

Introduction: *Maus* Now

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1.

In the fall of 2011 I was interviewing Art Spiegelman onstage in a ticketed event at the 92nd Street Y in New York. I asked him, very earnestly, about a musing he had jotted down in a notebook in the early 1970s—which was around the time he started making comics stories about the Holocaust that would eventually lead to creating his two-volume masterpiece, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. “Maybe Western civilization has forfeited any right to literature with a big ‘L,’” Spiegelman had written. “Maybe Goethe and Mozart were not the patron saints of Germany. . . . Maybe vulgar, semiliterate, unsubtle comic books are an appropriate form for speaking of the unspeakable.” Forty years later, onstage, Art quipped back at me, “For one thing the unspeakable gets spoken within ten minutes, by me if nobody else.” (This is, I should note, the same event in which he got up in the middle of our interview and went outside to smoke a cigarette, leaving me facing an empty chair, and a sold-out crowd.) Through its creativity and innovation, Spiegelman’s *Maus*, coming up on a four-decade anniversary, shifted how people talk about history, trauma, ethnic and racial persecution—and comics.

Maus has profoundly changed cultures of expression in the United States and all over the world. First serialized in the biannual *RAW* magazine beginning in 1980, and published as two book volumes in 1986 and 1991, respectively, it has been translated into almost forty

languages, and Spiegelman is one of our most famous living cartoonists, as well as a globally recognized public intellectual. As the German critic Kurt Scheel writes in his 1989 review of *Maus I*, referring to the celebrated “Todesfuge” (“Death Fugue”) poet and onetime labor camp inmate Paul Celan: “Celan and Spiegelman are to be mentioned together because both the cartoonist and the poet invented a language for their subject that did not exist before” (see “Mauschwitz?” in this volume, published here in English for the first time). Spiegelman’s approach to “speaking” the unspeakable—the language he invented, as Scheel suggests—is both verbal and visual: comics, with its peculiar, distilled word-and-image grammar. Spiegelman, who spent thirteen years making *Maus*, not only modeled definitively that in fact comics could be remarkably sophisticated, literate, and subtle, but he also blew open about a thousand other clichés and pieties about art and representation, particularly in the expression of the darkest aspects of human history, and the testimony that results from it. (Today the pressure *Maus* places on some of those pieties is itself under pressure, as the book’s recent banning by a Tennessee county school board, which cited examples of its supposed impropriety, reveals.)

Unfolding in black line art, *Maus* presents at least two stories: the testimony of Spiegelman’s father, Vladek Spiegelman, a Polish Jew who survived the Holocaust (and emigrated to the United States in 1951 with his wife, Anja, also a survivor, and their toddler, Art), and the story of the cartoonist son, as an adult, soliciting his father’s testimony in order to understand and visualize his experience on the page for readers. Anja Spiegelman died by suicide in 1968, when Art was twenty, and her absence is a vexing, animating force of the narrative.

Maus toggles back and forth between the 1930s and 1940s in Poland and Germany, during which Spiegelman’s parents fight for their lives against the murderous Nazi regime—both ultimately wind up imprisoned in the Auschwitz death camp complex—and the 1970s and 1980s in New York City and the Catskills, during which Spiegelman interviews Vladek, a difficult and often frustrating figure to his son. (“No way—I’d rather feel guilty!” the Spiegelman character remarks when his wife asks, in their SoHo apartment, if he is going to Queens at his father’s request to help him fix a drainpipe [*Maus I*, 97].) *Maus* is a powerful story for many reasons, one of which is the propulsive

structure of the book, in which readers, immersed in its pages, on one level know that Vladek survives—after all, Art, his postwar progeny, is its creator—but are also constantly, and harrowingly, in suspense as to how he can escape the succession of terrifying circumstances we witness with him. Readers wait with bated breath for the gap between present and past to close. (Professor Brian Boyd’s study *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*, which offers an evolutionary explanation for “supremely successful stories,” opens with the line “My first debt is to Art Spiegelman” [389, xi].) Further, *Maus* famously visually articulates its characters as animals throughout—a visual overlay that provides a level of abstraction hard to imagine being effective in any other medium aside from comics. While the characters who populate *Maus* are all drawn with animal heads—and sometimes tails—this figuration is never remarked upon by them in the book (except in rare instances in which Spiegelman reflects, as part of the narrative, on his artistic choices). The characters understand themselves as human, but readers see Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, and Polish gentiles as pigs, among other figurations (Americans are dogs). This animal metaphor—itself borrowed from Nazi propaganda and resignified—is, further, self-reflexively disrupted by the book itself over the course of its pages.

Spiegelman had for some time in the 1980s imagined that he would self-publish *Maus* with the Raw Books & Graphics imprint that he and Françoise Mouly ran out of their living room, and then their basement. (The couple cofounded, and coedited, *RAW* magazine from 1980 to 1991, which offered shifting subtitles with each edition, such as “The Graphix Magazine That Lost Its Faith in Nihilism.”) Spiegelman joked to interviewer Stanley Crouch in 1996 that working on a book was like having a long-term disease—to battle, I suppose; this comment also vividly illustrates how Spiegelman approaches the stakes of his work, which is: existentially. I have rarely known anyone as seriously consumed by the act of creation as Art Spiegelman is, whether the project at hand is one page or three hundred pages. But this dedication, particularly as Spiegelman came to *Maus* from an avant-garde comics culture, driven by underground, independent publishing and distribution, was not matched by any expectation for commercial achievement. Spiegelman’s three-page 1972 comics story

“*Maus*,” the seed for the longer work (analyzed in this volume by Joshua Brown and Marianne Hirsch, among others), published in the underground anthology *Funny Aministrals* (the swapped letters are deliberate), was aesthetically and politically important, but didn’t elicit much of a reaction. Spiegelman did not anticipate the enormous critical and commercial success *Maus* would become, particularly after his struggle to find a publisher—Pantheon took it on only after already passing on it once, and Spiegelman had garnered dozens and dozens of rejection letters (a photograph of a thick spread of these appears in our collaborative, interview-driven book, *MetaMaus: A Look Inside a Modern Classic*, *Maus*).

Maus was an immediate success—a “sensation,” to use Michiko Kakutani’s phrase in her review of the second volume in *The New York Times*—even as some readers struggled with the perceived glibness of connecting comics and the Holocaust, and still others struggled to understand the valences of its animal conceit. For most readers, actual engagement with the book revealed its complexity, above and beyond the cultural connotations of comics and its “funny animal” tradition. Crouch, in his interview with Spiegelman, notes: “The remarkable thing about it, is when you pick up the book you say, ‘Hah . . . This can’t work’ . . . but he brings it off.” As Hirsch suggests in an interview with Martha Kuhlman about *Maus* scholarship—in an important formulation that underscores the book’s barrier-breaking—*Maus* teaches you how to read it. “Some of the best strategies are taken from the text,” Hirsch points out, “rather than the other way around,” namely the standard practice of approaching a book with interpretive frameworks in mind. (Hirsch herself developed the now canonical concept of “postmemory” in relation to *Maus*, as her essay in this volume explains.) Previous frames of reference are inadequate; they might help you a little, but they fail to account for the fullness, and the uniqueness, of what *Maus* accomplishes. While *Maus* is nonfiction, the series was awarded a Special Pulitzer Prize in 1992, because the Pulitzer committee, while bestowing a huge and terrain-shifting honor upon Spiegelman, wasn’t sure into which category a comics work about the Holocaust that pictured Jews as mice should fall.

