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Spring, 2008 - Maus: A Survivor's Tale

Since 1998, communities all over the United States have increasingly embraced the notion of civic unity through the reading of literature. There are now statewide, citywide, and even countrywide reading programs all over the world.

The City of Highland Park, the Highland Park Public Library, and Borders Books & Music share a commitment to the value of reading and are proud to announce and sponsor One Book, One Highland Park, a community?wide reading program customized for Highland Park.

This program is designed to broaden and deepen an appreciation of reading and compel friends, families and neighbors to share their experience while reading the same book. The project will engage the community in dialogue and seeks to bring people together by promoting tolerance and understanding about differing points of view.

To begin our program, we invite the Highland Park community to share the memorable and poignant experience of reading Art Spiegelman?s Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel, MAUS. Together, as one city, we will grow and learn by taking part in celebration, discussion and discovery of this important literary contribution to our community and our history.

Enjoy the book and we hope that you will participate in one of the many events and activities that relate to the book, its author and historical and literal significance. Schedules of related community events are included in this guide.

From the Mayor

I am pleased to announce the inauguration of One Book One Highland Park. This program allows for a community wide discussion on great literature.

Maus is my favorite graphic novel. This form of literature, and this Pulitzer Prize winning book in particular, allows readers to approach a difficult subject (the Holocaust) through the medium of comics. For me Maus was a gateway to literature and history of the Holocaust as well as to other graphic novels. Some of these are included in this guide.

I encourage you to read Maus and to participate in the various workshops and discussions planned for One Book One Highland Park also included in this guide.

I would like to thank the Highland Park Public Library and the City?s Economic Development office for helping to coordinate this program. I would also like to thank Borders for being great corporate citizens and for enriching our lives through literature.

Mayor Michael D. Belsky

About the Book

In *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History,* Art Spiegelman has simultaneously expanded the boundaries of a 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 (in an interview in The New Comics, p. 191): "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: "Arbeit Macht Frei"?"Work Makes You Free."

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.

About the Author

Art Spiegelman ~ Pulitzer Prize-winning Artist/Illustrator

Art Spiegelman has almost single-handedly brought comic books out of the toy closet and onto the literature shelves. In 1992 he won the Pulitzer Prize for his masterful Holocaust narrative *Maus* ? which portrayed Jews as mice and Nazis as cats. *Maus II* continued the remarkable story of his parents? survival of the Nazi regime and their lives later in America. His comics are best known for their shifting graphic styles, their formal complexity, and controversial content. In his lecture ?Comix 101.1" Spiegelman takes his audience on a chronological tour of the evolution of comics, all the while explaining the value of this medium and why it should not be ignored. He believes that in our post-literate culture the importance of the comic is on the rise, for ?comics echo the way the brain works."

Having rejected his parents aspirations for him to become a dentist, Art Spiegelman studied cartooning in high school and began drawing professionally at age 16. He went on to study art and philosophy at Harpur College before becoming part of the underground comics movement. As creative consultant for Topps Bubble Gum Co. from 1965-1987, Spiegelman designed Wacky Packages, Garbage Pail Kids and other novelty items, and taught history and aesthetics of comics at the School for Visual Arts in New York from 1979-1986. In 1980, Spiegelman founded RAW, the acclaimed avant-garde comics magazine, with his wife, Françoise Mouly. They've more recently co-edited Little Lit, a series of three comics anthologies for children published by HarperCollins ("Comics-They're not just for Grown-ups Anymore") and Big Fat Little Lit, which includes the three comics in one volume. In 1997 Spiegelman created a picture book for young children called Open Me? I?m A Dog with the same publisher. His work has been published in many periodicals, including The New Yorker, where he was a staff artist and writer from 1993-2003. A collection of his New Yorker work is soon to be published by Pantheon, who also published his illustrated version of the 1928 lost classic, The Wild Party, by Joseph Moncure March.

In 2004 he completed a two-year cycle of broadsheet-sized color comics pages, In the Shadow of No Towers, first published in a number of European newspapers and magazines including Die Zeit and The London Review of Books. A book version of these highly political works was published by Pantheon in the United States, appeared on many national bestseller lists, and was

selected by The New York Times Book Review as one of the 100 Notable Books of 2004.
A new edition of Art Spiegelman's 1978 anthology, Breakdowns, will be published in spring 2008; it will include an autobiographical comix-format introduction almost as long as the book itself, entitled Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!. Also in preparation is a book with a DVD about the making of *Maus*, entitled Meta *Maus*. A major exhibition of his work was arranged by Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, as part of the "15 Masters of 20th Century Comics" exhibit (November 2005). In 2005, Art Spiegelman was made a Chevalier de l?Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France and named one of Time Magazine?s 100 Most Influential People. He was named to the Art Director?s Club Hall of Fame in 2006.

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Further Reading

Further Reading

A Contract with God by Will Eisner

Against All Odds: Holocaust Survivors and the Successful Lives they Made by William B. Helmreich

The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust by Aaron Hass

American Splendor by Harvey Pekar

Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology by Lawrence L. Langer

Auschwitz and After by Charlotte Delbo

Barefoot Gen Volume One: A Cartoon Story by Keiji Nakazawa

Berlin: Book One by Jason Lutes

Black Hole by Charles Burns

Blankets by Craig Thompson

Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman by Deborah R. Geis

The Contract with God Trilogy by Will Eisner

Displaced Persons: Growing Up American after the Holocaust by Joseph Berger

The Drowned and the Saved by Primo Levi

Exodus by Leon Uris

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic by Alison Bechdel

Good-bye, Chunky Rice by Craig Thompson

Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise by Jonathan Petropoulos

Heartbreak Soup by Gilbert Hernandez

Hiding Places by Daniel Asa

Holocaust Poetry by Hilda Schiff

The Holocaust: Problems and Perspectives by Donald Niewyk

In the Shadow of No Towers by Art Spiegelman

Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth by Chris Ware

La Perdida by Jessica Abel

Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Begin by Art Spiegelman

Mr. Sammler?s Planet by Saul Bellow

Night by Elie Wiesel

Nothing Makes You Free, Edited by Melvin Jules Bukiet.

One Hundred Demons by Lynda Barry

Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 by Christopher R. Browning

Palestine by Joe Sacco

The Reawakening by, Primo Levi

Remembering: Voices of the Holocaust by Lyn Smith

Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia by Joe Sacco

Schindler?s Legacy by Elinor Brecher,

The Shawl by Cynthia Ozick

Shoah: The Complete Text by Claude Lanzmann

Sophie?s Choice by William Styron

The Story of a Life by Aron Appelfeld

Survival in Auschwitz by Primo Levi

Trap with a Green Fence by Richard Glazar

Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art by Scott McCloud

War and Genocide: A Concise History by Doris L. Bergen

Watchmen by Alan Moore

Interview

Art Spiegelman Interview at*Booksense*

Events

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