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‘We Don’t Need the Nakedness and All the Other Stuff’: Maus, Graphic History, and School Board Excuses

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Maus, Graphic History, and School Board Excuses

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In January 2022, during an otherwise routine school board meeting in McMinn County, Tennessee, ten concerned school board members unanimously voted to remove a comic book from the local eighth-grade curriculum. Citing the book's "profanity and nudity," the board justified its decision on the grounds of public decency and the protection of children from pornographic materials.

This small instance of local governmental history is, in many ways, an unremarkable data point in a much larger and troubling trend, one that today's panel addresses. It's no secret that we are living in a moment where book bans and general curricular challenges are rapidly increasing. According to a PEN America study, a statistically notable number of these challenges are aimed at literature categorized as *graphic narrative*. In fact, of the 874 titles that repeatedly make the banned books list, three of the top five titles most likely to be banned are comics. Clearly, our nation's current and troubling spate of book ban fervor is characterized by a particular aversion to graphic narrative—that is, to longform comic books, both fiction and nonfiction.

But although instances of censorship such as these are now depressingly quotidian, the McMinn County decision made national news, because of the specific comic book under fire. The book McMinn County banned was Art Spiegelman's *Maus*.

I expect this crowd to know Spiegelman's work, but for those of you who aren't familiar, *Maus* is a two-volume graphic memoir, first published in 1991. The book-length comic, written

and illustrated by acclaimed cartoonist Art Spiegelman, is a holocaust memoir told from the perspective of Spiegelman's father. As the first widely recognized comic to take on traumatic historical events on such a large scale, *Maus* is famous for breaking the genre conventions of the comics medium. *Maus* is also famous for its primary conceit: when illustrating his father's story, Spiegelman draws the Jews as mice, the Germans as cats, the Americans as dogs, etc. Playing on Nazi propagandist stereotypes of Jews as "vermin," Spiegelman's visual lexicon ends up subverting the very stereotypes it draws from, as readers witness this crude gimmick's slow unraveling against a backdrop of false fascistic definitions.

Maus's significance to the world of comics cannot be overstated. It is the first graphic novel to win a Pulitzer Prize. There is more academic writing on *Maus* than any other comic book. Though it is nonfiction and technically not a novel, *Maus* is widely cited as the one of the first examples of a successful "graphic novel," that is, a bound, book-length manuscript that uses comics to tell a story. Its commercial and critical success heralded a new boom in book-length comics that dealt with difficult themes. For this reason, Spiegelman's comic frequently makes its way onto school syllabi, library bookshelves, and college reading lists.

Due to both *Maus*'s respected and canonical status and its important subject matter, the McMinn County decision stood out among book ban cases and made headlines across the US. In a political moment characterized by growing Christian Nationalism and holocaust denial, activists have rightly cast the McMinn County school board decision as symptomatic of a national rise in anti-Semitism. Indeed, perhaps the most disturbing comment in the school board minutes is from member Rob Shamblin, who notes that *Maus* "can be vetted either direction about the picture that it paints." Shamblin's "both sides" argument legitimizes the here-unnamed Neo-Nazi groups that condemn Spiegelman's text for being too "critical" of genocide. Since the

Maus ban, there have been other instances of schools removing Holocaust literature from libraries and curricula. Last September, a school board in Texas fired a teacher for assigning a graphic adaptation of Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*; just a few months before, a high school along Florida's Atlantic Coast pulled the same book from library shelves.

Because they target Holocaust memoir, and because this targeting is obvious in its anti-Semitism, the Frank and Spiegelman bans are often described as running parallel to, but ultimately separate from, book bans related to the recent growing attacks on critical race theory or LGBTQ+ education in schools. But I want to caution around flat readings of the *Maus* ban that attribute such censorship to anti-Semitism *alone*. In a world where anti-Semitism is incorrectly—and now legally—equated with anti-Zionism, Christian conservatives and right-wing Jewish organizations often find themselves strange bedfellows. Indeed, in the two years since I began working on this project, the political landscape has notably shifted: the same Christian Nationalism fueling the *Maus* ban two years ago now takes to the podium at pro-Israel rallies, for example. As a means of resisting such toxic alliances, I want to understand the McMinn County school board decision in a historical context in which Christian nationalism, anti-Semitism, queerphobia, xenophobia, and anti-blackness are inextricably bound together. In other words, misreading the *Maus* ban as an isolated incident ignores the multiple and intersectional valences of the McMinn school board decision—valences which, once named, might allow for cross-identificatory coalition in the face of growing right-wing violence. Today, I want to illustrate how reading *Maus* not just as a holocaust memoir, but as a graphic memoir *specifically*, helps illuminate these potential lines of solidarity.

