

Sequential Sketches of Ethnic Identity: Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* as Graphic Cycle

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The term “graphic novel” enjoys widespread usage today, and even though some unacquainted with comics studies might be at a loss to pinpoint exactly what it is—and even for scholars within the field, the term “graphic novel” is problematic at best—most would probably be able to approximate an accurate description.¹ Thirty years ago, however, such was not the case. As he describes in his original preface to *A Contract with God*, Will Eisner set out in 1976 to write a “novelistic” work that would be a striking departure from the shorter format of comic writing he had been accustomed to producing up to that time.² His previous efforts in comics—for instance, the legendary *The Spirit* series, running from 1940 to 1952—more or less reflected the form of his day: brief narrative scenarios released as installments and concerning a rather fantastic or adventurous subject matter. In this more con-

temporary work, Eisner wanted to ensure that, although recalled from memory, the people and events must be, as he put it, “things which I would have [the reader] accept as real.” He said of his new narrative, “I tried to adhere to a rule of realism which requires that caricature or exaggeration accept the limitations of actuality.” Yet with admitted insecurity over the nature of his newer project, he confesses to a “certain sense of uneasiness at trying to explain what I’m about to present” (2006, xviii–xix). And what he presents, as printed on the cover of the first paperback edition of *A Contract with God*, is a series of realistic and interconnected narratives that bears the generic designation, “graphic novel.”

There is little question as to the importance of Eisner’s work within the medium of comics. *A Contract with God*, along with many of his other “novelistic” graphic texts—e.g., *The Dreamer* (1986), *A Life Force* (1988), *To the Heart of the Storm* (1991), and *The Name of the Game* (2001)—has secured his place as one of the most influential practitioners of the medium.³ However, in addition to their significance to comics scholarship, Eisner’s narratives ought also to be read for their contributions to Jewish and ethnic American literary studies. The subject matter of many of his books, most notably *A Contract with God* and other Dropsie Avenue sketches, could easily stand alongside more “traditional” narratives as illustrative representations of Jewish American life in the twentieth century.⁴ What is more, the very form of *A Contract with God* is strikingly similar to that of other recent works in Jewish American writing. It is comprised of several interconnected narratives that share not only a common setting, but also a number of prominent themes. It functions, in other words, as a cycle narrative, a series of self-sufficient yet interrelated stories. One could read *A Contract with God* in the company of such short-story cycles as Bernard Malamud’s *Pictures of Fidelman* (1969), Steve Stern’s *Lazar Malkin Enters Heaven* (1986), Allegra Goodman’s *Total Immersion* (1989), and Gerald Shapiro’s *Little Men* (2004). Eisner’s interconnected stories are analogous to the more traditional text-only cycle narratives that define much of contemporary Jewish American writing. Read in this manner, the very structure of the work underscores the varied and even fragmented nature of communal ethnic identity.

Although written as a “graphic novel,” Eisner’s *A Contract with God* could more accurately be called a “graphic cycle” in that its narrative structure is based on four shorter stories, all linked by the common setting of a 1930s Bronx tenement house. In this way, the text shares more similarities with the short-story cycle than it does with the traditional novel. Generally defined, the short-story cycle⁵ is a collection of short narratives that establishes relationships among its segments—usually through character, setting, or theme—so as to create a larger whole without destroying the identity of its individ-

ual components. As Susan Garland Mann puts it, “there is only one essential characteristic of the short story cycle: the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated” (1988, 15). Similarly, Forrest L. Ingram defines the form as “a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts” (1971, 19). The cycle narrative can be distinguished from “mere collections” of short stories in that the various parts that compose the text are all directly linked in ways that encourage a more holistic reading. It differs from the novel in its weaker narrative unity and the ability of each of its segments (or chapters or “stories”) to stand alone outside of the book’s larger context. The significance of this narrative form is that it provides an alternative means through which authors can narrate subjectivity, and do so through a “fragmented,” yet nonetheless interconnected, structure.⁶

