Alison Bechdel

The Secret of Superhuman Strength

May 3, 2021

Hello again friends and welcome to Madison BookBeat, your listener-sponsored community radio home for Madison authors, topics, book events, and publishers. I'm your host, Stu Levitan. Our guest today is the cartoonist Alison Bechdel, whose long-awaited graphic memoir, The Secret to Superhuman Strength, comes out tomorrow and is already receiving rave reviews. It also features the extremely extensive coloring collaboration of her wife, the artist Holly Ray Taylor.

And on Thursday, 4 o'clock, Alison will be appearing at the Wisconsin Book Festival in conversation with another best-selling memoirist, Cheryl Strayed, the author of Wild.

The unexamined life, Socrates reportedly said during his trial for impiety, is not worth living. By that standard, as well as many others, Alison Bechdel has had a very worthwhile life. The Secret to Superhuman Strength, a decade-by-decade examination of her exuberant, sometimes excessive pursuit of bodily and metaphysical fitness, is her third graphic memoir examining her life and that of her family. It follows:

1. *Fun Home, a family tragicomic from 2006 about the strained relationship she had with her closeted gay father.*
2. *Are You My Mother?, a comic drama about the strained relationship she had with her emotionally distant mother.*

Two years later, she was rewarded for those works by being awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, the so-called Genius Grant. Fun Home, the musical, came to Broadway in 2015, winning five Tony Awards, including Best Musical. She began her literary career with a syndicated comic strip, Dykes to Watch Out For, which ran from 1983 to 2008. It was a 1985 strip that she popularized but did not devise, the so-called Bechdel Test for Measuring Representation of Women in Fiction. She and Holly Rae Taylor live in Vermont, where she has also served as the state's cartoonist laureate.

It is a great pleasure to welcome to Madison Book Beat, Alison Bechdel.

Stu, thank you so much for having me.

Pleasure to have you here on the day before the big day. Congratulations. You were really shot out of a cannon on the press tour for Fun Home, which happened right around the time you were undergoing some major stressors in your life. Are you going to miss flying around, or is doing this all virtually good enough for you?

You know, I don't miss the travel. I'm very glad I'm not having to get up at 4 o'clock every day and catch a plane to another city. But I am going to miss being able to see people one-on-one and to be in audiences. I'll be doing a lot of events, like this one with Cheryl on

Wednesday, but there will be no feeling of an audience. It's all going to be me in my basement. So that's sort of sad.

Well, I'm sure you will pull through. About this book, after the books about your father and mother, you planned to write a light, fun memoir of your athletic life that you could just bang out quickly. Instead, here we are nine years later with a very deep meditation on self-awareness and creativity. How did that happen?

Well, I don't seem able to take shortcuts, I guess. I thought I could do a simple book, and I couldn't. Yeah, exercise, suddenly, the more I looked at it, was very connected to a lot of other very complicated things, notably, like you said, self-awareness, consciousness, and ways of transcending that. Exercise for me has always been a way to free myself from that everyday sort of hyper self-awareness that's quite taxing and painful. But when I'm exercising, I feel like I get a little freedom from that.

As late as November 2018, you still hadn't really figured out what the book was about. Were you taking some kind of perverse pleasure in being unhappy about that state?

One of the strands of the book is, yes, my perverse happiness in being unhappy, which is something I learned from my mother. My mom made an art form of complaining in a colorful way about the difficulties of her life. And even though you could tell she wasn't happy about these things, she was taking pleasure in being able to describe them. So there's a way that she was still attached to the unhappiness. And I feel like that resonates for me, too. There's a way that I have clung to a familiar kind of unhappiness in my life. And I use familiar very intentionally because I feel like it's a kind of unhappiness I learned in my family. Just a certain tension. I grew up in a very tense household. So that's always something I'm fighting against, trying to undo. And it's been kind of a lifelong project that I've made progress on, but very slowly over the decades.

Do your brothers share those traits? You know, I've never actually talked about it with my brothers.

