

Tricycle Talks

Episode #68 with Suzannah Showler

“Inside the Issue: Embracing Our Interdependence”

November 24, 2021



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James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. In this special series of episodes, I sit down with three contributors to the winter issue of the magazine, out this month. Today, I’m joined by Suzannah Showler, a writer, cultural critic, and poet. In “Bechdel’s Quest,” Showler reviews Alison Bechdel’s new graphic novel, *The Secret to Superhuman Strength*. Showler and I talk about toxic work habits, embracing our interdependence, and the dangers of the American myth of self-reliance.

James Shaheen: So I’m here with Suzannah Showler, writer, cultural critic, and poet. Hi Suzannah, thanks so much for being here.

Suzannah Showler: Yeah, no problem. Thanks for having me.

James Shaheen: So you reviewed Alison Bechdel’s latest graphic memoir, *The Secret to Superhuman Strength*, for our winner issue. Can you tell us a little bit about the memoir? What is the secret to superhuman strength?

Suzannah Showler: Oh boy, that second question is a big one. Well, the book is, as you mentioned, a memoir. It’s Alison Bechdel’s third graphic memoir, and it’s quite a departure from her previous work for those who are familiar with that. So Alison Bechdel’s first two memoirs, the first one focuses on her relationship with her father, the second on her relationship with her mother. This book is about—I mean, in theory, it’s about her relationship with exercise. But it proves to be about quite a bit more than that and really more about the quest for transcendence

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and different ways of exploring the mind-body relationship. Bechdel ultimately concludes, at least in theory, that the secret to superhuman strength is interconnectivity and interdependence rather than independence.

James Shaheen: Right, and the book’s title comes from where?

Suzannah Showler: When she was a kid, Alison Bechdel writes away for one of these penny pamphlets that you see advertised in the back of comics and magazines—or that you used to—that promises to offer the secret to superhuman strength, and it turns out to be badly photocopied little martial arts pamphlet and doesn’t really show her that secret at all. But obviously, the idea stayed with her and becomes this quest that in a lot of ways really dominates her life.

James Shaheen: I used to write away for products in the back of those comic books like sea monkeys, and they turned out to be brine shrimp. I was very disappointed. So you describe the book as “a rangy exploration of mind-body dualism, a semitransitional hero’s journey, a seeker’s quest for transcendence, a Kunstlerroman, and, eventually, a love story.” So for those of you who don’t know what a Kunstlerroman is, it’s a coming of age novel for an artist. So Suzannah, can you unpack some of these layers for us? How does Bechdel explore these themes in a book about her exercise obsession?

Suzannah Showler: Sure. Which one do you want me to start with?

James Shaheen: I suppose you could talk about a seeker’s quest for transcendence.



Suzannah Showler: OK, a seeker’s quest for transcendence. Well, what becomes clear fairly early on in the book, I would say, is that Bechdel’s relationship to exercise is really about looking for moments in which you lose yourself to your bodily experience, give yourself over entirely to something else. She really ends up tying her interest in exercise, her exploration of different sports activities, into her spiritual interests and ways in which she’s looking for narratives or metanarratives that will allow her to think about overcoming a sense of self. And then in terms of the *Kunstlerroman*, that in a lot of ways, I mean, I don’t even want to pick out one part of this book and say it was the most compelling to me because it was all really compelling, but the ways that Bechdel ties her interest in transcendence and bodily experiences and exercise into her description of her creative process and her coming of age as an artist and what it means to make art was really a particular interest to me. I’m really interested in questions of creativity and what it is and how we harness it and explore it and be with it, and this book is in a lot of ways really about Bechdel’s really long and trying journey as an artist in terms of her relationship to the act of making art itself. Obviously, as an artist, she’s had an extremely successful career. But within that huge astronomical success, she has struggled and, it seems, continues to struggle with questions of process and how you sit down and do the work without harming yourself in the process.

James Shaheen: Why don’t you say something about harming oneself because she does push herself to such limits that at the end it almost seems there’s nothing left before she regenerates and goes back at it?