By applying such definitions of the short-story cycle form to *A Contract with God*, we open up the text so that it may be read not only as an illuminating example of long-form comics, but as a larger expression of the Jewish American experience, one where identity is defined through a plurality of voices (analogous to Eisner’s emphasis on multiple stories). Through his composite or cycled structuring, Eisner links his four Dropsie Avenue stories in such a way that the content of his narratives complements, as well as complicates, the very nature of his chosen medium. In other words, the meaning of each story in *Contract with God* is largely linked to that of the others placed in juxtaposition. Such an emphasis on proximity is significant, not only in terms of defining the short-story cycle, but in understanding comics. Scott McCloud makes much of “juxtaposition” in his noted, albeit awkward, definition of the medium: “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the reader” (1994, 9). Just as, according to McCloud, comics generate meaning through images spatially placed side-by-side, so too do cycle narratives with their interlinked stories, where the significance of one narrative installment is fundamentally linked to those that follow and/or precede it. Put simply, juxtaposition creates meaning. And when this structural concept is applied to the ethnic subject, we can see how definitions of self are contingent upon community. In this way, the ambiguous genre distinction of Eisner’s text—neither a novel nor a collection of disparate stories—parallels a more fluid understanding of American ethnic identity, where no one means of expression in isolation can stand as “essentially” Jewish. So by creating a “graphic novel” that is not really novelistic, Eisner sequentially sketches Jewish American identity by juxtaposing diverse yet interlinked, although at times potentially incompatible, representations of Jewishness.

As James Nagel points out, the short-story cycle appears to have been the genre of choice for emerging ethnic American writers throughout the 1980s and 1990s (2001, 17). Works such as Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984), Frank Chin's *The Chinaman Pacific & Frisco R.R. Co.*, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1991), and Sherman Alexi's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) utilize the form in ways that foreground the multi-voicedness within particular ethnic communities.⁷ The same could be said of Jewish American writing during this same period. In fact, one of the distinguishing characteristics of Jewish American texts over the past thirty years has been the widespread employment of the short-story cycle form.⁸ Such a structure, with its emphasis on fragmented yet interconnected parts, underscores the varied experiences of Jews in the United States. Individuals may differ in the ways they define or perform Jewishness, but there is nonetheless a shared understanding—however loose that understanding might be at times—that binds the various parts into a communal whole. Eisner's *A Contract with God* fits within this narrative trend. It is not a single, continuous story following one or two storylines from beginning to end, but a series of four short graphic works that present Eisner's subject matter through proximity or juxtaposition.

Indeed, the hybrid nature of *A Contract with God*—its fragmented story-like structure balanced against its more novelistic cohesiveness—is an apt form for a kind of ethnic writing that struggles with questions of assimilation and identity. As an in-between text—not a long-form narrative and not a mere collection of stories; neither purely text-based nor solely image-driven—Eisner's graphic cycle underscores the ambivalence felt by many ethnic American (in this case, first- and second-generation Jewish Americans). On the one hand, it represents the rupture of the Jewish subject, torn between the lure of cultural integration and the demands of the ethnic community, what Werner Sollors describes as tensions between relations of “consent” and “descent,” which he sees as “the central drama in American culture” (1986, 6). At the same time, the composite or cycle form, with its unifying themes and iconography, suggests a loose cohesion that is not dissimilar to the ways in which diversity within an ethnic community is tempered by overarching connections shared among its members. In other words, Eisner's text reflects the unfinished nature of the American ethnic subject, one whose sense of self is always ongoing and by necessity lacks any ultimate resolution.

As in other cycle narratives, the tales in this work all share a common thread that binds them together, in this case, the setting of 55 Dropsie Avenue, a tenement building of railroad flats in the Bronx. In his introductory set up of the neighborhood, Eisner visually underscores the close nature of tenement living—words tumble down the relatively thin vertical margins

of the page like the dirt that is shaken out of a neighbor's rug—while at the same time demonstrating the interlinked narrative “apartments” that will follow (xxiv). All four stories are also linked through the themes of desire and disillusion, a state in which each of the narratives' protagonists must come to terms with the reality of their unfulfilled longings.

