

Graphic Autobiography: Using *Maus* in a Composition Class

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Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is one of the most effective texts I have found to engage students in writing topics. Every time I have used it, students are immediately interested in it. Their interest is sustained as they move from an appreciation of *Maus*'s simplicity and accessibility to a realization of how complex this apparently simple text is. The writing they produce in response to the book is frequently compelling, largely because they are interested in explaining their ideas. It is paradoxical that a book that relies so much on graphic arts to convey its meanings should work so well in a writing class. The very nature of *Maus* as a complex graphic arts memoir, where the artwork is at least as important as the text, where the double story line of Vladek's experiences during the Holocaust and Art's relationship with his father presents a complex narrative, can perhaps explain this success. Whatever the reasons, though, this book offers writing teachers a wonderful opportunity to introduce students to a wide variety of writing tasks--literary analysis, historical study, and personal essay.

It is not hard to understand why the students are so fascinated by this book when they first delve into it. First, it is easy to read: most students can make their way through Parts I and II in less than four or five hours. The storyline is entertaining--exciting, disturbing, and even at times amusing. All the students are accustomed to reading the comics, and as a result of their wide exposure to television and film media, they are accustomed to interpreting visual texts, quite often more accustomed than I. The use of flashbacks and flash forwards usually cause most student readers little difficulty. Furthermore, the subject of the book is something in which most of them have some interest--the Holocaust--and while Vladek's story is grim enough when one ponders the details, the use of animal figures to represent various ethnic groups presents the Holocaust in manageable symbolic terms. What is more important to me as a writing teacher, though, is how the work supports extended inquiry. Although it entices students' interest by its comic book form, it sustains it by its attention to both historical and personal detail. For this reason, the work serves as the ideal text on which students can build an understanding of connections between the personal and the collective, between autobiography and history.

Like most writing teachers, I believe that good writing is closely related to careful reading. *Maus* is ideal for this purpose, for the students realize quite soon that the work is crafted with painstaking care and that almost each page reveals subtle rewards for careful readers. In the first chapter, we look for how the details Spiegelman tells us about his father are crucial to understanding him later. Toward the end of this chapter, Vladek says, "But this what I just told you . . . I don't want you should write this in your book. It has nothing to do with Hitler, with the Holocaust" (I 23). The students can usually see that this isn't quite true: we learn a great deal about Vladek's character from his early behavior. In his description of himself, we see his vanity: "People always told me I looked just like Rudolph Valentino" (I 13). In his treatment of Lucia Greenberg, we see his calculating nature, a characteristic that is further developed in his behavior when he first visits Anja's house and snoops in her medicine chest (I 19). (I ask one of the men students if he usually goes through the medicine cabinet when he is invited to

his girlfriend's home the first time.) Some classes will exhibit some disagreement among the sexes as to the behavior of Vladek and Lucia. Men students typically read the scene as evidence of the trials that occur when one breaks off a relationship with a girlfriend: for these students Lucia Greenberg is the prototype of the woman in the film *Fatal Attraction*. Women students often see the incident as evidence that Vladek was nothing more than a sexual opportunist who deserves his difficulties when he tried to break up with Lucia. This discussion provides a good opportunity to show the students how their interpretations of the story are colored by their previous experiences and their underlying ideologies. It can even suggest to some students how they might reinterpret their own experiences with the opposite sex. The last page of the chapter offers another opportunity for the students to ponder the complexities of self-portrayal: if Vladek really did ask Art not to include any of these stories in his book, why did Art disobey him? Furthermore, why does Spiegelman portray himself as promising his father that he won't mention what Vladek calls "such private things" (I 23)? Students are capable of providing thoughtful answers to this question, but I usually ask them to discuss possibilities in small groups instead of asking them to provide an answer in open-class discussion. They usually decide that Spiegelman is establishing his relationship with his readers in this first chapter: by showing us that he lied to his father, he paradoxically manages to suggest that he will be quite honest with readers. As one student later put it in a paper, "Spiegelman suggests that his relationship with the readers is stronger than his relationship with his father, so we can trust him to tell the truth later on."