I don't think they do. I think they're different from me in that way. This is kind of my own problem.

So how was it that you figured out what the book was going to be about?

Well, I've been working with all these various strands. And eventually they started to sort of braid together. And I could see that I was looking at these different writers. I was looking at the transcendentalists. I was looking at the British romantics. I was looking at Jack Kerouac writing about his experiences being in the mountains. And those other writers and their stories and their lives started kind of helping me to shape what I was doing. Actually, you know, I sort of had a project for this book. Like I wanted to induce in myself the very things I was writing about, this sense of transcendence, self-transcendence, of flow. And I gave myself little projects, little exercises to try and induce that.

I started doing some free drawing or drawing with a brush. For a cartoonist, I honestly don't draw as much as I should. I wish I had a daily drawing practice. But I went for many years

without hardly drawing at all over the period of time I was working on this book. So I had this exercise, okay, I'm going to start drawing with a brush, which is a much freer way of drawing than with a pen. And I thought it would just be, it would loosen me up and sort of get me in the habit of drawing. And I was doing these, I was actually drawing on a scroll. One of the things I find appealing about Jack Kerouac is how he's always, he prizes spontaneity and famously wrote On the Road and The Dharma Bums on a long scroll of paper, just like this continuous mad burst. So I started doing a scroll drawing of my own. And every day I would do a little additional doodle on it.

And one day as I was doing my daily drawing, the words transcendental etude popped into my head. I had been reading about the transcendentalists, but somehow I associated to this phrase transcendental etude, which I went, you know, I Googled it. Oh, it's these piano pieces by List. Oh, but it's also a poem, a very famous poem by Adrienne Rich. And I remembered reading this poem in my youth. And I looked up the poem and at that point I could see that this poem was incredible and kind of tied together everything I was trying to write about. So that was sort of a breakthrough. When you ask about how did I figure out what this book was about, part of it was that like spontaneous stumbling onto this poem by Adrienne Rich, which gave me like a sort of framework that I began structuring the book around. And you quote from that poem in the book? Yes. Yeah, it's sort of a through line in the book. beautiful poem. And honestly, I still don't really understand it. It's a very long poem. I feel like it's a poem kind of about life, you know, about what it means to be alive and what we're here for. And it's about creativity. It's about transformation. It's a poem Adrienne Rich wrote in her first book of poetry when she came out as a lesbian. So it was this pivotal, transformative moment of her own life that she wrote it. And part of my connection to the poem is the fact that she wrote it in 1977, which was just before I went off to college myself. And I remember that summer and I sort of draw these parallels in my book between the day that I'm imagining her writing this poem and my own self packing up to head away to college into a life that Adrienne Rich and women like her made possible for me as a young, not yet out lesbian.

I want to get to the nature of the artwork and something somewhat revolutionary in the book, which I refer to implicitly in the introduction. But to pick up on the source material of the romantics and the transcendentalists, obviously you had read The Dharma Bums before experiencing what you experienced and you wrote about in the book. But the references to Wordsworth and Coleridge and especially the tragic figure of Margaret Fuller, were those links and connections that you had before you experienced what you wrote about in the book or those connections that you then pursued and researched as part of the book process?

That was part of the book process. I had never read those. Well, I had read a wonderful biography of Margaret Fuller, but quite recently, you know, actually I might have read that while I was working on this book. So yeah, all of that stuff was part of exploring this, whatever I was doing in this book. It led me to the transcendentalists, it led me to the British romantics. And I didn't ever really have a natural affinity to any of those people's work. I hadn't really read it. I was forced to read Rime of the Ancient Mariner in college, but I

didn't get it. I didn't enjoy it because I didn't really understand it. So it was fun to come back to that and to learn more about what those guys were doing. And, you know, I'd always thought of Wordsworth as this kind of stodgy old poet, but he was doing amazing revolutionary stuff.

