

= A Contract with God =

A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories is a graphic novel by American cartoonist Will Eisner published in 1978 . The book 's short story cycle revolves around poor Jewish characters who live in a tenement in New York City . Eisner produced two sequels set in the same tenement : A Life Force in 1988 , and Dropsie Avenue in 1995 . Though the term " graphic novel " did not originate with Eisner , the book is credited with popularizing its use .

Four stand @-@ alone stories make up the book : in " A Contract with God " a religious man gives up his faith after the death of his young adopted daughter ; in " The Street Singer " a has @-@ been diva tries to seduce a poor , young street singer , who tries to take advantage of her in turn ; a bullying racist is led to suicide after false accusations of pedophilia in " The Super " ; and " Cookalein " intertwines the stories of several characters vacationing in the Catskill Mountains . The stories are thematically linked with motifs of frustration , disillusionment , violence , and issues of ethnic identity . Eisner uses large , monochromatic images in dramatic perspective , and emphasizes the caricatured characters ' facial expressions ; few panels or captions have traditional borders around them .

Eisner began his comic book career in 1936 and had long held artistic ambitions for what was perceived as a lowbrow medium . He found no support for his ideas , and left the world of commercial comics after ending his signature work The Spirit in 1952 . The growth of comics fandom convinced him to return in the 1970s , and he worked to realize his aspirations of creating comics with literary content . He wanted a mainstream publisher for the book and to have it sold in traditional bookstores , rather than in comic book shops ; the small press Baronet Books released A Contract with God in 1978 and marketed it as a " graphic novel " , which thereafter became the common term for book @-@ length comics . It sold slowly at first , but gained respect from Eisner 's peers , and since has been reprinted by larger publishers . A Contract with God cemented Eisner 's reputation as an elder statesman of comics , and he continued to produce graphic novels and theoretical works on comics until his death in 2005 .

= = Content and plot summaries = =

A Contract with God mixes melodrama with social realism . Following an author 's introduction , " A Tenement in the Bronx " , the book contains four stories set in a tenement building ; they derive in part from Eisner 's personal memories growing up in a tenement in the Bronx . With A Contract with God he aimed to explore an area of Jewish @-@ American history that he felt was underdocumented , while showing that comics was capable of mature literary expression , at a time when it received little such regard as an artistic medium . In the preface he stated his aim to keep the exaggeration in his cartooning within realistic limits .

The story " A Contract with God " drew from Eisner 's feelings over the death at sixteen of his daughter Alice . In his introduction to the 2006 edition of the book , Eisner first wrote about it and the feelings he felt toward God that were reflected in the story . " The Street Singer " and " The Super " are fiction , but sprang from Eisner 's memories of people he had met in the tenements of his youth . " Cookalein " was the most autobiographical ? the main character " Willie " even carries Eisner 's own boyhood nickname . Eisner remarked that " it took a lot of determination , a kind of courage , to write that story " .

The stories ' sexual content is prominent , though not in the gratuitous manner of underground comix ' celebration of hedonism , which contrasted with the conservative lifestyle of Eisner the middle @-@ aged businessman . Eisner used no profanity in the book , and according to critic Josh Lambert the sex in Contract is not so much erotic as disturbing , the characters frustrated or filled with guilt .

= = = " A Contract with God " = = =

In Russia , the young , deeply religious Hasidic Jew Frimme Hersh carves a contract with God on a

stone tablet to live a life of good deeds ; he attributes to it his later success in life . He moves to New York , into a tenement building at 55 Dropsie Avenue , and lives a simple life devoted to God . He adopts an infant girl , Rachele , who is abandoned on his doorstep . When she dies of a sudden illness , Hersh is infuriated , and accuses God of violating their contract . He abandons his faith , shaves his beard , and lives a life as a miserly businessman in a penthouse with a gentile mistress . He illicitly uses a synagogue 's bonds that were entrusted to him to buy the tenement building in which he had lived when poor . He becomes dissatisfied with his new way of life , and decides that he needs a new contract with God to fill the emptiness he feels . He has a group of rabbis draw up a new contract , but when he returns home with it , his heart fails and he dies . A boy , Shloime , finds Hersh 's old contract , and signs his own name to it . Eisner appended a page to the 2006 edition , depicting Shloime ascending the stairs to the tenement .

