COMICS—A FORM ONCE CONSIDERED PURE JUNK—IS SPARKING INTEREST IN LITERARY STUDIES. I’M AS AMAZED AS ANYBODY ELSE BY THE comics boom—despite the fact that I wrote an English department dissertation that makes the passionate case that we should not ignore this innovative narrative form. Yet if there’s promoting of comics, there’s also confusion about categories and terms. Those of us in literary studies may think the moves obvious: making claims in the name of popular culture or in the rich tradition of word-and-image inquiry (bringing us back to the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages). But comics presents problems we’re still figuring out (the term doesn’t settle comfortably into our grammar; nomenclature remains tricky and open to debate). The field hasn’t yet grasped its object or properly posed its project. To explore today’s comics we need to go beyond preestablished rubrics: we have to reexamine the categories of fiction, narrative, and historicity. Scholarship on comics—and specifically on what I will call graphic narrative—is gaining traction in the humanities. Comics might be defined as a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially. Comics moves forward in time through the space of the page, through its progressive counterpoint of presence and absence: packed panels (also called frames) alternating with gutters (empty space). Highly textured in its narrative scaffolding, comics doesn’t blend the visual and the verbal—or use one simply to illustrate the other—but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously; a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of reading and looking for meaning. Throughout this essay, I treat comics as a medium—not as a lowbrow genre, which is how it is usually understood. However, I will end by focusing attention on the strongest genre in the field: nonfiction comics.
Overview

Three journals have devoted special issues to graphic narrative. Art Spiegelman recently taught a seminar at Columbia University called Comics: Marching into the Canon. The Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Fiction includes comics. Outside the academy, graphic narrative is coming to the forefront of literary-critical and cultural conversations: *Time* magazine, a mainstream barometer, named Alison Bechdel’s graphic narrative memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* its best book of 2006—the same year Houghton Mifflin, which publishes the Best American series, inaugurated the first Best American Comics volume. The *New York Times Magazine*, in a cover article in July 2004, asserted that this “new literary form” is “what novels used to be—an accessible, vernacular form with mass appeal” (McGrath 24).
Excerpt Three:

The most important graphic narratives explore the conflicted boundaries of what can be said and what can be shown at the intersection of collective histories and life stories. Authors like Spiegelman and Sacco, engaged with the horizon of history, portray torture and massacre in a complex formal mode that does not turn away from or mitigate trauma; in fact, they demonstrate how its visual re-tracing is enabling, ethical, and productive.

Excerpt Four:

To address the question of literacy proposed by the idea of “decoding” comics, we might consider Spiegelman’s explanation of the term. His comments attach a specific, active literacy to comics: “It seems to me that comics have already shifted from being an icon of illiteracy to becoming one of the last bastions of literacy,” he told the Comics Journal in 1995. “If comics have any problem now, it’s that people don’t even have the patience to decode comics at this point. . . . I don’t know if we’re the vanguard of another culture or if we’re the last blacksmiths” (Interview 61).
Indeed, now is the time to expand scholarly expertise and interest in comics. “What kind of visual-verbal literacy can respond to the needs of the present moment?” Hirsch asks (1212). Certainly, I wager—as does Hirsch, who goes on to analyze Spiegelman’s most recent book, *In the Shadow of No Towers*—that graphic narrative opens up some of the most pressing questions put to literature today: What is the texture of narrative forms that are relevant to ethical representations of history? What are the current stakes surrounding the right to show and to tell history? What are the risks of representation? How do people understand their lives through narrative design and render the difficult processes of memory intelligible? Graphic narrative has echoed and expanded on the formal inventions of fiction, from modernist social and aesthetic attitudes and practices to the postmodern shift toward the democracy of popular forms. In the graphic narrative, we see an embrace of reproducibility and mass circulation as well as a rigorous, experimental attention to form as a mode of political intervention. Critical approaches to literature, as they are starting to do, need to direct more sustained attention to this developing form—a form that demands a rethinking of narrative, genre, and, to use James Joyce’s phrase, today’s “ineluctable modality of the visible” (31).
You’ve said that Hitler was your collaborator on Maus. When did you become aware of the history of anti-Semitic caricature and stereotypes in creating your animals?

I began to read what I could about the Nazi genocide, which really was very easy because there was actually rather little available in English. 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 a 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.

In fact, Zyklon B, the gas used in Auschwitz and elsewhere as the killing agent, was a pesticide manufactured to kill vermin—like fleas and roaches.

As I began to do more detailed and more finely grained research for the longer Maus project, I found how regularly Jews were represented literally as rats. Caricatures by Fips (the pen name of Philippe Rupprecht) filled the pages of Der Stürmer; grubby, swarthy, Jewish apelike creatures in one drawing, ratlike creatures in the next. Posters of killing the vermin and making them flee were part of the overarching metaphor. It’s amazing how often the image still comes up in anti-Semitic cartoons in Arab countries today.
You show mice with their mouths open so few times in the book. Was that deliberate?

When I show the mouths, they’re almost always there as cries and screams. It’s not usually used to show characters yukking it up and laughing really loud. It’s that triangle inverted as you look at it from underneath with a kind of scream face. It allows for a kind of vulnerability, coming in toward the underbelly of the mouse. The screaming mouth completes the face; it’s a way of making that face human.

Art Spiegelman