After this introduction, which I usually conduct as a class discussion, another good technique is to ask the students to work in small groups on particular topics that I supply. I provide some guide questions that are designed to get them to read the work in a somewhat different way. The students are then asked to teach this portion of the book to the class; this teaching usually results in a somewhat self-conscious short lecture or discussion by the group members, but the sense of engagement that students exhibit makes the activity worthwhile. I have used the following topics as prompts; *Maus* is a rich enough text that it would not be hard to think of more:

- Throughout the work, Spiegelman gives us two apparently contradictory views of what Vladek Spiegelman was like, one given by Vladek himself as he sees and remembers himself and the other by his son, Art. What are the distinguishing characteristics of these two views? What are some key scenes throughout the book that would show support your interpretation of these two characters? Are these two views of the same character in fact contradictory? Can they be reconciled?
- *Maus* is a memoir in two obvious ways: it is the record of Vladek telling of his experiences throughout the Holocaust, and it is also the story of Art getting the story from his father. In Part I, Vladek's story appears to have precedence, and Art's story appears to be only a framing device. But in Part II, Art's story takes on greater importance, especially in the "Time Flies" section of Part II. There is another, more subtle memoir going on, however: Artie's recollection

of his childhood to various people, sort of a sub-memoir during the Artie story. The first brief story comes on I, 43 when Artie tells the story of how his father would treat him when he wouldn't eat all his food. What purpose do these stories serve in relation to the larger stories (Vladek's experiences before and during the Holocaust, and Artie's experience of writing the story)? What dimension do the stories add to the narrative as a whole? What is Art's purpose in telling these stories at the time that he does? Include in your consideration the "Prisoner from Hell Planet" sequence, which may be considered another kind of memoir altogether, but could also be included in this memoir-within-a-memoir group. Look carefully at pages I, 130-32 (for Mala's memories of life with Vladek) and II, 14-16.

- In many ways, *Maus* is like a movie in that Spiegelman has to set up "shots" of the various scenes he creates. He has uses "flash forwards" (a cut to scenes that jumps forward in time) and "flashbacks" (cuts to scenes that go back in time). There are also close-ups (see I, 109, 3rd panel for a particular dramatic one). Finally, there are "voiceovers"--Vladek's voice from the present narrating the scenes from the war when the only images one sees are from the earlier period. Look through the book and see if you can find some good examples of these "cinematic" techniques. Be sure to consider some of the stranger effects in the "Time Flies" chapter in Part II.

I usually have a range of possible answers in mind in posing these areas for the students' study; even so, I have frequently been surprised by their answers. Instead of having the students develop these answers in small groups, it works well for questions like these to serve as prompts for journal assignments. I emphasize to the students that the questions are only prompts, questions to get them started. Theorists such as Peter Elbow ("Closing my Eyes") remind us many writers need to explore a topic in writing without regard to their audience as a technique for developing their own ideas.

Another reason for engaging in exercises like these is to encourage students not to achieve closure on their ideas too early. Perhaps because of earlier writing experiences in which the importance of developing a thesis or central idea was impressed upon them, students in introductory courses are prone to one-dimensional readings, which they then develop into essays. As Stephen E. Tabachnick points out in an extended analysis of the structure of the work, "there are no saints among the main characters in *Maus*" (156): this characteristic of the work helps push students toward more complex views of the characters. For example, some of my students have argued that the Art Spiegelman's character is basically "bad" because he is often impatient with his father and even selfish in his single-minded determination to extract the story of his experiences in the war. This gives a good opportunity to show how their writing can be strengthened by considering contrary evidence: instances that show how difficult Vladek is to live with, examples that show Art being conscious of his less-than-admirable behavior. In addition, students can analyze the important fact that it is this same Art Spiegelman who is portraying himself in this manner.

