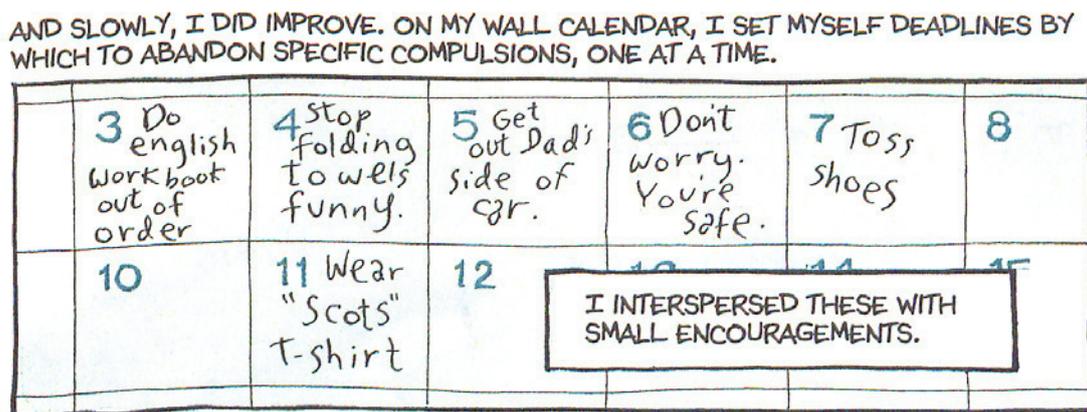


Fig. 10: Alison’s calendar is reminiscent of panels (FH, 149).

Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary

While Alison’s OCD is depicted as mainly taking place in the medium of pictures and pens and emerges out of the family being an »artist’s colony« where everyone is busy with their own com-

pulsions, Binky's OCD plays out differently. Early on Binky, who grows up in a repressed Catholic environment, starts thinking about penises at length and comparing his penis to the other boys' penises in the locker room. His shame about these thoughts only serves to intensify them, and soon two things start to happen: Firstly, he starts to see penises everywhere, and secondly, he starts to see the rays these ›penises‹ are emitting. The transformation of objects starts when his rubber bumper guard suddenly morphs, before his very eyes, into a penis. Here we see a similar process at work as in *Fun Home*: Binky's OCD alters the visual reality of his world, and the new visual reality is just as ›real‹ to him as the old one even though he knows that it's impossible for things to suddenly transform. The comic's panel structure replicates this equal footing of the real and the OCD-induced visual impression: For the reader, the bumper-guard-as-bumper-guard and the bumper-guard-as-penis are placed alongside each other much as they are for Binky.



Fig. 11: An everyday object morphs into a penis before Binky's eyes (BB, 33).

Binky confesses these ›sinful‹ thoughts to a priest, but when the priest is understanding, Binky seeks another priest so as »to make sure beyond the shadow of a doubt that he was completely guiltless...« (BB, 34) (Like Alison, he has no tolerance for doubt). The second priest compounds Binky's guilt, exacerbating his OCD: Now, he starts to see even his fingers as penises emitting rays.

While this changes the visual and bodily reality of Binky's life, in a next step, it forces Binky to rethink the geography around him.

Binky doesn't know how to move around in the world anymore: No matter where he turns,

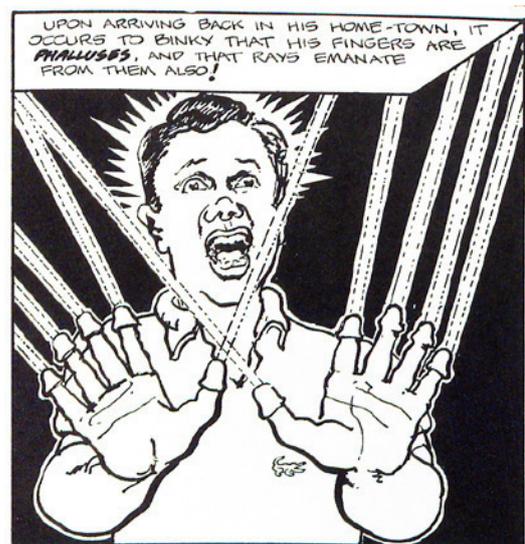


Fig. 12: Binky's own fingers become penises (BB, 36).

the penis rays are contaminating places of worship around him. »Where can I go? What can I do? There must be hundreds of statues n' churches churches [sic] in the Chicago-land area! / No matter which way I turn (except when I'm facing towards Lake Michigan) the rays have gotta constantly intersect th' forbidden stuff!« (*BB*, 42). The penis rays are a result of Binky's strictly Catholic upbringing. Binky's internalized guilt seems to break out into the open (albeit an openness that only he can see) in the form of penis rays. But Binky's Catholic guilt remains, and so the worst thing for the penis rays to do is to touch places of worship and other religiously significant »forbidden stuff«.

