

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

Maus, art spiegelman's two-part graphic memoir, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, details his family's survival of World War II as Polish Jews, including time in death camps, while also exploring spiegelman's 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

Identity, guilt, memory, survival, racism

Reasons Challenged

Ethnic insensitivity

Suggested Age Range

High school and up

Discussion Questions

Remembering

1. What were Vladek Spiegelman's motivations for survival during World War II? What was more helpful: his luck or his resourcefulness? Explain your reasoning.

Understanding

2. Vladek's memory and his interpretation of his personal past is not always reliable. How does his relationship with his son impact spiegelman's narration of his father's history? How does the absence of spiegelman's mother's voice due to the destruction of her journals impact the narration?
3. spiegelman often uses masks in his narrative. What do they convey?

Applying

4. How does spiegelman's simple, straightforward, and spare artistic style influence the narrative?
5. spiegelman was born after the end of World War II, yet the events of the World War II and the Holocaust deeply impact his life. Discuss the ramifications of past events on spiegelman's life.

Analyzing

6. How effective is spiegelman's use of visual metaphor in depicting different races as animals?
7. The father-son relationship depicted in *Maus* is a complicated one. Does spiegelman portray his father fairly? Truthfully? Explain your reasoning.

8. *Book One: A Survivor's Tale* depicts Anja Spiegelman's suicide and its impact. These passages are presented in a different visual style. How do these differences alter the reader's interpretation of Anja's suicide?

Evaluating

9. What would Anja think about Spiegelman writing and publishing *Maus*? Of Vladek destroying her journals? Would she be happy or sad about her story being so widely read? Explain your reasoning.
10. Spiegelman is ambivalent about the success of *Maus* and refuses to sell his book to Hollywood. What does his ambivalence convey about the personal nature of his material and his complicated feelings about his family's history?

Creating

11. Spiegelman uses visual metaphor throughout the book to depict the various ethnic and social groups involved in and impacted by the Holocaust. What are some examples of contemporary events that can be depicted using similar visual techniques?

Activities

Journaling

Based on how Anja is portrayed in *Maus*, reconstruct Anja's journal. Imagine you are the character, and keep a journal in her voice. Exchange your journal with another classmate and discuss how you each interpreted Anja's thoughts and motivations, identifying common themes and differences in your interpretations.

Writing

Select a supporting character from the story and write a monologue that explains the character's actions and how the character either assisted or betrayed the Spiegelmans.

Poster Project

Research the Holocaust and its impact on various groups in Europe. Use what you learn to make a poster that juxtaposes images and events from *Maus* with actual events during World War II. In your poster, compare how Spiegelman depicts an incident with how it is conveyed in historical documents, such as photographs and news reports.

For more about attempts to censor *Maus*, visit <http://cblddf.org/banned-comic/banned-challenged-comics/case-study-maus/>

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