Many students taking writing courses have the impres-

sion that instruction in "writing" mostly involves attention to proper form--punctuation, proper citation form, and "grammar." Most writing teachers have a considerably broader definition of what writing instruction entails; we are generally more concerned about the quality of students' ideas than some of them expect. One of the wonderful difficulties in using *Maus* is that the text is so accessible and at the same time so rich in interpretative possibilities that it is hard to determine when the class as a whole has developed enough ideas and is ready to start writing. In an introductory writing course, especially one that includes as one of its purposes the teaching of academic discourse conventions, it is necessary to focus in class on how students are going to express their ideas, sometimes before students are ready to exploit the text fully. In a more advanced class, the book serves well to introduce more complex notions about writing, about the relationship between autobiography and history. Fortunately, *Maus* works equally well in these different courses.

Using *Maus* to Teach Conventions of Academic Discourse

Some students, often those who are not particularly adept at verbal expression, have a much better eye for visual detail than do I. Whatever the students' abilities in this area, I try to devise assignments that require them to explain in writing an effect that they experience visually. The verbal skills that this requires seem to me to be similar to the task of paraphrasing or summarizing complex material without the difficulties that result from working with another text--namely the tendency to plagiarize, even inadvertently. In other words, the task of rendering into one's own words a complex text requires similar skills to the task of putting into words the meaning of a complex visual text, but working from the visual text eliminates the temptation to plagiarize that arises from working with a verbal text. Both tasks ask the writer to form a complex meaning originating with an experience with some other text and to do so using his or her own language. The task of working with other texts may be more challenging because the ideas come expressed in a form that to many beginning writers seems so inextricably tied to their meaning that one has to use the original language. Describing a visual text requires students to "read" in different ways and to transform that reading into their own words. Getting the students to "paraphrase" their reading of a visual text in this way is an excellent introduction to having them work with verbal texts.

I have also found it helpful to have them "quote" from *Maus* in a variety of ways. One problem that inexperienced writers working with literature have is that they don't always understand the degree to which academic writing on literature requires that evidence be provided by means of quotations from the text. Students can easily quote the verbal text that form part of *Maus*, and for some of their points, short quotations from the work are all the evidence they will need. These can be handled by telling students to simply cite them as they would any other quotations. Sometimes, though, it is necessary for a student to reproduce a short stretch of dialogue in the form of a blocked-out quotation. I instruct my students to reproduce Spiegelman's dialogue as if they were writing a play. For example, a student could reproduce the dialogue in which Art and Vladek argue over the Special K as follows:

Vladek: I'll pack the foods what Mala left to return it over to the Shop-Rite. Help yourself for a little cereal.

Art: No thanks. I'll stick to coffee.

Vladek: Please. Just taste and you'll see how good it is.

Art: No thanks. I don't like Special K.

Vladek: But it has salt and also sugar. For me it's poison--I'll give for you a little, yes Françoise?

Françoise: No thanks.

Vladek: It's a shame to waste. I'll pack and you can take it home with you.

Art: The box is almost empty. Just leave it here.

Vladek: Okay, if not, is not. Only just try then a piece from this fruit cake.

Art: I'M NOT HUNGRY.

Vladek: So, fine. I can pack the fruitcake in with the cereal for you to take home.

Art: Look. We don't want any, OK? Just forget it!

Vladek: I cannot forget it. Ever since Hitler I don't like to throw out even a crumb.

Art: Then just SAVE the damn Special K in case Hitler ever comes back!

Vladek: I can glue together the box, but STILL I don't think the Shop-Rite will exchange it.

(II, 78)

This method of quoting works well if the student wishes to concentrate only on the verbal text, if for example a student wanted to point out that before Art loses his temper, he says no to Vladek twice and implies no three other times.