Suzannah Showler: Yeah, I mean, her portrait of her own work habits is really horrifying and kind of distressing, honestly, to read. It’s a very honest memoir. She doesn’t aggrandize these sort of manic fits of work necessarily. But she does certainly seem very attached to them or attached



to what it feels like and what it yields. I mean, in a lot of ways, this book is just a portrait of workaholism.

James Shaheen: Right, which I get, and so do you, obviously, from the review.

Suzannah Showler: I do. I mean, I also set up a lot of barriers in my life to prevent that. I don't know, I really don't give myself to the cult of work in a lot of ways. I kind of resist that in a political sense. It's something I think about a lot, though, especially when it comes to creative work when you're so responsible for yourself and nobody is really asking you to do this, and you have to really carve out space in the world to make things and what that demands, what that looks like, who it helps, and who it harms are all questions I think about a lot.

James Shaheen: Yeah, yet this is also a love story. Why don't you say something about that?

Suzannah Showler: So alongside all of these mind-body transcendent experiences with exercise and her own creative work, Bechdel does also chart her relationships and her romantic relationships and the ways that pushing herself to various extremes has strained or made some of those relationships difficult over the years. Eventually she arrives with her now life partner, and throughout the last really third of the memoir, that relationship and its presence becomes this constant. Underlying Bechdel's extremes, you have the presence of this person who seems very, very grounded and very healthy. By the end of the book, to me, the most fascinating part of this is that at the very end, we start to see the process of making this book itself comes into the memoir, and it becomes a part of the story being told. She ends up running out of time on her book deadline, and she needs to enlist her partner, who is an artist in her own right, to do the coloration work for the book. So it ends up being a collaboration. So after all these years of being



somewhat addicted to independence and struggling with that in various ways, the work itself becomes this testament to interdependence and collaboration and mutual care.

James Shaheen: Right, that’s so nicely put. We touched on this a little bit, but you said this book also resonates personally for you. You describe yourself as a “bookish-presenting person with a lifelong exercise habit and a tendency toward immersive dabbling.” Do you want to say something about that?

Suzannah Showler: I’ve done sports my whole life. I come from a half very sporty family in that my dad is really just an athlete, a natural athlete, and my mom couldn’t be less interested in exercise if she tried. So I grew up playing sports. I grew up throwing the football with my dad in the front street. But I am also not a competitive person, honestly, and I don’t have the mental capacity for it. I just do not have a winning attitude. Anyway, that’s really more about sports than exercise. But I’ve really done exercise my whole life. It’s a really big part of my life. It’s kind of how I cope with being human, moving my body and exploring its capacities and its limits. I think that might surprise people potentially in the same way that Bechdel sort of similarly is like, “You might not think it, I sort of look like a nerd, but yeah, I’m secretly a jock.” As for that immersive dabbling element, kind of like Bechdel, I’ve gone through a lot of phases of being kind of obsessed with one thing that I will be doing six days a week, and then I’ll move on from that to something else. So I understand that urge towards a certain loss of self in bodily activities.

James Shaheen: You also talked a little bit about this, but did the book teach you anything about your own work and exercise obsessions, if I can call them obsessions? I mean, you said you set limits for yourself. Did the book help with that in any way? What sort of limits do you set?



Suzannah Showler: We live in a world that will demand that you both consume and produce 24 hours a day if you allow yourself to feel that. I put really hard work limits around things like when I check my email and when my computer closes and when it opens and when I'm doing one task versus another. I have a strong sense that if I don't put those kinds of limits around things, I am an obsessive person, and I might just give myself over to something entirely and do the really hardcore work binging that Bechdel does. I know from experience that that depletes and depresses me fundamentally in ways that are not sustainable. A lot of the discipline of work for me is the discipline to choose when to not work or to try to anyway. I would say that mostly the portrait Bechdel gave me felt very much like a cautionary tale, and it's not really a path that I'm on currently. I don't think I'm really at risk of doing the sorts of things she does, but that's really only because I've paid \$100 for an app that prevents me from opening certain websites at certain times of day. I will take pretty extreme measures to keep myself from going to extremes. And this book definitely felt like OK, I'm glad I don't do what she's doing.

James Shaheen: I felt the same way.

