

Art Spiegelman on *Crumb*

With the release of the documentary *Crumb* on April 21 at Film Forum, legendary underground-comics artist Robert Crumb finally receives the attention he deserves—but by no means wants. “From what I’ve heard,” says Art Spiegelman, the creator of *Maus* and an acquaintance of Crumb’s for nearly 30 years, “Robert’s ready to change his name and go into hiding because of this film.” Small wonder. Though his work has always seemed bracingly honest—detailing Crumb’s misogynistic sexual fantasies and self-mocking attitude—director Terry Zwigoff has plumbed Crumb’s dark childhood, revealing an abusive, domineering father; a prescription-pill-addicted mother; and two artistically gifted but *exceptionally* troubled brothers. For Spiegelman, the experience of watching a film to find out personal details about someone he’d known for so many years was an odd one. “Crumb’s always been a very closed-off guy,” he says, “so I’ve known him, but his way of socializing in a group is to hide himself in a sketchbook and draw while other people are talking.” The result of that focus is a complex and significant body of work that traffics in racial and sexual stereotypes without ever offering a reader the comfort of knowing the creator doesn’t really mean it. “Cartoon language is built on stereotypes,” says Spiegelman, whose own work has recently been accused of insensitivity, “and Crumb’s cartoons relish those stereotypes in a very kind of mean-spirited way, one could say if one wanted to pass judgment. There are racist and sexist characters really central to the work. The misanthropic aspects of that are more understandable after seeing the movie. Robert’s a genius. He’s a central and important figure in the history of comics, certainly one of our most important cartoonists alive now.”



Robert Crumb.

MICHAEL GILTZ