Although the drawing in this scene show the dynamics of the conversation in small ways (the shadowing of Art's face in the bottom left panel on II 78 or the cloud over Art's head indicating anger and self-disgust in the bottom right panel on the same page), a full analysis of the more visual scenes require students to describe the text both visually and verbally. I encourage the students to photocopy pages from the text, cut out the panels that they wished to emphasize, and insert these panels into their own text just as they would a long quotation. Then, rather than simply using the reproduced text to make the point, the students must describe and interpret the excerpt, making their explanation fit in with the rest of the essay--really the same techniques that they would use with a purely verbal text from a more conventional piece of literature. The difference is that the students must provide a verbal rendering of a text they have first experienced visually.

Both this technique and the practice of citing long quotations in the style of play gives students an opportunity to practice the techniques of providing lead-ins to and follow-ups to the "quotation" (excerpted material). I have the students summarize a portion of the story leading up to the quoted material, identify the characters depicted in the drawings, and provide background information necessary to understand the verbal text accompanying the drawing. In a follow-up to the quotation, they need to interpret the excerpt, making clear to the reader what elements in the excerpt connect with the point being developed in the paper. These are really the same skills we often expect students to develop and practice when they quote from more conventional literary texts.

The Relationship Between Autobiography and History

Numerous critics have commented on the self-reflexive nature of *Maus*, on how Spiegelman is interested in portraying his own creative processes at work. For advanced classes or for a follow-up assignment in introductory classes, *Maus* offers many opportunities to explore the nature of autobiography, of biography, and of the difficulties of representation. As students begin to learn more about the Holocaust, it naturally occurs to them that none of us can ever know what it was "really" like, no matter how detailed or realistic descriptions of the experience are. To put Vladek's reminiscences in more of a context, I have found it helpful to show excerpts of Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* to the class, so that they get a clearer sense of the true horror of some of these memories. Only a short sequence from this film is necessary to make this point. For example, Michael Podchlebnik's account of how he was forced to unload corpses from the gas vans at Chelmo and discovered on the third day the bodies of his wife and children (which occurs toward the start of the film) allows students to understand the painful nature of many of these memories.

A little bit of this kind of viewing goes a long way toward putting Vladek's memories in a wider context. The students do not have to read a critic such as Barbara Foley to be able to grasp the idea that the Holocaust's "full dimensions are inaccessible to the ideological framework that we have inherited from the liberal era" (333). By exploring the problem that Spiegelman is facing in Chapter Two of Book II, as he tries to represent the destruction process at Auschwitz, the students can more readily understand a critic such as Miles Orvell who interprets the ending of Chapter Two, Book II, "Auschwitz (time flies)" as an instance of "the changed reality of postmodernism." Art and Françoise comment on how peaceful and still it is in the Catskills, so much so that "it's almost impossible to believe Auschwitz ever happened" (II 74), as Françoise puts it. Art then complains about the mosquitoes and sprays them with pesticide. Orvell comments,

Thus . . . do we pass from nightmares to petty annoyances, from gas chambers to spray cans, from corpses to dead flies. The ironic disproportion between past and present emphasizes the disjunction between the father and son, but also draws a line of separation between the anguish of Art and the relative insouciance (albeit sympathetic) of Françoise. (125)

Such ideas, when stated in language like this, are not easy for most writing students. Nevertheless, students can understand that Spiegelman himself is probably writing about our inability to understand an event so far removed from usual experience. Exposure to ideas such as this helps move the students beyond interpretations in which they try to determine why the mosquitoes should represent the Jews. If that is the case, then who does Art represent? (It does offer a good opening for students to explore why the Nazis should have relied on Zyklon B, a pesticide, at Auschwitz or why Spiegelman chose to represent the Jews as mice, as vermin.) Orvell's larger point--that this provides a good instance of the postmodern condition--is something that that my advanced writing students can begin to explore.

