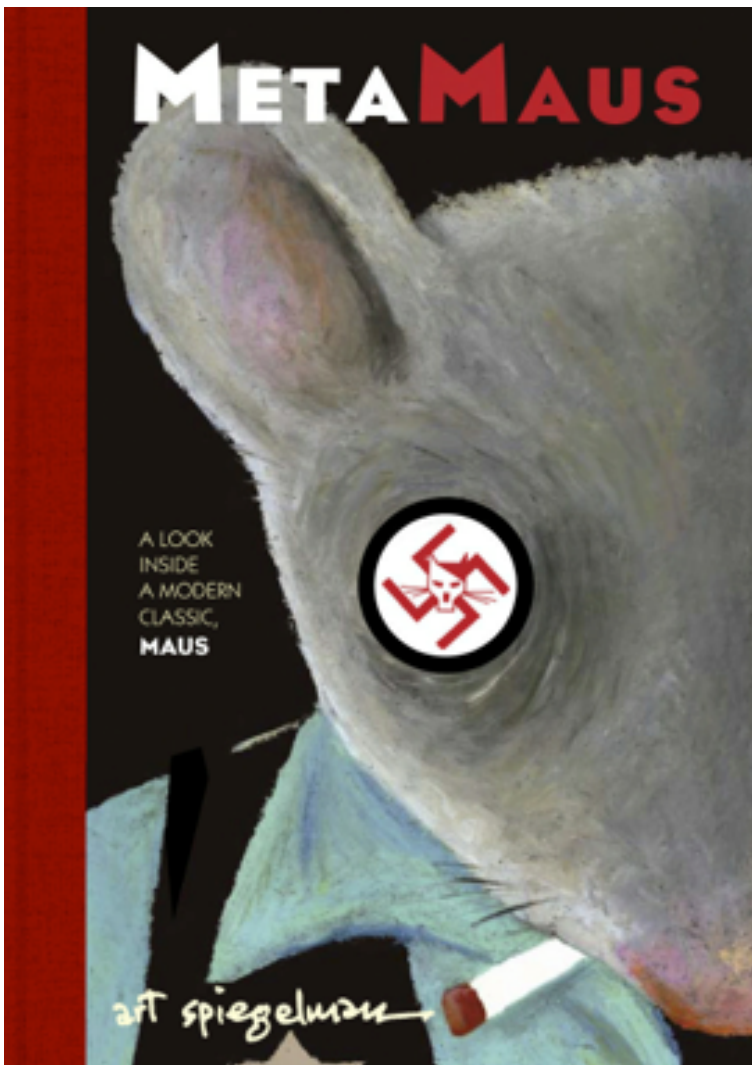


META MAUS - A LOOK INSIDE A MODERN CLASSIC



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META MAUS BY ART SPIEGELMAN

Maus I: A survivor's tale - My Father bleeds History and Maus II: A Survivor's Tale - And Here My Troubles Began are graphic novels created by American author and publisher of Raw magazine Art Spiegelman (1948). He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for this work in 1992.

They tell his father, Vladek Spiegelman's, story of survival during the second World War, and of his time in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Dachau. They are drawn in a stark black and white line style, and the characters are represented as human figures with animal heads. The Jews are mice, the Germans are cats, the Poles are swine, the Americans are dogs, and so forth. This mode of representation is especially poignant as it allows for an interplay of subtle tensions between the perceived inter-species relations (cats hunt mice, dogs hunt cats, etc.).

The moments set in the past are intertwined with present time moments when Art Spiegelman visited and interviewed his father in order to obtain his story. These moments reveal the tensions and misunderstandings that arise between men from generations so diverse in their experiences.

It is sometimes hard to convey to someone who hasn't read any of the *Maus* books, the peculiar feeling they evoke. The images of humans with mouse heads make them somehow more fragile, more relatable than if they were portrayed as actual human beings.

