
A New Way Of Imagining The Holocaust In Maus

Maus Dear art Spiegelman, In Maus My Father Bleeds History Art Spiegelman has simultaneously expanded the boundaries of literary form and found a new way of imagining the Holocaust, an event that is commonly described as unimaginable. The form is the comic book, once dismissed as an entertainment for children and regarded as suited only for slapstick comedy, action-adventure, or graphic horror. And although Maus includes elements of humor and suspense, the horror it envisions is far worse than anything encountered in the pages of Stephen King it is horror that happened; horror perpetrated by real people against millions of other real people; horror whose contemplation inevitably forces us to ask what human beings are capable of perpetrating and surviving.

Maus has recognized the true nature of that riddle by casting its protagonists as animals mice, cats, pigs, and dogs. As Spiegelman has said 'To use these ciphers, the cats and mice, is actually a way to allow you past the cipher at the people who are experiencing it.' When Maus first appeared as a three-page comic strip in an underground anthology, the words 'Nazi' and 'Jew' were never mentioned. Spiegelman's animals permit readers to bypass the question of what human beings can or cannot do and at the same time force them to confront it more directly. His Jewish mice are a barbed response to Hitler's statement 'The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human.' His feline Nazis remind us that the Germans' brutality was at bottom no more explicable than the delicate savagery of cats toying with their prey. And although Vladek Spiegelman and his family initially seem even more human than the rest of us, as the story unfolds they become more and more like animals, driven into deeper and deeper hiding places, foraging for scarcer and scarcer scraps of sustenance, betraying all the ties that we associate with humanity.

Many books and films about the Holocaust founder on its hugeness those caught up in it blur into a faceless mass of victims and victimizers. But Maus is the particular story of one survivor, Vladek Spiegelman, a young man who treated his mistress badly and may have married for money, whom we first see in his stubborn, tight-fisted, infuriatingly manipulative old age. Because he is not a saint, what happens to Vladek is all the more horrible. And by its very nature the comic book is a specific medium, in which even the slightest background details tell a story of their own. Students who read Maus will come away knowing the workings of the ghetto black market, the architecture of false-walled bunkers, and what was happening in the town squares where Polish Jews lined up patiently for deportation. They will know the words on the sign above the gate to Auschwitz. In addition, Maus is the story of the aged Vladek's tortured relations with his son, Artie, who is both a character in this book and its narrator; with his first wife, Anja, who killed herself twenty-three years after leaving Auschwitz; and with his long-suffering second wife, Mala, who reminds Artie that Vladek's cheapness and paranoia are not wholly attributable to his ordeal.

The elderly Vladek's conversations with his son give the Holocaust narrative a frame and also an ironic depth. Vladek and his son are at odds, and what stands between them is Vladek's unexamined past, which has left deep wounds in both of them. Maus is subtitled 'a survivor's tale,' and the survivor is not just Vladek it is also his son. In reading this simple book, students are driven to ask large and complex questions about the nature of survival, about suffering and

the moral choices that people make in response to it. They are compelled to consider the terrible relation between history and the real human beings who are history's casualties.

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