

# *Maus*, graphic novel about the Holocaust, censored by Tennessee school board

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Last month, the school board in McMinn County, Tennessee, voted unanimously to remove Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel about the Holocaust, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986), from its 8th grade English Language Arts curriculum because of eight words they judged to be inappropriate, such as "bitch" and "god damn," as well as a nude image. Spiegelman's work powerfully depicts the experience of the author's family during the Holocaust.

In *Maus*, the author uses the comic-book format to represent various ethnicities as different species of animals (Jews are depicted as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs, Americans as dogs, English as fish, etc.). The novel was the central text used for a module on the Holocaust. The book, which has been translated into some 30 languages, is widely regarded and used in middle school and high school curricula across the United States and internationally, including in other school districts in Tennessee.

McMinn County, with a population of about 50,000, lies in the southeastern corner of Tennessee, close to Georgia and North Carolina. It is poor and rural, and its students have a lower reading proficiency, like most of Tennessee, than the national average. Tennessee is among the bottom 10 states in per pupil education spending.

Board members meeting on January 10 argued that the Spiegelman book was not "age-appropriate," although it has been taught to middle schoolers for decades to describe the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Board members said they wanted to protect young minds from what they are exposed to every day on social media and cable television. One of them pontificated on the nature of art, with one board member declaring, "It's like when you're watching TV and a cuss word or nude scene comes on, it would be

the same movie without it. Well, this would be the same book without it." The board member then essentially called Spiegelman a pornographer, asserting that "this guy that created the artwork used to do the graphics for *Playboy*."

Educators from the county defended the novel before the board, arguing that it aligned with state standards and served students well as the centerpiece of a curriculum module on the Holocaust. One educator told the board that the author "is trying to portray that the best he can with the language that he chooses that would relate to that time, maybe to help people who haven't been in that aspect in time to actually relate to the horrors of it."

But that did not stop the board from removing the book from the curriculum. In a statement after the fact, the board said, while declaring the Holocaust an atrocity that must never be repeated, "We simply do not believe that this work is an appropriate text for our students to study."

In an interview on CNN, Spiegelman remarked that the board was asking, essentially, "Why can't they teach a nicer Holocaust?"

This is a sordid episode of censorship, and it certainly reeks of anti-Semitism and social backwardness. While the board members did not make any overtly racist remarks, the tone of those on the board who spoke was one of dismissing the historical significance of the Holocaust. The most that could be mustered by one board member was, "Our children need to know about the Holocaust, they need to understand that there are several pieces of history ... that shows depression or suppression of certain ethnicities. It's not acceptable today. We've got to accept people for who and what they are."

The removal of the book from the curriculum in this

county cannot be seen outside of the increasingly fascist character of the Republican Party. The county voted 71 percent for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election, and all the county's leading officials are members of the party.

The school board clearly felt emboldened to censor *Maus* because of the visibility of such figures as Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a promoter of fascist and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, whose district is only about an hour south of McMinn County. Republicans are currently seeking to eliminate hundreds of books from school libraries in Texas, many on sexuality or works by prominent black novelists such as Toni Morrison and Jesmyn Ward.

The party is under the leadership of Donald Trump, who told the fascist Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by” and is the hero of open anti-Semites who were present at the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

This week, Republican legislators in Tennessee sponsored House Bill 1944 that would prohibit public schools from including “obscene” books in libraries.

All indications are that many people in McMinn County feel humiliated by the behavior of the school board. One resident writing on a McMinn County Facebook page said, “I was even more shocked when I saw a graphic novel series that I had read as a youth being banned by what I had always took for granted was the most free county in America. I read *Maus* when I was in 9th grade for American history. I cannot believe that we deny this now as curriculum. While graphic, it conveys a glimpse into one of the saddest chapters in human history.”

The result of the banning of *Maus* has been to boost sales of the book to bestseller status around the country. There is a waiting list for copies of the work at Knox County Library in Knoxville, Tennessee.



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