I first read a translated version of *Maus I: A survivor's tale - My Father bleeds History* in 1992. I read it in one sitting, at a café in Oporto - what a sight I must have been, sitting alone with a book and alternately laughing out loud and wiping tears from

my eyes (I'm pretty sure this is a common reaction to this book). Until then, my perception of the comic book medium was limited to the understanding that the topics it covered could be funny or shocking, but never have the scope and depth this book had. *Maus* is generally considered a seminal work in the comic book medium, and led to the publication of other extremely important biographical works such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* in 2000. Before its publication, comic books were considered a type of entertainment, mainly geared towards children and teenagers, and it helped define a new, adult audience as well as the genre of the Graphic Novel.

As soon as *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale - And Here My Troubles Began* came out in Portuguese in 1995, I rushed to buy it, and the experience was exactly the same as with the previous book.

I thought I had understood the full scope of this work in reading these translated versions, but I recently

acquired a copy of *The Complete Maus* in English. What a difference! Although reading it probably for the tenth time, entirely new nuances in the text emerged. Vladek's speech changes completely, his broken English is both endearing and exasperating, as is his relationship with his comic book author son, Art.

Finally, this monumental and ground-breaking work was joined by a third title - *Meta Maus: A look inside a Modern Classic*, which provides the reader with an insight into the creative process behind the *Maus* books. It is accompanied by a CD-ROM containing most of the drafts and original boards for the graphic novels, and an immense amount of extra material. Reading it, and browsing through the vast image archives makes it clear what a gargantuan task Art Spiegelman undertook in writing and drawing *Maus I and II*.

The written part of *Meta Maus* includes several subsections, and is mostly based on taped interviews with Art Spiegelman conducted by



FIGURE 2 | Pages in *Meta Maus - A Look Inside a Modern Classic* by Art Spiegelman.

English Literature Professor Hillary Chute. In the first chapter (*Why the Holocaust?*) the author explains how his interest in the subject emerged, and how he conducted his research leading up to the creation of *Maus*. That chapter is followed by a small section (*Family Album*) which records the reaction of Spiegelman's family to *Maus* (His children Nadja and Dash, and his wife Françoise).

This is followed by the chapter *Why Mice?*, where Art Spiegelman proceeds to explain how the idea to represent Jews as mice came about. He speaks of his reaction to Nazi propaganda found during research: *"The most shockingly relevant anti-Semitic work I found was The Eternal Jew, a 1940 German 'documentary' that portrayed Jews in a ghetto swarming in tight quarters, bearded caftaned creatures, and then cut to Jews as mice - or rather rats - swarming in a sewer, with a title card that said 'Jews are the rats' or the 'vermin of mankind.' This made it clear to me that this dehumanization was at the very heart of the killing project."* He also proceeds to explain how the other nationalities were transformed into different types of animals for the books, and how the overall visual style of *Maus* came to be. Although he repeatedly states that he cannot draw, it is hard not to admire his concise and simple graphic style, truly the mark of a great draftsman.

In the chapter *Why Comics?* Spiegelman justifies how he came to realize that the comics medium was the only way to tell the story he wanted to tell. He also explains his process extensively, from the first ideas up to the final drawings: *"I decided to work the same size as publication: the drawings that you see in the book are exactly in a one-to-one ratio to the size they're drawn (...). Drawing large and reducing the art for publication*

tightens it up, makes the art look more crisp and 'professional'. Reproducing one's mark - offering up a facsimile of one's own handwriting - makes it more like looking into an actual journal, like Anne Frank's or maybe Alfred Kantor's notebook drawings of Auschwitz." Finally, he widely discusses his influences as a comic book author, influences ranging from Harvey Kurtzman's MAD magazine to *Little Nemo in Slumberland* by Winsor McCay (1905-1914), as well as other relevant works such as Will Eisner's *Spirit* (1940) or George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* (1913-1944).

One of the more touching testimonies found in *Meta Maus* is the graphic representation of the Spiegelman's family tree. On pages 228 through 231 he presents us with two versions of this family tree. The first, charting family members at the start of World War II counts more than sixty people. In the second one, at the end of World War II, only thirteen people remain alive. This visual representation brings home the

notion of how extensive the losses were for this family (as undoubtedly for countless others).

The book goes on to present a transcript of the interviews conducted with Vladek Spiegelman, the author's father, based on his recollections of his time before and during World War II. It concludes with interviews of people who knew Art's mother Anja Spiegelman during the War and in the concentration camps. While Vladek spent his time in Auschwitz and Dachau, Anja was imprisoned in Birkenau (a part of the larger Auschwitz camp).

