

UNITED STATES

The great 'Maus' giveaway is on as bookstores, professors and churches counter Tennessee school board's ban

BY ANDREW LAPIN JANUARY 28, 2022



Art Spiegelman, author of Maus, poses in Paris, March 20, 2012. (Bertrand Langlois/AFP via Getty Images)

(JTA) — A rural Tennessee school board's decision earlier this month to remove "Maus," the celebrated graphic novel about the Holocaust, from its curriculum has attracted fierce backlash from other pockets of the state and beyond.

A nearby comic-book store is pledging to give away the book for free to every student in the county, an area church plans to hold a discussion on its themes and a college professor intends to offer free classes on the book to students in the county.

Nirvana Comics, a comic-book store in Knoxville, announced Thursday on social media that it would be giving away copies of Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning book to any interested students, saying, "it is a must-read for everyone."

“Maus’ was a book that opened my eyes and changed my worldview, because I grew up on a small town in Tennessee where I honestly don’t know if to this day there is a single Jewish person,” Nirvana Comics store owner Rich Davis told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

Davis, who is not Jewish, said he had become “immediately angry” when he’d heard that the school board of nearby McMinn County had voted 10-0 on Jan. 10 to remove the book from its middle-school classes, citing its use of profanity, nudity and depictions of “killing kids” as reasons for its inappropriateness.

“But then I realized you don’t fight anger with anger, hate with hate,” Davis said. “I just felt like I needed to do something.”

The resulting Nirvana Comics initiative, “Project Maus,” was at first only supposed to loan copies of the book to students “like a library,” he said. But as word of the store’s intent spread through social media and supporters rushed in to help, those plans expanded. A GoFundMe that Davis set up to support giveaways of the book has raised more than \$6,000 to date, and the book’s publishers at Penguin Random House negotiated a deal to sell 500 additional copies of “Maus” to Nirvana at a reduced price with the intent to give them away to students.

When “Star Trek: The Next Generation” actor Wil Wheaton shared Nirvana’s story on social media, “that’s when it really, really exploded,” Davis said. “That doesn’t surprise me because ‘Star Trek’ fans are some of the most amazing and committed fans on the planet.”

In addition, Davis said, he was in talks with a group of “Jewish attorneys and businessmen” whom he declined to name, but who he said were interested in purchasing an additional 1,000 copies of the book for free giveaways to McMinn County students. As the county itself only numbers around 50,000 people total, Davis said it could prove possible “to donate a copy of ‘Maus’ to every kid in McMinn County.”

In the county itself, a local Episcopal church in Athens announced it would be conducting a discussion of the book Feb. 3. The event will include discussion about the complicity of many churches in the

systematic murder of Jews during the Holocaust, as well as modern-day antisemitism.

Scott Denham, a Holocaust and German Studies professor at Davidson College in North Carolina, launched an online course about the book specifically intended for 8th grade and high school students. On the course's website, Denham said the lessons would not be public and would only be offered to students in McMinn County.

A representative for Denham said the professor was currently experiencing a family emergency and wasn't available to elaborate on his plans for the lessons.

As of Friday, Jan. 28, "Maus" — originally published in two volumes in the late 1980s and early '90s — sat at #23 on Amazon's bestseller list. The county school board's rejection of the book generated international news coverage, with prominent authors including Neil Gaiman harshly criticizing the board's decision. Organizations like the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum emphasized the book's frequent use as a Holocaust education tool for middle and high school-aged readers.

For Davis, who is also the author of the horror comic series "Cult of Dracula," the incident at its core stemmed from misguided intentions.

"I'm sure they thought they were protecting their children." Davis said about the McMinn County parents and school board members who had initially raised concerns about the book's content. But, he added, he believed "they're actually harming their children... If 'Maus' offends you, then you certainly don't know very much about the Holocaust."