The Complete Maus by Art Spiegelman

In a German newspaper article written in 1930s the author states, “away with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika Cross”. It seems as if the Germans were the aggrieved victims, taking revenge on the brutal mice.

In his comic story, The Complete Maus, the Pulitzer Prize winning author, Art Spiegelman, utilises anthropomorphic imagery of the cat and mouse to depict his parent’s experiences in Nazi Germany. Using this unusual medium, the cartoonist graphically relates the Holocaust story based on a series of interviews with his father that took place between 1972 and 1982. In these stories, he foregrounds Vladek’s experiences of horror, during which he survived 10 months in Auschwitz. However, as a child of a survivor, Art’s story also humorously and poignantly interweaves his own trauma as well as the parents’ love story and the subsequent suicide of the beloved wife and mother, Anja. As these stories of the past and present clash and collide, so readers become aware of the pain of broken, disrupted relationships. Vladek died in 1982 of “congestive heart”; in 1986 the first part of Maus was published to critical acclaim.

The novel is presented in two parts: the first part, My Father Bleeds History, focuses primarily on Vladek and the stories of the Jews living through the Nazi occupation of Poland from 1939 to 1945. Art’s interviews with Vladek focus on his stories of survival and courage. The second part, And Here my Troubles Began, continues the story of his parents’ incarceration in Auschwitz but also includes more of Art’s own personal story as he seeks to understand the delayed trauma of an Auschwitz-related son. One of his most pressing points is that the scars are generational: the psychological scars of the parents continue to haunt subsequent generations.

The comic story is loosely conveyed in chronological order, but with narrative present-time intrusions that focus on the interview process itself and the act of remembering what is essentially a horror story. Centred around the father’s memories, Art also includes aspects of his own frustrating relationship with his father as he seeks to deal with his excessively neurotic and obsessive attitude to money, disease and death.
Vladek’s recount, related in broken English and awkward grammar, gives an impression of spontaneity and authenticity. “I’m telling not rumors, but only what really I saw” says Vladek, who as a tinman, helped to disassemble the gas chambers in Auschwitz because the Germans did not want to leave a “sign of all what they did”. “For this I was an eyewitness” (229). Sadly, though the destruction of Anja’s diaries ruin other first-hand stories that would have complemented and validated Vladek’s. Whilst the first-hand stories loom large, the cartoonist is also aware of the “rebuilding” process and the fact that he is recreating the father’s memories at the same time. (258) At times, Art despairs of the enormity of this task; he realises that reality is too complex for comics and agonises over the fact that “so much has to be left out or distorted” (176).

In Auschwitz, the outline of the captions become sharp and serrated as Art struggles with his frustration at trying to draw the father’s experiences as a tinsmith. (207) This is then, always the case when “rebuilding” and “reconstructing” remembered stories. Furthermore, Spiegelman also includes historical facts that complement the documentary-style black and white graphics to authenticate his father’s memories. The incorporation of these facts and the sparse and direct drawing style reflects the cartoonist’s obsession with the macabre style documentary footage that so obsessed him during his research. For example, the cartoonist, notes factually, from May 16 to May 24 in 1944, over 100,000 Hungarian Jews were gassed in Auschwitz. Likewise, the map of Poland (p. 62) highlights the three divisions. Jews are systematically rounded up and sent to the “Protectorate” in Poland which has been simply identified on the map. Vladek and Anja live in Sosnowiec — in the REICH which was “annexed to Germany” (62).

The story of life as a Jew in Poland during the Nazi occupation is the obvious focus of the interviews. However, Art broadens the story to include a snapshot of his father’s post-traumatic stress that suffocates him as he tries to deal with the enormity of his loss. A touch of black humour conveys this depiction, which is both poignant and mocking. Art ridicules the father’s neurotic obsession with pills and death; it also seems impossible for Vladek to have a fulfilling relationship with Mala because of the grief over his wife and the traumas that still beset him. Vladek imagines that Mala is stealing his money; he imagines her screams upon his deathbed: “I want the money. The money. The money”. (129).

