

SALEM PRESS

MAUS: A SURVIVOR'S TALE

Author: Spiegelman, Art

Artist: Art Spiegelman (illustrator)

Publisher: Pantheon Books

First serial publication: 1980-1991

First book publication: 1986; 1991

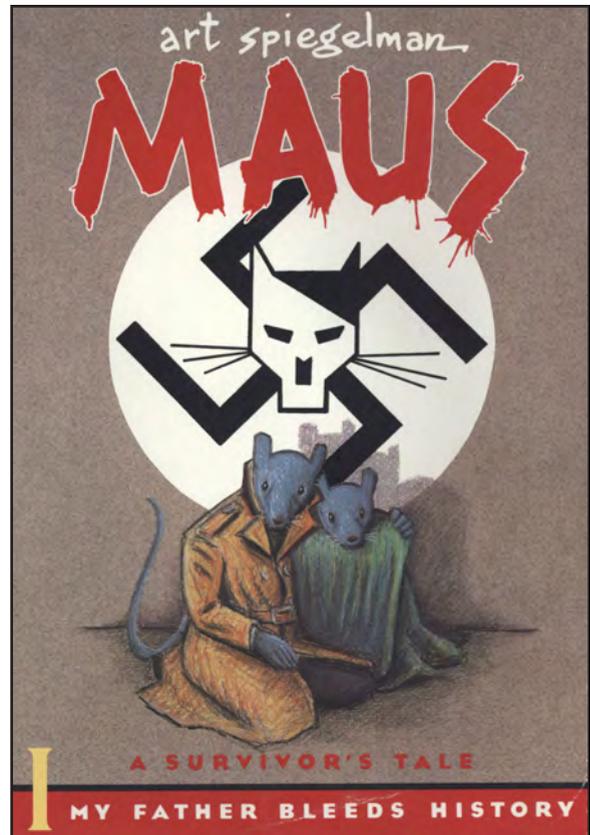
Publication History

Maus was first introduced as a three-page comic in *Funny Animals* in 1972 and was then serialized in the underground comics magazine *RAW* between the years 1980 and 1991. With the exception of the last chapter in Volume 2, all of the chapters of *Maus* first appeared in altered versions in the magazine. It was then published by Pantheon Press as two separate hardcover books, then as softcover books, and finally as a boxed set. Additionally, in 1994, *Maus* was released on CD-ROM with annotations, maps, and extended video commentary by creator Art Spiegelman on the text as well as examples of his later work. Spiegelman's *MetaMaus*, a commentary on the making of *Maus*, was released in 2011.

Plot

Maus presents two simultaneous stories, Vladek Spiegelman's Holocaust story and Art Spiegelman's experiences as the child of a Holocaust survivor. The two stories are interwoven together, as the framework for the narrative is a series of interviews conducted between Art and his father, Vladek. Through these interviews, the reader learns about Vladek's life before the Holocaust, his Holocaust story, and Art's struggles to live in the shadow of a father who seeks to control all aspects of his life.

The first volume, *My Father Bleeds History*, presents the foundation for *Maus*, relating the story of Vladek's upbringing in Poland and his courtship and early marriage to Art's mother, Anja. Vladek narrates about the family business and the ways that the Jews' lives became restricted after the Nazis took power. At first, Vladek is able to protect his family by paying non-Jews to hide them; however, as the situation deteriorates, he finds it increasingly difficult to do this



Maus: A Survivor's Tale. (Courtesy of Pantheon Books)

and is ultimately deceived in an attempt to flee the country. Vladek's narrative in Volume 1 ends with his and Anja's deportment to the concentration camp at Auschwitz.

In this volume, the reader also learns of the challenges that Art has in his relationship with Vladek as well as his guilt over his mother's suicide some years earlier. These issues are revealed through strained conversations regarding Mala, Vladek's second wife whom he treats poorly, and Vladek's decision to destroy Anja's Holocaust diaries, which Art was interested in using as research for presenting Anja's story in *Maus*. The volume ends with Vladek confessing that he burned the diaries in a fit of depression, which prompts Art to call him a murderer.

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The second volume, *And Here My Troubles Began*, commences with Vladek and Anja in Auschwitz and details the ways in which Vladek was able to survive selections, work details, and marches. In Auschwitz, Vladek was adept at making deals with *kapos*, prisoners working as supervisors inside the concentration camp, in order to get better work details for himself and Anja and used his English-language skills to advantage. Both survive Auschwitz, reunite in their hometown after the war, and rebuild their lives, first in Sweden and then in the United States.

In the present, Mala leaves Vladek because she can no longer tolerate his verbal and financial abuse, and Vladek pretends to have a heart attack so that Art will call him. Art and his wife, Françoise, temporarily move in with Vladek at his summer home to help him, but they are quickly burdened by Vladek's demands. Eventually Mala returns and takes care of Vladek until his death at the age of seventy-five. Vladek's death is briefly mentioned but neither shown nor described in the text; the final page depicts Vladek and Anja's reunion followed by an illustration of their shared tombstone.