In the title story, for example, a grieving father, Frimme Hirsch, forswears his relationship with God due to the unexpected death of his young adopted daughter, Rachele. Years ago young Frimehleh, while escaping the pogroms of Tsarist Russia in the late-1880s, had signed a contract with God in which he would respond to God's graces through kindness and good deeds in America (Figure 1). The death of Rachele leaves him angry and disillusioned, and as a result he tosses his contract with God—written on a small stone tablet he picked up on his way out of Russia—out the window, changes his humble and meager ways, and eventually becomes a Bronx slum lord of economic means and power. Eisner emphasizes the cycle nature of his project, not only through tying Frimme's chronicle of disenchantment to the ones that follow, but also through establishing visual associations *within* this individual story. These iconographic links maintain the contiguity of the narrative, thereby showing how the individual parts of Eisner's cycle are inextricably linked to the text as a whole. One such example occurs with the title story's major plot point: the contractual act itself. Several years after the protagonist forswears his religious promise, Shloime, a young Hassidic boy who has recently moved to Dropsie Avenue, finds Frimme's old discarded stone, and after reading it, uses it as a palimpsest to make his own contract with God (Figure 2). The stone itself, similar to the illustrated title page that opens the entire story cycle (3), directly links both figures through the act of writing—something that Will Eisner is himself performing, as if making a textual “contract” with his readers. Notice also how both Figures 1 and 2 complement each other, with both boys sitting hunched over the tablet, alone and with only one meager source of light—a graphic representation of spiritual inspiration—that illuminates their actions. The latter visually recalls the other, but the two images also share striking differences. In Figure 1, young Frimme sits in the direction facing what would be the front of the text—toward the beginning, and looking to the past, if you will—while Shloime is turned in the opposite direction, what would be the yet unread part of the book (or within the context of Shloime's story, his yet-untold future). There are also significant differences between the two sources of light in these images: while the illumination in Frimme's illustration comes from a simple campfire, linked to a relatively impoverished and more traditional life in the *stetl*, Shloime's light derives from a Dropsie Avenue streetlamp. The latter light

suggests a new and modern setting severed from the past—and a world that will go on to serve as the backdrop for the remainder of the book.

If we are to read the opening narrative of *A Contract with God* as a cycle, then such visual composition sets the stage for what is to follow. Frimme's story begins in the Pale of Settlement and ends with financial success in the United States. As an immigrant, he may have achieved the American Dream, but he is nonetheless linked to the past—visually represented through the aforementioned position and campfire (Eisner 2006, 18)—and obsessed with the broken contract. His life story ends immediately after he establishes a new contract with God (another way in which the narrative cycles back on itself), an act reminiscent of his days in the shtetl. His emigration from the Old World to the New sets the stage, suggested in the story's Epilogue by the positioning of Shloime and the streetlight on the original concluding page,⁹ for the tales that follow, all of which concern individuals who are decidedly established in the neighborhood. Read as a cycle narrative, the arrangement of the individual stories suggests an ethnic progression, beginning with the diasporic past and ending, as we will see, on the cusp of artistic detachment and an immersion into the broader American landscape. Much like the tablet on which both Frimme and Shloime inscribe their contracts, the various events on Dropsie Avenue serve as a palimpsest, stories of Jewish assimilation that are metaphorically inscribed one on top of the other—as with the actual text of *A Contract with God*, a graphic cycle whose preceding images and themes resonate throughout and are still perceptible “underneath” the stories that follow.

Similar iconographic links can be seen in the three other narratives in *A Contract with God*. The second story of the collection, “The Street Singer,” nicely counterbalances, through juxtaposition, the rags-to-riches tale of Frimme. What is more, if we are to read the title story as an immigrant narrative—an account of Frimme's negotiation between the Europe and the New World—then “The Street Singer,” and the pieces that follow, may be seen as “settlement” narratives, various accounts of how residents have acclimated to America and the experiences they undergo. In other words, while it may not be overtly ethnic in content, “The Street Singer” nonetheless shows the more impoverished side of the Jewish neighborhood and suggests a more sobering account of post-immigrant experience. The story briefly follows the life of a depression-era man, Eddie, who sings operatic arias in the alleys between tenement buildings for the few coins tossed down from open windows (Figure 3). His desolate life—punctuated with alcohol and an unsympathetic wife—is given new hope when an over-the-hill opera diva attempts to take him under her wings, and into her bed, with plans to make him into a star. The third installment of this graphic novel, “The Super,” focuses on Mr. Scuggs, the oppressive and bullying superintendent of 55 Dropsie

Avenue. His intimidating tactics with the building's residents, however, are no match for Rosie Farfell, the niece of one of the building's tenants. She is a young girl with a grown-up talent to seduce and manipulate men, and she uses her allure to both tease and taunt Scruggs, to the point of suicide.