The Holocaust narrative

Despite his anxiety at trying to convey the complexity of the Nazi occupation, Spiegelman achieves an amazingly simple portrayal of the power and brutality of the Gestapo and the impotence and emasculation of the Jews. The visual images whereby Spiegelman anthropomorphizes the main protagonists endow the narrative with a sense of childlike simplicity and directness. However, the animalistic imagery also gives an impression of the wild jungle. (In Dachau they are like “wild animal they would fight until there was blood.”) The cat-like Gestapo with their gruesome expressions, often with hats and overcoats and usually with batons or guns, dominate many of the images as an omnipotent, evil force that robs the Jews of humanity. For example, in Solniewic, when the Jews are marched to work “every day” for “about an hour and a half” the
cats, in black uniform, are quick to beat them. Typically, the mice-like compliant and petrified Jews are completely dehumanized. The cats have vicious dogs which they use to sniff out the Jews (113)

Vladek’s direct narrative relates how the family skillfully foils both the dogs and the guards. “Even when they came with dogs to smell us out – and they knew that Jews are laying here – but still they couldn’t find.” (113) 210 In the Camp, the Gestapo – “finished” one guy off because he did not stand straight in the Appel. “I heard he pushed him down and jumped hard on his neck”. Graphically, the powerful Gestapo stomps on a body. “He never anymore complained”. Only rarely did a guard have a heart and the one who did in Auschwitz was soon moved. Retaliation was difficult; if you killed one German they killed “fast a hundred from you” (233/239)

Contrastingly, the Jews are portrayed as the faceless victims of the German pogrom; they are stigmatized and portrayed as vermin. One Jew carries a sign “I am a filthy Jew”. Emblazoned in the background, the swastika appears in a circular shape in four frames to highlight its overwhelming power and its allegedly honourable aim — to rid the towns of Jews, “This town is Jew Free”. Once the rabbi departs, Vladek states, “I never heard again from him. It came such a misery in Warsaw, almost none survived.”

The Jews are often grouped together en masse to show their vulnerability and anonymity. To the Gestapo, their background, profession, age and gender are irrelevant. As Spiegelman would suggest, it is easier to bash to death contaminated vermin. It is harder, when such people have individual human dimensions. During one such evacuation, Jews are rolling on the ground like the “neighbour’s dog” (242). Children were treated just as, if not more, brutally. During one massacre, four young girls got hanged a “long, long time’.

Jews are typically depicted as faceless animals, as vermin. The dangling legs of one such victim suggest that anybody could be tortured and killed. Killing is an impersonal business. (p. 85). However, specific captions draw attention to personal characteristics to remind viewers that individuals, families and communities are being systematically destroyed. Many of the Jews hanging from the stake sport their respectable professional attire. One is Mr Cohn who “had a goods store.” As such, Art critiques the German’s shameful tendency to stereotype or objectively categorise the Jews in order to exterminate them.

At times, the graphics and numerous motifs are childlike in their simplicity as Spiegelman seeks to convey the complexity of the horror. Trains symbolise loss and displacement on a grand scale. They were used by the SS in their systematic attempt to rid the state of Jews and to ship them to various destinations. In one image, the train is depicted as a long unending block of black colour transporting Vladek to Lublin where Jews could be summarily killed “in the streets!” (62) (Vladek cannot believe, when he is finally exchanged on the Swiss border, that there is a “train, not for cows and horses, but a real train to take passengers — a train for people!” (257)
One of the most poignant moments in Vladek's recount is the separation from the parents of the young children, Lonia and Richieu. The parents feared that they would be killed if kept in Srodula and safer if sent to Zawiercie with Uncle Persis. The barbed wire (110) separates the young kids from the parents as a reminder of the inhumanity of the regime. ("It was the last time ever we saw them; but that we couldn’t know.") At that time the SS guards sent 1,000 people to Auschwitz; to stop the kids from screaming, the guards “swung them by the legs against a wall… “ and “they never anymore screamed”. (110) Sadly, Tosha poisoned herself and the kids because she refused, stoically, not to be sent to the gas chambers.