Maus has been received so ecstatically that after researching it for my PhD degree, and subsequently for two of my books, in addition to

MetaMaus, I can count the negative reviews I've encountered on two hands. There have been some holdouts, most notably Hillel Halkin, who wrote in *Commentary* that *Maus* "fails to convince me that comics, no matter how sophisticated, have the slightest potential to vie with either literature or art as a serious medium of expression." (I should note Spiegelman himself, who thrives on debate and intellectual engagement, encouraged me repeatedly to include negative reviews in this volume—his only suggestion for a project for which he had no editorial role. As I explained to him, should any of those pieces, however critical, have merited the "best of" standard with which I approached the book's contents, they would have appeared here.)

Yet for most *Maus* was revelatory, and generative, in profound and long-lasting ways. It is hard to overstate *Maus*'s effect on post-war American culture, and on the collective sense of what art and literature can accomplish (I appreciate how the form of comics puts pressure on the boundaries of these categories—it is a productive awkwardness, as I like to think of it). Not only has *Maus* influenced the fields of literature and history (see Joshua Brown's piece in this volume, first published in *Oral History Review*), but it has refigured contemporary art—Spiegelman, although usually creating comics for print, has yet had exhibits at major museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, as critic and curator Robert Storr addresses here. *Maus* is taught routinely in high school, college, and graduate school, in departments including Sociology and Political Science. It is, in addition, often taught to middle school students—a fact to which its banning in 2022 in Tennessee, for an eighth-grade curriculum, calls attention.

Maus is also a key text in memory studies and trauma studies, connected fields that have emerged, in part, as a response to the Holocaust (a term Spiegelman happens to dislike)—and the idea that its extremity shattered previous interpretive frameworks for understanding subjectivity and history. And within Jewish studies generally, and Holocaust studies specifically, *Maus* has become a signal text, particularly as a work of second-generation literature—that is, created by the child of a survivor. One of the lasting influences of *Maus*, for instance, is its insistence on the fact that, as Spiegelman tells me in *MetaMaus*, "suffering . . . just makes you suffer"—a feature that comes across sharply, sometimes harshly, in a book that avoids the tendency to ennoble the

figure of the survivor (36). Vladek Spiegelman, at the center of the book, is a thorny personality—even one whom Spiegelman captures in an episode toward the end as racist toward Black Americans. (An example of Spiegelman’s attention to Othering at all levels.) And Spiegelman himself, the seeker-artist figure, is a thorny personality in *Maus*; Spiegelman the author displays his younger self’s selfish character, and rage at his parents. After reading *Maus* probably twenty times, I remain shocked, and moved, every time I read the Spiegelman character, in a perverse formulation, call each of his parents—people who survived the ghastly trial of other people trying to kill them every day for years—“murderers.”

Maus succeeds in part because of its rigorous self-reflexivity. Today, due in large part to *Maus*, contemporary culture operates with an expanded sense of modalities of expression, including the idea that drawing, and in particular comics, can express the horizon of history with an accuracy that is not canceled by creative invention. I have long admired a feature in *The Village Voice* that gathered artists, scholars, and critics—including Spiegelman—to debate the value of *Schindler’s List*. While it’s nominally about Steven Spielberg’s 1993 film, which is perhaps, along with *The Diary of Anne Frank* and Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, among the best known and most mainstream works of cultural production about the Holocaust, it sheds light on *Maus* by comparison, and, when I first encountered it as a graduate student, it helped give me a language to understand what the book is doing.

In the *Voice* roundtable, Spiegelman discusses what he views as the film’s “problem of re-creation for the sake of an audience’s recreation”—its staging and replication of violence for the camera and for film viewers (Hoberman, 27). In contradistinction, while *Maus* does depict the death camps and their operations in detail, in comics one avoids the “ersatz verisimilitude” of film (*MetaMaus*, 59). *Maus* is much more like what the avant-garde filmmaker Ken Jacobs, Spiegelman’s former mentor and longtime friend, suggests in the *Voice* would be a better approach than Spielberg’s: a “Pirandello cinema” in which real survivors would be present instructing actors on-screen, showing the seams of the work and its desire to represent reality. Spiegelman draws “obvious stand-ins for the real thing,” to use Jacobs’s phrase, with his animal heads (Hoberman, 27). And *Maus*, through its hand-

drawn, juxtaposed frames on the page, which sidestep the realism of film, rather creates Auschwitz as what Spiegelman has called “a mental zone,” its own form of accuracy (*MetaMaus*, 166). In a 1995 op-ed in *The New York Times*, Melvin Jules Bukiet declared: “I have more faith in the power of Art Spiegelman’s ‘Maus’ to convey the terror than all the guided tours in the world.” For Spiegelman, making the difficulty of visualizing his father’s experience in comics part of the narrative we read is an acknowledgment of the impossibility—ethical and practical—of fully representing it. As the acclaimed historian Hayden White affirms, with admiration, in the volume *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*: “*Maus* manages to raise all of the crucial issues regarding the ‘limits of representation’ in general” (42).

One of the central suggestions of *Maus* is the presence of the past, the inescapability, and uncontainability, of the horrors of history; they are not separate or closed off from the present-tense of lived life in the book. Vladek has survived, but he is damaged (in a *Maus*-era notebook, Spiegelman wrote of his father, in a sentence that captures something of the experience of survivors generally, including his mother: “There’s more to survival than bringing the body through its ordeal unscathed”). And in the case of the Spiegelman character in *Maus*, the weight of the past—even a past he did not live himself—bears down upon him. Spiegelman and I were once preparing a *Maus* timeline together for inclusion in *MetaMaus*, as I mention in my book *Why Comics?* We were on the phone, musing about where it should begin. I think I may have suggested his birthdate, in February 1948, to which he responded: “My chronology would start with: When was Kristallnacht?” This has stuck with me over the years because it indicates so clearly how history—and violent history—is deeply etched into Spiegelman’s sense of being and self; for him, his chronology, or story, begins with the November 1938 pogrom in Nazi Germany (“Night of the Broken Glass”) that is often seen as the beginning of the Holocaust.

One of the most effective features of comics is its ability—through its unique syntax of balloons and bleeds, gutters and frames—to experiment with time and space on the page. *Maus* does this meaningfully on every single page, each of which has its own narrative and aesthetic

logic. In a poetic formulation, Spiegelman has suggested that comics “choreograph and shape time” (“Ephemera,” 4). And in *Maus*, Spiegelman asks readers to encounter the collapse of different temporalities—the imbrication of the past and the present—graphically. *Maus* displays, dramatically, how the past invades the present. In one striking *Maus* episode that I have returned to repeatedly in my teaching and writing (including my essay in this volume), the Spiegelman family—Art, Françoise, and Vladek—drives to a supermarket in the Catskills in the late 1970s, as Art asks his father about a prisoner revolt in Auschwitz. “And the four young girls what sneaked over the ammunitions for this, they hanged them near to my workshop,” Vladek says, as the car winds its way on a rural road. At the top of the panel readers see four pairs of legs dangling down from the trees; in this panel the 1940s and the 1970s collide and literally share space as readers cannot help but see how the past wordlessly intertwines the present.



