

## Split-Level Dykes To Watch Out For

By Alison Bechdel  
Firebrand Books  
\$10.95 paper.

## The Indelible Alison Bechdel

By Alison Bechdel  
Firebrand Books  
\$16.95 paper.

Reviewed by Patrice Jones  
Common Language Staff

My partner's ex-girlfriend is "a little bit worried" about Lois's depression. One of my friends is "very nervous" about Clarice and Toni's move to the suburbs. A lot of women are still very angry at Clarice for having that affair with Ginger a few years ago. Almost no one can understand what Mo sees in Sydney and everybody's rooting for Jezanna's bookstore to survive.

The object of all of this emotion is a comic strip. Serialized in gay and lesbian newspapers and collected into a series of books, Alison Bechdel's *Dykes To Watch Out For* is followed as avidly as any soap opera. Unlike any of the soap operas I've seen, *DTWOF* is peopled primarily by lesbians and addresses serious political issues while tracing the twists and turns of its characters' lives.

If you're a *DTWOF* fan, you're in luck. The latest *DTWOF* collection has just arrived in local stores. It joins the recently-released *The Indelible Alison Bechdel*, a behind-the-scenes look at the comic and its author, liberally spiced with previously uncollected Bechdel creations. Both are published by Firebrand Books, one of the few remaining independent feminist publishers in this country.

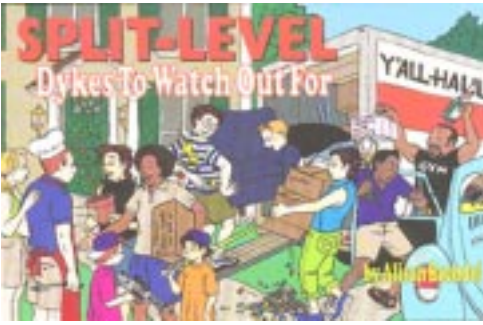
If you've not yet met Mo, Toni, Jezanna, Sparrow, and the rest of the *DTWOF* cast, I envy you. You can jump into the ongoing plot with the

new collection or, even better, you can spend hours of happy fun catching up by starting with the original *Dykes To Watch Out For* and reading the seven subsequent collections in turn.

In brief, the series follows Mo, a kvetching leftist in a striped shirt, and her friends and co-workers as they navigate the nuances of lesbian life in the 80s and 90s. The community of characters is remarkably diverse in terms of race, class, and ability. Bechdel handles the challenges this poses with integrity, sometimes making mistakes, but always striving to respectfully portray life experiences which are often very different from her own. As Bechdel notes in the companion volume published earlier this year, she has taken some heat for the one arena in which she does not portray the full diversity of the

lesbian community: political opinion. The characters' views range from liberal to radical — no Log Cabin Republicans in sight. Since I've always considered 'gay Republican' to be a contradiction in terms, that's never bothered me.

Speaking of the *DTWOF* crew, let me introduce a few. In preparing this review, I spoke with a number of regular readers about their favorite characters. My sister's favorite is Clarice, an environmental lawyer who struggles to balance work and home obligations while also endeavoring to rein in an extramarital attraction. Clarice's partner Toni, an accountant, also juggles child care with work; like most of Bechdel's characters, she is a complex individual, combining strength with



like they did in *Bonfire*, to affect the main storyline of Croker's acute debt build-up.

The mayor of Atlanta, Wes Jordan, a graduate of Morehouse college, is contacted by a college fraternity buddy, now corporate lawyer Roger White II (snidely referred to in college as Roger Too White). The issue is this: a nationally acclaimed star running back for the Georgia Tech football team is privately accused (not in the court of law) of raping the daughter of a big-time white establishment businessman. What follows is a clever set of maneuvering to keep the case out of court and out of the reach of the press. And when failing the latter, which is anticipated, Roger Too White, the counsel for the running back Fareek Fanon, solicits the aid of one Charlie Croker, another white establishment businessman.

If the story were simply this, then it would be difficult to say that *A Man in Full* is all that different from *Bonfire of the Vanities*. It would be the same old story about America's obsession with power, except this time through the pursuit of status first and money second. Sometimes the two are interchangeable but I believe it is fair to say, this time around, Wolfe emphasizes the former. There are some who make the case that this novel exposes and in some, if not explicitly, secondary way explores racial relations in this country. No doubt racial politics is an important tool for Wolfe. But the principal characters in this novel, even those who profess race to be important to them, however sincere they may be, are still using racial politics as a means towards status and financial gain. It is clear that is the primary thrust of Roger Too White's development as a character.

Unlike *Bonfire of the Vanities*, which is strictly satire and therefore unrelenting in its depiction of contemporary American society, *A Man in Full* does offer something a little deeper, reaches a little farther. Wolfe seems to betray something. Some might say, a spiritual yearning. The story of Conrad Hensley, who is imprisoned after being laid-off from a Croker Global Foods Warehouse, is often times wrenching and inspiring. Certain pas-

sages involving Croker's ex-wife, Martha, are beautiful and tender. And though the ending of the novel is meant, I believe, to serve as a warning to our apathetic and insincere attitude towards the spiritual growth of others, there is a Tom Wolfe exposed here who is much more humane and caring than we have given him credit for. In a recent luncheon before the National Press Club, Wolfe was asked to name the '90s like he had named the '80s. The '80s, according to Wolfe, was a decade of "money fever." The '90s, he said, with only a slight hint of hesitation, is the decade of "moral fever." *A Man in Full* is an attempt to show that fever in all its empty rhetoric. And though he has written a classic darkly comic novel, Tom Wolfe is not laughing. ☑

vulnerability and an uptight profession with a decidedly quirky set of friends. Among those friends is Lois, a good-time girl who works at the local feminist bookstore with Mo and is always trying to increase the store's supply of sex toys.

