

The cats of *Maus*

## Reading Art Spiegelman's Holocaust graphic novel with Christian eyes

by [Lauren F. Winner](#) in the [May 18, 2022](#) issue



During Holy Week, I devoted a surprising number of hours to drafting a note to place in my church's Good Friday bulletin—a note about the Johannine passion, its anti-Jewish vitriol, and the history of violence the text carries in its train. It was hard to find the right thing to say.

I thought a lot about the Good Friday ritual, begun in Toulouse in 1020, in which a Jew was made to stand in front of the cathedral and be slapped by a Christian; about John Chrysostom's homiletical description of Jews as beasts fit for slaughter; about the various church carvings (in the cathedral in Magdeburg, and nestled among the gargoyles of a church in Wimpfen im Tal) that depict Jews suckling on sows' teats. I thought about Marc Chagall's *White Crucifixion* and about Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a book I have long considered one of the greatest works of postwar American nonfiction—and which received renewed attention recently when Tennessee's

McMinn County School Board banned it from its curricula.

*Maus* is two stories at once—the story of Spiegelman’s father’s experience as a Polish Jew during the Holocaust, and the story of Spiegelman’s own experience as an artist and a son desperate to capture his father’s experience on paper. When the first volume of *Maus* was published in 1986, its most distinctive feature seemed to be the medium. This was before the average reader knew there was such a thing as a graphic novel, though the term had been in circulation since 1964. What was Spiegelman doing, treating such a serious topic in a medium commonly associated with the exploits of Betty and Archie and Charlie Brown?

Throughout *Maus*, Artie struggles to get down the tale he wants. He goes to his father’s house ready to record Vladek’s reminiscences, and Vladek wants instead to hang out in the garage, sorting long nails from short nails. When Vladek does begin to talk, he frequently claims that he can’t remember something, or he says he must backtrack and pick up an earlier event accidentally omitted. Artie has an even harder time getting to the story of his mother, who died by suicide after the war. When Vladek mentions that Anja, having lost her journals during the war, later wrote down her wartime experiences in several notebooks, Artie tries to search the house for them. Vladek finally admits that he destroyed the notebooks: ‘These papers had too many *memories*. So I burned them.’

On the surface of the narrative, then, is the difficulty of turning the Holocaust into narrative. And, as many readers of *Maus*, most notably the scholar Hillary Chute, have noted, that point is underscored by Spiegelman’s medium. The graphic form itself indicates that the horrors of the Holocaust exceed language. That’s a claim about the Holocaust, of course. But it’s also a claim about genre and trauma. As Chute has argued about other graphic texts, the form is especially well suited to representing traumas that defy speech—as in the carved-up body of a political prisoner in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, rendered principally in image, not words.

Christianity is largely invisible in *Maus*. Spiegelman chose not to make legible that most of the non-Jewish characters in the book are baptized Christians. The Holocaust was caused by many things, but it is impossible to account for it without accounting for the ways that Christianity was part of the loam in which the Holocaust was nurtured—that it happened exactly in Christian Europe, in Christian Germany. This is not discussed explicitly in the pages of *Maus*, so it’s the obligation of Christian readers to bring that knowledge to the text.

Perhaps there's also an invitation in *Maus* for Christian readers to think about testimony. We tend to focus on words when we think about what kind of testimony counts, for good reasons. The early Christians sent letters to one another, and they read those letters aloud in church, as we still do. When we come together for corporate prayer, much of that prayer consists of verbal address to God. Returning to *Maus* during Holy Week, I began to consider what paraverbal forms might suit Christian witness and what media Christian testimony requires.

To consider this is not to do something innovative. Artisans who made stained-glass windows for churches understood that something beyond words can testify, as did J. S. Bach when he set Matthew's and John's Passions to music. Among the testimony we might want to imagine is penitential testimony. Perhaps the acknowledgment of and repentance of anti-Judaism in the church is exactly the kind of testimony that cannot be met only with words.

And what of the animals, which are such a distinctive feature of Spiegelman's text? In *Maus*, the Germans are cats and the Americans are dogs. (I'm no breed expert, but to me they look like mastiffs, loyal and helpful but not that smart.) The Jews, of course, are mice. Spiegelman's use of animals sometimes confused people. In 1991, the second volume of *Maus* became a *New York Times* best seller, and the newspaper's classification provoked an irenic but pointed letter from Spiegelman:

I was delighted to see [*Maus II*] surface on your best-seller list . . . but to the extent that 'fiction' indicates that a work isn't factual, I feel a bit queasy. . . . I shudder to think how David Duke—if he could read—would respond to seeing a carefully researched work based closely on my father's memories of life in Hitler's Europe and in the death camps classified as fiction. I know that by delineating people with animal heads I've raised problems of taxonomy for you. Could you consider adding a special 'nonfiction/mice' category to your list?

The *Times* duly moved *Maus* to the number 13 slot on the nonfiction list.

For many years, when I read *Maus*, I thought of it in the company of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. But of course animals were used to represent people and people groups long before Orwell. The book of Daniel represents various empires as animals, and Revelation uses animals to depict the enemies of the early church. And there's a very old tradition of depicting three of the Gospel writers as animals.

Perhaps the most helpful ancient text for thinking about *Maus* is the portion of I Enoch known as the Animal Apocalypse. Written about a century and a half before the birth of Jesus, the Animal Apocalypse tells the tale of human history, depicting people and people groups as animals. The children of Israel are depicted as sheep, and most of Israel's enemies are wild beasts—some are predators that kill sheep, others are scavengers that feast on their carcasses.

Much has been written about Spiegelman's decision to render Jews as mice. To do so is to literalize, and thus reveal as absurd, the Nazi trope that Jews were vermin. But perhaps just as notable is Spiegelman's choice to draw the Germans as cats. Cats, of course, are predators of mice. But there's more to be said, and the Animal Apocalypse helps us say it. Unlike Israel's enemies in the Animal Apocalypse—ravens and hyenas and tigers—the enemies in *Maus* are house cats. Domestic animals. Everyday animals. Ordinary animals who live in our homes, intimate with us.