These stories, like the others of the book, are linked by their physical setting: the Dropsie Avenue building itself. Much as he does in his introduction to the book, in these two middle narratives Eisner uses images of the neighborhood's physical structures to highlight his protagonists' social and psychological positions within their stories. As shown in Figures 3 and 4, Eisner uses contrasting yet complementing graphic images—in ways similar to the two contractual scenes in the previous story, "A Contract with God"—both of which are anchored in the physical environment, and both of which are also potential threats to the Jewish subject. In the first of these, presented almost cinematically as if in a high angle camera shot, Eddie is seen as a small and insignificant form, almost blotted out by the towering sides of the buildings that surround him in the alley. The reader finds it difficult to distinguish his individual features, making him more of a character type than a unique figure. It is as if the hostile urban landscape erases whatever identity Eddie may have had, making him just one of the hundreds of Jewish residents consumed by assimilative culture. By contrast, the close up of the building super provides a wealth of graphic detail. The scowling eyes, the unshaven jowls, and the spit projecting from his mouth leave little doubt as to the distasteful temperament of this man, one clearly threatening to his Jewish tenants. It is no accident that Scruggs is also German and one of the few non-Jews residing in the building, a figure who exacerbates much of the ethnic tensions underlying the text. And whereas Eisner chose to eclipse his street singer in the shadows of the towering facades, here he forces his readers to confront the oppressive power of the super. In the two illustrations leading up to this head shot the entire body of Scruggs and his violent bulldog more or less consume their unframed pages (2006, 96-97). As shown in Figure 4, the super's head almost completely swallows up the vast majority of its unframed page, leaving only a little space in the upper left corner for the cowering tenant.

The middle two stories of Eisner's text share other similarities as well. In contrast to the outer two narratives, "The Street Singer" and "The Super" concern outcasts whose identities are erased due to their moral transgressions, yet in both cases such erasures hold mixed messages for our understanding of Jewishness. In the former, the emerging operatic identity of "Ronald Barry" (the stage name given to Eddie by the elderly diva) is "killed off" when in a drunken haze, and after violently beating his wife, he forgets the street address of his potential benefactor. Such a "death" could be seen as ambiguous in this case, since the potential stage name suggests an obliteration

tion of ethnic identity. Eddie may fail through self-destructive habits, but the aborted whitewashing of his name could suggest the reinstatement of his Jewish identity (albeit a problematic one). In the case of “The Super,” the erasure is twofold. Scruggs takes his own life as a result of his perceived pedophilia, and young Rosie Farfell suffers a possible moral death by remorselessly, and even cheerfully, orchestrating the super’s demise. In the penultimate frame of the story, Rosie is seen sitting on her tenement steps, counting her “blackmail” money while she hums a tune (2006, 121). One is not sure whether to condemn Rosie for her manipulative actions, which may perpetuate the myth of the devious money-loving Jew, or commend her for handily defeating a racist and sexual predator. However, the succeeding illustration brings our attention back to Scruggs. In the original version of *A Contract with God*, the illustration of Rosie sitting on her steps was the final image of “The Super.” But for the new W.W. Norton *Trilogy* edition in 2005 (and for the paperback of *A Contract with God* in 2006), Eisner inserted a brand new illustration that concluded this story, a visual close-up of the “Super Wanted” sign that appears in much less noticeable form in the final page with Rosie (122). The inclusion of this final “Super Wanted” close-up highlights not only Scruggs’s permanent erasure from the text, but it also emphasizes the threats he imposed on the Jewish community. This is similar to the final image in “The Street Singer,” where Eddie is once again presented in shadows and indistinct form (92). So not only does the second story in *A Contract with God* cycle back on itself, beginning and ending with the “anonymous” image of Eddie, but its graphic composition thematically anticipates the wanted sign that concludes “The Super.” Both are reminders that the Jewish subject, in the process of assimilation, faces threats to his or her identity. If “A Contract with God” introduces the challenges of transition into America, then the middle two stories of the collection highlight the difficulties of having “made it” in a modern urban landscape.