*DTWOF* readers often see themselves and their lives in the series. So, I wasn't surprised when the owner of a local bookstore chose Jezanna, a bookstore owner who is mourning the death of her mother while fending off the economic demise of her store, as her favorite character. I was surprised when a local activist chose Sydney, a relatively new character described by another reader as a "really annoying snotty academic." Other central characters include Sparrow, the 'new age' director of a domestic violence shelter; Ginger, who finally finished her dis-

sertation; and Thea, who also works at the bookstore and, as far as I'm concerned, has every right to be mad at Mo, considering what Sydney did to her a few years ago.

That last outburst indicates just how emotionally involved we *DTWOF* readers can become in the ongoing drama. *DTWOF* is a comic strip that does what serious literature often only aims to do — it jumps off the page and into the hearts and minds of its readers. Every *DTWOF* reader with whom I spoke could recount a plot twist that left her with lingering emotions or troubled thoughts. Toni and Clarice's relationship seems to provoke the most feeling, with the fate of the bookstore running a close second.

If you're a lesbian but not yet a *DTWOF* reader, I urge you to dip into these books. If you do not find yourself on their pages, you will surely find some of your friends. Gay men and heterosexuals are encouraged to have a look, too. Since the personal really is the political, the lives and loves of the series' characters often reflect the serious issues with which contemporary lesbians and other women are struggling. Bechdel does a good job of reflecting the spectrum of progressive lesbian opinion and of capturing the mundane and sublime aspects of our lives. So, you may find yourself being educated while you are being entertained.

Before closing, I guess I ought to own up to my own *DTWOF* preferences. My favorite character is and will always be Toni. I identify most with Mo, the angst-ridden activist, since I share her proclivity for launching political tirades at softball games, dinner parties, and other inopportune moments. As for the plot-line with which I am most emotionally involved, well, let's just say I am often found clutching my head and moaning, "Sparrow, Sparrow... what are you thinking?"

What is she thinking? Guess you'll have to read the series to find out. ☑

## WARNING: EVIL EMPIRE ASCENDING

Barnes & Noble's recently announced its intention to acquire Ingram Book Company, the single largest supplier of books to many independent bookstores in the area as well as throughout the country. As the desire intensifies to increase bottom line profits no matter what the other consequences, so does the concentration of power in the book industry. Consumers are left with an environment in which fewer and fewer people are deciding which books get published and, ultimately, which books Americans can read and buy.

Barnes & Noble has already entered into an alliance with the \$14 billion media giant, German-owned Bertelsmann AG. Now, with Barnes & Noble's proposed acquisition of the billion dollar Ingram Book Company, there can be little doubt that the book industry is falling prey to the same anti-competitive ills that currently plague the computer software and other industries. This deal would make independent bookstores virtually dependent upon their largest competitor for their books. It's as if Burger King and Wendy's had to buy their french fries from McDonald's.

The acquisition will be reviewed in Washington. Representatives can be asked that the Fair Trade Commission and the Anti-Trust Division of the Justice Department thoroughly investigate the implications of the B&N/ Ingram deal. Petitions to block the acquisition and sample letters to representatives are available at Common Language Bookstore.

## A Man in Full

by Tom Wolfe  
\$28.95, FSG

Reviewed by Tyler Patterson  
Shaman Drum Staff

Charlie Croker is a bull-headed mammoth of a man. A former Georgia Tech Yellowjacket football star, Croker holds an enviable position in life. He has achieved legendary status for his exploits on the football field. Granted he is now sixty years old, the old farts still sing songs about him. "Charlie Croker was a man in full! He had a back like a Jersey Bull!" Croker owns a 29,000-acre quail plantation, builds a skyscraper in an underdeveloped metro Atlanta area with his name on it, and is married to a gorgeous former art dealer less than half his age. Of course, like the hero in Tom Wolfe's other work of fiction, *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Croker has vastly overreached his financial capabilities and faces a mountain of debt.

The stylistic flourishes so enjoyed by Wolfe fans are certainly in *A Man in Full*. Repetitions galore. *Saddlebags. Back like a Jersey Bull. Peel yo cap!* Even the obligatory reference to *Bonfire*'s hemorrhaging money. Most characters are subjected to Wolfe's signature skills of observation, as well. Exposed in all their imperfections, they certainly in their thoughts do not adhere to the political correctness of their speech. At least, for the most part.

While the structures of *Bonfire* and *A Man in Full* are basically the same, there are considerable differences between the thematic style and content. Quite a bit of plot and sub-plot, in particular the efforts of the mayor to keep the potential explosive revelations about Georgia Tech's star running back (one of "Atlanta's own") from turning into a racially divisive point for the city. In this storyline, politics side-step legal issues,