And Kerouac's Dharma Bums is clearly very important in the narrative. Jack Kerouac was not a pleasant person and he is not high on the hit parade for most middle-aged lesbian feminists. Did you ever have any qualms about emotionally committing to Dharma Bums as a book important to your own development or in writing about it in the book?

I did. You know, I kept thinking to myself, why do I keep coming back to the Dharma Bums? There's plenty of women who were exploring, you know, the Western mountains and writing beautiful things about it. But I kind of, and I don't really, I personally don't enjoy much of Kerouac's other writing, but I just, some note was hit for me with the Dharma Bums. And I guess as I started learning about Kerouac and really understanding more about why he was the difficult person that he was, I felt a little more compassionate for him. And, you know, I could see, start to see even parallels between myself and him. You know, obviously I did not drink myself to death when I was 47 like he did, but I certainly have struggled with drinking and struggled with success in similar ways that he did. And I just, I felt sort of a constructive connection to him and I kept pursuing it.

Were you sympathetic to him because of his mommy issues?

Well, kind of. I mean, yeah, he had a hard life and he lost his brother. Yeah, he had a hard life. He lost his brother very tragically at a young age, his older brother who everyone adored, and that I think just set him up for a permanent, never quite measuring up, you know?

We're talking with Alison Bechdel. Her new book is The Secret to Superhuman Strength. She'll be at the Wisconsin Book Festival on Thursday, May 6th at 4 o'clock.

The title is based on an ad from one of your childhood comic books for a pamphlet promising the aforementioned secret to superhuman strength, which you sent away for. You're also a big fan of Charles Atlas and Jack LaLanne. How much of your childhood attraction to fitness and strength do you think was a subconscious need to be self-sufficient because you felt you couldn't depend on your parents to protect you?

That is very perceptive, Stu. As a kid, I thought it was just about being big and tough and strong, but really, I felt quite vulnerable as a kid because I always felt like I somehow was having to parent my own parents, like I was having to take care of them both on some level. I never really was able to be a child, to just be free as a little kid growing up. So, yeah, it was definitely like the promise of this big muscular carapace that would protect me that was appealing, that I wouldn't need anyone else to take care of me, you know?

And when did you figure that out?

Oh, sometime in therapy, probably in my 30s or 40s.

Was writing this book a form of therapy and self-analysis?

Yeah, I mean, all my books are that for me. I undertake them in order to figure something out about myself. I know that I'm not supposed to do that. I'm supposed to separate therapy from my creative work, but for me, they do kind of fuse a bit. I mean, obviously, I've got to think things through. I'm not just blurting stuff out on the page. It's all very thought through. But that's the point for me of doing it. Like, I want to learn something about myself or figure something out.

And are there things you learned doing this book that you hadn't learned previously?

Well, I feel like my entire life is just a process of learning and relearning many of the same things. Like, I sort of keep coming around but spiraling up a little higher. So I might be dealing with the same issue, but on a slightly more advanced level next time I come around. Like, just my struggles with intimacy, my struggles with self-confidence, my struggles with being frozen with self-consciousness. I keep working through all those, and I get a little better each time. So in that sense, this book, yeah, I feel like I made some progress. In a way, it was sort of like a high-wire act of pushing myself to see if I could achieve some measure of self-transcendence or flow over the course of writing this book. And I think I actually did. So by that measure, I feel like it was a success.

So in the spirit of Margaret Fuller, can you identify how the Alison Bechdel of The Secret of Superhuman Strength is different or, quote, better than the previous iterations?

Wow, that's an interesting question. I feel like there's, even though I'm writing about my struggles with self-doubt, I feel like my self-doubt is much less in evidence in this book than it was in *Are You My Mother*, for example. That book, a friend of mine who is an academic told me that she couldn't even read that book because it was so much an example of what it was about. It was about what it means to be just very caught up in your own mind, to be invested in your own mind, almost as if it's another person, like an object. And she just felt like the book was kind of enacting that. So I certainly feel like I broke free of that tendency in this book. And this is very much a book that feels to me very vital, very filled with motion and action. And a lot of exercise.

