

Alison Bechdel

Recipient: 2018 Walter Cerf Medal for Outstanding Achievement in the Arts

Acceptance remarks, November 14, 2018

Thank you so much, this is a huge honor, especially when I look at the list of artists and writers who've won this award in the past. There are so many people whose names are household words in Vermont, people who I've thought of as somehow grown-up and respectable in a way that it never occurred to me that I might ever be. So it's quite odd and startling to see my name on the list. Mainly because as a double outsider—a lesbian and a practitioner of that sketchy, lowbrow art form, cartooning—I had long ago given up on respectability, and had gotten used to the idea of being a sort of shadowy, disreputable person on the margins of polite society.

I moved to Vermont almost thirty years ago, just at the point when I'd quit my part-time day job to see if I could survive as a full-time cartoonist. I felt right at home here. I felt much safer living out in the hills of Vermont than I would have in rural Pennsylvania, where I are up. In Vermont, there seemed to be a weird artist in every other hollow. Some combination of the human scale of the state and the topography seemed to make it a place that tended naturally to a kind of progressivism — or at least toward leaving people alone.

So I worked away quite happily here on my countercultural cartoons ... until one day in the year 2000, a very strange thing happened. The VT legislature passed the Civil Union Bill, and became the first state in the union to legally recognize same sex relationships. It wasn't marriage yet—that would take nine more years—but VT would be first at that, too. But back in April of 2000, when Governor Dean signed the Civil Union bill into law, I came to Montpelier with everyone to celebrate at a big rally out front. And as I approached the Statehouse, a weird thing happened. I had always admired this charming miniature capitol building—as an example of official state architecture it was more hospitable and welcoming than most. But until this moment I had never thought of it as meaning anything, as symbolizing anything. But for the first time in my life I had the clear understanding that this building, with its pretty golden dome and its statue of Ceres the goddess of agriculture at the tippy top—represented ME. It was a stunning moment. I hadn't even known this was something I was missing, I'd gotten so used to thinking of myself as an outsider.

I feel like that experience helped me to start thinking bigger about my own work. It made me more determined to speak to people outside the little ghetto I'd grown so comfortable in. So it means a very great deal to me to be here in this hallowed building tonight, to receive this recognition from the state of Vermont. It's a very wonderful feeling to be told that I've given a small something back to the place that has given so much to me. Thank you.