From *Maus II*, page 79

If *Maus* is about the presence of the past, its own timelessness indicates both the dynamic, enduring quality of its structure and execution as a work of art—and also, today, the relevance of the politics and attitudes it anatomizes. “If *Maus* is about anything,” Spiegelman once told critic and writer Lawrence Weschler, “it’s a critique of the limitations—the sometimes *fatal* limitations—of the caricaturizing impulse” (“Pig Perplex”). To invoke a commonplace, we see these fatal limitations in the 1930s in Nazi Germany, among other times and places—and we also see it today. Spiegelman’s point could not be any more urgent right now, during an era of rampant division—during a time, for instance, in which racism and anti-Semitism are

rising both nationally and globally, and in which violence, in the case of America, has been encouraged even at the level of the U.S. government. As the title *Maus Now* indicates, *Maus* is more resonant than ever. One of Spiegelman's longtime catchphrases—Never Again and Again and Again—feels prescient for this moment.

Maus charts fascism and its rise, and insists on the continuation of aspects of the past that so many of us would wish to be over—and which have been conspicuous in recent years. Among a succession of other devastating events, the fatal racist white nationalist Charlottesville rally in 2017 (which included the chant “Jews will not replace us!”) and the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh in 2018—in which a gunman opened fire on congregants during a morning Shabbat service, killing eleven and wounding others, becoming the deadliest attack on Jews in America—gave me the feeling that in its political valences, *Maus* is more vital than ever. Jolted by these events, Spiegelman, an in-demand lecturer, started delivering talks he calls “Maus Now” talks, which inspired this collection's title. After the shock of Charlottesville, despite his long-standing aversion to what he has perceived as the overdetermination of his being received in explicitly Jewish contexts, Spiegelman decided to willingly open up conversations around *Maus* as a Jewish book. I introduced him in 2017, for example, in a lecture at Harvard sponsored by the Center for Jewish Studies called “Comix, Jews, 'n Art—Dun't Esk!” (the title nodding to his own ambivalence and to the cartoonist Milt Gross's Yiddishy English).

Moved—and horrified—by growing, open anti-Semitism, including in the United States and also in Germany, among other countries, I started, along with my research assistant, a file called “Anti-Semitism Now” in conjunction with thinking about *Maus* now. At this point, examples and news reports are so rampant that it's hard to keep track, but they still feel shocking, whether it is a local detail such as elite students at the Sidwell Friends School projecting swastikas on a wall, or reports of far-right extremism within Germany's Parliament.¹ The attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, was a brutal and traumatic manifestation of the fatal limitations of the caricaturizing impulse, complete with the surreal appearance of a “Camp Auschwitz” sweatshirt worn by an American rioter. Captured in photographs

during the attack, the black sweatshirt also advertises one translation of the famous slogan that hung above the gate of Auschwitz: “Work Brings Freedom” (“Arbeit Macht Frei”), along with a skull and crossbones. We can note, in 2021, not only proliferating anti-Semitism, but further, and specifically, the public desire for the return of the Nazi death machine.

We can also note how *Maus*, in 2022, emerged as a target in the culture wars, in ways that work to erase histories of racialized violence from being taught and discussed. The banning of *Maus* in an eighth-grade English Language Arts curriculum in McMinn County, Tennessee, by its school board, became a global news story in January, resulting in a huge outpouring of support for the book, including by groups, some led by students, that raised money to distribute it for free.

Part of the outrage the ban provoked has to do with the school board’s official, and seemingly flimsy, reasons for removing it from the curriculum: bad language (such as “bitch” and “Goddamn”) and nudity (specifically, one small image of Spiegelman’s mother Anja, drawn in human form, in the bathtub after taking her own life, a profoundly troubling visual on which to pin the charge of obscenity). These aspects of the book, while debatably not ideal for an eighth-grade audience, feel beside the point in a testimonial narrative that bears witness to the genocide of the Holocaust: a pretext. In one telling comment from the meeting minutes, a school board member comments, “Being in the schools, educators and stuff we don’t need to enable or somewhat promote this stuff. It shows people hanging, it shows them killing kids, why does the educational system promote this kind of stuff, it is not wise or healthy.” The real reason for the ban seems to lie here. *Maus* is not “promoting” murder by bearing witness to it, and visualizing the horrors of history on its pages. As Spiegelman observed in an event at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, “They want a kinder, gentler Holocaust they can stand.” (*Maus*—clearly not a pro-Nazi text—had earlier been banned in Russia, in 2015, for violating its anti-Nazi propaganda laws, due to the modified swastika on its cover; graphic histories and testimonies ask readers to encounter, in small part, what their subjects and witnesses also encountered, including the malevolent power of this Nazi symbol.)

Maus's role as a signal text for our troubled times has also been marked out in recent popular culture. *Maus*'s contemporary currency really hit home for me when as an unsuspecting viewer in 2018, I encountered *Maus* in a cameo on *The Handmaid's Tale*, the award-winning Hulu television series based on Margaret Atwood's dystopian feminist novel. *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in a theocratic near-future in which a group of powerful, insurrectionary men have staged a coup in the United States—the members of Congress were shot, a detail that now seems especially vivid—and the new state, Gilead, enslaves women as child bearers; it is against the law for women to read or write. In one episode, an enslaved woman named Emily, momentarily alone in her master's library, sneaks a peak at a book—and the camera lingers on an open page of *Maus I*. She risks having her finger chopped off—the punishment for a first offense—to look at *Maus*. The page she and we as viewers see is a striking and painful scene from *Maus I* in which four Jews executed for trading on the black market are shown hanging on a central street in the Polish city of Sosnowiec in 1942. This page, too, entered the Tennessee debates as a flashpoint.

Why *Maus* and this particular page? Within the context of the show, considering the book's owner, *Maus* could be viewed as a play-book for fascism, including its murders; it diagrams fascism and its machinations that closely. But its presence also underscores *Maus* as a text of resistance. While displaying the horror of their deaths, the page additionally, through its word and image form, restores humanity to the hanged men. While a large, unbordered panel in the middle of the page shows their hanging bodies—its size registering the shock and sadness Vladek experienced seeing them—the bottom tier of panels makes the significant move of particularizing the people. The page's last two panels function as literal footnotes, revealing to us their legs and feet and also offering information about the men's identities and personalities. *Maus* is a text of resistance not because it shows us how to survive—Spiegelman emphasized to Stanley Crouch that Vladek survived because of "sheer unmitigated luck"—but rather because it constantly does the work of particularizing victims and survivors alike, working against the caricaturizing impulse despite its prominent animal taxonomy.

FOR A COUPLE MONTHS I DID HERE STILL MY BLACK MARKET BUSINESS. THEN CAME MORE BAD NEWS, VERY BAD...



