Rationale For Magneto: Testament

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X-Men: Magneto Testament (2009)

By Gregory Pak and Carmine Di Giandomenico

Rationale by Brian Kelley

Grade Level and Audience

This graphic novel is recommended for middle and high school English and social studies classes.

Plot Summary

Before there was the complex X-Men villain Magneto, there was Max Eisenhardt. As a boy, Max has a loving family: a father who tinkers with jewelry, an overprotective mother, a sickly sister, and an uncle determined to teach him how to be a ladies’ man. He goes to high school, is a stellar student academically, and even beats (twice) the school’s leading jock in javelin competitions. He’s the victim of bullying by peers and teachers. And he has a beautiful muse named Magda. He is a typical adolescent boy. The setting: Nazi Germany.

The target of systematic racism at school because he is Jewish, Max is not only forced to defend his honor but is emotionally and physically humiliated by teachers and peers professing the superiority of the German race. He watches Herr Kalb, a mentor, beaten and carried from the school after defending Max. His uncle, Erich, becomes a victim of public assault and humiliation because he’s in the company of a German woman. His family, fearing for survival, leaves the city and tries hiding.

Losing his family to a firing squad, Max is forced to survive independently. Though not fully an adult and more a creature of instinct, he survives in the wilderness and on the streets. Eventually captured and interred in a concentration camp, Max is again saved by Herr Kalb who encourages him to work for survival and teaches him how to survive in the concentration camps. Still Max is a creature of instinct, listening to the Nazi soldiers in order to survive.

When he sees that Magda is in a neighboring camp, still holding onto a necklace he made her while in school, he becomes determined to help her survive. Determination to help her survive, although helping him regain his humanity (i.e., no longer only interested in survival), also causes him to endure more horrors, including digging gold from the teeth of corpses to bribe guards. His determination to save her becomes a determination to help others in the concentration camp as well, and he enters adulthood not only by leading but by inspiring.
Pak and Giandomenico paint a poignant and realistic picture of life in a concentration camp and the impact such a life has on the physical and psychological health of its prisoners. The struggles of adolescent boy trying to survive the horrors, slowly losing his own humanity until inspired by another, illustrate the horrific sense pain and yet hope embodied in human nature.

**Strengths and Unique Characteristics of the Work**

The Holocaust, one of the most horrific incidents in the history of mankind, has been the topic of numerous books for young adults. While *Magneto Testament* offers no new insight into the tragedy of the Holocaust, the authors’ abilities to capture the effects of the Holocaust on human life is as artistically rendered as in other pieces of literature.

The text not only works as a graphic novel, but the format lends itself to exploring the reality of the Holocaust, a reality some students have difficulty visualizing. The artist carefully depicts the sensitive nature of the Holocaust, especially the portrayal of corpses, to avoid dehumanizing the loss of human life. At the same time, the artist avoids illustrations which show any sensuality or beauty when depicting the Nazis or their brutality, helping students form powerful understandings of brutality inherent in the actions of the Nazis.

Unlike *Maus*, which makes use of cartoon animals as main characters, *Magneto Testament* is realistic in its depictions of characters. Though the symbolism of Spiegelman’s text is significant to the story of *Maus*, the use of human characters in *Magneto Testament* will help students more clearly see connections between their own lives and actions and those of the characters. Connections not only help students relate to characters and better understand conflicts but also help struggling and apathetic readers attend to the elements of the story. While struggling readers may find it difficult to understand symbolic characterization in *Maus*, the human quality of characters in *Magneto Testament* helps students find immediate connections.

*Magneto Testament* is, in essence, a young adult novel depicting the horrors of the Holocaust and featuring a realistic adolescent male protagonist. Not only do adolescent readers respond well when protagonists are adolescents who are portrayed realistically, male readers tend to respond more positively to male characters. Many struggling readers are males who find it difficult to sustain interest in characters and plot. Max is not only a realistic male protagonist who is a teenager, readers will also become invested in learning how he survives the Holocaust, a storyline heretofore not attempted in the annals of comics history. Many students, particularly males, will know the character of Magneto from comic books, providing them with schema to make the elements of the text not only more memorable but also emotional.