Two things strike me about both the Tennessee *Maus* case and the Texas *Diary of a Young Girl* case: first, they both deal with *graphic* literature, i.e., comic books. Second, in both

cases, school boards or administration pulled these books not because they dealt with the challenging topics of genocide or fascism, but rather because both contained "inappropriate" sexual content. In Texas, the graphic adaptation of the diary of Anne Frank came under scrutiny as part of a review program meant "to protect kids from sexually explicit content," revising previous library policies that "exposed children to pornographic material." (The diary references female genitalia, and at one point Anne wonders if she is sexually attracted to women, which made it subject of district scrutiny). In McMinn County Tennessee, school board members voted to remove *Maus* from the curriculum because of its "unnecessary use of profanity and nudity, and its depiction of violence and suicide." (*Here are the panels in question*). As school board member Mike Cochran told reporters: "We can tell them exactly what happened, but we don't need all the nakedness and all the other stuff."

As a scholar of queer sexuality, comic books, and American identity—I'm interested in how and why the threat of *sexuality* becomes an excuse to pull comics about the holocaust from public school curricula and library shelves.

Trying to answer that question took me to different moments. These moments feel kind of disjointed, but I have a working hunch that juxtaposing them shows how the current culture war being fought in US school boards draws from a much longer history.

Our first moment is the very moment upon which *Maus* reflects. In 1933, shortly after he was appointed chancellor, Adolph Hitler passes the "Law for Removing the Distress of People and Reich." This law catalyzed a swift and sweeping series of book burnings and publishing house arrests throughout Germany.

It's important for our purposes to note that these book burnings often took place at schools, led by university student members of Hitler Youth. "All students were to cleanse their own collections of books; student organizations were to see to it that public libraries were purged," etc.

As the above photo suggests, these books were often not banned for being authored by Jews, at least not explicitly. Rather, public lending libraries were attacked for selling "trash and filth," and many closed after accusations that they were peddling pornography and other erotica. German citizens were encouraged to take Hitler's "thorough-going moral renewal" into their own hands. In just one example, a policeman named K. Schulz personally confiscated at least 70 novels that "dwelled on unrestrained sexuality" on the grounds that they were too "accessible to children and young people."

My point is not merely to say that anti-Semitism is hiding behind the excuse of sexual prudery, although that is certainly at play here (just as it is certainly at play in the 2022 *Maus* ban). Instead, we should understand the Nazi calls to ban both "Jewish" and "sexually filthy" literature as co-constitutive. In Hitler's Germany, calculated propaganda played on already-extant stereotypes which linked Jewishness to lechery, seduction, and deviance. The stigma of Jewishness was thus already a queer stigma. Much like in the US, race and sex in Nazi Germany were bound up together. In both the US and German cases, eugenic efforts by the state led to ever-more-stringent prohibitions on interracial relationships, as well as to strict anti-abortion laws hypocritically concurrent with the forced sterilization of non-white or non-Aryan couples.

Eventually, this eugenicist project meant that other non-reproductive sexualities were also targeted by the German state. We now know that the national culture campaigns of 1933—and their accompanying book bonfires—bolstered a logic that ultimately led to the state-

sponsored murder of six million Jews, the incarceration of 100,000 gay men, and the deaths of five million other political prisoners.

I tell this story first to illustrate a moment in which cultural campaigns aimed at protecting young people allowed for later genocidal campaigns against queered or ethnically minoritized identities. There's a connection there, that I want us to learn from. So: that is historical moment number one.

Our current cultural literary moral panic, as we know, is idiosyncratic in that it seems to be particularly rabid about graphic literature. On its website, the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund offers an explanation that is both formal and social: "Comics are uniquely vulnerable to [content] challenges because the medium thrives on the power of static images, and because there is a lingering stigma that comics are low-value speech." This is a good start, but one that fails to explain the historical source of that lingering stigma. To really understand how the "graphic" part of "graphic memoir" might be functioning in case of the *Maus* ban, it's important to understand the greater *American* history of comic books. Enter historical moment number two: the post-war period, across the Atlantic, in the United States.