Volumes

- *Maus I, A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (1986). Relates Vladek's early life prior to the Nazi invasion and his experiences during the Holocaust, culminating with his and Anja's deportation to Auschwitz.
- *Maus II, A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began* (1991). Describes Vladek's experiences in the concentration camp, reunion with Anja, and life after the Holocaust.

Characters

- *Art Spiegelman* is not only the writer and artist of *Maus*, but also one of the two main characters. He is interested in Vladek's Holocaust story and how it shaped Vladek's life, but he struggles to comprehend why his father is stingy and intent on micromanaging his and Mala's lives. He is troubled by his mother's suicide and does not understand why she took her life. A breaking point in his

relationship with his father comes when Vladek admits to having burned Anja's diaries. He wants to present a realistic portrait of his father but is negatively affected by his father's actions.

- *Vladek Spiegelman* is a Holocaust survivor and the second main character in *Maus*. In his interviews with Art, he explains the different ways that he saved himself and his first wife, Anja, negotiating with people to hide them or give them food and bribing officials to allow him to take jobs for which he was not qualified. His ability to save and store for the future was essential to their survival; however, he is unable to abandon these skills following the Holocaust, ultimately becoming obsessive and controlling. He loved Anja and remains fully devoted to her, even after her suicide and his subsequent marriage to Mala, which seems to be a marriage of convenience in which Mala takes care of him. He is supportive of Art's need to express his feelings through art but is concerned with the way that he will be presented in the text.
- *Anja Spiegelman*, Vladek's first wife and Art's mother, was also a Holocaust survivor. An innately anxious and depressive person, she was devastated when she learned that her first son, Richieu, had died during the Holocaust. To combat her feelings of helplessness, she becomes involved in Art's life to the extent that he feels burdened by her presence. She committed suicide prior to the writing of *Maus*.
- *Mala Spiegelman*, Vladek's second wife, struggles to live up to Vladek's comparison of her and Anja. Vladek micromanages her life, refuses to give her money for her own needs, and accuses her of stealing his life's savings. Eventually, she leaves Vladek but feels guilty for abandoning him and returns to take care of him.
- *Françoise Mouly*, Art's wife, is the person to whom Art confides his difficulties with his father and his struggles in representing their relationship. She supports Art emotionally and helps him care for his father after Mala leaves.

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Artistic Style

Maus was drawn by Spiegelman as a black-and-white text that relies heavily on dark shading throughout. Pages are typically arranged in a series of two panels per line with three or four lines per page. This format, however, is not used consistently throughout, and Spiegelman introduces larger panels and pages with more panels at various points.

The most significant aspect of *Maus*'s artwork is the metaphorical way that Spiegelman has chosen to represent his characters. Each nationality is represented as a different member of the animal kingdom: Jews are mice, Nazis are cats, the French are frogs, Poles are pigs, Americans are dogs, and Swedes are reindeer. These choices are intentional, motivated either by the hierarchy that exists in the animal kingdom or by sociocultural associations. Jews are represented as mice to illustrate how they were perceived by Nazis, as lowly, dirty prey. These representations are used both for Vladek's memories and in the present-day stories.

During the Holocaust, Jews often tried to present themselves as Germans or Poles in order to save themselves. In *Maus*, Jews who try to present themselves as another ethnicity are drawn as mice wearing masks with noticeable ties. Spiegelman thereby suggests that ethnicity and religion are aspects of identity that cannot be easily changed and that no amount of subterfuge can truly change.

Importantly, individual characters do not have distinct bodies. Among non-Jews, it is difficult to distinguish between individuals. For Jews, it is not always possible to determine an individual, but main characters are identified by clothing, glasses, or facial features or marks. This ambiguity of identity inverts the Nazi belief that Jews did not have identities and distinct personalities.

The animal imagery is abandoned twice during the series, once in each volume. In Volume 1, Spiegelman includes a previously published short comic entitled "Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History," as part of a dialogue between Art and Mala in which she tells him that his father has already seen the comic. The comic is an autobiographical vignette about Art's experiences, sense of guilt, and suffering following

Anja's suicide; although the comic upsets Vladek, he comforts Art by suggesting its importance as a cathartic creative outlet. The comic's art style is a departure from *Maus*'s animal imagery and instead uses exaggerated poses and facial expressions. The erratic line work reflects the scattered emotions presented in the text.

In Volume 2, Art briefly abandons drawing himself as a mouse and instead draws himself as a human wearing a mouse mask. In this narrative sequence, Art shows the challenges he had resuming his father's narrative about Auschwitz, the unexpected publicity Volume 1 received, his annoyance at the commercialization of his work, and his therapy sessions. In presenting himself as a human pretending to be a mouse, Spiegelman suggests that he felt distanced from his Jewish identity and from the original purpose of the work. Only following a therapy session is he able to return to his father's narrative and to presenting himself as a mouse.



