

# CBLDF Discussion Guide



## **Maus**

by Art Spiegelman

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*Given their visual nature, comics are easy targets for would-be censors. CBLDF's Discussion Guides are tools that can be used to lead conversations about challenged graphic novels and to help allay misconceptions about comics.*

### **Synopsis**

Art Spiegelman's two-part memoir, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, details his family's survival of World War II as Polish Jews; including time in the death camps while also exploring his troubled relationship with his father and coping with the suicide of his mother. Spiegelman's technique of depicting different ethnicities as animals; for example Jews are mice and Germans are cats, is a profound and deeply effective metaphor for racism.

### **Themes**

Coming-of-age, gender roles, homosexuality, fatherhood, identity, death and loss

### **Reasons Challenged**

LGBTQ themes, sexuality

### **Suggested Age Range**

High school and up

### **Discussion Questions**

#### **Remembering**

1. How did Bechdel's relationship with her father change as she became an adult and a self-identified lesbian?

#### **Understanding**

2. Bechdel relied heavily on first hand sources such as letters, journals, and photographs to document her upbringing. One example of this is the series of photos on page 120. How do these media contribute to the authenticity of the book and influence her art?
3. *Fun Home's* narrative is non-linear and moves fluidly between the past and the present, revisiting central incidents over and over again. In what ways does this structure impact the story?

#### **Applying**

4. Dream sequences are frequently found in artistic expression. How does Bechdel's analysis and interpretation of her dreams and her emphasis on imagery enhance her storytelling?
5. One of the reasons that *Fun Home* has been challenged is LGBTQ themes. In what ways is this public discomfort with sexual identity similar to the discomfort of the characters in the memoir? How does it differ?

#### **Analyzing**

6. How does Bechdel's use of a limited color palette influence the story? Does it enhance or distract from the story? Explain your reasoning.

7. Appearances are important to the Bechdel family, even though they do not often reflect reality. What are some examples from the story in which appearance and reality did not match, and how do these examples illustrate the tensions among the members of the Bechdel family?
8. Bechdel has obsessive-compulsive tendencies, which began with a particularly intense onset at age 10. How did her obsessive-compulsive disorder contribute to the documentation of her childhood?

### Evaluating

9. Bechdel and her father connect over literature, and literary references are integral to *Fun Home*. Identify some of these references. How did Bechdel's various literary allusions impact her storytelling?
10. On page 125, Bechdel imagines how things would differ if her family told the truth. Is Bechdel telling the truth in her own memoir? Explain your reasoning.
11. Bechdel painstakingly drew *Fun Home* by hand, often reproducing actual photographs and journal entries. How do you think her reliance on drawing everything by hand versus using computer techniques impacts the narrative?

### Creating

12. Showing, which relays the action so the reader is experiencing it with the characters, and telling, which uses a narrator to fill in the reader about aspects of the story, are two tools by which creators relay action in their books. Bechdel uses both showing and telling in *Fun Home*. How might the story have differed if she used one and not the other? Is one method more honest than the other? Explain your reasoning.

## Activities

### Journaling

Keep a daily comic journal over the course of a few weeks or a month. Instead of writing prose about your experiences in your journal, use a multi-panel comic strip. Consider incorporating newspaper clippings, photographs, and other media into your comics. At the end of your journaling period, evaluate your memoir. How truthful were you in telling your story? Which topics were easier or more fun to relate than others? How did your artwork or use of media change with the types of things you shared?

### Writing

Research obsessive-compulsive disorder. Based on what you learn, write about how various aspects of *Fun Home*, from the topics covered to the very act of creating the book, reflect Bechdel's own struggles with OCD.

### Poster Project

Bechdel uses non-linear story telling throughout *Fun Home*, reflecting on past events throughout the narrative. Create a timeline for the action in the story. Reproduce key panels on your timeline and cite page numbers to create a linear version of the story. After your timeline is complete, examine how the story differs when told linearly.

For more about attempts to censor *Fun Home*, visit <http://cblddf.org/banned-challenged-comics/case-study-fun-home/>

For information about adding *Fun Home* to your classroom or library collection, visit <http://cblddf.org/2015/06/adding-fun-home-to-your-library-or-classroom-collection/>

**Comic Book Legal Defense Fund is a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection of the First Amendment rights of the comics art form and its community of retailers, creators, publishers, librarians, and readers. CBLDF provides legal referrals, representation, advice, assistance, and education in furtherance of these goals.**  
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