Yes. Well, as you continued your fitness mania as an adult and after the deaths of your parents, were you after the physical results of the exercise, namely strength or the emotional results of it, namely some kind of mental clarity?

Very much the latter. I mean, I value the physical benefits of exercise. It's nice to feel strong and flexible and to have aerobic capacity. I like that. But really, for me, it's the calming effect of exercise that is the most important thing. You know, I'm just a very tense, anxious person and getting half an hour or an hour of intense aerobic activity, really, it's like taking an anti-anxiety drug. It's very effective.

So if it's more just the doing and the experience, are you less apprehensive about growing old and having increasingly lower peak performances?

Well, that's something I also grappled with over the course of writing this book, over the eight years I spent writing this book. You know, gradually little benchmarks, I was unable to like, I ended up at the end of this book, I could no longer do a pull-up. When I began the book, I could do at least one pull-up. So I was witnessing myself actually, you know, losing a certain amount of strength, losing a certain amount of speed and stamina, which is both disturbing and expected. You know, we know this is going to happen. But I was, you know, paying pretty close attention to it. And since I have derived so much of my self-identity from my physical fitness and my strength, it's been, you know, I have to think about who am I if I can't do these things? Who am I if I'm not strong? Who am I if I am slow and dependent on other people to help me? So it's just a way into thinking of all that stuff, which is I know I'm going to have to face as I age.

And how big a deal was it physically and emotionally to hit menopause?

Wow, menopause is really, can be quite a whammy, not for everyone. But thanks for asking about it, by the way, because it's a topic that few people like to discuss, except maybe like, you know, the tiny percentage of women who are actually going through it. Or the men who lived with women who went through it. Yeah, it's an intense transformation. It's like all of a sudden you age quickly in a short period of time. It doesn't continue that way. It feels like it's going to, like this is like you're just cascading downhill. Fortunately, it levels off if you're lucky. I think that's pretty typical, though. It's just a sudden accelerated glimpse of what it's like to get old. My mental faculties, I was having trouble thinking, thinking of words, you know, concentrating. I was having mood swings. It was like a period of about a year when I just felt really kind of nuts. And you also don't really know what's happening. Gradually, one figures it out, but it sneaks up on you. But fortunately, yeah, that sudden increase in the pace of my aging slowed down again.

Now there's one form of exercise that for all the fads and activities you went through, you have not yet experienced. And that is post-heart attack cardio. And if you think biking and running are symbolically staving off the grave, let me tell you, after a heart attack, it becomes very real and not symbolic at all. You do the miles to stay alive, literally.

Wow. Do you have to be careful, like not go too hard, or do you push yourself?

I maintain a decent cardio. I try and get up to, you know, into the 120s to keep the pipes flowing. It's not just, oh, I'll feel better. It's like, okay, the doctor said do this to stay alive.

Yeah. Does that feel, you know, does that make you dread it and not enjoy it? Or are you able to get some kind of pleasure from it?

It makes me thankful I'm able to do it.

Yeah. Huh.

But unlike you, I do listen to music. I want that backbeatte. I want that four on the floor. I want Charlie Watts and Ringo Starr and Mighty Max propelling me down the walk.

We're talking with Alison Bechdel. Her book is The Secret to Superhuman Strength, now out tomorrow, and she'll be at the Wisconsin Book Festival on Thursday.

*To get back to something I alluded to in the introduction, the first thing most of your longtime fans will note is that the narrative, which is most of the book, is in pen and ink full color with, as you referenced, a couple of pages each chapter, which are more reflective, done in the style of a Japanese brush drawing. How did you come up with the i*dea of using two kinds of art to reflect the two kinds of reality that the book was addressing?