Eisner called the story 's creation " an exercise in personal anguish " as he was still grieved and angered over his daughter Alice 's death from leukemia at 16 . In early sketches of the story , Eisner used her name for Hersh 's adopted daughter , and expressed his own anguish through Hersh . He stated , " [ Hersh 's ] argument with God was mine . I exorcised my rage at a deity that I believed violated my faith and deprived my lovely 16 @-@ year @-@ old child of her life at the very flowering of it . "

= = = " The Street Singer " = = =

Marta Maria , an aging opera singer , tries to seduce a young man , Eddie , whom she finds singing in the alleys between tenement buildings . She had given up her own singing career for an alcoholic husband ; she hopes to get back into show business as mentor to Eddie , and gives him money for clothes . He buys whiskey instead and returns to his pregnant wife , who herself had given up on show business for him and whom he abuses . He hopes to take advantage of Maria and build an actual singing career , but is unable to find the aging diva again ? he does not know her address , and the tenement buildings appear all the same to him .

Eisner based the story on memories of an unemployed man who made the rounds of tenements singing " popular songs or off @-@ key operatic operas " for spare change . Eisner remembered throwing the street singer coins on occasion , and considered he " was able to immortalize his story " in " The Street Singer " .

= = = " The Super " = = =

Those who live in the tenement at 55 Dropsie Avenue fear and mistrust their antisemitic superintendent , Mr. Scuggs . The tenant Mrs. Farfell 's young niece Rosie goes down to the his apartment and offers him a peek at her panties for a nickel . After receiving the nickel she poisons Scuggs ' dog and only companion , Hugo , and steals Scuggs 's money . He corners her in an alley , where the tenants spot him and call the police , accusing him of trying to molest a minor . Before the police can break into his apartment to arrest him , he shoots himself , embracing Hugo 's body .

Eisner wrote that he based the superintendent on the " mysterious but threatening custodian " of his boyhood tenement . Eisner added a page to the 2006 edition in which a " Super Wanted " sign is posted on the tenement building , following the original conclusion of Rosie counting her stolen money .

= = = " Cookalein " = = =

" Cookalein " is a story of tenants of 55 Dropsie Avenue vacationing in the country . To be alone with his mistress , a man named Sam sends his wife and children away to the Catskill Mountains , where they stay at a " cookalein " ( Yiddish : kochalayn , " cook alone " , a place for boarders with access to a kitchen ) .

A clothing cutter named Benny and a secretary named Goldie are staying at an expensive hotel near the cookalein , both hoping to find someone rich to marry ; they mistake each other for a

wealthy target , and when they discover this , Benny rapes Goldie . Herbie , an intern Goldie had earlier turned down , takes her into his care , and Benny goes on to court an heiress . An older woman seduces Sam 's fifteen @-@ year @-@ old son Willie at the cookalein ; they are discovered by her husband who , after beating her , makes love to her in front of the boy .

At the end of the summer , the vacationers return to Dropsie Avenue . Goldie and Herbie are engaged , and Benny believes he will be marrying into the diamond business . Willie is affected by his experiences , but does not express them , and his family plan to leave the tenement . For the 2006 edition Eisner added an extra page of Willie from a rear @-@ view perspective , looking out from his balcony .

" Cookalein " was the most overtly autobiographical of the stories ? Eisner used the real names of his family members : his parents Sam and Fannie , his brother Petey , and himself , " Willie " . Eisner called " Cookalein " " an honest account of [ his ] coming of age " that was " a combination of invention and recall " .

= = Background = =

Will Eisner was born in New York in 1917 to poor Jewish immigrants . He has said he wanted a career in the arts , but that poor Jews at the time were restricted from upper @-@ class universities where he could study it . Like others of his generation , he turned to comics as an artistic outlet , a career he began in 1936 . In the late 1930s he co @-@ owned a studio which produced content for comic books ; he left the studio in 1940 to produce his best @-@ known creation , the formally inventive The Spirit , which ran as a newspaper insert from 1940 to 1952 . After its end , Eisner withdrew from the comic book world and focused on the American Visuals Corporation , which he had founded in 1948 to produce educational and commercial comics and related media . With the rise of comics fandom in the 1970s , Eisner found there was still interest in his decades @-@ old Spirit comics , and that the fans wanted more work from him . After American Visuals went out of business in 1972 , Eisner entered a deal with underground comix publisher Denis Kitchen to reprint old Spirit stories . Other reprints followed , but Eisner was unwilling to do new Spirit stories ? instead , he wanted to do something more serious , inspired in part by the wordless novels of Lynd Ward he first read in 1938 , and similar work by the Flemish Frans Masereel and the German Otto Nückel .