COHN HAD A DRY GOODS STORE. HE WAS KNOWN OVER ALL SOSNOWIEC. OFTEN HE GAVE ME CLOTH WITH NO COUPONS.



I TRADED ALSO WITH PFEFER, A FINE YOUNG MAN - A ZIONIST. HE WAS JUST MARRIED. HIS WIFE RAN SCREAMING IN THE STREET.

2.

“The impact of what Mr. Spiegelman has done is so complex and self-contradictory that it nearly defies analysis,” Christopher Lehmann-Haupt suggested in 1986 in an early review in *The New York Times*. I enjoy this formulation. I have been actively thinking and writing about *Maus* for over twenty years and still—even after now having collaborated on a book about *Maus* closely with its creator—I don’t feel like I’ve definitively “solved” the question of why it works so well. For me *Maus* is a text that keeps on giving; every time I reencounter it, I find something new—the ideas it provokes, and its value, feel inextinguishable, ongoing, active. So while one way to capture its stunning mix of intricacy and simplicity is to think of it as practically defying analysis, yet another way to articulate the feat of *Maus* is to examine the range of ways it *has* been analyzed, from the mid-1980s when it first appeared to the current moment. Illustrated throughout with images from the book, *Maus Now: Selected Writing* gathers together many of contemporary culture’s leading critics, authors, and academics, who are enlivened by that complexity, approaching *Maus* from a wide range of viewpoints and traditions.

Maus Now has several goals. One is simply to collect and make accessible the best writing on *Maus*, whether the original context is a newspaper such as *The Guardian* (see celebrated novelist Philip Pullman’s “Behind the Masks”), or an art exhibit publication (as with then-MoMA curator Robert Storr’s “Making *Maus*”), or an academic book, or journal like *American Literature* and *Word & Image*. *Maus* has generated reactions from many different corners of culture, and through a dynamic mix of public and academic writing, this book reveals just how profoundly it has preoccupied, and continues to preoccupy, thinkers of all kinds. *Maus Now* aims to be an essential guide to *Maus*. Its essays offer distinct perspectives to help readers understand the project and impact of *Maus*—whether that means placing *Maus* in conversation with prominent fiction, as literary critic Michael Rothberg does in his focus on Philip Roth, or Holocaust scholar Terrence Des Pres does with Leslie Epstein and Tadeusz Borowski, or thinking about *Maus* as a work of oral history, as in historian Joshua Brown’s “Of Mice and Memory.” Crucially, this book includes writing

on *Maus* translated into English for the first time—one of the central motivations of this collection is to widen the scope of *Maus* criticism by grouping together the perspectives of writers rooted in different global traditions (and languages). *Maus Now* includes two essays translated from German, one from Hebrew, and one from French. All three of these languages and national traditions are significant to the historical context of *Maus* and its aftermath.

The book is organized into three very loosely chronological sections: Contexts, Problems of Representation, and Legacy. The opening section, Contexts, contains some of the earliest critical responses to *Maus*, such as Ken Tucker’s consequential “Cats, Mice, and History: The Avant-Garde of the Comic Strip,” which appeared in *The New York Times Book Review* in 1985—previous to the book publication of *Maus I*—and played a role in its subsequent publication history. Spiegelman details the significance of this then-quite-anomalous review in our interview in *MetaMaus*: Tucker not only reviewed, in one of the nation’s leading literary venues, a work in progress (rare), but further a work in progress serialized by a small-press publisher, *RAW* (very rare), and even further, a *comics* work in progress serialized by a small-press publisher (virtually unheard-of). Tucker’s sharp eye, sensitivity, and discernment provoked interest from readers about *Maus* and helped convince Pantheon to issue the work in two volumes (*Maus I* appeared the following year).

Contexts also offers classics of *Maus* criticism focused on frameworks for understanding the book’s graphic dimension, from film to caricature. In “Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*: Graphic Art and the Holocaust,” film scholar Thomas Doherty demonstrates how *Maus* counters Nazi propaganda and aesthetics, contending that through the medium of comics, *Maus* rejects the “erotic energy” of Nazi film and films about Nazis (for this volume, he updated his 1996 essay to include references to Quentin Tarantino’s 2009 *Inglourious Basterds*). And in the important essay “Comics and Catastrophe” (1987), current *New Yorker* staff writer Adam Gopnik places *Maus* within a long—and highbrow—history of caricature. Gopnik’s *New Republic* piece uncovers a surprising and profound Jewish precedent for Spiegelman’s contemporary comics in the Birds’ Head Haggadah, one of the earliest surviving illuminated manuscripts of the Haggadah, the ritual text recounting

the story of Passover, in which humans are depicted with bird heads and beaks. Spiegelman's own stated range of influences includes both the highbrow and the putatively lowbrow; this is an artist, after all, whom Stephen Tabachnick, in his contribution, establishes is inspired by a Jewish lineage of creators that includes both Franz Kafka and also *Mad* magazine's Harvey Kurtzman.

The opening Contexts section also presents essays translated from Hebrew and German that offer readers a historical sense of how *Maus* was received in countries in which the Holocaust, the book's central subject, has come to be defining. Dorit Abusch, writing in the art magazine *Studio*, explains that in the early 1990s, when she first gave a talk on *Maus* at an Israeli museum, the book was met with misunderstanding, and even contempt (people walked out as she spoke). In Germany, Kurt Scheel praised *Maus I* in a review essay in the pages of the journal *Merkur*, for which he was an editor (and later editor in chief). Founded in 1947, *Merkur* has published the likes of Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, and Ernst Bloch—as well as Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, members of the Nazi party. Scheel reveals a serious initial German reception of the series (“the secret of *Maus* lies in the shocking and fascinating contrast between the object and the medium of its representation”) and significantly, considering *Maus* in *Merkur* places Spiegelman within a distinguished but fraught lineage of intellectuals appearing on the magazine's pages.

The second section tackles what Hayden White, as noted above, deems the limits of representation, examining *Maus*'s aesthetic and ethical strategies. Articulating the problems of—and possible solutions to—representing the violence and suffering of the Holocaust, the six influential scholarly essays here outline different facets of *Maus*, from Andreas Huyssen's focus on Spiegelman's animal faces in “Of Mice and Mimesis: Reading Spiegelman with Adorno” to Terrence Des Pres's exploration of the subversive possibilities of humor in “Holocaust *Laughter?*” to Alan Rosen's examination of Polish-born Vladek Spiegelman's “broken English” in “The Language of Survival: English as Metaphor in Spiegelman's *Maus*.” Spotlighting Vladek's often overlooked accent and syntax, and Spiegelman's representation of his father's speech, Rosen argues that in making English “the most foreign language” in the book, *Maus* uses this fundamental aspect of

the text to convey the foreignness of the Holocaust itself, an event that is radically other to, and affronts, one's sense of normal experience. (Michael Rothberg, whose framework is the commodification of the Holocaust, and Nancy K. Miller, whose framework is identity and autobiography, each also discuss the disconnect between reading and hearing Vladek's voice, as one was able to do at the Storr-curated 1991 MoMA show.)

