

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Maus I & II
by Art Spiegelman

written by Rebecca Challman

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ISBN 978-1-60389-156-1
Item No. 303384

Maus I – A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History

Pre-Reading

1. On the cover of *Maus I*, two mice huddle close together caught in the glare of a blazing spotlight. At the center of the spotlight is a swastika emblazoned with the face of a cat, which bears a strong resemblance to Adolf Hitler. Above the symbol, the word MAUS drips, like blood. How does this cover image make you feel? What do you think is happening to the couple?

Write a poem describing how the image makes you feel, or write a narrative poem about the couple and what might be happening to them.

2. In *Maus*, Art Spiegelman uses cats to represent the Nazis and mice to represent himself, his family, and Jews in general. His symbolism is appropriate since cats prey on mice. If you were to relate a distressing event from your family’s history in a graphic novel format, how would you illustrate your family? How would you depict the villains? Would you use animals, or would you draw humans?

Write a brief synopsis of your theoretical graphic novel. Begin with the event you would relate. Then tell your publisher how you would depict the positive characters and the negative characters.

3. In his prologue, Spiegelman uses an incident from his childhood to hint at momentous events in his father’s life. He showcases a snippet of personal memory to foreshadow shocking revelations and to reveal to the reader how he grew up in the constant shadow of his father’s pain. The exchanges between Artie and his friends who leave him behind, and then between his father, who admonishes him about true friendship, take all of ten sentences.

This brevity of words is an essential aspect of a good graphic novel. What the writer does not reveal with text, the artist reveals with pictures. In this case the words and pictures, both Spiegelman’s, work seamlessly together.

Maus I & II

4. Examine the father last sentence. How much of the story do the words reveal by themselves? Write down your own interpretation of what they mean, especially in light of what you think will happen in the book.

As you can see by the first few pages, Art Spiegelman mixes time elements, personal accounts, emotions, his perspectives, and world elements. However, his main characters are mice, with who Spiegelman expects you to identify, understand, and show sympathy for.

Compose a short letter to him explaining your feelings about this use. Include your thoughts about a graphic novel being used to depict something as horrible as the Holocaust.

Chapter One: The Sheik

5. Vladek says Lucia's family "was nice, but had no money, even for a dowry." However, Anja comes from a rich family, and Vladek quickly becomes engaged to her. He tells his son that Anja wasn't as pretty as Lucia, but she was more lovable.

Vladek's motives for marrying Anja may be suspect. Do you think he chooses her for her money? If so, how do you feel about that? Is marrying strictly for money wrong? Pretend a classmate has asked your opinion on the matter. Write your response, beginning with the phrase, "I think that marrying someone for their money is..."

6. Vladek snoops in Anja's closet in order to "see what a housekeeper she was." While snooping, he discovers pills and writes down the names of the drugs he sees. Perhaps Vladek is concerned for Anja, or perhaps he is merely trying to protect himself from a bad marriage to an ill woman. Whatever his motives, he is violating Anja's privacy by prying into his personal life.

Maus I & II

How do you feel about snooping? Is there ever a time when it is justified? Think about, or imagine, a time when you were caught snooping by a friend. Write a letter to that friend explaining why you felt justified in snooping. Or if someone has violated your privacy, write to that person explaining how it made you feel.

7. Anja almost doesn't marry Vladek, because she receives an anonymous letter warning her about Vladek's bad reputation. Of course, Vladek's ex-girlfriend is the author of the letter. She is angry and spiteful after Vladek chooses Anja over her.

Most people are wrongly accused of something at some point in their lives. Some people react by defending themselves, others by seeking revenge against their accuser. What do you think is the best course of action in such a situation?

Imagine you are an advice columnist, and you must help both the person whose character has been soiled, like Vladek, and the person who receives the anonymous letter, like Anja. Compose the two letters the columnist would receive and the response to each one.

8. At the conclusion of their conversation, Vladek asks his son Art not to include his story about Lucia in his book. Art responds that it is great material and that he wants to tell Vladek's story "the way it really happened." His father insists that it wouldn't be appropriate or respectful, and Art relents. He promises he will not include the account of the aggressive Lucia in his book.

Write a paragraph or two recounting a time when you broke a promise, or when someone broke a promise made to you.

Chapter Two: The Honeymoon

9. In Vladek's words, "Anja was involved in conspirations!" Anja translates Communist messages into German and then passes them on. When Vladek learns of her actions, he wants to end the marriage. He gives her an ultimatum, saying she must choose between him and her Communist friends.

From Vladek's perspective, Anja has revealed herself to be involved in behavior that threatens their secure way of life. If Anja were still alive, she might tell her son Art a different story, a story in which she explains why it was important for her to support the Communists against the new Nazi government.

Think of a time when you were caught doing something that upset someone close to you. Write an account of the event from the perspective of the one person. Step in to that person's shoes and make it as convincing as possible. Then write the same story from your perspective.

10. When Anja discovers the police are coming, she asks Miss Stefanska to hide a package of documents for her. Miss Stefanska is not only Anja's neighbor, she is also her seamstress and her tenant. That means that Anja has power over her. That power may influence Miss Stefanska. Whatever her motive, Miss Stefanska does as she is asked, and when the police find the documents, they throw her in jail for three months. When Miss Stefanska is released from prison, Anja's father pays her bills and rewards her with a tidy sum of money.

Answer the following questions in clear, concise sentences.

- A. Do you think Anja used her position of power to get Miss Stefanska to protect her? Why?
- B. What would you have done in Anja's shoes?
- C. What would you have done if you were Miss Stefanska?

11. As a follow-up to the previous prompt, imagine a conversation the two women have when Miss Stefanska is released from prison. She must now resume her life, which has been on hold for three months. How does she communicate her loss to Anja? How does Anja communicate her sorrow, if at all? Begin your conversation with Miss Stefanska saying, "Oh, Anja, you would not believe what I've had to endure..."
12. Vladek is a salesman who dreams of opening his own shop. In an effort to make sure his grandchildren prosper, Vladek's father-in-law gives him enough money to open a textile factory.

Imagine you have a benefactor who can provide you with enough money to make one of your dreams come true. Which dream would you pursue? What makes this dream more important than any other? Make a list of your wishes for the future, from most important to least important.

13. After Anja and Vladek have their first child, a son they name Richieu, Anja begins suffering severe melancholy or sadness. Contemporary doctors might diagnose her with post-partum depression. They might prescribe an antidepressant, and she may well be able to continue taking care of her newborn baby.

In the late 1930s, however, not much was known about depression and changes in brain chemistry induced by changing hormones. By the 1970s, when Art Spiegelman is writing his father's story, much has changed. Today, even more advances, both in medical science and in people's attitudes towards depression, have taken place. Imagine yourself and your life in thirty or even fifty years.

What medical advances do you expect to see as you age? Make a list of at least ten changes you think will occur in your lifestyle.

14. On the train to the sanitarium, Vladek and Anja hear many horrible tales of Jews being mistreated by the Nazis. Later, Vladek spies a swastika on a flag flying in a town center. These things foreshadow catastrophic events. As readers, we can see what lies ahead. For Vladek and Anja, however, the future remains a mystery.