Eisner had had greater artistic ambitions for comics since his time doing The Spirit . Since the 1950s , he had been developing ideas for a book , but was unable to gain support for them , as comics was seen by both the public and its practitioners as low @-@ status entertainment ; at a meeting of the National Cartoonists Society in 1960 , Rube Goldberg rebuked Eisner 's ambitions , saying , " You are a vaudevillian like the rest of us ... don 't ever forget that ! " .

With the critical acceptance of underground comix in the 1970s , Eisner saw a potential market for his ideas . In 1978 , he produced his first book @-@ length , adult @-@ oriented work , A Contract with God . He marketed it as a " graphic novel " ? a term which had been in use since the 1960s , but was little known until Eisner popularized it with Contract . Though it was a modest commercial success , Eisner was financially independent , and soon set to work on another graphic novel Life on Another Planet , and completed eighteen further graphic novels before his 2005 death ; two featured the autobiographical Willie from the story " Cookalein " : The Dreamer ( 1986 ) and To the Heart of the Storm ( 1991 ) .

Eisner was brought up in a religious household , but himself was a reluctant disbeliever . In 1970 , his sixteen @-@ year @-@ old daughter Alice died after an eighteen @-@ month battle with leukemia . Eisner was enraged , and questioned how a God could let such a thing happen ; he dealt with his grief by immersing himself in his work . When working on " A Contract with God " , he tried to capture these emotions by acting out Frimma Hersch 's character in his head .

= = Style = =

The narration is lettered as part of the artwork , rather than being set apart in caption boxes , and Eisner makes little use of conventional box @-@ style panels , often avoiding panel borders entirely

, delimiting spaces with buildings or window frames instead . Pages are uncrowded and have large drawings which focus on facial expression . He allowed the length of the stories to develop based on their content , rather than a set page count as was traditional in comics before that time . Eisner emphasizes the urban setting with dramatic , vertical perspective , and dark artwork with much chiaroscuro , and uses visual motifs to tie the stories together . The dark , vertical rain surrounding Hersh when he buries his daughter in the first story is echoed by the revised final image of the last story , in which Willie stares out into a city sky in a similar hatched rainy " Eisenshpritz " style . The monochromatic artwork was printed in sepia tones , rather than conventional black @-@ and @-@ white .

In contrast to comics in the superhero genre , in which Eisner did prominent work early in his career , the characters in *A Contract with God* are not heroic ; they often feel frustrated and powerless , even when performing seemingly heroic deeds to help their neighbors . The characters are rendered in a caricatured manner that contrasts with the realistic backgrounds , though the backgrounds are rendered in less detail than in Eisner 's work in *The Spirit* ; according to writer Dennis O 'Neil , this style mimics the impressionistic sense of memory . Eisner explored these sorts of characters and situations further in his other Dropsie Avenue books , such as *A Life Force* .

= = Analysis = =

The stories share themes of disillusionment and frustration over thwarted desires . Frimme Hersh grieves over the death of his daughter , which he perceives as a breach of his contract with God ; street singer Eddie returns to insignificance when he finds himself unable to find his would @-@ be benefactor ; Goldie 's and Willie 's romantic ideals are disillusioned after her near @-@ rape and his seduction . Violence also ties the stories together ; Eddie 's wife @-@ beating is mirrored by the beating Willie 's seductress receives from her husband .

The characters are depicted neither as purely good or evil : for example , Rosie in " The Super " triumphs over the racist , abusive superintendent by stealing his money , having him framed for pedophilia , and driving him to suicide . Confinement is a prominent theme ; Eisner chooses perspectives through which the reader views the characters framed by doorways , window frames , or sheets of rain . Frimme Hersh seeks freedom from oppressive Eastern European antisemitism ; there is a feeling of elation for characters in the final story as they find their way out of the tenement 's , and the city 's , confinement .

According to academic Derek Royal , Jewish ethnicity is prominent throughout the stories ; in " *A Contract with God* " and " *Cookalein* " , religious and cultural Jewish symbolry are prominent , though in the middle two stories , there is little outward evidence of the characters ' Jewishness . The two outer stories further emphasize Jewish identity with the extra @-@ urban portions of their settings ? the rural Russian origin of the religious Hersh in " *Contract* " , and the Catskill mountains in " *Cookalein* " , a retreat commonly associated with Jews in the 20th century . Eisner deals with representing Jewish identity through community . He juxtaposes individual stories and individual characters , who have different experiences which may be incompatible with one another ; this confounds any single definition of " Jewishness " , though there is a communal sense that binds these characters and their Jewishness together . Royal argues that Eisner shows the unresolved nature of American identity , in which ethnicities are conflicted between cultural assimilation and their ethnic associations . As the book progresses , the characters move from overt Jewishness to greater levels of assimilation , presented as an ambivalent change that has costs of its own .

