

Art Spiegelman's Genre-Defying Holocaust Work, Revisited

Ruth Franklin / October 5, 2011

“A quest for ersatz verisimilitude might have pulled me further away from essential actuality as I tried to reconstruct it,” muses the author of a seminal work of literature about the Holocaust. In a lengthy interview that has just been published, he reveals that his source material included thousands of hours of interviews; a shelf of books in Polish, Yiddish, and Ukrainian; detailed maps of the death camps; and even manuals of shoe repair. No element of the concentration-camp universe has escaped his attention: Confronted by a historian who disputes his depiction of the toilets at Auschwitz, he gleefully points out that he is referring to the lesser-known Auschwitz I, which had actual plumbing, rather than the more notorious Auschwitz II (Birkenau), with only rows of planks over open pits. “Maybe as a way of getting past my own aversion I tried to see Auschwitz as clearly as I could,” he says. “It was a way of forcing myself and others to look at it.”

This writer is not Elie Wiesel or Primo Levi, though his work, like theirs, is based in testimony. He is not Piotr Rawicz or H.G. Adler, though he shares their interest in viewing real events through a filter of surrealism. He is not Thomas Keneally, though his work has a quality of the “nonfiction novel” about it; nor is he W.G. Sebald, though his books, like Sebald’s, have been described as a mix of fiction, documentary, and memoir. He is Art Spiegelman, and he has done more than any other writer of the last few decades to change our understanding of the way stories about the Holocaust can be written. *Maus*, Spiegelman’s “epic story told in tiny pictures” (in the words of Ken Tucker, one of its first reviewers), is now twenty-five years old, and it is testimony to the book’s wide reach that its premise hardly needs to be restated. The idea of a graphic novel about the Holocaust in which the Jews are



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But what is less well known about *Maus* is the way the book was put together—in a drawn-out process lasting thirteen years and incorporating a vast amount of research. In *MetaMaus*, a combination book and DVD just published by Pantheon, the artist investigates his own creative process with a comprehensiveness that may well be unprecedented. The book transcribes a long interview with Spiegelman by the literary scholar Hillary Chute, as well as interviews with the artist's family members and people who knew his parents during the war, reproductions of documents, and a transcript of the original interviews with Spiegelman's father, Vladek, on which *Maus* was based. In addition to the full text of *Maus* itself, with nearly every frame hyperlinked and annotated, the DVD presents thousands of supporting documents interspersed with sketches and studies, accompanied by critical essays on the book and even a home movie taken by Spiegelman and his wife on their second visit to Auschwitz. "Perhaps the only honest way to present such material is to say: 'Here are all the documents I used, you go through them,'" Spiegelman tells Chute. "And here's a twelve-foot shelf of works to give these documents context, and here's like thousands of hours of tape recordings, and here's a bunch of photographs to look at. Now, go make yourself a *Maus*!"

Of course, no one else could make a *Maus*. One of the book's most striking qualities is how relentlessly personal it is: The story of Vladek's persecution and survival is inseparable from the story of his son's efforts to portray it on the page. "The subject of *Maus* is the retrieval of memory and ultimately, the creation of memory," Spiegelman says. "It's about choices being made, of finding what one can tell, and what one can reveal, and what one can reveal beyond what one knows one is revealing." The panels of *Maus* are so straightforward that it's easy to overlook the wrenching act of imagination required to fit so much material into such a compact



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brings things full circle by embedding clips of these interviews on some of the relevant pages. Readers can now hear exactly what got left out and try to discern the ways Spiegelman supplemented the missing words in his drawings. At the very least, this is an impressive pedagogical tool, even if all but the most dedicated scholars will ultimately weaken under the flood of documentation. (*MetaMaus* will no doubt birth thousands of undergraduate term papers.)

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In addition to rendering Vladek's story both as accurately and as concisely as possible, Spiegelman was obsessively focused on getting the visual details right, consulting drawings by survivors and contemporaneous photographs and maps to ensure that nothing was misrepresented. "In a way, it's a lot more challenging than trying to simply tell a story," he says of his chosen medium. "In a prose story, I could just write, 'Then they dragged my father through the gate and into the camp.' But here I have to live those words, to assimilate them, to turn them into finished business—so that I end up *seeing* them and am then able to convey that vision. Were there tufts of grass, ruts in the path, puddles in the ruts? How tall were the buildings, how many windows, any bars, any lights in the windows, any people? What time of day was it? What was the horizon like? Every panel requires that I interrogate my material like that over and over again."

The medium of the graphic novel, with its almost cinematic combination of word and image, is ideal for conveying both memory and its elisions. (Lawrence Wechsler, in a magazine profile of Spiegelman included in *MetaMaus*, notes that in *Maus* "the ambiguity is of an almost crystalline precision.") In one sequence, Spiegelman



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orchestras.” In the first panel of this page, we see a group of inmates marching with an orchestra in the background. Below, after Vladek has contradicted the account of the orchestra, the inmates are depicted marching past it so that they cover up the musicians—only the tops of their instruments are now visible. “I have the orchestra being blotted out by the people marching because that’s all he remembers,” Spiegelman explains. In the last panel of the sequence, Vladek and Art are in the present, debating the orchestra, and Vladek gets the last word. Was the orchestra there or wasn’t it? Spiegelman knows, from all his documents, that it must have been, but Vladek is equally sure that it wasn’t, and the images give them each their due.

There’s something mildly lunatic about insisting on this sort of “verisimilitude” in a story in which all the people appear as cartoon animals. Or is there? The question of how truthful *Maus* can be is perfectly illustrated by the minor kerfuffle that broke out when the second section of the book was published in hardcover and promptly made its way to the *New York Times* best-seller list—in the fiction column. In a letter to the *New York Times Book Review* (reproduced, naturally, in *MetaMaus*), Spiegelman protested: “I shudder to think how David Duke ... would respond to seeing a carefully researched work based closely on my father’s memories of life in Hitler’s Europe and in the death camps classified as fiction.” One editor reportedly responded, “Let’s go out to Spiegelman’s house and if a giant mouse answers the door, we’ll move it to the nonfiction side of the list!” But the *Times*, following Pantheon (which had listed it as both history and memoir), ruled with Spiegelman.

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and historians,” Spiegelman says in *MetaMaus*. “I tried to explain that one has to use the information and give shape to it in order to help people understand what happened—that historians, in fact, do that as much as any artist—but that history was far too important to leave to historians.” Even if there were no Holocaust deniers, the documentary novel would most likely be the dominant form of Holocaust fiction, for the simple reason that “getting it right” is crucial to the illusion of every historical novel. To give but one example, Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones*, though it is the opposite of testimonial, rests nearly as heavily on historical resources. For a period as excruciatingly well-documented as the Holocaust, any misplaced detail could be fatal to a work of literature.

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I admit that I have always thought of *Maus* as a kind of novel; but I may use that term more broadly than Spiegelman does. What *MetaMaus* makes clear is that *Maus*, like the works of W.G. Sebald, exists somewhere outside of the genres as they are normally defined: We might call it “testimonial based Holocaust representation.” But no matter what it is called, it gives the lie to the critics of Holocaust literature (as well as certain writers of it) who have insisted that either everything must be true or nothing is true. By finding a new medium for an old story, *Maus* became also a story about its medium. Similarly, in its quest to document its own documentation, *MetaMaus* is a profound meditation on the meaning of sources and the uses we make of them.

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