

Maus by Art Spiegelman

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Sunday, June 05, 2022

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Graphic novels are not something I typically read. The closest I have come as an adult would be several books compiling the work of various newspaper cartoonists. What piqued my curiosity on this book is that a school board in Tennessee banned this book from the eighth grade curriculum. While a graphic novel, honors received include: **The Pulitzer Prize**, a **Guggenheim fellowship** and **National Book Critics Circle Award**. *The New Yorker* called it “*the first masterpiece in comic book history*.” The very conservative *Wall Street Journal* described it as “*the most affecting and successful narrative ever done about the Holocaust*.”

This is not an easy book to read due to the theme. It deals with the treatment of the Jews in Poland by the Germans and Poles at the beginning of the World War II. The main character and his wife end up at the Auschwitz concentration camp. Partly through ingenuity, but mostly due to luck they both survived that experience. They fled Poland after the war as there remained much hostility to Jews there, going first to Sweden and then eventually to the United States. Their war time and concentration camp experiences deeply scared both of them, and their dysfunctionality strongly affected the child they had after the war. The wife eventually ended up committing suicide, and the son spent some time in a mental institution being treated for depression. Their first son, Richieu, born in Poland before the war, was poisoned without their knowledge by a family caregiver. They had sent him to be with relatives in another city hoping he would be safer there. This relative, when the Nazis started rounding up Jews, poisoned her own children, their son and herself rather than let them be taken to the camps. A good portion of the book was taken up with the unhealthy interactions of the father and son as the son was extracting his father’s life story.

One important point to make is that the author chose to use animals for the various characters, actually animal heads on human bodies. Occasionally, the characters are sketched as humans with animal masks... I am still trying to figure that one out. The Jews were mice, Nazis and most Germans were cats, Poles were depicted as pigs, the single Frenchman had a frog’s head. Police and other authority figures were drawn as dogs. Towards the end of the story American GIs were sketched as very friendly dogs. Most of these common stereotypes, a shorthand method often employed in pulp fiction, and I would imagine in graphic novels as well. The connection between mice and cats is obvious, but Spiegelman uses a quote from a German newspaper from the 1930s to drive this point home:

“Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed... Healthy emotions tell every independent young man and every honorable youth that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom, cannot be the ideal type of animal... Away with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika Cross!”

The explanation given by various school board members for banning the book included the sexuality, the nudity and the language in the book. The scariest quote I read was:

“It looks like the entire curriculum is developed to normalize sexuality, normalize nudity and normalize vulgar language,” said Mike Cochran, a school board member. “I think we need to re-look at the entire curriculum.”

Last time I looked those were parts of normal, everyday life. I personally think we load way too much baggage on to these commonplace constituents of being human.

Remember that the characters are sketched as humans having animal heads. The only scene I found in the book that could vaguely be classified as sexual is of an unmarried couple sitting on a bed. However, she is in her old school slip that is practically a dress, and he is completely dressed, in the act of putting on his tie .

When you are depicting humans in such trying circumstances strong language is going to be part of it. That is how real people talk in those situations. I did not go through and count, but if there were more than ten or twenty such words in the 300 pages of the book, I would be surprised. The language definitely fitted the situation; it was not the gratuitous foul language so common in current movies.

And as to nudity, there was some. When our protagonist arrived at Auschwitz the Nazis separated the sexes. Thereafter followed some scenes in which the Nazis had him and his fellow male Jews strip. They then ran them naked from point to point in the camp including into a delousing shower room. If you looked closely you could see something that might have been depicting penises between their legs, something half the population has. And this was only for a few panels in the middle of the book. To me, this nudity was the perfect vehicle to depict the inhuman treatment the Jews were suffering at the hands of the Nazis in the concentration camp. It most certainly was not pornographic voyeurism.

IMHO, what is going on with the school board is not a strong desire to protect Little Johnny from sex, language and the human body, but a wish to whitewash history. There is a well documented rise in antisemitism, authoritarianism, and yes, even Nazism in this country. More than a few folks would like us to forget what occurred last time this happened. Education must be about breaking down prejudices, it must be about climbing out of our silos. It must be about challenging our intellect. If your religion/belief system is not strong enough to withstand an occasional assault, then, perhaps it needs re-examining.

The old saw is that “those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it.” Many would argue that even with knowing history, humanity keeps making the same awful mistakes over and over. But... I do have a strong gut feeling that if we do not learn about such atrocities as Auschwitz and Nazism the repetition rate would be even higher. Or at a minimum, I fervently pray knowledge can short circuit our mistakes on occasion. All of which is a plea for folks to read this book. Once again, it is not an easy book to read, but it is extremely worthwhile.

In my universe, *Maus* would be on the shelves of all middle and high school libraries. I would not want to subject younger children to some of the scenes. Such as one incidence, while not depicted, the protagonist does recall an incidence when a Nazi smashed a Jewish child's head against a wall to make it stop crying. The book, at times, is rough and violent, but have you seen the current crop of video games and movies?

I have figured out, though, that my universe is an alternate reality lacking a portal to the one we jointly occupy.

There are actually two books *Maus* books, *A Survivor's Tale*, *My Father Bleeds History* and *And Here My Troubles Begin*. They can be bought separately, but my suggestion would be to buy [The Complete Maus](#) which includes both books. It is available both as a hardback and as a paperback. Used, slightly cheaper, versions are also available from various retailers. Or perhaps if you slip the librarian a sawbuck they would get you a copy from the back room, wrapping it in plain, brown paper before giving it to you.

And so it goes...sort of, sometimes...

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