By contrast, the final story of the book, “Cookalein,” transitions from a sense of urban centeredness to world beyond the ghetto. As with the other stories in the text, the first visual references we get in the final narrative are not of individuals, but of buildings. Indeed, the vertical image of women hanging out their laundry (2006, 126) brings to mind the book’s opening images in Eisner’s introduction, “A Tenement in the Bronx” (xxiii-xxiv). What is more, the beginning and ending of *A Contract with God* are linked, or cycled, through other narrative means. The opening and closing stories in the text center on sets of idealists: the religious dreamers Frimme and Shloime in “A Contract with God” and, as we will soon see, the autobiographical Willie and the sentimentalist Goldie in “Cookalein.” And whereas the two inner stories are the only ones in the cycle that display no outward

expression of cultural or religious Jewishness (and in doing so allow for a more liberal understanding of Jewish identity, one that is not necessarily linked to overt ethnic iconography), ethnic references permeate the plots of the two outer narratives. The title story is predicated on covenantal matters, and the closing narrative takes place almost entirely in the Catskills, a locale that has served as a cultural signifier for Jewishness throughout much of the twentieth century. Furthermore, both “A Contract with God” and “Cookalein” partially set their protagonists beyond the urban confines of Dropsie Avenue—Eastern Europe in the former, and the Catskills in the latter—thereby tempering any understanding of Jewish American identity as inextricably linked to city space. But perhaps more importantly, the two outer stories within the cycle mirror what can perhaps be seen as the identifying ethnic markers of American Jewishness as it has progressed from a more religiously-based form exhibited by immigrants, such as Frimme and Shloime, to a more assimilated emphasis on cultural or social performance. By the end of the graphic novel, all of the younger characters of “Cookalein” anticipate a world beyond that of their more ethnically-rooted parents. None of the characters in the middle two stories—those who live at 55 Dropsie Avenue or those from the outside—betray any overt Jewish ethnic or religious concerns. As is the case with the other stories of the text, “The Street Singer” and “The Super” are interrelated in such a way that a reading of one better informs our understanding of the other.

The final story of Eisner’s graphic cycle, “Cookalein,” is the most complex narrative of the four. It follows the lives of several individuals during their summers at a cookalein, a country retreat where city dwellers stay in a bungalow on an upstate rural farm, share a common kitchen, and provide their own meals. The narrative’s three storylines concern a garment manufacturer’s family staying at one country farm, and two other Dropsie Avenue tenants—young singles looking for a potential spouse—staying at another. Both Goldie and Benny, the two spouse hunters in the story, hope to marry up into a financially higher class. Eisner uses a single page (Figure 5) to interlink the three narrative strands of the story, showing how all characters depart (or will soon depart) the Dropsie Avenue tenement building and head out into a larger assimilated world where each will seek a freedom that the city fails to offer. The two young singles, as well as the garment worker’s family, are hoping to escape their crowded urban spaces and move up in society, as can be seen in this image and its focus on automobiles. Both Goldie and Benny are shown in cars, symbols of rapid mobility, and the boys of the upstairs family look down on them with excitement as they depart. With its three-paneled layout, one can even read this illustration as a more localized version of Eisner’s large-

er narrative strategy: the juxtaposing and bringing together of diverse stories in a way that underscores their larger, more novelistic, connectedness.

This page is also important in that we see Willie—whom we can read as young Will Eisner¹⁰—as he witnesses his neighbors' departures. Notice that in this illustration, Willie remains inside his apartment, looking out at the larger world through the frame of his window.¹¹ Although like Goldie and Benny he yearns for life beyond his narrow confines, he is not yet a participant of this outside world and at this point functions more as a detached observer. His attitude in this panel is more speculative in nature as he tries to read the street performance below, analogous to the ways in which Eisner narratologically interprets the landscape of his subject matter (and which Willie will begin doing at the end of "Cookalein"). Both the positioning and the theme of this image are repeated again in an illustration of Goldie at a cookalein (Figure 6). Like the younger Willie several pages before, she is poised in a frame-like position—in this instance, leaning on the railing and framed by the outline of the porch—in the act of speculating on the events surrounding her arrival. And also like Willie, her romantic pursuits after this moment of contemplation will be thwarted by sexual transgression: in the case of Goldie, her attempted rape by Benny, and with Willie, an adulterous seducer of his innocence. In this way, Eisner is able to link both "idealists" in a way that foregrounds their narrative desires. Willie, we assume, will eventually become an author who utilizes his observations and hard-won experiences as the grist for his art, and Goldie longs to become a central figure in the "happy ending" to her fairytale romance.