About two decades into the comic book boom—in the 1950s, during what's known as the "golden age" of superhero comics, comic books become very popular with children and preteens, because they're cheap, they're exciting, and they're easy to read. By the end of World War II, adults began to take notice of this new teen trend, and not long after, a bestselling pop-psychology book exploited and exacerbated this panic. In 1953, child psychologist Fredric Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent*, a sensationalist book that made a forceful case that comic books were turning children into antisocial juvenile delinquents. Like later decriers of

video games, Wertham and his followers argued that comics' representation of violent crime made young readers into violent criminals. Perhaps most famously, Wertham argued that *Batman* encouraged homosexuality in impressionable boys. In his book *The Ten-Cent Plague*, David Hadju describes the Cold War-era panic around comic books as "one of the first and hardest-fought conflicts between young people and their parents in America."

"Churches and community groups raged and organized campaigns against comic books," Hadju writes. "Schools held public burnings of comics, and students threw thousands of books into the bonfires… More than one hundred acts of legislation were introduced on the state and municipal levels to ban or limit the sale of comics," and "Soon, congress took action with a set of sensational, televised hearings that nearly destroyed the comic-book business.... The majority of working comics artists, writers, and editors—more than eight hundred people—lost their jobs." Eventually, the comic book scare led to the creation of the Comics Code Authority, established in 1954 as an alternative to government regulation.

Given our subject matter today, I'd be remiss to not mention that most of the comics artists, writers, and editors targeted in this effort are also, it so happens, the children or grandchildren of Jewish-American refugees. In fact, the story of American comic books is inseparable from Jewish-American identity. It was Max Gaines, head publisher at *EC Comics*, who is credited with inventing the comic book, successfully moving comics out of newspapers and into their own space. We owe both Superman and Batman to Jewish New Yorkers, ; not to mention most Marvel characters. Many leaders of the underground comix movement; as well as the women who founded and maintained the popular feminist underground zine *Wimmin's Comix*, were second-generation Jewish Americans. The graphic novel as we know it today also claims Jewish-American ancestry. Most comics scholars cite Will Eisner, author of the popular

Spirit comics, as the first person to create a book-length comic. Finally, we have *Maus*, which we already know is historic.

For those of us who know the history of the Cold War era, the hysteria surrounding comic books might look eerily like McCarthyism: that is, a similar and simultaneous hysteria surrounding Communist infiltration in the government, higher education, and Hollywood. Both the comic book panic and the Red Scare conducted sensational trials before Congress. Both resulted in blacklists and arrests. Both, also, disproportionately targeted Jewish Americans, black Americans, and gay men. It's my and others' contention that the comic book scare and McCarthyism are born of similar paranoias and are both part of a larger Cold War culture. As Hadju writes, "It is clear now that the hysteria over comic books was always about many things other than cartoons."

Today, we are experiencing another moment of moral panic. In much the same way that the dime-store comic books of the 1950s were challenged because they were perceived as a threat to childhood innocence, graphic novels in school libraries are now frequently challenged for containing "adult" subject matter. Certainly, many of the associations that attach to comics today stem from Wertham's book and the McCarthy-esque panic that resulted from its publication.

The PEN America data alone hints at a powerful link between graphic narrative and stigmatized sexuality. But comics align with queerness on a more theoretical level as well. In a special issue of *American Literature*, comics scholar and queer theorist Ramzi Farwaz ruminates on the potential connection between comics and what we might broadly call "queerness." Positioned as a metaphorical "seducer" of innocent children, comics as a medium stand in for other sexualized stereotypes of the historical American imagination. Perhaps the most

longstanding of these stereotypes is the stereotype of the Buck, that is, the dangerous and oversexed black man, queered and criminalized by a long history of white supremacist anxiety surrounding racial and sexual purity. We could also add the figure of the Communist, the Jew, and the homosexual as other criminalized and sexualized stereotypes. In more contemporary formulations, following the work of queer theorist Jasbir Puar and others, we can see how post-911 Islamophobia, xenophobia, and trans panic replaces these more traditional boogeymen with the figure of the terrorist, the immigrant, or the transgender person, such that these figures come to occupy the "queer" or anti-social position in the American psyche.

