

book of the week

A wife's diary of despair

A Victorian woman's 'record of her own infamy' is laid bare in this winning blend of biography and courtroom drama

Mid-Victorian marriage was, for a woman, a can of worms. However feckless her husband, divorce was impossible. A wife, her earnings and their children were chattels. As each generation has to be reminded, it was a long hard struggle before the Married Women's Property Act of 1882. Caroline Norton, whose brutal husband took her money and her children (one of whom died in his custody) used rage, friends in high places, even an appeal to Queen Victoria, to achieve it — posthumously.

Isabella Robinson was, like Mrs Norton, a trapped wife. As an intelligent young widow with a small son, she had inexplicably married the uncongenial Henry and produced two more sons. But she soon despised her husband, who used her money to maintain a mistress and two illegitimate daughters. Isabella's three boys were "my only ray of comfort", she wrote in her journal. This diary, and its exposure in 1858 in the new matrimonial court (until then it took an Act of Parliament for a man to secure a divorce) provides rich material for Kate Summerscale in a winning combination of biography and courtroom drama — and an important slice of social history.

Left in their grand house in Edinburgh while Henry was away on business, Isabella was smitten by Edward Lane, a young married doctor. They would take their children on outings and discuss literature, politics, poetry. He also made her laugh.

Dr Lane favoured a new-fangled nature cure, hydropathy, and opened a spa called Moor Park in Surrey. Isabella went several times on the pretext of lingering postnatal depression (or "hysteria"). Hydropathy was madly popular; even Darwin went to Dr Lane's for sundry malaises, including flatulence and boils, and anxiety about his "everlasting Species book".

Isabella's illicit yearnings for Dr Lane were assuaged by arm-in-arm walks and talks in the grounds of Moor Park. Then one day, there were kisses, and more: "He was nervous, and confused, and as eager as myself." Days later he accompanied her to the station in a Bovary-like cab ride, when "I leaned back at last in silent joy in those arms I had so often dreamed of, and kissed the curls and smooth face, so radiant with beauty", while her son Alfred perched on top of the carriage.

It was a fact not lost on the courtroom later that Isabella's descriptions "of the thrill of transgression, of pleasures sharpened by the danger of discovery" were "penned with a descriptive ability which renders them most dangerous reading", as *The Observer* noted. No wonder diaries became such a popular literary device for novelists from Anne Brontë to Wilkie Collins.

Just as Summerscale's *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* illuminated Victorian police work and the origins of detective fiction, this one illustrates how prone the Victori-

ans were to judge women mad, especially for sexual misdemeanour. To have written "a record of her own infamy", Isabella must surely be out of her mind.

Madame Bovary had just been published after Flaubert's trial for obscenity, but was considered too "disgusting" to translate into English until the 1880s. Isabella shared with Emma Bovary the misfortune of marrying the wrong man, allied to a romantic imagination. Her intellect was perfectly rational, but deprived of Dr Lane, she pursued a *tendresse* for her sons' tutors. Dr Lane continued, however, to invade her erotic dreams, even though (as he later swore) he had never written a line to Mrs Robinson "that could not be proclaimed at the market cross".

Isabella's illicit yearnings for Dr Lane were assuaged by arm-in-arm walks

Isabella was determined anyway to escape from her wretched marriage when the birth of a fourth son to Dr Lane's wife shattered any deluded hopes. At this point, Henry Robinson found her diaries in her desk. He was a bachelor who had two children by an unmarried woman. Then as now, the outcome depended on the will or whim of a legal mind. Caroline Norton had quoted from *Beak House*: "It won't do to have truth and justice on our side; we must have law and lawyers." Cockburn's reasoned judgment and its aftermath conclude an absorbing tale, admirably told by a mistress of her craft.

Isabella's diary was read aloud (women sometimes being asked to leave the court) and fully reported in the press. But could a diary provide reliable evidence of adultery? Was Isabella, aged 42, a predatory seductress of "about 55" as alleged? Had a stableboy seen Dr Lane's arm about her, in

the summerhouse? Dr Lane remembered things quite differently — he went for walks with many lady patients — but maintained a polite, unruffled demeanour. So Isabella sat in court, humiliated, in the stifling heat of that notorious summer when the Thames became a stinking sewer. She was forbidden to speak for herself: not until 1898 could any defendant speak in court. Dr Lane's mother-in-law, the spirited Lady Drysdale, testified that Edward had felt sorry for Mrs Robinson; he found her company boring, her conversation "facile". Her diaries were, Lane wrote, the "moonshine lucubrations" of a "rhapsodical and vaporing fool".