In other words, while recent criticism of *Maus* provides the writing teachers with interesting ideas to suggest to the class,

we need to keep in mind that our goal in using this text in a writing class need not include a full understanding of such criticism. The most accessible discussion concerning the relationship of history to autobiography is probably Joseph Witek's chapter in *The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar*. In Witek's perception that the book "makes Vladek's Holocaust story and Art's psychological quest into a single narrative which blends public and private history" (115), we find the most value of this book to a writing course. Students in writing courses are not able to write a full-fledged historical account because they lack the necessary background knowledge. But they are experts in their own lives, just as Vladek was in his and Anja in hers. The case of Anja is particularly important because of the importance that Spiegelman gives to her attempts to record that history in writing. *Maus* is a great demonstration of how in the act of writing personal stories, we can in some cases begin to fuse the personal with the collective. This concept can give writing teachers a basis for other assignments, such as the following:

- Read a regional memoir, in which an author examines his or her own life and those of her relatives for their personal and historical significance. In my area of the country, I have used Mary Clearman Blew's *All But the Waltz: A Memoir of Five Generations in the Life of a Montana Family* for this purpose.
- Read other interviews or oral histories and write an essay in which you compare two of these interviews. Then for another papers interview two persons similar to the people interviewed in the book and interview them yourself. I have used Studs Terkel's "*The Good War*": *An Oral Interpretation of World War Two* to give students a taste of the wide variety of experiences that Americans had as a result of the war. *Maus* prepares the students for the possibility that people often have other purposes in telling stories about themselves besides the straightforward communication of events.
- Read other works about the Holocaust, sometimes describing the same events that Vladek covers in *Maus*. Elie Wiesel's *Night*, for example, takes on much greater significance for students after they have first read *Maus*. One assignment is to ask students to compare the experiences of Elizer, the narrator of *Maus*, with Vladek's experiences and to try to draw some conclusions about the experience of the Holocaust victims in central Europe. Both Vladek and Elie Wiesel had similar experiences at Auschwitz: they were both "selected" for work, and both took part in the horrible forced evacuation of the camp in late January 1945.

Promoting Broader Purposes for a Writing Course

At bottom is a broader fundamental question of whether writing teachers need to be concerned at all with the content of their students' essays. One view, widely accepted in the profession, is that students should be able to select their own topics; the purpose of a writing course is to teach students the skills necessary to render their ideas into writing. Some writing teachers feel that building a writing topic around a single work like *Maus* amounts to the teacher selecting the topic for the student. It is true that students can learn to write well by selecting their own topics. And by working with *Maus*, they can select a broad range

of topics, yet have enough common ground to create their own discourse field within the class. Our writing classes can also serve to inculcate "citizenship" skills in the broadest sense, but only if we direct our students' attention a little more pointedly than the "content-free" pedagogy of many writing courses would allow.

Let me suggest some reasons why *Maus* works well in a course in which the instructor is determined to emphasize the students' freedom in topic selection. Although the ostensible subject of the book is the Holocaust, many students are attracted to the conflict between Art and Vladek, a conflict exacerbated by the Holocaust, but still universal in the relationships between parents and children. Because they are so close to adolescence, many students can identify with Art as the rebellious son. But many of these same students criticize Art for his callous treatment of his father (pointing out his selfish interest only in completing the memoir, rather than just providing his father with company, or his short temper with his father, and his refusal to help Vladek with jobs around the house). It is not hard in class discussion or small-group work for students to see there is plenty of blame to go around, that Vladek was a very difficult father. This line of inquiry leads some students into developing interesting essays on the subject of co-dependency or destructive patterns within families. It is even possible to ask students to write personal essays in which they describe similar patterns in their own families. Other students may be more struck by the historical aspects of the text: because they are interested in the Holocaust, they read Vladek's story with considerable interest. It doesn't take long before they realize that Vladek's story seems almost unbelievable in the number of close escapes. I explain that his story is not an unusual survivor story, that in fact many survivor stories have these qualities because we only have the stories of the survivors not the dead victims, so that statistically, it makes sense that this type of story would predominate. But even this explanation does not completely deal with the degree to which Vladek is always the hero of his story. This line of inquiry can lead some students into investigating the nature of story-telling, leading them to an understanding of how Spiegelman himself seems aware of how a story told by its hero is problematic. What is most important for teachers with this theoretical orientation is that *Maus*, by the nature of its central themes, will serve to prompt a wide range of interesting topics.