Vladek’s holocaust

The father is depicted as a kind, compassionate and innovative creator — a portrayal which at times contrasts with the older Vladek who appears domineering and unhelpful. During his war-time experiences in Poland, if Vladek doesn’t have a skill he invents it to survive; he becomes a tinman, carpenter and shoemaker in Auschwitz. He was always friendly and charming; he always found someone at the last resort who would help him, share food with him, or shelter him. In Dachau, the French prisoner shares food received from the Red Cross with Vladek — “it saved my life” (253) Both he and Anja used their language skills to advantage; Anja taught Mol’s son German; Vladek was often teaching the Kapo or guards English. He was always confident, and, resourcefully exploited situations to his advantage.

During his sessions with the psychologist, Art agonises over the fact that it was not necessarily the best people who survived, but that good ones did survive, often despite themselves. (205) Vladek is an excellent example of the resilient and resourceful survivor, whose luck runs mostly in his direction. He saves everything, because food scraps are so precious. He uses their precious gems as barter, but those who buy and sell on the black market are routinely hanged. It is again a question of luck. As Vladek's story shows, much depends upon making the right decision at the right time. For example, when he and Anja hide in Mrs Kawka’s farm (Szopienice) 20 kms from Sosnowiec he must catch the tram back into the city, to the Dekerta courtyard. Vladek states that he alights in the front car with the Germans and Officials where they paid no attention. “In the polish car they could smell if a Polish Jew came in” (142). The comic image shows the differences in the two compartments of the streetcar with German officials parading in the second. (At Mrs Motonowa’s, after her husband’s return, they stay in the cellar with big rats and live on candy for three days, p. 150.) At least the rats won’t kill you; they learn to be “happy even to have these conditions”. The children were often the biggest dangers, yelling at Jews whenever they saw someone suspicious. They were indoctrinated: “be careful. A Jew will catch you in a bag and eat you.” (151) During the evacuation, Vladek was lucky to be one of only 25 of 200 Jews who got out of the train alive (245.)

(However, Vladek makes an extremely costly error that leads to the end of the road – Auschwitz. Anya suspected the smugglers but for once Vladek let down his guard. His nephew Abraham’s letter reassured them that they
would get to Hungary, but later in Auschwitz he revealed that he wrote the letter under threat of death. Ironically, Vladek’s brother Miloch was living in much worse conditions: almost in a garbage bunker, but survived the war when he moved to Mrs Motonowa’s cellar after Vladek and Anja left. (155)

Vladek’s clear and simple narrative constantly punctuates the stark horror of the graphic images reminding readers of the sheer terror and heartache of the victims as they are hurled onwards towards Hitler’s final solution. Arriving at Auschwitz and confronted by the slogan “Arbeit Macht Frei”, Vladek is aware that their chances of survival are minimal despite their valiant attempts to resist: “And we knew that from here we will not come out anymore”. Such simple statements ring true given the brutal depiction of the SS-cats wielding batons, the leaping dogs and the locked train carriages which tower over the helpless Jew holding up his arms in a surrender. Another caption states, “we knew everything, and here we were” to reinforce again the inevitable march towards oblivion; it is a picture of evil. (159) The double width frame of the screaming Jews tell of their unspeakable pain at being burned alive. “And the fat from the burning bodies they scooped and poured again so everyone could burn better.” (232).

The love story

The beginning of Vladek’s story also presents the parallel love story between the parents as Anja replaces Lucia as preferred fiancé. Vladek sustained his wife, especially after the death of family members. She was devastated to have lost most of her family and “now they’ll take Lolek”. She lies completely dejected on the bed; Vladek’s face is omitted from the top of the graphic to show her insconsolable state (124) He urges her, “to die, it’s easy” but you have to struggle for life! .. We must struggle together. I need you.” He promises and convinces her, “And you’ll see that together we’ll survive.” (124). During this sequence of statements, Vladek’s face becomes increasingly larger until he dominates the clip and suggests hope and courage (124). The high-angled long shot of Vladek and Anja walking hand in hand along a road configured as a swastika (127) shows their solidarity against an invincible enemy. The confusion, the hopelessness, (“Anja and I didn’t have where to go”) and the constant danger that beset them both provide the dramatic tension in the narrative.