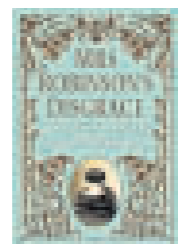
Victorian misinformation about sex pervaded the proceedings. George Combe, Isabella's phrenologist friend, had designated her brain particularly "amative", that is, seething with sexual desire. George Drysdale, Dr Lane's brother-in-law, wrote a book advocating sexual freedom and issued this contraceptive advice: have intercourse eight days after menstruation. Which possibly contributed to the Victorian population boom.

The judge who had to wrestle with the legal conundrum — could Dr Lane be innocent of adultery imagined by a mad woman, while she herself is divorced for that adultery? — was Sir Alexander Cockburn. He was a bachelor who had two children by an unmarried woman. Then as now, the outcome depended on the will or whim of a legal mind. Caroline Norton had quoted from *Beak House*: "It won't do to have truth and justice on our side; we must have law and lawyers." Cockburn's reasoned judgment and its aftermath conclude an absorbing tale, admirably told by a mistress of her craft.

To order books at discounted prices and with free p&p call 0845 2712134



PART OF THE FURNITURE Victorian women and their children were regarded as their husband's chattels



Mrs Robinson's Disgrace: the Private Diary of a Victorian Lady by Kate Summerscale

Bloomsbury, 298pp £16.99 * £13.99

Valerie Grove

interview

'Our families are mysteries to us all'

Alison Bechdel's comic strip memoirs are letters to her parents, she tells Tim Teeman

A few years ago the American comic strip author Alison Bechdel was doing a reading from her 2006 memoir, *Fun Home*, which is about her father Bruce, who died — she believes he committed suicide — after being hit by a truck. A man stood up, a friend of her father's, clearly upset she thought "because I had betrayed my father's memory by writing about him". But he had news to impart: the man and her father, who died aged 44, had a friend in common, the doctor on call when her father arrived at the hospital. "I learnt my father was alive when he got to the emergency room. I'd always thought he'd died instantly," says Bechdel. "Over 20 years later I find this out on stage, in front of 200 people."

It was her search for the truth about her father — who was gay, closeted and coming to terms with both his wife's desire for a divorce and his daughter's coming out at the time of his death — that led her to write the brilliant *Fun Home*, which spent two weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list and made it into this newspaper's top ten "books of the decade". It's the enigma of her mother Helen that has led to her latest memoir, *Are You My Mother?*

The book doesn't answer the questions over which Bechdel still mulls. Why did Helen stop kissing her, but continue kissing her sons, after Bechdel was 7? What did she think of her husband's sexuality, his death? How did she grieve? The 51-year-old author insists that she couldn't ask her mother these questions directly: "I'm afraid to. I know we seem close, but we're quite distant and have a very formal relationship. The book is my attempt to get her to respond to me." At 13, Bechdel went to see her mother after getting upset by a novel. "Well, life is rough," her mother told her gruffly, and Bechdel left "knowing we couldn't talk about anything emotional".

Bechdel, as readers of her most famous strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* will expect, draws both memoirs in her characteristically moving, funny, intelligent hand, though the latest got a pasting from a *New York Times* critic who said it "flirted with being . . . actively dismal". Certainly, if you've never read Bechdel before, *Fun*

Home is the place to start; *Mother* has a tendency to make the assumption you've read its predecessor and is heavier going, marshalling figures from literature and psychoanalysis, including Virginia Woolf and Donald Winnicott, to examine childhood and parenting.

Bechdel, who grew up inspired by *Tintin*, *Mad* magazine and the work of the writer and artist Edward Gorey, has mined her life throughout her career. *Dykes*, which ran from 1983 to 2008, featured a gallery of women who Bechdel says were aspects of herself: fretful Mo, workaholic lawyer Clarice, lothario Lois and new-agey Sparrow. Bechdel reveals that she is planning to reunite the women for new adventures.