Yet, I argue that *Maus* works best in a writing course for which the teacher has broader goals than the inculcation of some rather narrow writing skills. A primary reason that the students like the book is that in Vladek's tale, *Maus* gives them a riveting adventure story about the Holocaust. The Holocaust is initially fascinating because of its horror, but this by itself is not a good enough reason for writing teachers to select a topic. Many topics have this quality. We can capitalize on this initial interest, however, because studying the Holocaust has other advantages: through historical example, it shows the power of a totalitarian government (a by extension, any government) over a people. It illustrates the capacity of a racist ideology to unleash catastrophe on a vast scale. It demonstrates the extreme inhumanity that humans are capable of and, less notably, the extreme sacrifices of which they are also capable. An in-depth study of it will show the degree to which almost everyone involved--perpetrators, of course, but also bystanders and even victims--becomes morally compromised. Why should this matter to writing teachers? Because studying a topic like this has the capacity for moral and ethical development that will lead to informed and well-educated citizens.

Maus can serve as a good introduction to the Holocaust in general. Some observers, however, disagree; Hillel Halkin, for example, addresses this issue in his review in *Commentary*. After offering several plausible reasons for why the book might be considered useful in a high school history class, Halkin continues ironically:

And finally, it makes sense. Why did the Germans murder the Jews, who did not fight back, while third parties like the Poles let it happen? For the same reason that cats kill mice, who do not attack cats, while pigs do not care about either: because that's the way it is, boys and girls, and next week we will be studying the Marshall Plan and beginning of the cold war.

But that is not the way it is and not the way it was, and it is here that our history teacher, if all conscientious, might have second thoughts. The Holocaust was a crime committed by humans against humans, not--as Nazi theory held--by one biological species against another. And while the German campaign of annihilation against the Jews and the reactions of the various peoples caught up in it had to do with many factors, historical, political, sociological, and ideological, instinctual behavior, except insofar as we all have instincts of aggression and survival, was not one of them. (55)

The issue of Jewish resistance--and the perceived absence of it--is a complex issue. It is plausible that some students, when asked to interpret the work entirely on their own, will occasionally conclude Spiegelman is suggesting a kind of genetic determinism. My experience, though, is that students are more likely to criticize Spiegelman along the lines that Halkin himself is doing. The use of animals, though, points out how *Maus* is really a more difficult work to analyze than it appears at first. In using this work to introduce the Holocaust, we need to explore in class this question of how the animal imagery functions.

My students are not well informed about Judaism before they begin the course. Jews form only a small percentage of the population from which my students come, so small that I very rarely have had a student who was Jewish. Approximately half of my students are somewhat surprised to learn that it is not accurate to refer to Jews as a "race"; for these students Spiegelman's drawings seem to make perfect sense. In class discussion, though, it is easy for them to see that Spiegelman's distinctions are not made along racial lines: cats, pigs, dogs, frogs, and fish are different species, but Germans, Poles, Americans, French, and British are basically the same "race." Furthermore, African-Americans are represented as black dogs (II 98-100). Of course, Jews are always represented as mice, even American Jews, but by this point the students realize that simply thinking of the animal representation as symbolizing genetic characteristics is too simplistic. Once alerted to this subtlety, students are able to discover others: Art's discussion of how he should draw François (II 11-12), the presence of the nonferocious cats, both as German soldiers (II 54) and as civilians (II 130), and even German-Jewish children (mice with cat stripes in II 131), the difficulties of determining whether someone was Jewish (II 50), and the presence of Poles and Germans among the victims (II 28, II 64). Students can be asked to look for these kinds of instances

as part of journal writing. But the richest topic to explore is Spiegelman use of masks, both as ordinary disguises as in Part I, when Vladek and Anja are in hiding (136-41, 144, 146, 149 and 155) and as something else (Jewish identity? professional roles?) in the "Time Flies" section (II 41-47). When students consider these issues in some depth, they are in little danger of making simplistic assumptions that equate ethnic and religious identity with genetic characteristics.

