



NICK WEIBE

ART UNFILTERED Spiegelman says he's not a speaker, but a performer, because "they're still allowed to smoke on stage."

Spiegelman gets graphic about 'Forbidden Images' for RS Series

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Not many authors pen articles that get a magazine pulled from bookstore shelves in Canada. Even fewer wear that that distinction proudly. But not many are like Art Spiegelman, the third and final guest of the Students' Union's Revolutionary Speaker Series.

"It's in honour of Indigo Books that I called this speech 'Forbidden Images,'" Spiegelman told the audience in Myer Horowitz last Wednesday.

Last year the Canadian bookstore giant pulled the June 2006 issue of *Harper's* magazine from its store shelves because of an article penned by Spiegelman. Indigo objected to Spiegelman's piece, which reprinted and critiqued editorial cartoons featuring the prophet Muhammad printed by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*; the cartoons sparked outrage and riots across Europe and the Middle East and launched an international debate on freedom of speech versus religious tolerance.

However, despite the company's refusal to carry the issue, Spiegelman joked that the article was seen by many eyes north of the 49th.

"I'm told that *Harper's* sold better that issue in Canada than they ever have before," he told the audience with a laugh, adding that when material is repressed, it does nothing more than creates a greater demand for it.

Spiegelman, whose speech explored the unique ability of cartoons and images to spark outrage, is no stranger to controversial cartoons. The New York-based artist and writer is probably best known for the graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, which told the story of his parents' time spent in a German concentration camp during World War II. The story "masked" various groups involved in the conflict in the guises of animals—the Jewish victims as mice, the Nazis as cats, the British as fish, the Poles as pigs and the Americans as dogs—as a way of showing the folly in identifying people by their ethnicity or nationality.

Spiegelman explained that the form of *Maus* was integral in telling the story of his father's idea. He noted that comics and cartoons connect with viewers in the way that other media can't duplicate.

"Comics speak directly to the mind," he said. "They're iconic images."

Human beings don't think or remember in pure language,

according to Spiegelman. Instead, they cobble together a disjointed series of striking images and memorable dialogue—and that comics and cartoons are media ripe to reconstruct these methods.

Released in 1986, *Maus*, a work that Spiegelman says he's still living in the shadow of, owes a large debt to the comics that Spiegelman read as a kid. Using excerpts from his yet-unreleased autobiographical graphic novel, *Portrait of the Artist* as a *Young %@?**, he guided the audience through his introduction to the white-washed funnies of his youth, to the gruesome horror tales purchased by his unwitting but well-intentioned father, to an era in comics that he simply referred to as "too many superheroes." However, he said that a large part of *Maus*—the idea that comics can be used to examine the gritty reality under the surface of clean, Mickey Mouse-esque medium—came from *MAD* magazine.

"It's the problem with images, they're open. They can move towards parts of your brain that you're not steering them towards. Language is easier to navigate."

ART SPIEGELMAN

"*MAD* had a kind of irony that worked very well for the time," Spiegelman said, adding that it's hard to describe the impact of the magazine in today's climate. "I'm afraid that the *MAD* inoculation to popular culture is wearing off. We need something after the irony. Because you can't go home to sincerity."

For Spiegelman, even in those early days, comics could be used to strengthen stereotypes or to weaken them. He showed examples of two very different comics, both of them dealing with the Korean War. One displayed a trio of American soldiers, one recently killed, which was designed to show the frustration and uncertainty that many people in the United States had towards the war. The other cover, produced around the same time, showed a couple of GIs nonchalantly blasting enemies

away with grenades.

Spiegelman said that the former example attempted to show that the war was fought by frightened young men, while the second dehumanized the enemy. He added that cartoons and comics have the ability to both deconstruct and analyze or trivialize controversial events.

The *Harper's* article where he discussed the Danish cartoons came almost by accident, when one of the editors of the magazine noticed the obsessive curiosity that Spiegelman had since the beginning of the controversy and suggested that he write an article on it. Still, Spiegelman jumped at the chance to do so.

"Nothing that important has happened to cartoons in the last 100 years—maybe forever," he said.

After studying the cartoons, Spiegelman came to the conclusion that the mess didn't come from the cartoons themselves, which he described as tame and, for the most part, not all that original. Instead of a non-event put on by a far-right newspaper, the cartoons were blown out of proportion by the media who caused such a stir over whether they should be reprinted or not.

"Those cartoons would never have become amplified into such a world-class issue if they were allowed to be the nasty little inept event that they were originally made as," he said. "They were so suppressed and hidden by newspapers ... it became hard to see what the actual context of the cartoons were."

Spiegelman further criticized the cartoons for "afflicting the afflicted," picking on Denmark's already marginalized Muslim community by using the cartoons to create a Catch-22.

"One on hand, if [the Danish Muslim community] says nothing about the cartoons, it was a sign of disrespect and they weren't standing up to it. On the other hand, if they protested, they would be told 'Well, you don't understand free speech,'" he said.

As to why images, even relatively innocent ones, can cause such outrage, Spiegelman says that the images can be interpreted in many different ways, and can imply a meaning that wasn't intended by the artist.

"It's the problem with images, they're open. They can move towards parts of your brain that you're not steering them towards. Language is easier to navigate," he said.

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