The increasing number of book bans across the nation reflects a wider political trend in the contemporary US in which public school curricula has become a battleground in an increasingly virulent culture war. Tennessee, the state in which McMinn County sits, has become one of these many battlegrounds. The *Times* reports that one proposed Tennessee law prohibits textbooks that "promote L.G.B.T.Q. issues or lifestyles," while another prohibits materials that make someone feel "discomfort" based on their race or sex. (I am struck by the literal echoes here, as "discomfort" sounds so close to the "distress" of the 1933 "Law for Removing the Distress of People and Reich.") State legislators in Nashville are "considering a ban on 'obscene materials' in school libraries as well as a measure requiring school boards to establish procedures for reviewing school library collections," and Governor Bill Lee recently announced a plan to open 50 charter schools designed to educate children to be "informed patriots." Panic over queer teachers "grooming" young students has raised questions about gay identity in the classroom, echoing the moral panics of McCarthy-era America.

Because of history, I am alarmed about the ways in which an increasingly malicious political rhetoric concerning the establishment of moral norms, the protection of 'innocent'

children, and the preservation of national culture currently aims itself towards other marginalized groups in this country. In other words, it is crucial we also understand the Tennessee county's decision to ban *Maus* as part a larger trend of a long-standing right-wing organizing strategy that includes anti-CRT, anti-Palestine, and anti-queer political movements. What worries me is not that genocide will spring anew, but that these new bans are a sign of more systematized and state-sanctioned violence to come.

So the stakes, to me at least, feel high.

Bearing in mind those stakes, I want to end with a different thought, a different anecdote, and a different way of viewing the "inappropriateness" in *Maus*. (There aren't slides for this part; it's just a story).

I first read *Maus* nearly twenty years ago. It was but one book in a cardboard box full of and other various items, given to me by my seventh-grade English teacher. I got the cardboard box because this teacher was quitting public school. The box was full of things he had reserved for me, because he thought I would like them.

By the time I received this box, I had come to know this teacher as a trusted mentor, a safe space, and someone to whom I never had to explain myself. He was, and remains, one of my dearest friends.

He was also the first gay adult I ever knew.

As a gift from one queer English teacher to another future queer English teacher, my tattered copy of *Maus* now also registers as a symbol of my own inheritance. But twenty years ago when I received this cardboard box, I could not articulate the reason for our strange friendship. I could not ask him about himself, nor could I articulate something about me. To live

as a young queer person in a homophobic world is a particular type of linguistic torture: it is to feel, constantly, like the right words are on the tip of your tongue, but that you are suffering from aphasia. I literally did not have the words, because language and representation refused those words to me.

Because I also know *Maus* as a gift from an adult gay teacher to his young gay student, this comic holds additional emotional weight for me, especially in a time when the same people that want to ban it also want to ban the queer relationships of recognition and support that led to me getting this book in the first place. Art Spiegelman's memoir is a node in many intersecting lines of personhood, history, oppression, inheritance, and care; this makes it particularly and personally resonant for me. I have sought to trace some of those lines here, to articulate that resonance.

While this Coda might be too personal or particular to have literary critical relevance, I wanted to tell it anyway as the last piece of evidence towards the argument I have been making, about how the recent efforts to ban *Maus* in schools fit into larger history of comic books and minoritized sexualities. I wanted to tell it, also, because I think that it is not a complete coincidence that, of all the texts in that cardboard box, *Maus* is one that stuck.

Part of the reason *Maus* stuck, part of why it had such a visceral impact on me, is precisely because it was, in the words of one Tennessee school board member, "too adult-oriented." There were dicks and emaciated bodies and swastikas, Auschwitz partitions drawn next to Catskills condos, ugliness next to sex next to chain-smoking next to romance next to everyday arguments. *Maus* is memorable because its characters are not sentimentalized, nor are they saints; they are people—ironically, perhaps, because they're all drawn as animals. *Maus* is adult-oriented, but it also oriented me into adulthood.

But beyond even that: sex and all that other stuff reminds us that the people who lived in the camps were human. We owe sex and humanity and messiness to them. Denying the presence of sex, or obscenity, or queerness in the lives of the six million people whom *Maus* memorializes is also to deny that these people lived messy, embodied, naked human lives. This is "all the other stuff" that those who ban books want to excise. The impulse to "sanitize" this history—like the impulse to "sanitize" histories of racial violence, or "sanitize" histories of sexuality, or "sanitize" the identities of educators—mirrors the sanitizing impulse of a genocidal regime. And we need the nakedness, we need all the other stuff, because that's the stuff of life.