That evolved slowly over the course of the book. As I said, I sort of set myself a drawing challenge just as an exercise to start doing more of these looser brush style drawings because I've always really loved that Asian brush drawing stuff, like people do beautiful landscapes and images of animals and flowers, and it's very spontaneous. So that was an appealing contrast to the kind of very laborious studied drawing that I do normally. The body of the book is all line art that I get to after doing layers and layers of pencil sketches. But this brush drawing has to be pretty spontaneous. It has to just flow out of you. So I started to see that maybe I could use that somehow in the book. And gradually I used it for a few key moments, a few key transformative moments, and also at the end of every chapter, just as a glimpse into, I don't know, I'm not like an expert on Buddhism by any stretch, but I do love the idea in Buddhism of absolute versus relative reality. Like there's these two registers of reality. One is the everyday world we live in, which is the relative world where things are separate, and we have subjects and objects. But then there's absolute reality where that dualism, that separation between subject and object falls away and everything is one thing. And to me, those brush drawings sort of nod to that feeling of unity and things blurring together. Zen in the art of workout.

Yeah. And as to the color, your father had such strong opinions about color that he once almost came to blows over whether something was fuchsia or magenta. Was it difficult for you to turn the coloring over to Holly?

Yeah, I'm not used to collaborating, period. And in a way it was a relief to turn the color over to her because I wouldn't have to really make all the decisions, although I was part of it. And I was sort of giving her rough sketches of what things should look like. But in the end, I had to turn over a lot of creative control to her and she was certainly making her own creative decisions on the color. But yeah, my dad kind of damaged me as far as color goes. In fact, I think that's kind of why I became a cartoonist. It was the only art form that didn't involve color, that was purely black and white back in the day anyway.

Can you talk a bit about the technical process of doing the coloring and how your process has changed, how your drawing and lettering process has changed over the years?

Well, yeah, it's funny. My career has spanned the whole digital revolution. I started back in analog days when everything was just pen and ink done by hand, copied at the copy shop, put in the mail. And toward the turn of the century, I was getting much more involved with Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator and certainly Google image search to help me with my references for my drawings. I feel like I sort of struggle with finding the proper tension. I do

like technology, but I don't want to use it too much. I don't want to draw on the computer. I don't like that. I try to spend as much time in the analog world as I can and use the computer just as necessary. But the coloring process that I hit on for this book was a very funny mix of modern Photoshop technique and sort of a throwback to old ways of coloring comics, like in the Sunday Funnies pages or old comic books where people were using those Bendet dots and using a cyan, a magenta, a yellow, and a black layer, combining those things to get what looked like full color.

So when Holly was coloring this book, she wasn't using paint. She was using gray ink. This is a very geeky, probably not very interesting to the general audience topic, but she had to paint the whole book on multiple layers of gray ink for each page. There was a cyan layer, a magenta layer, a yellow layer, a gray layer, and then those would all get turned into color on the computer and magically come to life. But she was just dealing with gray the whole time. It's going to be a very strange artistic process to see something other than what you're actually looking at. I know, and to be keeping in your head like, okay, this tree is green, therefore I have to paint it on the yellow layer and on the cyan layer. It was a lot of just kind of mathematical logistics like that.

So are you going to keep with color in future books or go back to just basic washes?

I love color now. I might not use this incredibly time-consuming technique. I might now be brave enough to just use color, but yeah, I'm all in for color.

Now the cover illustration is of you in the yoga position called the archer. And yoga, there's a lot of yoga in your feelings for it in the book. As you know, your drawings have historically been very realistic, even to the point of taking digital images and tracings. But is there some artistic license in this illustration of you doing the archer?

Yes, yes there is, Stu. I learned after I drew myself doing this pose that I actually cannot do this pose. I copied it from a drawing of the great yoga master Mr. Iyengar doing the pose. I didn't actually take a picture of myself doing it. I should have. No, I shouldn't have because then I wouldn't have it. But actually that whole cover is a sort of nod for me to that book, Zen and the Art of Archery. I have a copy of that with, it's got a wonderful old sumi-e painting of an archer on it that I just love. It's a book cover that I've always loved. And so my book is a nod to it by having the yoga pose, the archer.