Problems of Representation also features "My Travels with *Maus*, 1992–2020," by Marianne Hirsch, a literature professor and the former president of the Modern Language Association. Hirsch's "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Postmemory," from 1992, is arguably the most famous academic essay on *Maus*. Hirsch centers her inquiry on the few uses of photographs in *Maus* (as do other essays in the volume here), and she coins the term postmemory, which refers to "a generational structure of transmission": how the children of survivors experience memories belonging to older generations as their own. First developed in conjunction with *Maus*, postmemory is a prominent, guiding concept in trauma and memory studies, and in literary studies widely (see postmemory.net). For *Maus Now*, Hirsch revisited the entirety of her writing of *Maus* over the years, adding new content and grouping together analysis from three separate sources (including her response to a 2020 forum on the significance of her original essay). At the opening of "My Travels with *Maus*," Hirsch cites feminist writer and professor Nancy K. Miller, whose "Cartoons of the Self: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Murderer," appearing next, crucially centers (as Hirsch also does) the figure of the missing mother, Anja Spiegelman, in its evaluation of *Maus*. Miller approaches *Maus* from a long-standing feminist engagement with autobiography, analyzing *Maus* through a feature of its autobiographical creation that is traditionally associated with women writers: how it establishes the identity of the narrator-protagonist in relation to a significant "other"—in this case, the absent mother. Together, these tour-de-force essays offer a feminist perspective (that is not at times uncritical) on the family drama that underpins *Maus*, which is limned by the trauma of the Holocaust.

As with its first, *Maus Now*'s concluding section, Legacy, presents both public and academic writing rooted in distinct contexts. This includes Storr's oft-cited "Making *Maus*," first published to accom-

pany Spiegelman's MoMA show—an exhibit that solidified *Maus*'s art world reception and reveals how the book extends meaningfully into different corners of culture. Storr makes the fascinating (and probably, to some, counterintuitive) claim that *Maus* is “a radically traditional work of art,” and his essay creates the case for *Maus* in the museum—a point that critic, dramaturge, and journalism professor Alisa Solomon returns to in the volume's final essay, which takes Spiegelman's traveling “Co-Mix” exhibit, more than twenty years later, as its point of departure.

The Legacy section also presents two translated scholarly essays, revealing that a key part of the ongoing power of *Maus* is its capacity to inspire critical attention across international boundaries. Spiegelman critic Pierre-Alban Delannoy, the author of France's only book-length study of *Maus*, offers a moving reading of the haunting figure of Richieu, Spiegelman's older brother who died as a small child during the war, in order to explain how the concept of survival operates in the text. And Hans Kruschwitz, writing from a German perspective in a 2018 volume of contemporary reflections on the Holocaust, offers an absorbing analysis of how the tension between images and words as different modes of ideation maps onto characters in *Maus*, namely Spiegelman's parents. Both authors closely analyze *Maus*'s brilliant two-page prologue, using its 1950s insult “rotten egg” as a jumping-off point, modeling how a phrase that an English reader might gloss over can be defamiliarizing, and open new avenues of inquiries for non-English speakers. Kruschwitz's essay ends with a call to teach *Maus*, despite its difficulty and complexity, in history and German classes—a notion also at the center of a 2021 newspaper feature in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagzeitung*, which profiles a German teacher who used *Maus* in the classroom and suggests that *Maus* both expands current German curricula with respect to the Holocaust, and productively focuses on the legacy of the Holocaust for future generations.²

Looking back at *Maus* from a contemporary vantage point, critics in this book's final section, each anchored by a different set of interests, articulate its legacy in straightforward terms. In an unusual, unguarded interview with Spiegelman that dives into controversial debates about Jewish identity and Israel, the writer David Samuels claims: “Today it seems clear that *Maus* and *Maus II* are the most pow-

erful and significant works of art produced by any American Jewish writer or artist about the Holocaust.” National Book Critics Circle Award winner Ruth Franklin, another prolific and well-known critic, states at the outset of her 2011 assessment, which focuses on *Maus*’s productive unclassifiability, that Spiegelman “has done more than any other writer of the last few decades to change our understanding of the way stories about the Holocaust can be written.” And Solomon, in the wide-ranging “The Haus of *Maus*,” is incisive in summing up *Maus*’s compelling place in our culture. “Even in a bowdlerized Hollywood or Broadway adaptation,” Solomon muses, “one could never imagine Art believing, in spite of everything, that people are really good at heart. Hasn’t that always been part of *Maus*’s allure?” Solomon, writing in *The Nation*, brings us full circle, referring to Hirsch’s concept of post-memory and noting that *Maus* “became the proof text for academic study of the transgenerational transmission of trauma and its representation.” Throughout *Maus Now*, writers in the volume develop ideas by citing each other. This dynamic enacted across its chapters models a dialogue inspired by *Maus* itself, whose very structure and topic is an ongoing conversation, between father and son, that folds world history into the process. And the book ends with a selected list of fifty further essays on *Maus*; *Maus Now* aims to keep the conversation started by Spiegelman’s unique and indispensable book going for at least another forty years.

CONTEXTS

Behind the Masks

PHILIP PULLMAN

Since its first publication in 1986, *Maus* has achieved a celebrity that few other comics have ever done. And yet it's an extremely difficult work to talk about. In the first place, what is it? Is it a comic? Is it biography, or fiction? Is it a literary work, or a graphic one, or both? We use the term graphic novel, but can anything that is literary, like a novel, ever really work in graphic form? Words and pictures work differently: can they work together without pulling in different directions?

In the preface to *The Western Canon*, in his attempt to define "The Books and School of the Ages," Harold Bloom says: "One mark of an originality that can win canonical status for a literary work is a strangeness that we either never altogether assimilate, or that becomes such a given that we are blinded to its idiosyncrasies."

This is an accurate description of my reaction to *Maus*. In one way the work stands squarely in the comics tradition, observing many of the conventions of the form: a story about anthropomorphically depicted animals, told sequentially in a series of square panels six to a page, containing speech balloons and voiceover captions in which all the lettering is in capitals, with onomatopoeic sound effects to represent rifle fire, and so on. So it looks very like a comic.

It also refers to earlier forms. The stark black-and-white drawings, the lines so thick in places as almost to seem as if they belong in a woodcut, hark back to the wordless novels of Frans Masereel, with

their expressionist woodcut prints; and those in turn take their place in an even older Northern European tradition of printmaking that goes back to Holbein and Dürer. In telling a story about Germany, Spiegelman uses a very German technique.

Yet in other ways *Maus* does have a profound and unflinching “strangeness,” to use Bloom’s term. Part of this is due to the depiction of Jews as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs, and so forth. This is what jolts most people who come to it for the first time, and still jolts me after several readings. It is such a risky artistic strategy, because it implies a form of essentialism that many readers will find suspect. Cats kill mice because they are cats, and that’s what cats do. But is it in the nature of Germans, as Germans, to kill Jews?