Toward the end of the graphic novel, Willie experiences firsthand the rough and tumble of life outside the relatively safe boundaries of his Dropsie Avenue flat. In fact, the spousal beating he witnesses in the hayloft (Eisner 2006, 163-64)—where he is seduced by Maralyn, a married cookalein guest—is reminiscent of Eddie's adultery and violence in "The Street Singer." Here again, Eisner links narrative elements in such a way that their interwoven nature underscores the cohesiveness of the text. But whereas in the case of the street singer, who learns nothing from his brutality, Willie is apparently changed by his adulterous experience. The penultimate page of "Cookalein" (Figure 7), which also served as the final illustration of the original 1978 edition, shows a more mature and adult-looking Willie back at home, standing on the fire escape and gazing contemplatively down at the life below. Here is another example of Eisner repeating, or cycling, a previous graphic signifier—a visual allusion to the earlier scene where Willie looks out of his apartment window (133)—the young and probably soon-to-be-artist figure observing the world beyond his home. It is as if the more experienced Willie we see standing on his fire escape—and one who shares an obvious onomastic link

to his author—might soon be the author of a work similar to the one we currently hold in our hands. The significance of this visual, Willie's looking outward toward an undefined future, is twofold. First, it functions as an image of closure to the book. Whereas Frimme Hersh is linked directly to his Jewish past, Willie appears to be more invested in a world beyond the tenements. In other words, it suggests a sequence of progression from ethnic centeredness into a more assimilated world. At the same time, the concluding image of Willie serves as a cohesive device that brings together all of the stories in *A Contract with God*. If we read him as a future artist figure (i.e., a young Will Eisner), then the fragmentary character of minority experience in America is given form, cohesion, and meaning through his art, in this case, an art based on juxtaposed images and stories and the meanings such proximities generate. Yet, lest one be tempted to interpret this as a final word on the Jewish subject, that the closing image suggests a privileging of a younger generation's assimilative strategies, readers should take note of Willie's visage. As he stands on the fire escape, he appears noticeably older and less confident than he does earlier in the story.¹² Perhaps more significantly, his expression is pensive to the point of melancholy, almost as if he is uncertain and even regretful of the things that have transpired. If this image of Willie functions as a signifier of ethnic passage, then it is an ambivalent one at best. Assimilation, in other words, is not without its costs. We may even read such uncertainty or in-betweenness as a reflection of the graphic cycle's form, a narrative that is neither a novel nor a short-story collection, a hybrid of both text and image.

The significance of this full-page illustration is given added force in Norton's more recent publication of the text. As he did in with the earlier stories, Eisner added a brand new illustration to "Cookalein" that immediately follows the original ending of the book. In this newer addition to the text (Figure 8), Willie again stands out on his fire escape, but this time we see him from behind, almost as if the viewer were his mother looking out the window (see Figure 7), watching him gaze out over the neighborhood. This shift in perspective—we see nothing but his back as he overlooks the chaotic and fragmented street life below—places us more at a distance from the protagonist, emphasizing his increasing detachment from home life and suggesting that Dropsie Avenue can no longer contain his desires. At the same time, the visual allows us to see the budding author as he cognitively constructs what will become his narrative world. In an almost metafictional manner, Willie becomes "depersonalized" in such a way that he becomes more of a creator-in-process than a figure with whom to identify. It is as if we are seeing the genesis of the *A Contract with God* as it takes form within the mind of its author. A unifying source imposes a telos on these diverse experiences, and the various events Willie observes become the pieces of the

composite narrative we now hold in our hands.¹³ What is also significant about this new final image are the vertical lines that Eisner has drawn to suggest a dark nighttime backdrop. Not only do they cast somewhat of a pall on the preceding events, these lines are clearly reminiscent of the surroundings used at the beginning of *A Contract with God*, when we first see Frimme somberly walking home in the pouring rain—punctuated by sharp, heavy vertical lines that establish a dark mood, what Harvey Kurtzman famously dubbed “Eisenshpritz”—after burying his daughter (i). In this revised final act of illustration, Eisner brings us back full circle, graphically speaking, to the beginning of the book. Read in this way, the cycle aspect of Eisner’s four interconnected narratives highlights not only their sequential and repetitive nature, but the circular composition as well.