Suzannah Showler: As I say in the review, there is also this moment when you're reading it where you're like, “Oh, but Alison Bechdel is Alison Bechdel. Should I do it like her? Should I just be more hardcore? Should I just lose myself entirely in my work? Maybe that's why I'm not her not as successful.” It can be tempting to think that way.

James Shaheen: Yeah, so work and consumption, those seem to be two cultural afflictions. You also talk about, and you mentioned it before, independence. You write, “Insofar as this is a book that deals with addiction, Bechdel's primary dependence is on independence itself. She nurses a reliance on the broad American myth of self-reliance.” So could you say a little bit more about the myth of self-reliance and how that shows up in the book?



Suzannah Showler: It shows up in a couple of ways, both in personal experiences Bechdel talks about, and like I said, she’s a very self-aware narrator. This is not reaching. She will say in the book, “There I was, obsessively trying to be independent again.” It doesn’t take a deep reading to see that. So that comes up in her own personal journey, and also she explores a lot of great American thinkers who are held up as and nurtured as part of the myth or idea of what it means to be American and to be self-reliant. For example, Emerson makes an appearance. We also have figures who she explores like Jack Kerouac, these myths of selfhood, independence, self-making, Americana. She brings these things up and makes allusions to them and explores her own relationship to those ideas.

James Shaheen: Yeah, she also explores meditation a bit and visits a meditation center but talks about meditation in an interesting way. She’s there, and she’s not there with everybody.

Suzannah Showler: On two different occasions, she tries the meditation thing. She goes to Tail of the Tiger in Vermont, one of Chogyam Trungpa’s centers, and she decides to bike there in a sort of self-punishing way. I can’t remember how long the journey is, but she doesn’t leave herself enough time, and so she arrives late and kind of harried and finds that it’s not really what she’s looking for and phones her partner like a day later and asks to be picked up. So her attempt to go on a meditation retreat doesn’t go very well. And then a few years later, she again drops in on a Shambhala center and tries to sit, grasps onto this teacher, if I’m remembering right, and keeps wanting him to unlock something for her. She says, “Why can’t I do this? I’m trying really hard,” and he’s sort of like, “Chill a little. Just try, just come try sitting,” and she doesn’t want to sit with other people. And she winds up going home to obsessively jump on her exercise bike. So there is this yearning for a certain kind of thoughtful relationship to presence but that she seems a



little bit unable to get at through any means except for extreme ones. She finds a certain meditative experience in a lot of physical activities. It's just a little bit more kinetic.

James Shaheen: Right. But as you said, and I'll end with this and you might want to say something about it, she does end up embracing interdependence as demonstrated by her partnership with her wife.

Suzannah Showler: Yeah, she does. I mean, she also starts out the memoir, interestingly, saying “This is where I'm going to wind up is interdependence, what I'm looking for here and what I'm trying to show you,” and she does wind up there, but it's not totally straightforward. At the end of the memoir, there's this embrace of interdependence, but also she's making plans to train to be a member of the resistance and to run across the border sending messages and things like that. She hasn't given up entirely on some of the urge to move towards extremes in various ways, but it's quite playful, I would say, and quite tongue-in-cheek. The wish to embrace interdependence seems to do a lot of the work of that embrace itself.

James Shaheen: You know, for me, it was really interesting to see *Fun Home*, I saw the play before I saw the graphic novel, and then her mother, and now about herself. So that progression was very interesting, and you talk a little bit about that.

Suzannah Showler: It seems like Bechdel was really willing to go to the most core relationships we have in life and to build memoir out of those things. It's really very bold. I think all of these memoirs are beautifully done and quite different, and yet there's a through line. You recognize one person across their existence. Just really brave work, I think it's fair to say.

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James Shaheen: Yeah, I agree with that. So Suzannah, it was a real pleasure. Thanks for joining us. And for our listeners, you can read Suzannah’s review, “Bechdel’s Quest,” in the winter issue of *Tricycle*. Thanks, Suzannah.

Suzannah Showler: Thanks.

James Shaheen: You’ve been listening to Suzannah Showler on *Tricycle Talks*. You can read her article, as well as the rest of the winter issue, at tricycle.org/magazine. We’d love to hear your thoughts about our podcast. Write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think.

Tricycle Talks is produced by As It Should Be and Sarah Fleming. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!