Green puts the reader in a strikingly similar position to Binky, as he is asking us to read a book in which some pages consist of nothing but penises. He asks us to acknowledge all of these penises while also seeing the rest of the page despite being distracted or disoriented by their sheer number. The reader has to do what Binky is depicted as doing: Binky has to navigate a world that is almost hidden from view behind the penises and the rays they emit, and the reader has to navigate a page on which penises are screaming for her attention. We have to account for these penises and what they tell us about Binky's state of mind, but we have to dodge them at the same time, and in doing so we are sharing in a version of Binky's struggle.

The OCD forces Binky to remap his surroundings under these new circumstances. In *Fun Home*, obsessions like the ›noxious substance‹ change how Alison interacts with her immediate surroundings; for Binky it happens on a larger scale: He has to think not only of the churches he is walking past, but of the entire region around him, since the penis rays are potentially endless in their reach. The comic depicts the ubiquitous and pervasive nature of the rays: Though they don't seem to penetrate objects, their mere grazing of something pollutes it, which thereby enhances the shame that triggered the rays in the first place. The comic is unable to show the rays reaching the lakes and towns around Binky, which makes the potential scope as impossible to fathom for the reader as it is for Binky. In a similar way to Alison, Binky turns to an incantation as a last resort when remapping his surroundings fails: »Noyatin«. Binky's preoccupation with penises makes him feel so guilty that he starts exclaiming, »Not sin!«, which later becomes »No sin!« And finally »noyatin«, which is »invoked by the flustered lad at the drop of a hat, dozens of times every hour« (*BB*, 38). Green places the thought bubbles with »noyatin« on the same level as other characters' speech bubbles, as if showing Binky engaged in conversation. Ultimately, »noyatin« serves only to further Binky's isolation. In the end, he performs a kind of exorcism by sitting down in the midst of several Virgin Mary figurines and has his penis rays destroy them, and it is this act which frees him from his OCD.⁴ Like Alison, he lets go of his compulsions by embracing the spatial aspect of his OCD: If his penis rays are everywhere, he might as well use them to destroy the thing that made them so potent in the first place.