Royal argued that the book was not only important to comics studies , but also to the study of Jewish and ethnic American literature . Much like short story cycles common to contemporary Jewish prose , in which stories can stand alone , but complement each other when read as a loosely integrated package , Royal wrote that *Contract* could be better described as a " graphic cycle " rather than a " graphic novel " . He wrote that such cycles , as well as Eisner 's , emphasized a heterogeneous multiplicity of perspectives , as " [ n ] o American ethnic literature can ever be defined monolithically " .

Art critic Peter Schjeldahl saw the " over @-@ the @-@ topness " endemic to American comics ,

and Eisner 's work , as " ill suited to serious subjects , especially those that incorporate authentic social history " . The work has been criticized for its use of stereotypical imagery ; writer Jeremy Dauber countered that these images reflect Eisner 's own memories of his youth and the strictures that Jewish people felt in the tenements . Others said caricaturized character designs conflicted with the otherwise realism of the stories ; the appropriateness of the style was defended by others , such as Dennis O 'Neil , who said that they better reflect the impressionistic way a child remembers the past .

The concept of a contract or covenant with God is fundamental to the Jewish religion . The idea that God must uphold his end of the first commandment has been a subject of works such as Elie Wiesel 's play *The Trial of God* ( 1979 ) , made in response to the atrocities Wiesel witnessed at Auschwitz . To art historian Matthew Baigell , Hershe 's angst regarding his relationship with God is a modern response to the questions of Hillel the Elder 's quoted in the *Pirkei Avot* : " If I am not for myself , who will be for me ? But if I am only for myself , what am I ? And if not now , when ? " Literary scholar Susanne Klingenstein found Hersh 's character unrealistic from the view of Jewish scholarship . She wrote that " the suffering of the righteous " is " one of the greatest problems in Jewish thought " , and that a character as devoutly religious as Hersh would not have struggled with what she saw as elementary Jewish teaching .

= = Publication history = =

The book took two years to finish . Eisner worked through a variety of approaches and styles , and toyed with using color , overlays , or washes , before settling on a hard @-@ lined style printed in sepia . As he had no deadline , he reworked and resequenced the stories until he was satisfied .

Eisner intended *A Contract with God* to have an adult audience , and wanted it to be sold in bookstores rather than comic shops ; as such , he turned down an offer from Denis Kitchen to publish it . Though he had contacts at Bantam Books , he knew they would be uninterested in publishing comics . To secure a meeting with editor Oscar Dystel there , he called the book a " graphic novel " . When Dystel discovered that the book was actually comics , he told Eisner Bantam would not publish it , but a smaller publisher might .

Baronet Press , a small New York publishing house , agreed to publish *A Contract with God* , which bears the credit " Produced by Poorhouse Press " of " White Plains , N.Y. " on its indicia page . Eisner had originally intended to call the book *Tenement Stories* , *Tales from the Bronx* , or *A Tenement in the Bronx* but Baronet titled it *A Contract with God* , after the lead story , as the term " tenement " was not widely known outside the eastern US . The trade paperback carried the term " graphic novel " , though it is a collection of stories rather than a novel . As Baronet was not financially sound , Eisner loaned it money to ensure the book was published .

Sales were poor , but demand increased over the years . Kitchen Sink Press reissued the book in 1985 , as did DC Comics in 2001 as part of its Will Eisner Library ; and W. W. Norton collected it in 2005 as *The Contract with God Trilogy* in a single volume with its sequels , *A Life Force* ( 1988 ) and *Dropsie Avenue* ( 1995 ) . The Norton edition , and subsequent stand @-@ alone editions of *Contract* , included extra final pages to the stories . As of 2010 , at least eleven translations have been published , including in Yiddish , a language which would have been common with many of the characters in the book .