There are other reasons that the use of the animals is a strength of the work. In selecting material to be used as a common topic in a writing course, teachers need to be extremely sensitive to the fact that students in a writing course are a captive audience, more so than in other courses: they almost always take the course because they have to, not because they were interested in the subject matter. So if teachers are going to select works for the class to study in common, they need to take into account the sensibilities of the students. The Holocaust as a topic in a writing course requires the teacher to consider carefully why and how scenes of extreme brutality, cruelty, and human suffering will be presented and discussed. These scenes are represented in *Maus*, but only through Spiegelman's drawings, in which humans are represented as mouse figures. No student I have taught has had any difficulty in conceiving of these mouse figures as human beings, but scenes of brutality, such as the image of German soldiers killing children by swinging them by their heels and dashing their heads against a wall (I 108) or the scenes of killing at Auschwitz (II 72), have much less impact in *Maus* than they do in any work that depends on archival footage or photographs. We must remember that all artistic representations of the Holocaust have the effect of softening the horror of these scenes.

Nevertheless, as a work on the Holocaust, *Maus* is more than simply the story of Vladek Spiegelman. In setting the context for Vladek's experiences, Spiegelman takes care to illustrate a number of themes in Jewish experience from this period: the social and economic status of the Zylberberg family, into which Vladek was married; the confusing role played by Vladek as a conscript into the Polish Army at the start of the war, along with the role of Poland itself (illustrated with maps as on I 60 and the back cover of Volume I); the increasing restrictions on the Jews in Sosnowiec as Nazi rule tightens its grip on that area of Poland, including the role of the black market, the Jewish Council, and the Jewish Police; the methods by which Jews survived illegally after the vast majority had been deported to concentration camps; and methods of survival at a place like the workcamp at Auschwitz. Like Spielberg does in *Schindler's List*, Spiegelman even devises a way to describe the experience of the majority of the victims as Auschwitz: Vladek describes the story of a fellow prisoner who worked as a member of the Sonderkommando. To draw this section of the book, Spiegelman engaged in painstaking research, including visits to Poland, when he visited Auschwitz itself and the town of Sosnowiec where Vladek, Anja, and the Zylberbergs lived (Dreifus 37). A good historically based assignment is to ask students to trace in other sources some of the descriptions of the Holocaust in *Maus*.

Conclusion

Maus is an extraordinarily rich text for a writing class for a variety of reasons. It is a fine example (perhaps the finest) of the medium we know as the "comics." This fact makes it valuable to writing courses in many ways. First, it offers innovative ways to teach the difficult skill of paraphrasing and summarizing. Second, the comic medium allows students to see how the framing story of Art interviewing his father affects his father's story itself. It is accessible and at the same time profound in its implications about the nature of representation and the status of the author and narrator. Third, the medium is well suited as an introduction to the difficult topic of the Holocaust. It offers a good compromise between offering a detailed view of without overwhelming the reader. The content of *Maus* is an excellent basis for writing classes of various thematic orientations. Many students are intensely interested in the family dynamics represented in the book, especially in the way that earlier experiences affect later behavior. Art's relationship with his parents mirrors their own process of differentiating themselves their families at the same time that they are developing more complex representations of family dynamics. The text suggests to students a wide array of personal and psychological topics to explore. Finally, the book serves extremely well as an introduction to a more structured study of issues related to the Holocaust; it explores why and how the moral ambiguities of those terrible events continue to haunt us still.

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