The question hangs over the whole work, and is never answered directly. Instead we are reminded by the plot itself that this classification into different species was precisely how the human race was then regarded by those who had the power to order things; and the question is finally dispelled by the gradual gentle insistence that these characters might look like mice, or cats, or pigs, but what they are is people. They have the complexity and the surprisingness of human beings, and human beings are capable of anything.

At the heart of the story is the tormented relationship between Art and his father, Vladek, a survivor of Auschwitz, an obsessive, mean, doting, helpless, cantankerous, altogether impossible old man, whom we come to know in two different worlds: the present-day world of penny-pinching retirement in New York and the Catskill Mountains (names signify), and the remembered world of occupied Poland and the extermination camps. The work as a whole takes the form of a memoir by Art in which he tells us of his interviews with his father about Vladek’s experiences under the Nazis. As Vladek tells his story, the first-person-past-tense captions in Art’s voice give way to those in Vladek’s, so the bulk of the narrative is technically a flashback.

Names signify. Is the Art of the story the Art of the title page? Art Spiegelman is a man, but the Art in the story looks like a mouse. In one extraordinary passage about two-thirds of the way through, Art is worrying about art—about his art, and what it’s doing to himself and to its subject matter.

But the Art shown here is not a mouse but a man in a mouse mask,

and the journalists who come to pester and interview him are people in cat or dog masks, but men and women, not cats and dogs. This Art is the author, as distinct from the Art who is the narrator. So for six pages, as we follow the man-Art's anxiety about his art, we are in a different kind of world from either of the story-worlds, and in this sequence alone the words are not drawn in capitals.

What shape things have, and in what kind of letters the words are printed, and how a picture is set against its background, are matters we have to think about when we look at comics. A comic is not exactly a novel in pictures—it's something else. But the presence of pictures is not a new thing in printed narrative: William Caxton included woodcuts in the first books he printed in English, and some of the greatest novels in the language were conceived from the beginning as being accompanied by pictures. *Vanity Fair* is incomplete without Thackeray's own illustrations, which often extend and comment on the implications of the text; and in a sense the entire career of Dickens as a novelist began when he was commissioned to provide a text for a series of engravings of Cockney sporting life by the artist Robert Seymour. This grew into *The Pickwick Papers*. Our experience of Dickens is also an experience of "Phiz," his most prolific illustrator Hablot K. Browne, just as our sense of the world of Sherlock Holmes comes from the drawings by Sidney Paget as much as from the words by Conan Doyle.

So a criticism that was able to deal adequately with comics as a form would have to abandon the unspoken assumption that pictures aren't quite grown-up, or that they're only for people who don't read properly, and that clever and serious people need only consider the words. In order to have anything to say about comics, where the pictures generate a large part of the meaning, it would have to take the shape of things into account. For example, take the full-moon shape against which the characters are silhouetted at important points in the story of *Maus*, as if on a movie poster.

This echoes the claim old Vladek makes to young Vladek near the very beginning of the story, that he was romantic and dashing; but we know that movies are make-believe, and so the full-moon shape is bitter as well as sweet. It indicates something wished-for, not something true. There was no happy ever after; Anja was haunted by her



IN THE EVENINGS WE WENT EITHER TO THE THEATER OR TO DANCE IN THE CAFE.

DID I TELL YOU THE TRAGEDY ABOUT THE PILLOW MY FAMILY LOST AT THE START OF THE 1914 WAR? I WAS SEVEN... WE LIVED TOO CLOSE TO THE BORDER... IT WASN'T SAFE...



I TOLD HER MANY JOKES AND STORIES TO KEEP HER BUSY...

...SO WE TOOK WHAT WE COULD ON A WAGON PULLED BY FOUR HORSES AND WENT TO MY GRANDFATHER'S HOME IN RADOMSKO.



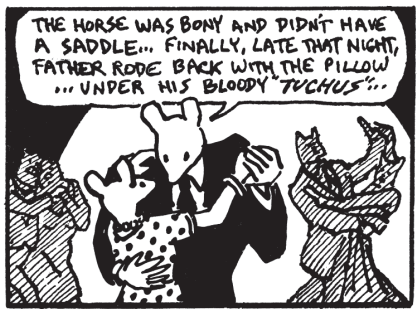
SOMEONE ROPE PAST US AND TOLD US THAT WE'D DROPPED A PILLOW A FEW MILES BACK. A GUY TRAVELING TO AMSTOW PICKED IT UP.



IMAGINE - MY FATHER NEVER ROPE A HORSE BEFORE... BUT HE UNHITCHED ONE FROM THE WAGON AND ROPE TOWARD AMSTOW.



WE WAITED AND WAITED... MOTHER STARTED CRYING: "SURELY HE FELL AND GOT KILLED!" SHE HAD BEGGED HIM TO "LET THE PILLOW GO AND TAKE ALL OUR TROUBLES WITH IT!"



THE HORSE WAS BONY AND DIDN'T HAVE A SADDLE... FINALLY, LATE THAT NIGHT, FATHER ROPE BACK WITH THE PILLOW... UNDER HIS BLOODY TUCHUS...



SO, FATHER GOT HIS PILLOW BACK... BUT HE COULDN'T SIT DOWN FOR THE REST OF THE WAR!

I LOVE YOU, VLADEK.

AND SHE WAS SO LAUGHING AND SO HAPPY, SO HAPPY, THAT SHE APPROACHED EACH TIME AND KISSED ME, SO HAPPY SHE WAS.

experiences, and committed suicide in 1968. The shape carries a charge of irony: we see it and feel it in a glance.

Perhaps the most powerful moment comes very close to the end, and it could only come by means of a picture. Vladek, after Auschwitz, is making his way home to Anja, and one day Anja receives a letter telling her that he's on his way. And in the envelope there's a photograph. Old Vladek explains to Art: "I passed once a photo place what had a camp uniform—a new and clean one—to make souvenir photos . . ."

And there is the photograph. Here on the page is the character we have come, with Art, to hate and love and despair over in his old age, not a mouse any longer, but a man: a handsome man, a strong man, a proud and wary man in the prime of life who has survived appalling suffering, and survived in part because of the very qualities that make him so difficult to like and to live with: in short, a human being in all his urgent and demanding complexity. As Anja says when she opens the letter and finds the photograph, "And here's a picture of him! My God—Vladek is really alive!"

He's really alive. This story is really true. The impact of that photograph is astonishing.