= = = Editions = = =

1978 Baronet Books , ISBN 978 @-@ 0 @-@ 89437 @-@ 045 @-@ 8 ( hardcover ) , ISBN 978 @-@ 0 @-@ 89437 @-@ 035 @-@ 9 ( trade paperback )

1985 Kitchen Sink Press , ISBN 978 @-@ 0 @-@ 87816 @-@ 018 @-@ 1 ( softcover ) , ISBN 978 @-@ 0 @-@ 87816 @-@ 017 @-@ 4 ( hardcover limited to 600 copies with a tipped @-@ in plate by Eisner )

2001 DC Comics , ISBN 978 @-@ 1 @-@ 56389 @-@ 674 @-@ 3 ( Will Eisner Library )

2005 W. W. Norton , ISBN 978 @-@ 0 @-@ 393 @-@ 06105 @-@ 5 ( *The Contract with God* )

Trilogy )

2006 W. W. Norton , ISBN 978 0 393 32804 2

= = Reception and legacy = =

A Contract with God has frequently , though erroneously , been cited as the first graphic novel ; comic book reviewer Richard Kyle had used the term in 1964 in a fan newsletter , and it had appeared on the cover of The First Kingdom ( 1974 ) by Jack Katz , with whom Eisner had corresponded . A number of book length comics preceded Contract , at least as far back as Milt Gross 's He Done Her Wrong ( 1930 ) . A Contract with God attracted greater attention than these previous efforts partly due to Eisner 's greater status in the comics community . It is considered a milestone in American comics history not only for its format , but also for its literary aspirations and for having dispensed with typical comic book genre tropes .

Eisner continued to produce graphic novels in a third phase to his cartooning career that ultimately lasted longer than either his periods in comic books or in educational comics . According to comics historian R. Fiore , Eisner 's work as a graphic novelist also maintained his reputation as " a contemporary figure rather than a relic of the dim past " .

Editor N. C. Christopher Couch considered the book 's physical format to be Eisner 's major contribution to the graphic novel form ? few in comic book publishing had experience in bookmaking , whereas Eisner gained intimate familiarity with the process during his time at American Visuals . The book succeeded in getting into bookstores , though initial sales amounted to a few thousand copies in its first year ; stores had difficulty finding an appropriate section in which to shelve it . It was put on display at the Brentano 's bookstore in Manhattan , and reportedly sold well . Eisner visited the store to find out how the book was faring after being taken down from display . The manager told him it had been placed in the religious section , and then in humor , but customers had raised concerns that the book did not belong in those sections . The manager gave up and put the book in storage in the cellar .

Early reviews were positive . The book 's marketing consisted initially of word of mouth and in fanzines and trade periodicals , as mainstream newspapers and magazines did not normally review comics at the time . Comic book writer Dennis O 'Neil called Contract " a masterpiece " that exceeded his expectations . O 'Neil wrote that the combination of words and images mimicked the experience of remembering more accurately than was possible with pure prose . O 'Neil 's review originally appeared in The Comics Journal , and was used to preface later editions of Eisner 's book . Critic Dale Luciano called the book a " perfectly and exquisitely balanced ... masterpiece " , and praised Kitchen Sink Press for reprinting such a " risky project " in 1985 .

Eisner 's status as a cartoonist grew after A Contract with God appeared , and his influence was augmented by his time as a teacher at the School of Visual Arts in New York , where he expounded his theories of the medium . He later turned his lectures into the books Comics and Sequential Art ( 1985 ) ? the first book in English on the formalities and of the comics medium ? and Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative ( 1995 ) . As Eisner 's social esteem grew , a distinction developed among publishers between Eisner 's pre ? and post ? graphic novel work ; highbrow publishers such as W. W. Norton have reissued his graphic novel work , while his superhero Spirit work has been reprinted by publishers with less social esteem such as DC Comics . The Comics Journal placed the book in 57th place on its " Top 100 English Language Comics of the Century " list , which called it " the masterpiece of one of the medium 's first true artists " .

Cartoonist Dave Sim praised the book and wrote that he reread it frequently , but called it " a bit illegitimate " to use the term " graphic novel " for works of such brevity ; he stated he could read the book in " twenty to thirty minutes " , which he argued amounted to " the equivalent of a twenty page short story " .

= = Adaptations = =

On July 24 , 2010 , at the San Diego Comic Con International , producers Darren Dean ,

Tommy Oliver , Bob Schreck , Mike Ruggerio , and Mark Rabinowitz announced plans for a film adaptation of A Contract with God . Darren Dean was hired to script it , with plans to have a different director for each of the four stories .

= = = = Books = = = =

= = = = Other media = = = =