Maus: A Survivor's Tale. (Courtesy of Pantheon Books)

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Themes

Through the juxtaposition of the interwoven narratives, *Maus* revolves primarily around the impact that traumatic experiences can have on individuals and their families over a protracted period. By presenting specific examples of how Vladek still lives his life as if he were in Auschwitz, especially in relation to his obsessive need to save, Spiegelman demonstrates that trauma is not easily overcome. Additionally, by presenting his own voice, Spiegelman further illustrates how traumas can be debilitating for the children of survivors, who cannot truly understand their parents' experiences.

Another important thematic concern of *Maus* is the concept of self-sacrifice for loved ones. At Auschwitz, Vladek partially starves himself to be able to make deals that will benefit Anja, only to have his "savings" stolen and have to begin again. He does whatever he can to ease conditions for her and, when caught talking to her, he suffers a severe beating. This suggests that Anja was the lifeline that sustained Vladek throughout the entire ordeal. It is noteworthy that Art and Françoise's relationship also exhibits some of the traits of Vladek and Anja's relationship in relation to sacrifice. Throughout the text, Françoise encourages Art to meet with Vladek and agrees to help take care of him even though she too finds it difficult to work with Vladek for extended periods.

Lastly, Spiegelman makes strong statements about the concept of racial identity. The novel's funny-animal format and use of masks helps to undermine the arbitrary divisions between races, nationalities, and religions. The argument between Art and Françoise about how she should be represented is illustrative of this aim. The second volume opens with Art's various doodles of Françoise as a moose, a frog, a rabbit, a poodle, and so forth. As a Jewish convert of French descent and his wife, Françoise expresses irritation over Art's proposed depictions of her along ethnic lines. This scene's inclusion in the narrative, along with the clear use of masks to indicate Jews trying to pass as a different ethnicity, suggests that identities are partially social constructions, albeit powerful and enduring ones.

Art Spiegelman

Arguably the most influential and important American cartoonist of the second half of the twentieth century, Art Spiegelman created *Maus*, the defining work of alternative and independent comics. Having produced work in the underground comics movement of the late-1960's, Spiegelman turned his hand to editing with *Arcade* (co-edited with Bill Griffith) and *RAW* (co-edited with François Mouly). It was in *RAW* that he began serializing *Maus*, the biographical tale of his parents' experiences of the Holocaust that is presented through the use of anthropomorphic animals. Collected as a two-volume graphic novel, *Maus* proved to a generation of skeptics that comics could produce work on a par with achievements in the arts, and won an entirely new respectability for the form. Spiegelman's reflection on the events of September 11, 2001, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, was also widely praised. Few cartoonists have had the cultural impact that Art Spiegelman has had, and fewer have done so much to advance the common understanding of the art form.

Impact

Maus is considered one of the most significant graphic novels ever produced. Its publication was instrumental in legitimizing comics and graphic novels in the eyes of both scholars and the general population. It was the first graphic novel to win a major literary prize, being awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. It is also included on many college and university syllabi that focus on the Holocaust or graphic novels because of its themes, mode of expression, and critical reception.

Spiegelman's text was the first to represent the Holocaust in graphic novel form. Some deemed the work inappropriate given the sensitive nature of the subject and a perception that the medium of expression delegitimizes and trivializes the Holocaust. For many others, including Vladek Spiegelman as represented in Volume 1, the graphic novel is a genre of communication equal in weight to film, memoir, visual arts, poetry, and other media.

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Maus also raised many important questions of historicity, including whether facts can accurately be represented in graphic novel format given the unorthodox mode of presentation. During the book's run on *The New York Times* best-sellers list in 1991, Spiegelman petitioned the newspaper to move it from the fiction list to the nonfiction list. The book's eventual reclassification affirmed that comics and graphic novels can address serious historical events.

Maus is considered the prototypical Holocaust graphic novel, a genre that includes Dave Sim's *Judenhass* (2008), Greg Pak and Carmine Di Giandomenico's *X-Men: Magneto Testament* (2008), Pascal Croci's *Auschwitz* (2003), Joe Kubert's *Yossel* (2003), and Bernice Eisenstein's *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (2006).

Matt Reingold

Further Reading

Díaz Canales, Juan, and Juanjo Guarnido. *Blacksad* (2010).

Pak, Greg, and Carmine Di Giandomenico. *X-Men: Magneto Testament* (2009).

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Spiegelman, Art. "A Problem of Taxonomy." *The New York Times Book Review*, December 29, 1991. <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/29/books/1-a-problem-of-taxonomy-37092.html>.

See also: *In the Shadow of No Towers*; *Yossel*