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Reflections: A Student Response Journal



Maus I & II
Art Spiegelman



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To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

Maus I – A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History

Pre-Reading

1. On the cover of *Maus I*, two mice huddle close together caught in the glare of a blazing spotlight. At the center of the spotlight is a swastika emblazoned with the face of a cat, which bears a strong resemblance to Adolf Hitler. Above the symbol, the word MAUS drips, like blood. How does this cover image make you feel? What do you think is happening to the couple?

Write a poem describing how the image makes you feel, or write a narrative poem about the couple and what might be happening to them.

2. In *Maus*, Art Spiegelman uses cats to represent the Nazis and mice to represent himself, his family, and Jews in general. His symbolism is appropriate since cats prey on mice. If you were to relate a distressing event from your family’s history in a graphic novel format, how would you illustrate your family? How would you depict the villains? Would you use animals, or would you draw humans?

Write a brief synopsis of your theoretical graphic novel. Begin with the event you would relate. Then tell your publisher how you would depict the positive characters and the negative characters.

3. In his prologue, Spiegelman uses an incident from his childhood to hint at momentous events in his father’s life. He showcases a snippet of personal memory to foreshadow shocking revelations and to reveal to the reader how he grew up in the constant shadow of his father’s pain. The exchanges between Artie and his friends who leave him behind, and then between his father, who admonishes him about true friendship, take all of ten sentences.

This brevity of words is an essential aspect of a good graphic novel. What the writer does not reveal with text, the artist reveals with pictures. In this case the words and pictures, both Spiegelman’s, work seamlessly together.

How do you feel about snooping? Is there ever a time when it is justified? Think about, or imagine, a time when you were caught snooping by a friend. Write a letter to that friend explaining why you felt justified in snooping. Or if someone has violated your privacy, write to that person explaining how it made you feel.

7. Anja almost doesn't marry Vladek, because she receives an anonymous letter warning her about Vladek's bad reputation. Of course, Vladek's ex-girlfriend is the author of the letter. She is angry and spiteful after Vladek chooses Anja over her.

Most people are wrongly accused of something at some point in their lives. Some people react by defending themselves, others by seeking revenge against their accuser. What do you think is the best course of action in such a situation?

Imagine you are an advice columnist, and you must help both the person whose character has been soiled, like Vladek, and the person who receives the anonymous letter, like Anja. Compose the two letters the columnist would receive and the response to each one.

8. At the conclusion of their conversation, Vladek asks his son Art not to include his story about Lucia in his book. Art responds that it is great material and that he wants to tell Vladek's story "the way it really happened." His father insists that it wouldn't be appropriate or respectful, and Art relents. He promises he will not include the account of the aggressive Lucia in his book.

Write a paragraph or two recounting a time when you broke a promise, or when someone broke a promise made to you.

Chapter Three: Prisoner of War

18. Vladek seems very unhappy with his second wife, Mala. He criticizes her cooking instead of thanking her for the meal. Later, he complains about her to his son. Art, however, reminds his father that he is there to record his father's tale of survival, not the petty complaints against his wife.

Do you think Art is right to dismiss his father's complaining? Do you think he should advise his father, or even intercede in the couple's problems? Do you think he should tell Mala what his father says about her when she is not in the room? When friends or relatives complain to you about other friends or relatives, how do you handle it? Write Art a letter explaining your opinion.

19. Vladek's father pulled out fourteen of his own teeth to escape the Russian Army. Later, he starves his own son to keep him from having to serve in the military. Finally, he uses sleep deprivation and starvation to keep his younger son at home. It delays his entrance into the army for one year. His father's tactics are so painful, however, that Vladek refuses to employ them the next time the military calls him.

Respond to one of the following prompts:

- A. Write an essay about the most extreme thing you have ever done to avoid something you dread.
 - B. Write an essay describing how far you would go to protect someone you love from suffering.
20. By now, you have gone through various time periods in the book—Art at eleven, Art married, Vladek before and after WWII, and soon, you will see his experiences during the war. This telling of the Spiegelman story would have been very different if it had been told in a conventional, straight-line, chronological order, instead of the jumbled order it is in.

24. The conversation between Art and Vladek about Art's missing coat seems to resound with the things they don't say. Art is angry, and yet, after an initial and useless outburst, he merely mumbles, "You really threw out my coat. I can't believe it." Vladek, meanwhile, justifies his actions by claiming that Art's coat was shabby. Vladek has bought a new coat, and he gives his old jacket to Art.

Imagine you are Art. You are over thirty years old, and your father has tossed out your coat. How do you react? Keep in mind that your dad has survived the Holocaust, and his behavior may be linked to the suffering he endured. How do you show compassion and empathy, while still standing up for yourself?

Chapter Four: The Noose Tightens

25. When Art returns to his father's house, they argue about money. Specifically, they argue about why Vladek would rather risk his health than pay a handyman. Later, as the chapter ends, Mala says, "He is more attached to things than to people."

Answer this question:

- A. Knowing how close to death he came at various times, why do you think he values money over his health and happiness?

26. Explain what Anja's brother-in-law Wolfe means when he tells Vladek, "With money you can always get anything." Do you agree or disagree with his statement?

Write a persuasive editorial for your school paper that supports your opinion.

27. After describing how he made deals on the black market and collected old debts, Vladek surmises, "And so we lived for more than a year. But always things came a little worse, a little worse..."