

**From “The Holocaust as Vicarious Past: Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and the Afterimages of History” by James E. Young**

Directions: Individually or with one partner, read through the following excerpts and determine whether you agree or disagree with the arguments presented. Include textual evidence to support your thoughts, and be prepared to share with the class.

Excerpt One:

I find that, by embodying what Marianne Hirsch has aptly termed an aesthetics of post-memory, *Maus* also suggests itself as a model for what I would like to call “received history” – a narrative hybrid that interweaves both events of the Holocaust and the ways they are passed down to us...I would not suggest that post-memory takes us beyond memory or displaces it in any way, but it is “distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Post-memory should reflect back on memory, revealing it as equally constructed, equally mediated by the processes of narration and imagination...Post-memory is anything but absent or evacuated: It is as full and as empty as memory itself.”

Excerpt Two:

What distinguishes many of these artists from their parents’ generation of survivors is their single-minded knack for representing just this sense of vicariousness, for measuring the distance between history-as-it-happened and their own postmemory of it. As becomes clear, then, especially to the author himself, *Maus* is not about the Holocaust so much as about the survivor’s tale itself and the artist-son’s recovery of it. In Spiegelman’s own words, “*Maus* is not what happened in the past, but rather what the son understands of the father’s story...[It is] an autobiographical history of my relationship with my father, a survivor of the Nazi death camps, cast with cartoon animals.” As his father recalled what happened to him at the hands of the Nazis, his son Art recalls what happened to him at the hands of his father and his father’s stories. As his father told his experiences to Art, in all their painful immediacy, Art tells his experiences of the storytelling sessions themselves – in all of their somewhat less painful mediacy.”

Excerpt Three:

The narrative sequence of his boxes, with some ambiguity as to the order in which they are to be read, combines with and then challenges the narrative of his father’s story – itself constantly interrupted by Art’s questions and his own neurotic preoccupations, his father’s pill taking, the rancorous father-son relationship, his father’s new and sour marriage. As a result, Spiegelman’s narrative is constantly interrupted by – and integrative of – life itself, with all its dislocutions, associations, and paralyzing self-reflections. It is narrative echoing with the ambient noise and issues surrounding its

telling. The roundabout method of memorytelling is captured here in ways unavailable to a straighter narrative. It is a narrative that tells both the story of events and its own unfolding as narrative.

#### Excerpt Four:

In fact, the story is not a single story at all but two stories being told simultaneously: the father's story and Spiegelman's imaginative record of it. It is double-stranded and includes the competing stories of what his father says and what Artie hears, what happened during the Holocaust and what happens now in Artie's mind. As a process, it makes visible the space between what gets told and what gets seen. The father says one thing as we see him doing something else. Artie promises not to betray certain details only to show us both the promise and betrayal together. Indeed, it may be Artie's unreliability as a son that makes his own narrative so reliable.

#### Excerpt Five:

By making the recovery of the story itself a visible part of Maus, Spiegelman can also hint darkly at the story not being recovered here, the ways that telling one story always leaves another untold, the ways common memory masks deep memory. In Spiegelman's case, this deep, unrecoverable story is his mother's memory of her experiences during the Holocaust. Vladek does not, cannot volunteer this story. It takes Artie to ask what Anja was doing all the time.

#### Excerpt Six:

Though he has tried to weave the process of drawing Maus back into its narrative, Spiegelman is also aware that as a finished text Maus may not truly capture the process at its heart. This is why two exhibitions...were so central to Spiegelman's project at the time. In these exhibitions, each entitled "The Road to Maus," the artist mounted the originals of his finished panels sequentially in a horizontal line along the walls of the gallery. Each panel in turn had all of its earlier drafts running vertically down into it, showing the evolution of each image from start to finish. Cassette players and earpieces were strategically interspersed along the walls of the gallery so that viewers could listen to Art's original interviews with his father. In this way, Spiegelman hoped to bring his true object of representation into view: the process by which he arrived at a narrative, by which he made meaning in and worked through a history that has been both public and personal.