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**“Heroes and Role Models:
Art Spiegelman”
by Sam Lewis
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I chose Art Spiegelman for my hero and role model paper. He is a graphic artist specializing in comics, who is best known for the graphic novel Maus, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize. Graphic novels use the comic form to tell a story. Art Spiegelman is a child of Holocaust survivors.

Maus was the first graphic novel to cover an idea as serious as the Holocaust. Spiegelman interviewed his father, Vladek, about his survival from Auschwitz. Maus not only covers the details of Vladek’s time in the Holocaust but also Spiegelman’s relationship with Vladek at the time the book was being written. The action switches between 1980’s Rego Park and WWII-era Poland.

To add another layer of meaning to Maus, Spiegelman drew the characters as different animals, according to their roles. The Jews are mice, the Poles are pigs, the Germans are cats, and the Americans are dogs. By using these stereotypes in comic book drawings, Spiegelman accentuates characteristics, such as the powerlessness of the Jews, as mice, or the predatory nature of the German cats that would kill them.

Every time I read this book I find another meaning or interesting piece to the story. The words and pictures go together very well and it offers incredible descriptive details in a different way than a novel ever could. The comic book format helped me understand how horrible it was, to have been there.

Now, I’d like to talk about what a hero or role model means to me: I believe a hero is someone who can run into a burning building and save lives or jump into a freezing lake and pull a child out to safety. I believe a role model is someone whom younger people want to be like, when they grow up.

Spiegelman, to me, is not a hero, but a role model. His ideas and beliefs are something I would like to emulate. I do not base my life on looking up to a hero. I think that I would rather emulate a person’s beliefs and ideas because I am not sure I’m the type of person who would have enough courage to put my life on the line.

I recognize that someone who would risk his or her life for someone else’s life is a true hero. In the large format comic book he wrote after 9/11 titled In the Shadow of No Towers, Spiegelman writes, “I don’t even believe in heroes.”

There are many other values that I greatly admire in Spiegelman, such as his belief in free speech, humor, family and education.

I really like the fact that no matter what the critics have said, he has defended his work— even under scrutiny by the government, the media, or someone in his family. I believe that these values are very worthy of emulation.

As a child, Spiegelman loved *Mad Magazine*. I am also a subscriber. It is filled with celebrity satires, crazy pop-culture references, and popular movie parodies. Since the jokes can be crude and gross, at the time, it was a hit with kids across the country, but not with the adults.

In Spiegelman's day, *Mad* was considered a threat to morality and was banned from classrooms because of its counter culture attitude. The magazine was reacting to the atmosphere in the country, the cold war, Vietnam and how censored things had become, especially in teen literature. Spiegelman loved this about the magazine and adopted some of this attitude.

He believes that kids should do their own thinking, and not just mimic adults. Today, *Mad* isn't considered a threat to morality, especially when one considers other forms of pop culture, such as some video games.

Spiegelman had an encounter with the establishment when he got a job with the Topps Card Company, which makes baseball cards. He was the creative consultant for both Garbage Pail Kids and Wacky packages. I have a few packs of Garbage Pail Kids and I think they are very gross, but also funny.

Spiegelman considered it the highest form of complement when a state official from West Virginia said that the cards should be banned from that state entirely.

Spiegelman was at the forefront of a new underground comics industry, called comix, spelled with an x, that weren't authorized by the comics code authority, weren't sold by the news stands and most stores, and they were meant for adult readers.

His comic book *RAW*, which came out in 1980, where Maus was first serialized, shows how Spiegelman felt about comics. Most comic books were fantasies filled with heroes like Superman and Spiderman who fought crime and were undefeatable. Spiegelman didn't like those comics and neither do I. The subject matter of this comic book and of Maus shocked many readers. The main characters did not have any super powers and weren't undefeatable. Maus I was published in 1986.

In the early nineties Spiegelman won the Guggenheim fellowship, and that helped him complete Maus II.

It took ten years to write the two books of Maus and at times Spiegelman had to take some work he didn't love to make ends meet. I believe that sometimes in order to get what you want, you must do work that you don't love to get closer to your true goals.

Eventually, when the Maus serial comics were collected and published as a book, Spiegelman was awarded a Pulitzer Prize, the first for a graphic novel.

Spiegelman's career continued to develop. He started to draw covers for the *New Yorker* magazine. Up to then, the *New Yorker's* covers were great illustrations, but weren't dealing with the controversies of the period. Art Spiegelman changed that. For instance, in 1993, a conflict in Crown Heights between Hasidic Jews and African Americans was front page news. Spiegelman created a *New Yorker* magazine cover that featured a black woman kissing a Hasidic man. It may have been one of their most controversial covers, at that time because some people were racist and did not want to see that sort of thing. People were very shocked by it, the cover pushed many boundaries. I think that this image is a great way of commenting on the problems at that time in a very direct way.

With the tragedy of 9/11, Spiegelman, once again, addressed a major matter that he witnessed. He came out with the large format comic book, In the Shadow of No Towers. Combining the events of 9/11 with many old comic books, this book is the most controversial of Spiegelman's work. There is one comic in the book, in which he shows that the American flag is a flag of unity, but he believes that because of partisan politics, the Democrats versus the Republicans, that we have become a nation under two flags.

Researching Art Spiegelman has really shown me that just because things such as comics have been a certain way for as long as anyone can remember, does not mean that they can't be changed by a single person. He inspires me to help change things in life, whether it is a huge world wide idea, a small local matter, or just the way I feel about something.

Two months ago I got to see Art Spiegelman speak at Colombia University. He talked about the development of comics in America and how they changed over the years. I thought that it was very interesting seeing him in person and actually hearing him talk. It brought him to life for me, and it validated what I wrote in the paper.

Although Spiegelman has done all great things, he is not nearly a perfect person. In college he experimented with illegal drugs, he smokes a lot, and lastly nobody is perfect. We all have done bad things at one point in our lives. I like how he tackled ideas that were hard for people to deal with and made them more personal. I also like how he made the *New Yorker* covers controversial and helped the events of the time be recognized by many people. I also like his sense of humor, which comes out even around serious topics. And that may have led me to the subject of my major project on Jewish humor, which I'll share with you shortly.