A nod to the artist, not to the author.

Yes, not to the author. Egan Harigal, who I found out after reading and enjoying his book, I found out that he became a Nazi. So kind of ruined the...

And one of the Zen masters who you refer to in the book also had some personal habits, which are not quite Nazism, but had some personal habits which were not endearing and uplifting. Does that trouble you when people who you put emotional and metaphysical import to turn out to have feet of clay like that?

Well, it doesn't really trouble me because I feel like I don't invest them with superhuman powers. You know, I understand people are all human, but it's vexing. It's, you know, it makes me angry when people in these positions of trust, you know, betray that trust.

Yeah, and I talk about Chogyam Trungpa, the great Tibetan teacher who was also very, you know, irresponsible and had a terrible drinking problem and had sex with his students. I don't think it completely invalidates their teachings, but it certainly makes everything very problematic.

I'm gonna go back to your father for a moment. There's a moment when you transfer to Oberlin and your father is getting you settled in and he finds your stash of pot and hence he'd like to get high with you and you refuse. When did you come to regret that?

Well, as soon as my dad died, which was less than a year after that moment, he took me to college. I immediately, when I got to Oberlin College, when I was 19, began the process of coming out, realizing that I was a lesbian. Came out to my family that year, you know, when I'd had this great realization. And unwittingly stumbled onto my parents' big dark secret, which was that my dad had been having affairs with other men over the whole course of their marriage. This led my mother to decide she wanted to get a divorce. This upset my father. And before I knew it, my father was dead. He had, I'm pretty sure, intentionally stepped in front of a truck. He was killed by a truck at any rate. So that was a very intense, tumultuous year. And yeah, I often think about maybe I could have changed something by getting high with my dad that night, you know, by bonding with him and connecting with him. I know that's ridiculous, but I can't help feeling a lot of regret about that.

What do you think you would have done if you had said, sure, let's roll a joint? What do you think you would have done that day? You mean, how would things have gone differently? Well, first, on a practical level, what would you have done? And then how would that have changed your relationships? So two questions.

I think it would have been really fun to get high with my dad. You know, it would have loosened us up, probably. We probably would have had a freer kind of connection or conversation. Maybe I would even have stood up to him a little bit. You know, he was always very sort of domineering in his expectations of what classes I was going to take, what I was going to do after college. Maybe we would have gotten into that, and it would have been productive. Who knows?

What was it like to see Fun Home on Broadway and what is it like anticipating it as a movie?

It was really magical when I first saw Fun Home on a stage. It's hard to put into words. It was very surreal, you know. I felt like it was a really wonderful adaptation of my story about my family. But also it was very powerful because my mother had just died. There was a way in which the play felt like it was bringing my parents back to life in this kind of magical way. And they both had loved the theater. I think they would have been thrilled on some level in some weird way to know that they had become characters in this play. Even though, of

course, once you think that through, it doesn't make sense. It's a musical about my father's suicide. But still there was something very beautiful about it that I think my parents would have really loved.

There's a permanence to movies. Are you at all apprehensive about that part of your life being set in stone for generations to access? I am. But also I guess the way I'm managing my feelings about that is by remembering that the movie will not be an adaptation of the book per se. The movie will be an adaptation of the musical. So it's sort of at a remove from my life itself. That's how I manage that fear.

Back to drugs. Back in the day you had an epiphany on psilocybin, which is something similar to what I learned taking LSD, which is to erase the distinction between self and other. How was the understanding you attained through psychedelics different from the understanding you attained through Buddhism?

Well, I only started trying to learn about Buddhism and trying to meditate because of that youthful psilocybin experience. It was the most amazing feeling. It was just a really wonderful feeling of bliss, you know, that sitting in the park for a whole afternoon, realizing that myself was not real, that there was no separation between what I thought of as me and everything else in the universe. It doesn't make sense to even put that in language. That's part of what happens, you know. This experience is something beyond language. But I knew that I wanted to have it again. And I knew I couldn't eat psilocybin mushrooms every day for the rest of my life. So meditation and, you know, incidentally, exercise have both become ways of sort of approximating that wonderful feeling.