The love story becomes particularly poignant when Anja and Vladek are separated in Auschwitz and Birkenau. Manci intervenes only because she is touched by their love. Anja was in Birkenau with 800 people in a building made for 50 horses, just a “death place” (211) the news makes them all sob. Mancie helped pass messages between Anja and Vladek and he sends food. “You always arrange miracles” 217. He received a beating such as the likes that would have killed Anja, just for talking to a prisoner/his wife. (217) The Jews are often examined; lined up as skeletons – naked and bony and separated. (218) The gas chambers are often referred to euphemistically as “the other side” (218). The big ugly face of the Guard seeks to intimidate them all during the “Appel”; the friends do not betray her. “You can IMAGINE what she went through”. During a typical “Selektion” (the use of German terms throughout Maus suggests that there is no translation for their unique agenda of genocide)
the dangerously thin Vladek escapes to the toilet to avoid examination. 
(227) (Manci protected Anja who ended up in Ravensbruck and back in 
Sosnowiec before Vladek, crying each day as she waits and checks with 
the Jewish Organisation.) Art depicts their reunion as a happily resolved 
love story. “Everybody around was crying together with us”. “We were 
both very happy and lived happy, happy ever after”. And he finally 
addresses Art as Richieu, dreaming of his lost son. (296), suggesting the 
beginning of the trauma.

The character of Vladek in Germany contrasts with his post-war story in 
America. In Germany, Vladek has always an ‘amazingly present minded 
and resourceful’ person, both during the war and the present day in which 
the comic was set. However, he becomes stingy to the painful shame of 
both Art and Mala. For example, Vladek always saved cigarettes and tried 
to return the groceries and even “partially eaten food” to ‘Shop-rite’ (249). 
Such as when he boasts that he received six dollars worth of new 
groceries for only one dollar, His character often seems to change little; it 
is rather the environment and the society’s standards that change.

One of Vladek’s most enduring memories is that he survived because “I 
saved” and this somehow troubles Art as he recognizes the caricature of 
the stingy Jew, which he also, conveniently, sets up for ridicule. Mala 
believes that it causes him “physical pain to part with money”. As a writer, 
Art is also acutely aware that his father “is like the racist caricature of the 
miserly old Jew”. (Accordingly, Art exploits but ridicules the father’s 
miserly habits in an attempt to personalise the stereotype.) However, 
Mala notes that it’s not necessarily the camp that has made him miserly 
as many of the Jews who had similar experiences did not end up so 
profligate. (Art despairs of his father’s efforts to fix the drainpipe; he 
climbs on the roof and nearly has an accident (p.98).)

The blending of the past into the present is often reinforced by a 
**palimpsest** technique. The four girls who were hanged were also good 
friends of Anja. Art’s car in the foreground seamlessly passes the hanging 
bodies. (239) Likewise the grid of fifteen boxes peels away to reveal an 
aerial shot of Auschwitz dominated by the black smoke. (211) The 
**palimpsest** is symbolic of a variety of forms of separation, although the 
past seeps into the present. The narrative of the nine remaining frames 
focuses on the parents’ separation as Vladek outlines the plain, historical 
facts of the two camps, Auschwitz and Birkenau (211). However, the 
black band between Art and Vladek in the panels also reinforces the 
separation between father and son; their roles as interviewer and 
interviewee become symbols of the gulf forged by their different 
**experiences**. Ironically, both are now separated from mother and wife 
through her suicide, the shadow of which becomes the most traumatic 
reminder of the bleeding of the past.