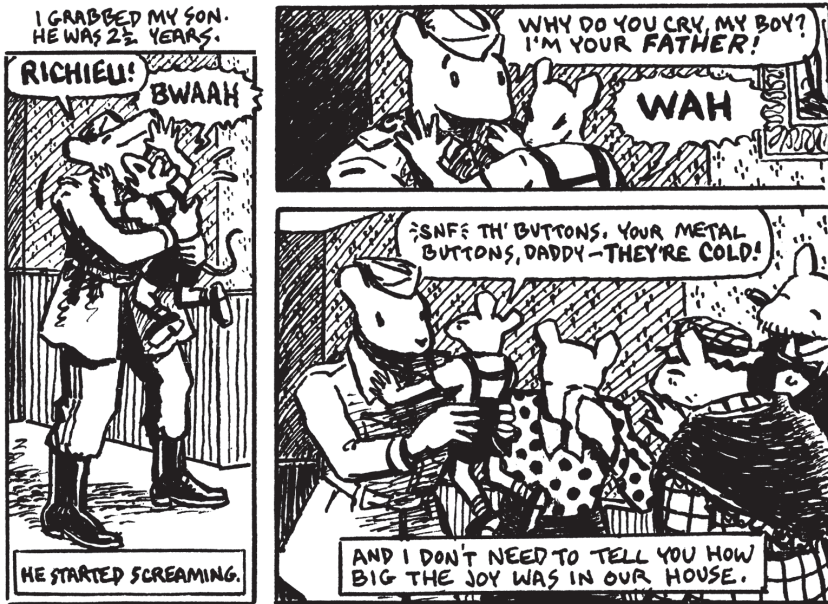
Comics are a modern form, but this story has ancient echoes. At one point early in the war, the young Vladek, having been drafted into the Polish army and then captured by the Germans, escapes and finds his way home, and when he tries to pick up his young son, Richieu, the boy is frightened and cries out. In the *Iliad*, Homer relates a little episode on the walls of Troy:

*. . . Shining Hector reached down
for his son—but the boy recoiled
cringing against his nurse's full breast,
screaming out at the sight of his own father,
terrified by the flashing bronze, the horsehair crest . . .*

(translation by Robert Fagles)

Men in uniform have been terrifying their own children for thousands of years.

At the very end, little Richieu's name appears again, although he died forty years before. Vladek, ill and near the end of his own life,



From *Maus I*, page 66

is talking to Art, and he says: “So . . . let’s stop, please, your tape recorder . . . I’m tired from talking, Richieu, and it’s enough stories for now . . .” Art stands by the bedside, silent, because art has been subsumed under a larger heading, namely life. There’s nothing more for him to say. I began with a series of questions, and I’m not sure they can ever be completely answered; *Maus* is a masterpiece, and it’s in the nature of such things to generate mysteries, and pose more questions than they answer. But if the notion of a canon means anything, *Maus* is there at the heart of it. Like all great stories, it tells us more about ourselves than we could ever suspect.

(2003)

Of Mice and Memory

JOSHUA BROWN

Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* is a digest-sized comic book using mice, cats, pigs, and other animals to portray a history of the Holocaust. It has received adulation in newspaper and magazine reviews, was nominated for the 1986 National Book Critics Circle prize in biography, and received the *Present Tense*/Joel H. Cavior Book Award sponsored by that journal and the American Jewish Committee. But the award *Maus* won was in the category of fiction, and in that designation one may discern an uneasiness, largely unaddressed in the press, that greeted the book even as it was lauded. I have not seen many criticisms of *Maus* in print, but I have heard them expressed in casual conversations: "Okay, *Maus* is an ingenious work of art, it's a good story as well and, certainly, it's better than the run-of-the-mill comic book. But, history? No way."

Maus is not a fictional comic strip, nor is it an illustrated novel: however unusual the form, it is an important historical work that offers historians, and oral historians in particular, a unique approach to narrative construction and interpretation. *Maus* also provides us with the unique opportunity to evaluate simultaneously a finished work and a work in progress. The present book, subtitled *My Father Bleeds History (Mid-1930s to Winter 1944)*, is the first half of a planned two-volume work. The six chapters comprising the first volume originally appeared from 1980 to 1985, in somewhat different form, as installments in *RAW*, an art comics/graphics magazine edited by

Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly. The chapters of the second volume will appear sequentially in subsequent issues. Chapter 7 has already been published in *RAW* number eight, picking up where the first volume ended, at the gates of Auschwitz.

Much of the power of Spiegelman's book lies in his discourse with the reader, a discourse that exists "between the panels," beneath the narration and the dialogue. To understand this relationship between *Maus* and the reader we must consider first how Spiegelman approached oral history techniques and the problem of remembrance, then how he worked to visualize the past, and finally his use of the central metaphor of mice. Spiegelman's reflections, recorded in an interview I conducted with him in early 1987, run throughout this review. They make clear how much the book's impact is grounded in his explicit intention.

1.

Maus is the story of two survivors of the Holocaust. The first is Vladek Spiegelman, a Polish Jew who, along with his wife, Anja, survived Auschwitz and came to live in Queens, New York. There, Vladek and Anja raised their second son, Art, their post-Holocaust child (their first son died during the early stages of the Final Solution). Art grew into adulthood under the shadows of his parents' past, the darkest appearing in 1968 when Anja committed suicide. Art himself is the second survivor, although at first his torment seems self-indulgent compared to the elemental horror of his parents' experience.

The accounts of these two survivors run through *Maus* as Art records his father's memories in a series of oral interviews: Vladek's courtship of the wealthy Anja, the marriage that facilitated his rise in the business world of the secularized Jewish community of Sosnowiec, his induction into the Polish army and capture by the Nazis in 1939, his release and return to the area of Poland "annexed" by the Reich. Vladek relates the steady tightening of the Nazi noose around the Jews as the policies of extermination were put into practice, detailing how, as the concentration camps filled, he and Anja managed to survive through cunning strategies and blind luck, until they were caught and sent to Auschwitz.

Throughout *Maus*, Vladek's story is paralleled by Art's attempts to come to terms with the opinionated, tight-fisted, and self-involved father whose personality was formed in a world and through an experience so completely divorced from his own. The ghosts of this past swirl around Art, who is haunted by the irretrievable experiences of the dead, their residue found in familial relationships characterized by guilt and manipulation. The first volume closes with dual betrayals: Vladek describes how he paid two Poles to smuggle Anja and him to Hungary only to be turned over to the Nazis; minutes later he reveals to his son that, after Anja's suicide, he destroyed her diaries, her account of the Holocaust for which Art has been frantically searching.

It is logical to approach the book first as a work of oral history, because of its sources and Spiegelman's decisions about the structure of its text. The absence of footnotes or bibliography should not be mistaken for indifference to the importance of research. "Essentially, the root source of the whole thing is my father's conversations with me," Spiegelman explained when I asked him about the sources he consulted. "Sixty percent of those are on tape and the rest of it's during phone conversations or while I was at his house without a tape recorder, taking notes. Now, my father's not necessarily a reliable witness and I never presumed that he was. So, as far as I could corroborate anything he said, I did—which meant, on occasion, talking to friends and to relatives and also doing as much reading as I could."