Is there an internal conflict or contradiction in writing a memoir in which you explain how you submerged your ego?

That is a really good question. Yes, that is sort of an essential paradox at the core of this whole thing. I'm trying to get rid of myself. I'm trying to get outside of myself by plunging directly into my own navel, you know. But I do somehow feel like if I do that deeply enough and thoroughly enough, I'll somehow come out the other side.

And then who will you be?

I'll be nobody. I'll just be a selfless, egoless spirit. They won't know where to send the royalty checks.

You've been keeping a diary since you were a child. When did you realize that your life was something that you not only wanted to document for yourself, but was interesting enough to tell other people about?

It was sometime in my 30s, I guess. I had been doing my comic strip for a long time, Dykes to Watch Out For. And then I got invited to do a special comic book issue, which meant I would have to create more work, like different work apart from my comic strip. And I did a few autobiographical pieces, which I really enjoyed. I really loved writing about my own life.

And I think I was very influenced by underground cartoonists like I loved the collaborations of R. Crumb and Elaine Kaminsky Crumb. They would write their, you know, these amazing, often X-rated, very revealing stories about their own life where they collaborate together. And I loved how, you know, there was something exhibitionistic, but also revelatory in that work. And it's something that I wanted to try myself. I just really liked writing about my own life.

Was that something of a reaction to the fact that your parents were closeted, your father sexually, your mother emotionally? Have you decided to live in such a transparent manner because you think that's the key to being happier than they were?

Yes. I mean, certainly my work drawing Dykes to Watch Out For was, you know, I was so committed to that because I wanted to be this out, public, open lesbian. It wasn't going to be a secret the way it had been for my father. I wanted to somehow counteract that secrecy that I'd been brought up with. I wanted to tell the truth.

And I guess the next extension of telling the truth is really telling the truth, like really getting at the truth of my own life, really boring down and dredging stuff up. I just like doing that, I guess.

But do you see that transparency that you want to live your life with as being the key to being happier than your parents were because they were not so transparent?

Yes, I do. I feel like, you know, it took a great deal of energy for them to maintain that facade. And that's, you know, energy that could be spent in other ways. You know, I want to have a more free flowing kind of life where I'm not all pent up, not hiding anything, not repressing anything. I want to have that energy available to me.

We're talking with Alison Bechdel. Her book, The Secret to Superhuman Strength, comes out tomorrow. She'll be at the Wisconsin Book Festival on Thursday. The book charts your fits and starts to self-awareness as we talked about. Has that increased understanding, and self-awareness had any effect on your creative process?

Yeah, I feel like I'm kind of getting a little more compassionate toward myself and not quite flogging myself as hard as I did when I was younger, like really just driving myself very hard with my work to produce and make deadlines. When I was younger, I would just stay up for days on end working on something, and I don't do that anymore, partly because I can't. I don't have the stamina to stay up all night anymore. But it's not a very healthy way to work. So I feel like I've gotten a lot more respectful of my own process, a lot more accepting with time.

The book charts the fact that as you reached greater literary success, your personal life was not always keeping pace. And there's a point where you wonder whether you've made a pact with the devil for professional success at the expense of personal happiness. If that were indeed the choice, success or happiness, which would you have wanted back then?

Well, that's the irony of it because I would certainly have chosen the success. Even in more recent years, I remember I got asked once when I was speaking somewhere, if you could have, which would you rather have, a happy childhood or Fun Home, the book? I didn't even have to think about that. I would rather have the book. Somehow, but that's obviously evidence of the damage from my childhood that I would choose the artistic product rather than the life itself. And now I don't know. I mean, I guess the point is to be happy, but still I would be loath to let go of all of my creative excogitations.