It also broaches the tense subject of Anja Spiegelman's notebooks. She committed suicide in 1968, and Vladek threw them away because they reminded him too much of her. This moment is depicted on the final page of *Maus I* (page 161). Art asks his father: *"Did you ever read any of them?... Can you remember what she wrote?"* to which Vladek replies *"No. I looked in but I don't remember... Only I know that she said, 'I wish my son, when he grows*

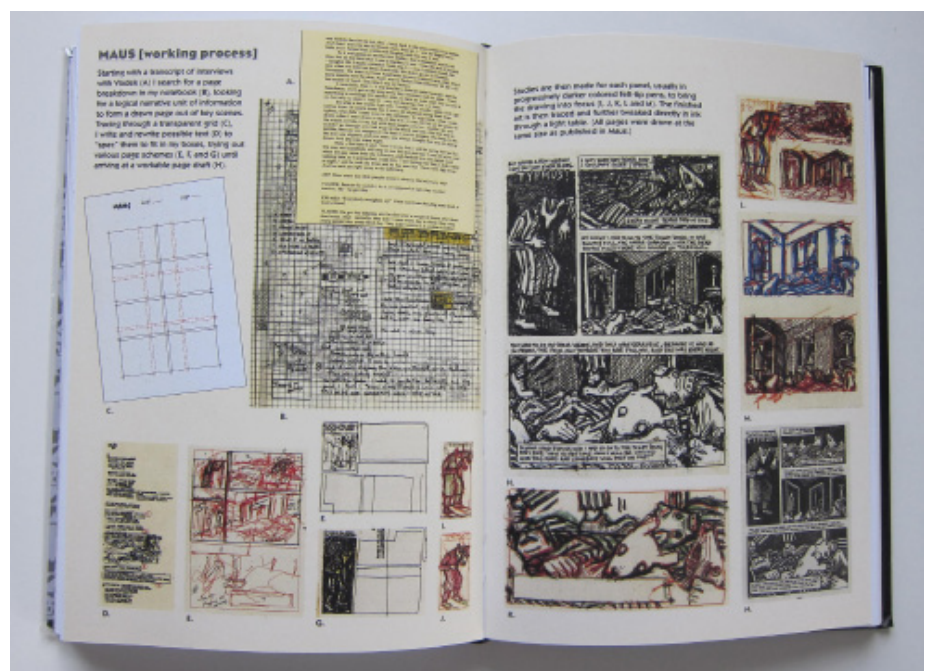


FIGURE 3 | Pages in *Meta Maus – A Look Inside a Modern Classic* by Art Spiegelman.

up, he will be interested by this". Art walks away calling his father a murderer.

The documental work of the book is complemented by a massive amount of visual information that can be found on the CD-ROM that accompanies it.

Part 1 comprises the complete final boards from *Maus I* and *Maus II*, and each square is linked to the preliminary sketches the author created. This allows for an incredibly comprehensive understanding of the development process for these two books.

Part 2 contains a vast amount of research material for the books, including the audio versions and unedited transcripts of the interviews with Vladek; facsimiles of the notebooks that eventually lead to *Maus*; a collection of post-war Polish pamphlets assembled by Anja Spiegelman; more than 7500 panel sketches and drafts; and a few diverse essays on the subject, both by Art Spiegelman and other authors.

This work is not only monumental as far as the insight it permits into the creation of *Maus I* and *II* goes, but also because it offers a look into the mind and working methods of one of the world's most relevant contemporary comic book artists. A casual reader that starts his acquaintance of Spiegelman's work with the reading of *Meta Maus* is bound to turn to his other works relatively quickly, as the mind revealed by this companion volume is a complex and fascinating one.

Maus I: A survivor's tale - My Father Bleeds History - first published by Pantheon Books in 1986

Maus II: A Survivor's Tale - And Here My Troubles Began - first published by Pantheon Books in 1992

The Complete Maus - first published by Pantheon Books in 1996

Meta Maus - first published by Pantheon Books in 2011