



## FAMILY

# Spiegelman sees new ban of his book 'Maus' as 'red alert'

By Michael Cavna

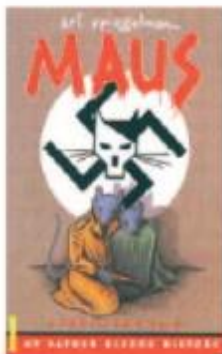
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Art Spiegelman didn't set out to write an educational aid for young-adult readers. A half-century ago, he simply wanted to better know his own origin story, discover more about his parents' histories – and hear from his father, a Polish Jew and a survivor, how some of their relatives were killed in the Holocaust.

In an interview Thursday, he remembers his mindset in his 20s: "I never meant to teach anybody anything."

Now, though, given the latest roiling debates over which books can be banned from schools and libraries, the author of the seminal graphic memoir "Maus" appreciates his work's long cultural tail: "I'm grateful the book has a second life as an anti-fascist tool."

Spiegelman is speaking shortly after learning that a Tennessee school board voted unanimously this month to ban "Maus," which in 1992 became the first graphic novel to win the Pulitzer Prize. The two-volume comic biography chronicles his family's Holocaust history through a frame-tale of '70s conversations between



Spiegelman and his estranged father, all told with anthropomorphic imagery: The Jewish characters are rendered as mice, for instance, and the Nazis are cats.

The 10-member board in McMinn County chose to remove "Maus" from its eighth-grade language arts curriculum, citing its profanity and nudity. Now the New York-based author is sifting through the minutes of the board's Jan. 10 meeting, trying to make some sense of its decision to target the graphic memoir, which previously has been challenged in California and banned in Russia. His conclusion: The issue is bigger than his comic book.

In the current sociopolitical climate, he views the Tennessee vote as no anomaly. "It's part of a continuum, and just a harbinger of things to come," Spiegelman says. "The control of people's thoughts is essential to all of this."

As such school votes strategically aim to limit "what people can learn, what they can understand and think about," he says, there is "at least one part of our political spectrum that seems to be very enthusiastic about" banning books.

"This is a red alert. It's not just: 'How dare they deny the Holocaust?'" he says

with a mock gasp. "They'll deny anything."

Spiegelman, 73, knows well the ways and whims of educational decision-makers. He cites how often "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" has been challenged and banned ever since its 1885 publication. And in 1986 – just a few weeks after book one of "Maus" was published – William Faulkner's 1930 Southern Gothic novel "As I Lay Dying" enjoyed a regional spike in sales when it was banned by a Kentucky school district.

As the "Maus" ban became widely publicized this week, after the vote was reported in the Tennessee Holler, the graphic novel had a surge in sales. By Friday, "The Complete Maus" hardcover was among the top 25 titles on Amazon's bestseller list, and second among all historical biographies, as well as comics and graphic novels.

Spiegelman says comics are often challenged in educational settings, partly because of the visceral power of visual imagery. Jerry Craft's "New Kid," Raina Telgemeier's "Drama" and Alison Bechdel's "Fun Home" are among the acclaimed graphic novels that have appeared on the challenged-book lists spotlighted during Banned Books Week, the annual event that celebrates "the freedom to read."

"One of the reasons 'Maus' is so threatening – and one of the reasons [some] educators were trying to protect the idea

of teaching it in a curriculum – was that it's in comics form," Spiegelman says. The panel-to-panel narrative "makes it easy to remember – the visual component as well as with the underlying thoughts that need to be communicated – because you can go from the past to the present to the future and back and forth, as your eye flits across the page. Kids do it instinctively."

So as Spiegelman read the record from the board's meeting, he focused on their stated issues with stark imagery, as well as strong language.

Spiegelman also laughs in reaction to a board member bringing up the author's past comics contributions to Playboy magazine when assessing the anthropomorphic nudity in "Maus," which includes stripped-down concentration camp prisoners.

Spiegelman acknowledges that the voices who spoke at the meeting weren't "monolithic by any means." One instructional supervisor spoke of "Maus" as an anchor book to begin teaching the Holocaust to children: "I am very passionate about history, and I would hate to rob our kids of this opportunity."

Amid the controversy, Spiegelman embraces the fact that "Maus" has an afterlife. "We thought it would be self-published and a one-shot in our RAW magazine."