Dykes to Watch Out For was a very niche item when it started and your audience has grown increasingly diverse, which is to say more mainstream. How has knowing your audience is no longer predominantly lesbian changed you and how you see your role as an artist?

Well, it's been kind of freeing. This book, The Secret to Superhuman Strength, is really not very much about my sexuality. It's not about queerness, really. Whereas all my other work on some level was. I had to create space for myself in the world is what I felt. I couldn't have told the story Fun Home at the time that it happened when I was in my early 20s. It just wasn't, the world wasn't ready for a story like that. Whether or not I was personally ready to tell it, which I wasn't. But I feel like I've just kind of kept trying to make more and more space for myself to just be who I am in the world. And so with this book, yeah, I'm a lesbian. I'm talking about my relationships with other women over the course of my life, but it's really just incidental. That's not really the concern of this book. And that's great. That's a great freedom to have.

There's not a lot of references to music in the book. You went to the Michigan Women's Music Festival for a while when you were in Minnesota and there's some classical music playing at some point in the car during an epiphany. Is music not a particularly large part of your emotionally or creative life?

That is true. I can tell that it's part of yours by the way that you sort of launched into your playlist back there a few minutes ago. But I feel like whatever part of my brain has the attention to graphic detail in it replaced the part of my brain that might have had the jukebox in it. Yeah, music is just not a big thing for me.

Had the whole trans exclusionary radical feminist issue at the Michigan Women's Music Festival arisen during the years you were there?

No, no, that all came later. Later in the 90s. Yeah, when I was there it was still the very early days and it was an amazing experience to me as a young woman to be in that all-woman space, I feel sort of sad. I mean, I don't agree with Michigan's anti-trans policy, and I stopped going because of that. But at the same time, I feel like the whole history and idea of the festival has kind of gotten, we don't see all the stuff that happened before the bad stuff happened. And that feels like a loss, a historic loss. Apparently, it's just the internet and all this stuff was happening before there was any way to really archive it online. But whenever I try to Google something about the Michigan Women's Music Festival, all I get is the anti-trans politics, you know, which is kind of sad. That's too bad.

Have Patagonia and Fitbit approached you for an endorsement?

I wish. I wish they would send me a big box of junk. Nope, nope. I wrote about that all of my own free will.

So I take it if they did, you would agree with alacrity?

Well, I guess it depends on what they sent. This is one part of capitalism that I don't mind is, you know, this endless escalation of technological, you know, gear improvement. I really, I love the way my, you know, bike equipment and ski equipment is constantly getting perfected and refined.

And these days, what is your favorite exercise or activity?

Running. Yeah, I've sort of come full circle from running in my youth to coming back to running. And it's just so simple. It feels really good. It's a really great workout.

So finally, what is the secret to superhuman strength?

You know, Stu, it's funny to me. Here's the thing. The book is launching on tomorrow, on May 4th. Well, I don't know what day this is going to air on, but that's Star Wars Day. May the 4th be with you. I was thinking about that. I was thinking about that great thing that Yoda says. If I may quote Yoda, the secret to superhuman strength is there is no try, only do. I just want to stop trying and start doing. Okay?

On that uplifting and resonant note, I'm afraid that is all the time we have with Alison Bechdel. Again, the book is The Secret to Superhuman Strength out tomorrow from the good people at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. More information about her appearance Thursday and a link to register for that free event at wisconsinbookfestival.org.

Next week on Mass and Book Beat, Jeff Kennell, author of Make Way for Liberty, Wisconsin African Americans in the Civil War, from our very good friends at the Wisconsin Historical Society Press. Until then, on behalf of news and public affairs director Chali Pittman and all of us here at Mass and Book Beat, I'm Stu Levitan. Thank you for joining us. Now as Ben Sidran plays us out with a little bit of Little Sherry, please stay tuned for Alex Walding White and All Around Jazz. You're listening to WORT 89.9 FM Madison, listener-sponsored community radio.