These are some of the most overt means in which Eisner uses his graphics to link both the setting and themes of his narrative, and to do so in ways that highlight its composite nature. In essence, he has adopted a specific generic form that not only has become increasingly more prominent within Jewish American writing, but more importantly, one that foregrounds the multifaceted nature of the American ethnic experience: the short-story cycle. One can read the various narratives within the cycle as suggestive of the different ways Jews have defined themselves in this country. This is the kind of narrative strategy found in many contemporary American ethnic works of fiction. The significance of the story cycle is not merely a literary contrivance. On the contrary, in its emphasis on multiple narratives and a diversity of perspective, it allows for a fuller and more varied expression of subjectivity, ethnic or otherwise. And since they directly link individual pieces to a larger narrative grouping, the story-cycle form also underscores one of the most prominent themes in American ethnic writing: the relationship between personal and collective identity. No American ethnic literature can ever be defined monolithically, and the same, of course, can be said of specific incidences within each individual community. Eisner’s *A Contract with God*, in ways similar to other Jewish American short-story cycles, demonstrates that the episodic and hybrid form of the short-story cycle—the interlinked yet autonomous stories that work best together, not separately—is one of the most effective means of capturing the multifaceted, fragmented, and even ambivalent nature of contemporary American ethnic experience.

Notes

¹ As Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven argue, the study of comics has reached the point that we no longer need to make the case for its legitimacy as “seri-

ous” narrative and art. Instead, scholars should now work “to explore what the form can tell us about the project of narrative representation itself. What do we gain from works that are, in their very structure and grammar, cross-discursive: composed in words and images, written *and* drawn” (2007, 768). Although correct, their analysis of “graphic narrative” (their preferred term) is not without its problems—e.g., their privileging of “literary” comics hints at a form of elitism—and what is more, they are merely acknowledging a reality that many comics scholars have taken for granted for a number of years. Yet despite the fact that the case for comics as a literary medium has clearly been made, its critical vocabulary is nonetheless the subject of ongoing debate. The term “graphic novel” is under particular contention. As both Bob Anedelman (2005, 290–96) and Michael Schumacher (2010, 201–05) point out in their biographies, Eisner was not the originator of the label, although he did use it as a way of securing the kind of literary respectability he felt many comics deserved. Still, “graphic novel” does pose provocative questions. Does this name provide more gravitas to the medium, or is it merely a critical (and commercial) affectation? Is “novel” a useful word to apply to long-form comic, or does the imposition of terminology from textual fiction delegitimize the unique project of comics as a medium? Although Chute and DeKoven argue for the term “graphic narrative,” as do I in my study on ethnoracial issues in comics, that alternative is not without its difficulties (and the same can be said for another Eisner term, “sequential art”). For a sampling of recent critical attempts to define and historicize “graphic novel,” see my discussion on the term (2007, 11–16), as well as those of Jan Baetens (2001, 7–9), Charles Hatfield (2005, 5–6, 152–63), Douglas Wolk (2007, 60–64), and Rocco Versaci (2007, 30).

² Eisner’s book was first published by Baronet Books in 1978, and then republished by DC Comics in 2000. In 2005, W. W. Norton collected all three Dropsie Avenue books—*A Contract with God*, *A Life Force* (1988), and *Dropsie Avenue* (1995)—in a hardcover edition, *The Contract with God Trilogy: Life on Dropsie Avenue*, and then a year later published the three narratives individually in soft cover. All references in this essay refer to Norton’s paperback edition of *A Contract with God* (2006).

³ Cartoonist/critics such as Robert C. Harvey and Scott McCloud have rightly acknowledged Eisner’s significance, not only as an early advocate of the long-form comic, but also as one of comics’ first practicing theoreticians. Works such as *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985, expanded ed. 1990) and *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (1996) provide an aesthetic framework for the medium as well as discuss its social significance.

⁴ Although *A Contract with God* and *A Life Force* are predominantly Jewish in subject matter, the same cannot be said of *Dropsie Avenue*. As I argue in a recent issue of *Shofar* (2011), while it nonetheless touches upon several aspects of American Jewish culture, the final text in the *Contract* trilogy is more concerned with multi-ethnic urban relations as a whole, and not necessarily focused on Jewishness.