**Self as protagonist**

Art’s parallel story shifts the emphasis to the aftermath, the consequences 
and the effects on the people, especially as Art would be aware of the fact 
that there are already numerous texts dealing with the horror.
The incorporation of self as protagonist in the comic enables him to elaborate on the Jewish population’s ‘ceaseless’ battle. More importantly however, Art’s inclusion in the comic gives him the opportunity to express his own personal guilt as to whether or not he should be prospering from his ‘presumptuous’ comic and his anxiety about the enormity of the task. “I can’t even make any sense out of my relationship with my father. How am I supposed to make any sense out of Auschwitz”. (174)

Art explores the consequences of growing up with such a miserly father, who has been irrevocably influenced and psychologically warped by the experience of horror. By inserting his own feelings and experiences into the story, there is always a direct or implied comparison, By presenting the parallel experiences of father and son, Art suggests that as a son, removed from the holocaust experiences, his experiences will always pale into insignificance. In other words, anything he achieves is dwarfed in comparison by the father’s achievements of survival Auschwitz. “No matter what I accomplish, it doesn’t seem like much compared to surviving Auschwitz”. (204) As a result it is just as much a personal journey of discovery and growing up as it is a story about horror and instruction.

Immediately in the prologue, Art foregrounds his relationship with his father to focus on the difficulties of growing up in families dominated by holocaust victims and the transference of emotional and psychological scars. We are constantly reminded throughout the comic that “my father’s ghost still hangs over me,” and later, that the father “took his guilt out on you”. As an eight-year old, Art is caught up in typical innocent schoolyard games of “rotten eggs” and exclusion. The father offers advice to Art that is based on his traumatic experiences during the holocaust. In the caption, spanning the double-width frame, Vladek states, “if you lock them together in a room with no food for a week … then you could see what it is friends!” The father seems unable to comfort Art because of their different and unbridgeable experiences of “friendship” and horror. (Later, readers become aware of the parents’ attempt to survive three days on a small amount of candy, or their attempt to ward off hunger by nibbling wood shavings — a testimony to the parents’ strength and friendship.) In a close-up shot, Art exaggerates the father’s saw and his work to depict a fractured relationship owing to the father’s evasion through physical work. Another close-up shot reminiscent of a fireplace-crematorium becomes just a small element in the long-shot picture of historical prison-like conditions that dwarf the prisoners. Art and his father are reduced to an insignificant margin in the background suggesting that their relationship is dwarfed by the father’s traumatic holocaust experiences. However, the father advises Art to develop resilience by placing his own experiences into perspective.

Art’s relationship with his father

Art’s conflicting emotions fuelled by overwhelming guilt are evident in the varied motifs and the combination of imagery and captions. The crux of the psychologist’s diagnosis, “he took his guilt out on you”, alludes to a real and impenetrable psychological barrier between father and son that prevents a secure and trustworthy relationship.
Art visits a psychologist (wearing a mask) to help him deal with his personal trauma; this suggests that he too has suffered the consequences of his parents’ horror; he has born the brunt of his mother’s depression who is clearly unable to deal with the hidden ghosts and killed herself in May 1968. Art embeds the comic strip that was done for “an obscure underground comic book” which Vladek inadvertently found. The very dark tonal shades of the graphics in “Prisoner of the Hell Planet” reveals Art’s sense of suffocation as he struggles to deal with his father’s overbearing personality and his mother’s depression and eventual suicide in May 1968. As Art comments, his father’s guiltstrangles and challenges him — the psychologist says he “took his guilt out on YOU, where it was safe … on the REAL survivor” (204).

Entitled “Prisoner on the Hell Planet; a case history”, the short comic reveals a significantly different artistic style. Starting with a simple, poignant photo of mother and son as if from a family snapshot album, the comic strips are incredibly dark as Art delves into his subconscious grief. The captions are almost typewritten in perfect script. A string of half faces with a tear is interrupted by the grim reaper type figure: “She’s dead. A suicide. I felt angry, I felt numb. I didn’t exactly feel like crying, but figured I should.” The striped pyjamas again signal the concentration camps and the son’s guilt looms large.