In person Bechdel is more guarded — though warm and wry — than you'd guess from the pulsating emotions of her strips. Her mother bustles around a later life of amateur dramatics and writing for a newspaper: she wonders whether these are attempts to fulfill some kind of professional destiny forsaken by having a family.

The memoirs are dense stews of frustration and self-interrogation: we see Bechdel in therapy and in and out of love, playing as a little girl in the dark wonderland of the family business (an undertaker's — hence

Writing about the living is like 'cleaning under a rug with someone on it'

Fun Home), talking to her mother on the phone and, guiltily not really listening, typing her words straight on to the page.

Unsurprisingly Bechdel says her mother is "on guard" about the latest book; her only reaction was, "Well, it coheres". Bechdel smiles: "All our families are mysteries, it's so strange that little bits of answers come to us over the years." She admits to vetting material according to her subjects' sensitivities and also that her father was more playful than she drew him in *Fun Home*. "It feels kind of bad I didn't provide a three-dimensional picture of him."

Writing about him dead was easier than writing about her mother alive, which Bechdel puts, wittily, as "vacuuming under a rug while someone's still standing on it". Two "big things" so far unaddressed are her two younger brothers, Christian and John. She says that she is going to draw a third memoir "looking at the family as a system" with



her brothers the focus. John feels that she has been too negative about her father, while Christian "is not completely functional in the world" and has obsessive compulsive disorder. Bechdel and her mother both had the disorder as children. "I think we all have Asperger's," Bechdel says.

The author lives with Holly, her partner of five years, outside Burlington, Vermont; the rest of the family is in Pennsylvania. "If I lived closer to them I wouldn't be able to create," she says. She became a cartoonist "because no one was watching this lowbrow populist arena", then "secretly" nursed ambitions that *Dykes* would become a cross-over success. "It never did, but it's been absorbed, grandfatherly, into the canon."

Fun Home includes many expositions of Bechdel's father, the closeted gay man bringing up a yet-to-realise-she's-gay daughter. "We were this strangely inverted version of one another," Bechdel says. At one reading a lesbian approached her with her silver-haired gay father: "It was so poignant and sad to imagine my dad being alive, like hers."

Bechdel imagines her father had casual affairs and relationships. Why does she think his death was a suicide? "Because it's less painful that way. He didn't leave a note. I have no proof. It just makes psychological sense. My coming out dislodged something. My parents were managing this secret of his, then I shone a light on it." Has she blamed herself in any way for his suicide? "Oh yeah, I feel completely responsible, even though I know intellectually it's not my fault. I feel as though if I had just kept my mouth shut things might have been different." Her mother's grief "happened off stage, the family carried on but something was shattered".

When Bechdel came out to her mother, the two-week silence hurt almost as much as the letter that broke it: "You have a mind. The rest, whatever it is, can wait." It took ten years for her mother "to come around". Bechdel's relationships are sketched in the book; she hopes Holly is her last. "I'm not sure I can do it again," she smiles. The couple go hiking, biking, gardening. "She's good for me," says Bechdel, who is introverted where Holly is outgoing.

Therapy, which Bechdel has had for 25 years ("almost half my life") has been "completely life-saving. I was never suicidal, though depressed and cut off from myself. I don't know what would have become of me without it."

Bechdel's mother isn't happy about the prospect of another memoir: "She's private, thinks it's self-indulgent," says Bechdel, who nevertheless feels compelled to write on. She is looking forward to reuniting the *Dykes*, too. "When I see what's on television it's sad that queerness has become as commodified as hetero-

sexuality. The rough edges have gone. I have nostalgia for the bad old days."

Are You My Mother? is published by Jonathan Cape, rrp £16.99. To buy it for £15.29, including p&p, call 0845 2712134 or visit thetimes.co.uk/bookshop

FAMILY STRIFE Alison Bechdel. Below left: Bechdel's mother hands over her father's papers in *Are You My Mother?*

SAVE 50% ON A TLS SUBSCRIPTION

Buy a subscription from only £16.75 a quarter and have the leading paper in the world for literary culture delivered direct to your door weekly.

CALL 01858 438 781

QUOTING S107 OR VISIT WWW.SUBSCRIPTION.CO.UK/TLS/S107

TLS
FOR LOVERS OF LITERARY CULTURE