**Possible Objections**
The story of Magneto Testament is certainly situated in the X-Men and Marvel universes, and this is likely to cause some teachers to hesitate using the text in the classroom. After all, one might wonder about the literary quality of “comics” even though he/she already invests in graphic novels for the classroom. While the story is about an adolescent version of one of the most notorious comic-book villains of all time, there is only one slight hint of the fantasy nature of the X-Men universe in the text itself. While facing a firing squad with his family, Max is able to survive while all members of his family are murdered. In many ways, this is reminiscent of magical realism (or fate) and not a suggestion of “mutant powers.” Because he must survive independently, become a voice for revolution, and keep his beloved alive, he has to be thrust into adulthood (like many characters from young adult novels). To do such, the authors must isolate Max from all adults and make him responsible for his own life. A minute break with reality to help their character to survive will likely cause no less confusion since suspension of disbelief is so often necessary for reading literature in general.

The artwork in Magneto Testament unifies the text, helping to make the Holocaust reality. Though images in the text are certainly horrific, sometimes bordering on the grotesque, there is no moment where either artwork or text appears gratuitous and instead both are constantly painting a sensitive and yet moving tribute to that reality. In some instances, whole black pages with little text remind us of the severity of loss and at no time is the loss or the Nazi party beautified or glorified.

Some teachers may also argue that the depictions of the Nazis (and pro-Nazi Germans) are flat and static while the depictions of the concentration camps’ prisoners are robust and dynamic. Certainly making the perpetrators heinous and uninteresting and the victims wholly opposite is vital to painting a moral picture, a picture which is inferred and never direct. The authors do not spend time painting a fine line between the Nazis, showing those who were sympathetic to the cause versus those who feared for their own families’ lives, and the story certainly justifies their depictions. In a testimonial we are offered the perspective of the victim. Enduring the Holocaust as Max did, one can see that the flat depictions of the Nazis as pure evil with no gradations is certainly in line with the experiences and suffering. While we could ask our students to think about whether the victim has a) the responsibility to see the other side as human and b) paint the other side as human, we understand the need to consistently paint those who slaughtered millions as evil.

The idea that this fictional text is referred to as a “testimonial” may also cause some difficulty. Testimonials are represented as realistic depictions of witnessing. The horrors unfurled in testimonials are scarcely the imaginings of fiction and, though the perspective of one individual, make many of us seethe with rage against those inflicting such torment and suffering. To refer, then, to a fictional text as “testimonial” can certainly cause alarm, and perhaps rightfully so. However, as a text that tells the story of the Holocaust from the perspective of Max Eisenhardt, the power of the narrative lies not in recounting the “witnessing” but in provoking the reader into critical and engaged discourse about
genocide. If fictional characters bring our students to such conversations, and if investment in human life comes from investment in fictional life, then we must begin where we can best reach our students.

Ideas for Implementation

*Magneto Testament* is an excellent text to situate in any unit on Holocaust and/or genocide studies, whether as a central or ancillary text used to further the purpose of the unit. The text is accompanied by a teachers’ guide and features numerous ideas for implementation which can further discussion across disciplines.

Because *Magneto Testament* is a visual text conveying information with both images and language, creating lessons using visual images, language, movement, and music can help students think about the Holocaust in multi-sensory ways. Multi-sensory learning can assist students to acquire and retain information learned while reading and can help extend student learning. Typically teachers rely on language-based texts, such as *Night* or the *Diary of Anne Frank*, to relay information about the Holocaust. Though these books are emotionally appealing, students are not employing all their senses to understand the topic. Students could create readers’ theatre or dramatic performances of the text, listen to music (such as fugues) played in concentration camps, listen to recordings of oral histories of life in the Holocaust, and even study artistic representations of the Holocaust (including film representations). The teachers’ guide also suggests particular panels in the text that can lead to conversations about the relationship between art and language.

Ideas for Thematic Braidings

*Night*, *Maus I & II*, and *Diary of Anne Frank* would make excellent texts to use in conjunction with this graphic novel in a unit on Holocaust literature. Expanding such a unit to be inclusive of other genocides might allow for opportunities to use texts such as *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda*, *Speak, Rwanda*, and/or *We Regret to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*.

Awards

2010 ALA Top Ten Books For Teens

Reviews

“Words never suffice to describe the pain of the victims of WWII, but this collaboration by Pak and Di Giandomenico truly reaches your heart” – Luis Alejandro Chavez
“What easily could have been a splashy tabloid take on a somber subject stays focused thanks to Carmine Di Giandomenico’s slightly restrained and stark art style. It remains a deafening reminder of man's inhumanity to man. "We must never forget" rings throughout” – Joseph Szadkowski, *The Washington Times*  

**Resources/References:**


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