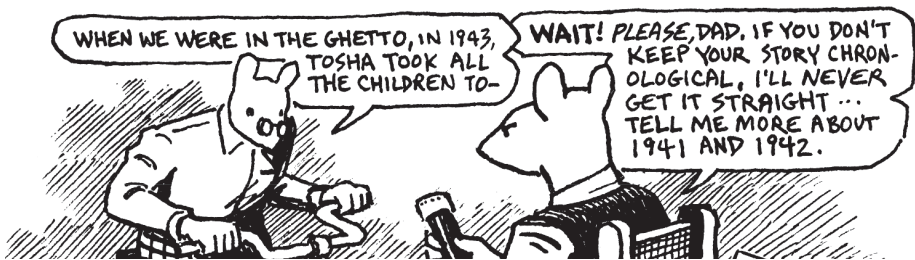
Although *Maus* focuses on the particularity of Vladek's story, Spiegelman succeeds, through succinct narration and dialogue, in keeping us aware of the changing social and political climate of Sosnowiec, and from there the context of Poland and the Third Reich. "This is a bottomless pit of reading if one falls into the area," Spiegelman said. "There's building after building of books and documents. I don't pretend to [have read them all]. On the other hand . . . I read as many survivors' accounts as I could get hold of that touched on the specific geographical locations [depicted in the book]." In his effort to place Vladek on the particular map of Sosnowiec, Spiegelman was also aided by a Polish pamphlet published after the war that chronicled the fate of the Jews of that city. "Every region had its own booklet. . . . [The Sosnowiec pamphlet] was really important for the things that

take place in the last half of the first volume because it has very, very specific information.”

Spiegelman’s sources are relevant, but oral history is more than a verbatim transcript propped up by corroborative facts and context. The structuring of an account—how a recorder shapes his or her sources, how he or she organizes the materials into an interpretive narrative—are equally a concern. In his choices and the critical considerations behind those choices, Spiegelman worked as a skilled oral historian. He presented his father’s story as a chronologically linked chain of events, restructuring Vladek’s testimony to strengthen the clarity of the account. But, the way one chooses to tell a story is a kind of censorship, and Spiegelman conscientiously had to weigh the impact of one narrative decision over the effects of others:

This is my father’s tale. I’ve tried to change as little as possible. But it’s almost impossible not to [change it] because as soon as you apply any kind of structure to material, you’re in trouble—as probably every historian learns from History 101 or whatever. Shaping means [that] things that came out [in an interview] as shotgun facts about events that happened in 1939, facts about things that happened in 1945, they all have to be organized. As a result, this tends to make my father seem more organized than he was. For a while I thought maybe I should do the book in a more Joycean way. Then I realized that, ultimately, that was a literary fabrication just as much as using a more nineteenth-century approach to telling a story, and that it would actually get more in the way of getting things across than a more linear approach.

Or, as Spiegelman shows more concisely in *Maus*:



However, Spiegelman was after more than “telling a story” or creating a comprehensible biographical account. He also strove to depict the process of remembering and relating, one that included the incidental breaks and digressions that occur between two people whose relationship exists outside of the roles of interviewer and interviewee. In the interstices of the testimony we learn more and more about both Vladek and Art. The breaks and digressions convey the sense of an interview shaped by a relationship. They also remind the reader that Vladek’s account is not a chronicle of undefiled fact but a constitutive process, that remembering is a construction of the past.

Spiegelman telegraphs information about events or insight into character or a relationship through inflection, carefully chosen words, or the structuring of their order. Spiegelman’s use of language is remarkable in its exactitude and lack of bravado. The language has the peculiar mix of confusion and clarity of spoken words—because, indeed, the dialogue is based on Spiegelman’s interviews with his father. But we are not provided with verbatim transcriptions of conversations. “It’s impossible in a comic strip to record verbatim conversation,” Spiegelman explained,

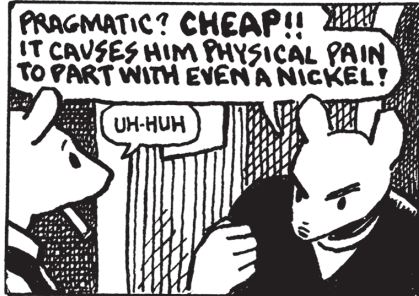
because the balloons would be about twelve inches high for every two-inch picture. . . . Comics are an art of indication. And it’s a matter of, after reading Vladek’s three or four different accounts of the same story with different language, trying to distill them, to keep the phrases that are most telling for me and rewrite a lot of that in a kind of telegram that catches the cadence of the way he talked. And because I grew up hearing him talk, it was easy enough for me to do.

Beyond presenting a comprehensible account of events while subtly depicting characterization and the composition of a relationship, *Maus* makes an even greater contribution as a work of oral history by interrogating the limitations of our techniques for recording experience, and by engaging the problematic of memory as evidence. As Art records Vladek’s story, the reader follows a course of events and, yet, revelation is accompanied by a feeling

of constraint, expressed concretely in Art's persistent and finally frustrated search for his mother's diaries. Spiegelman confronts the perennial obstacle facing any oral historian, the problem of one person's account, the reliance on one memory to record an event. But, there is an added dimension to this problem in *Maus*: the survivor is not only one person with one memory; the fact of his survival lends a delusory authenticity to his recollections: "It's a built-in problem," Spiegelman observed:

As soon as you tell a story of a survivor and how they survived, you're not telling a story of what happened. Somehow, it becomes a how-to manual. Because there's a natural desire and tendency on the reader's part to identify with a character in a book someplace, you identify with the one who survived. You pick a winner and you ride through with him. And, yet, there was such a large amount of luck involved. There might have been certain personality traits or mechanisms that would help a person increase the odds of surviving, but—no matter what Terrence Des Pres's or Bruno Bettelheim's theories of survivors are—within a situation where ninety percent died that's not enough and, therefore, isn't reason to identify with the survivors rather than to try to understand the situation.

Confronted with that dilemma, Spiegelman considered broadening Vladek's story to include others. Instead, however, he decided to confront the problem head-on. The dilemma of *not knowing* pervades the book. At one point, as Art endeavors to tell Vladek's story, all he seems to come up with is a distorted stereotype; speaking with Mala, Vladek's second wife, he reflects:



The book ends with Vladek's revelation that he has destroyed Anja's diaries. Spiegelman presents the reader with the terrible realization that Vladek's account is what we are left with. The issue escalates in the second volume:

In the second book, I'm now introducing another survivor who is giving me a little bit of a vantage point that I would have liked to have from my mother but isn't in any way available to me anymore from that source. And, yet, it seemed important to indicate ways in which Vladek was not the archetypal survivor, but a survivor.

So, the second volume of *Maus—From Mauschwitz to the Catskills (Winter 1944 to the Present)*—will overtly grapple with the limitations of oral technique, in part by presenting contradictions to Vladek's testimony through other survivors. Yet, it is the achievement of *Maus* that Spiegelman refuses to fill in the picture, leaving the reader with the terrible knowledge that we cannot know. "I was obviously angry that my father had done this [destroyed Anja's diaries]," he said.

On the other hand . . . if I had access to my mother's diaries, perhaps I'd have to find yet another way of trying to indicate that, okay, I have those two stories but I don't have the other five or six or seven million stories that could have gone alongside it. . . . In spite of the fact that everything's so concretely portrayed box-by-box, it's not what happened. It's what my father tells me of what happened and it's based on what my father remembers and is willing to tell and, therefore, is not the same as some kind of omniscient camera that sat on his shoulder between the years 1939 and 1945. So, essentially, the number of layers between an event and somebody trying to apprehend that event through time and intermediaries is like working with flickering shadows. It's all you can hope for.

"There persists this illusion that everything can be resolved," John Berger said in a recent *New York Times* interview, "and the great tragedies have been a result of this impatience with contradiction." The