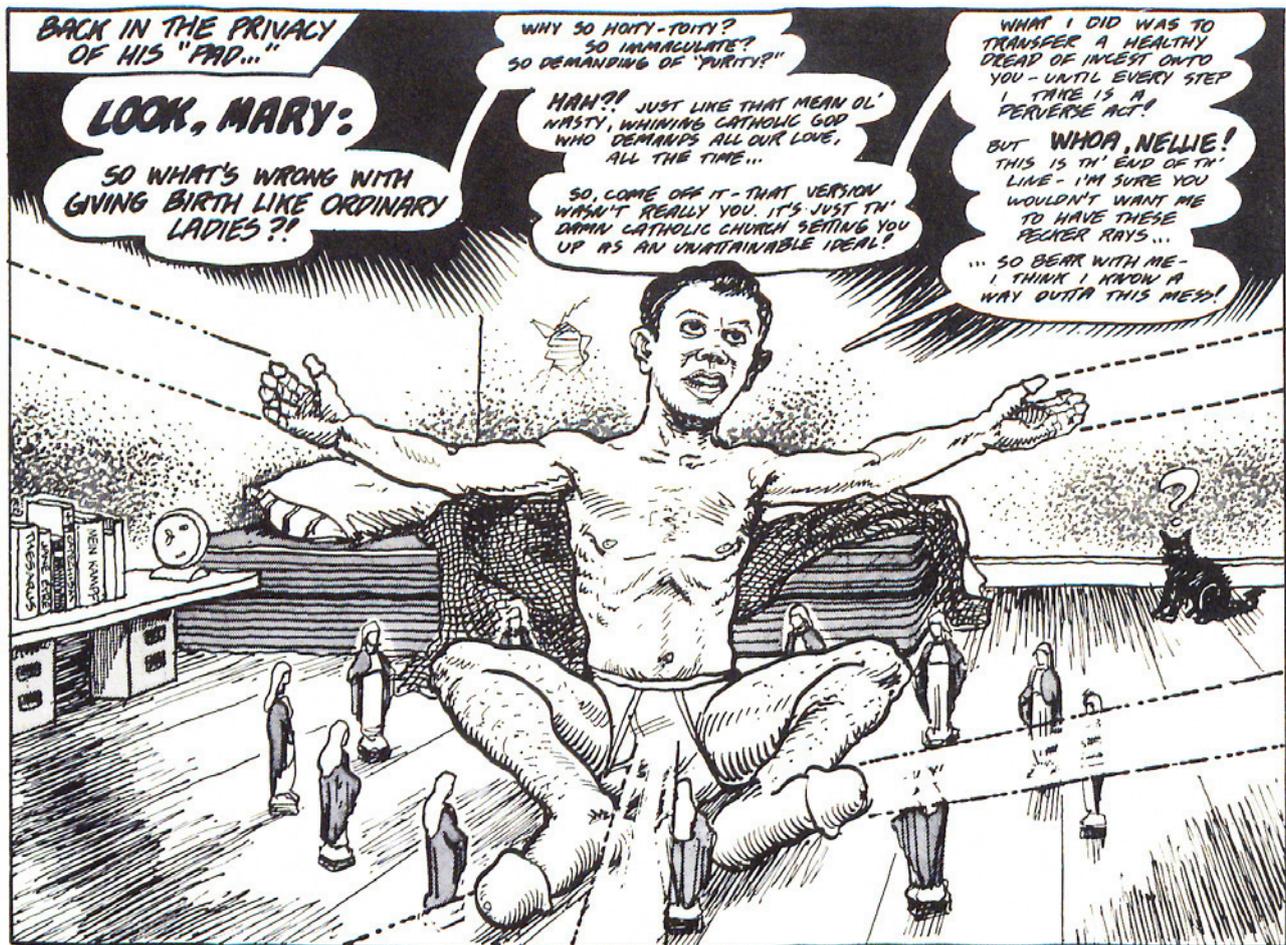


Fig. 13: Binky performs an exorcism (BB, 48).

Conclusion

Alison's OCD is just one aspect of her childhood and adolescence portrayed in *Fun Home*, along with her sexual coming-of-age and her relationship to her father, while OCD is the main theme in *Binky Brown*. This does not detract from the intensity of OCD in *Fun Home*; particularly in »The Canary-Colored Caravan of Death«, OCD is just as dominant a factor as in *Binky Brown*. The fact that this chapter is placed in the context of Alison's life in a way Binky's OCD is not, however, exemplifies that OCD, as depicted in her account, consists of »thoughts or practices that take place and unfold within the context of everyday life and which interact with the other aspects of people's lives and identities« (Doel/ Segrott 2004, 600) rather than existing in a sealed-off space. In *Binky Brown*, though the penis rays take up so much (literal) space that it is hard to know what Binky's life would be without them, OCD is shown to have largely arisen from his Catholic upbringing, which forms as crucial a part of Binky's childhood as OCD does.

In both *Fun Home* and *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, the compulsions depicted are »spatial strategies [which] transform uncertain time into readable space« (Doel/ Segrott 2004, 610) by taking creative action. These actions range from re-arranging objects to changing one's walking route, from performing specific hand gestures to coming up with an all-purpose protective phrase, from uttering an incantation to staging an exorcism. Both comics show what these actions look like for someone looking in from the outside: Alison stands in a room muttering to herself and waving her hands, Binky running from small invisible enemies. But more pronouncedly, these two autobiographical comics make the experience of these types of OCD and the practices resulting from them readable and understandable: We know about the substance Alison is trying to disperse and the rays Binky is trying to dodge. The comics manage to evoke empathy by showing us Binky's and Alison's actions both as they experience them and as they appear to someone else, gesturing toward their complex experiences by rendering them in specific, graphic images as well as in words which complicate the image. This works because comics as a medium always »locates the reader in space« (Chute 2011, 108), and in these representations of OCD, where space is disputed and problematic, the sharing of space with Binky and Alison is what makes the sharing of unusual and inner experiences possible.

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- 1] Throughout the article, I will refer to the writer of *Fun Home* as Bechdel and to the comic's protagonist as Alison.
- 2] This is further emphasized by the fact that »binky« is a colloquial term for a pacifier in American English.
- 3] »Caret« is the term used by, among others, Hillary Chute (cf. Chute 2010, 189).
- 4] In a panel discussion with Phoebe Gloeckner and Aline Chominsky-Crumb, Green says that he still sees the penis rays. »It is like having an annoying relative that you want to hit with a ball-peen hammer. You're tired of it. And besides, OCD [...] has a component of detachment that knows that this can't be right. And so it is recording and it is having an active dialogue that says, stop it, what are you doing? This is ridiculous. But then the more primitive side has to go back and check the story regardless. So perspective is vital to my orientation to drawing and to understanding how a ray can function« (Nelson 2014, 93).