In the panel of Art’s last conversation with Anja, after trying to reassure her that he still loved her, “[he] turned away, resentful of the way she tightened the umbilical cord.” (105). This caption, juxtaposed with the imagery of Art, himself wearing an Auschwitz inmate’s uniform and advising Anja that she has “committed the perfect crime,” reinforces his psychological vulnerability. She “shorted all my circuits … cut my nerve endings .. and crossed my wires”.

Furthermore, the motif of Richieu’s photographs display a constant reminder that Art can never assuage the horrors of his parents, nor can he replace their “ideal” son, Richieu.” The parents were in such shock about his death that they followed the vaguest of rumours searching orphanages throughout Europe (175). “it was an idea kid and I was a pain in the ass. I couldn’t compete” (175). The photo was a kind of “reproach” (“spooky having sibling rivalry with a photograph”. Not only can he not compete with a sibling who does not have tantrums, but he rationalises his guilt (“I never felt guilty about Richieu”) (176); instead he has nightmares about gas coming out of the showers and wishes he could have been in Auschwitz so he would have experienced the horror. “I guess it’s some kind of guilt about having had an easier life than they did.” (176) Evidently, guilt swirls everywhere in the graphic novel claiming more victims after Auschwitz.

Art as a writer/comic artist.

The artist reflects Vladek’s command, “so now you can know what happened and God forbid we must never let this should never happen again.” Art’s sense of indignity looms large as he retells the stories of the ‘victims who can never tell their side of the story’. “It’s an important book. People who don’t usually read such stories will be interested”. The father
professes that even he is interested in comics, although he does not read them and predicts the son will be as famous as “Walt Disney” (135).

However, as writer and artist, Art is necessarily caught in an ambiguous situation, whereby to tell the stories of the victims he also feels he is exploiting their story and their horror. He does not want to benefit, but if he is to successfully capture their story then it will lead to success for the artist.

Guilt swirls in the comic strip. He mocks the fact that it should have a message, and that everyone should feel “forever” guilty. “My father’s ghost still hangs over me.” He tried to be “fair” whilst he also shows “how angry I was”. (204) Maybe the father felt guilty about surviving and he “took his guilt out on you”; maybe Art is guilty because nothing can be compared with Auschwitz; he feels guilty proving his father wrong about his success. He also agonises over how to visualize such horror. “My father worked in a tin shop near the camp. I have no idea what kind of tools and stuff to draw. There’s no documentation”. (206)

Art feels that he is wrongfully prospering from his presumptuous ‘critical and commercial success’ which was made achievable by ‘over 100,000 Hungarian Jew who were gassed in Auschwitz’. Art realises that he ‘can’t begin to imagine what it felt like’ in the hellish prisons and warzones, how it would feel to lose the love of your life, and also how it would feel like to survive the war; yet he still publishes this comic which shows his second-hand understanding of the war.

Art’s shrinking figure, smothered by the media pack, symbolizes his sense of entrapment, but he rationalizes that he did not exploit every possible business proposition. However, he does feel ‘completely messed up’ at the thought of ‘walking on top of dead bodies’ to complete his comic. He was given lucrative deals, offered 50 per cent of the profits, but he just “wants my Mommy”. (202)

The artistic son

Guilt manifests in the depiction of the disrespectful and selfish son. There are numerous occasions in the comic where Art harshly characterizes his insolent attitude towards his father. For example, Art ‘promised’ Vladek that he would not write about ‘such private things’ between Vladek and Lucia; and Art also impatiently interrupts Vladek’s process of organizing his important medicine just so Vladek would tell him about Anja. Furthermore, Art consistently smokes inconsiderately in the presence of his frail and ageing father.

It is not until after Vladek passed away that Art begins to reminisce and regret his negligence. Art will always feel as though his ‘father hangs over’ him. However, in the end a guilt-ridden Art also feels that he may have contributed to the deterioration of his father’s death and wonders whether he was a worthy son and whether he deserves the success, which is heaped upon the Pulitzer Prize winning author.

Samuel Beckett once said, “every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.”
By Dr Jennifer Minter, Cat and Mouse: The Complete Maus (VCE Studies Notes: English Works) www.englishworks.com.au

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