ALISON BECHDEL is a cartoonist and writer. Her serialized comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, ran in dozens of periodicals from 1983 to 2008. In 2006 she published *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, a graphic memoir that centers on her relationship with her father and addresses matters of gender, sexual orientation, and family—and that has been adapted into a Tony award-winning musical. Her most recent book, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012), centers on her relationship with her mother. She’s currently at work on another memoir, *The Secret to Superhuman Strength*, a book that will focus on her obsession with skiing, running, weight lifting, yoga, and other forms of exercise. In a 2012 interview in the *New Yorker*, Bechdel states that “by looking inward deeply, I’m trying to get outside myself and connect with other people.” In 2014, she was awarded a MacArthur “genius” fellowship.

You may have heard of the Bechdel Test. To pass, a movie, TV show, or book has to have at least two female characters talking to each other about something other than a man. Interesting then that Alison Bechdel herself says she’s the “number one fan” of *Sex in the City*, a show that would never pass her test. “I would never watch any television or movies if I only watched shows that passed the test,” she once explained. Check out the website bechdeltest.com to see how many of your favorite films have passed the Bechdel Test.

The following piece was written originally for *Entertainment Weekly’s* 1,000th issue, in 2008. If you like it, you can find more of Bechdel’s work on her blog, dykestowatchoutfor.com, or on Twitter @AlisonBechdel.
AUTHORS, BLESS ME, FOR I HAVE SINNED.

IT'S BEEN THREE MONTHS SINCE MY LAST NOVEL, AND I DIDN'T EVEN FINISH THAT ONE.

FOR MY PENANCE, I SWEAR I'LL FINALLY READ SOMETHING BY JOYCE CAROL OATES, AND JOHN UPDIKE.

AND THE CORRECTIONS, AND LOVE IN THE TIME OF CHOLERA, AND BELOVED, FOR GOD'S SAKE'S. HOW IS IT EVEN POSSIBLE THAT I HAVEN'T READ BELOVED?

THERE'S A SPECIAL CIRCLE IN HELL FOR PEOPLE LIKE ME, AND IT'S LINED WITH LOUIS L'AMOUR WESTERNS, LOW-CARB COOKBOOKS, AND WINDOWS 98 MANUALS.
OH, I READ FOR WORK. ODD THINGS I'M RESEARCHING...

...STAYING CURRENT IN MY FIELD, ALL THAT.

THE HALLOWED RAPT ABSORPTION OF LIVING IN A FICTIONAL WORLD FOR DAYS ON END?

I HAVE TROUBLE FITTING THAT INTO MY SCHEDULE.

PERSEPOLIS

STUART HOLT

PALE

TORPID

WHERE DID I GO ASTRAY? I WAS ONE OF THOSE MODEL CHILDREN! A HARDENED CHAIN-READER.

BY SECOND GRADE, I WAS MANAGING ANYTHING I COULD GET MY HANDS ON.

ENTIRE CHILDHOOD OF FAMOUS AMERICANS SERIES

ROBERT! THE TAUSMAN, BY SIR WALTER SCOTT, PLEASE!

MY BROTHERS, MY FRIENDS, AND I HAD AN INORDINATE FONDNESS FOR THIS GAME—A HIGHFALUTIN VERSION OF “GO FISH.”

AAGHH! CURSE YOU!

AND KENILWORTH WHILE YOU'RE AT IT, MY GOOD MAN.

WE'D PLAY ENDLESS ROUNDS, WORKING OURSELVES INTO FRENZIES OVER ARCANE TEXTS WE KNEW NOTHING ABOUT.

WELL, WE'D HEARD OF SOME OF THEM, MAYBE EVEN SEEN THE MOVIES.

BUT MOSTLY WE GROUPED OUR CARDS BY FACIAL HAIR.

ALISON!

ALFRED, LORD TENNIS

CHARLES DICKENS

(THERE WERE ONLY THREE CLEAN-SHAVEN AUTHORS, COUNTING LOUISA MAY ALCOTT.)

EASY CONFUSED


YOU RAT FINK!

RAT FINK!

NOPE!
This coercive paradigm began to impinge on my innocent reading pleasure in other, less subtle ways.

My father grew up in a bookless home, and literature had been his salvation. But now he'd become an annoying missionary.

I developed a severe aversion to reading anything anyone else told me to, even my friends.

One day when I was 11 or 12, Dad tried a new tack.

I didn't want to give him the satisfaction, but five bucks was a lot of money to those days.

And when I did indeed beat my younger brothers to the finish, I couldn't help feeling a twinge of suspicion.

Although I'd never read Tom Sawyer, the book's prequel, everyone knows the story about the fence—how Tom tricks the other kids into whitewashing by pretending it's fun.

I'd show my father. I would force myself to read things, when I was 14, I began a grim list.

The variously imprisoned and doomed protagonists reflected my own joyless self-incarceration.

I'll give you five when you finish it, too.

This incident left me bitter.
I actually liked Anne Frank, and I got through Orwell, though I missed all the allegory. But that was as far as I got with my list. I can't help but think of Mr. Knightley's dry observation on a similar project undertaken by Emma Woodhouse.

Emma has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old. I have seen a great many lists of her drawing up at various times of books that she meant to read regularly through—and very good lists they were—very well chosen, and very neatly arranged—sometimes alphabetically, and sometimes by some other rule. The list she drew up when only fourteen—I remember thinking it did her judgment so much credit—that I preserved it some times; and I dare say she may have made out a very good list now.

Thank God Jane Austen wasn't in the author's deck, or I would have no way of knowing this.

I left the Count of Monte Cristo languishing in the Château d'If because I had discovered a kind of reading that was infinitely more compelling.

A man ought to read just as inclination leads him, for what he reads as a task will do him little good.

I absolutely must get to Boswell's Life of Johnson one of these days.

"If you really want your children to read something, for God's sake, keep it to yourself."

Shelve it judiciously.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some reading to do.

Oh... you're still here?!

I'm just checking out these classical allusions. What!
Thinking about the Text

1. Alison Bechdel’s narrative describes her relationship with reading throughout her life. What is the point of her narrative? What is her ARGUMENT?

2. Bechdel suggests that failing to read is sinful, and she writes of feeling guilty for not reading enough literary novels. Do you enjoy reading? Do you enjoy the reading that you have to do for school? Why or why not? Whatever your relationship to reading, what might make it better?

3. Bechdel’s drawings aren’t the only element of her narrative that creates images; she uses figurative language and allusions as well. Find two examples and explain what they contribute to the effect of the narrative.

4. Bechdel advocates the use of reverse psychology to get children to read, suggesting that restricting access to certain books will make them more attractive. Do you think this is an effective strategy? Why or why not? Have you ever read something just because you believed that you weren’t supposed to?

5. Write a NARRATIVE of your lifelong experience with reading (it needn’t be in graphic form). Make sure that your narrative has a clear point that readers can identify.