⁵ Although most critics of this generic hybrid refer to it as “short-story cycle,” others prefer the term “composite novel” or even “short story sequence.” The latter, when applied to comics, would be quite appropriate for emphasizing the serial

nature of many visual narratives. As I explore the structural crossroads of the graphic novel and story cycle, and given the nature of Eisner's chosen medium, I am tempted to privilege "sequence" over "cycle." However, the terms "sequential narrative" or "graphic sequence" could apply to any comic expression, from a simple four-panel installment of Bill Griffith's *Zippy* to Jeff Smith's voluminous epic *Bone*. In light of the semantic baggage surrounding "sequence" within the study of comics, and given the rhythmic structure of *A Contract with God*, I prefer the term "graphic cycle" and will use it throughout.

⁶ American literature is rich with examples of this hybrid genre, including such works as Sarah Orne Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925), and William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* (1942). For the purposes of this study, I am concerned not so much with the short-story cycle and American literature in general, but the ways in which it finds expression in *ethnic*-American writing. For broader discussions of the cycle or composite narrative form, see J. Gerald Kennedy, Robert M. Luscher, and Maggie Dunn and Anne Morris.

⁷ It is worth noting here the similarities between the fragmented voice in the cycle narrative and what M. M. Bakhtin describes as "heteroglossia," the various forms of speech within a culture and the ways in which those languages are represented in the novel. Bakhtin states that the social and historical voices that make up these various languages "are organized in the novel into a structured stylistic system that expresses the differentiated socio-ideological position of the author amid the heteroglossia of his epoch" (1981, 300). In this way, the multi-voicedness of the novel is similar to that of the short-story cycle. However, what distinguishes the cycle narrative from the "cohesive" novel is its more explicit attempt to delineate its various speech acts or perspectives through its affinities with the traditional short story collection and its distinct segmentation. In other words, the narrative cycle is more patently dialogic.

⁸ Although the cycle narrative form distinguishes early twentieth-century Jewish American writing—e.g., Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* (1909), Anzia Yezierska's *Hungry Hearts* (1920), Leo Rosten's *The Education of H*Y*m*a*n K*a*p*l*a*n* (1937), and (arguably) Michael Gold's *Jew without Money* (1930)—a survey of the field shows just how prominent this genre has been more recently. In addition to the aforementioned examples, see E. M. Broner's *A Weave of Women* (1982), Leslie Epstein's *Goldkorn Tales* (1985), Joyce Reiser Kornblatt's *White Water* (1985), Melvin Jules Bukiet's *Stories of an Imaginary Childhood* (1992), Steve Stern's *A Plague of Dreamers* (1994), Allegra Goodman's *The Family Markowitz* (1996), Thane Rosenbaum's *Elijah Visible* (1996), Cynthia Ozick's *The Puttermesser Papers* (1997), Merrill Joan Gerber's *Anna in Chains* (1998), Gerald Shapiro's *Bad Jews* (1999), and S. I. Wisenberg's *The Sweetheart Is In* (2001). And this is just a sampling of contemporary Jewish American cycle narratives.

⁹ One of the new illustrations for the W.W. Norton edition (2006, 62) now concludes "A Contract with God." It is an image of Shloime walking up the stairs as he enters the tenement building. While the directional composition diverges from the forward-looking image on the previous page (which was the original ending of the

story), it can nonetheless be read as promising, with the young Shloime ascending to a brightly lit doorway, which contrasts with the black-inked setting surrounding him. In a personal exchange, Eisner's close friend and publisher, Denis Kitchen, suggests that the cartoonist's inclusions of the new illustrations were not incidental. Even though Norton requested original drawings for its edition—so that the marketing department could advertise the book's "new" material—Eisner did not take his publisher's requests lightly and was purposeful in what he inserted.

¹⁰ Willie becomes the central figure in two later works, both of which are decidedly autobiographical: *The Dreamer* (1986) and *To the Heart of the Storm* (1991). See Bob Anderlman's and Michael Schumacher's biographies of Eisner for the real-life contexts underlying these representations.

¹¹ The window, in this instance, can even be read in a metafictional way, in that it becomes analogous to the comic's own aesthetic frame. Just as Willie looks through his window onto life in the streets, we as readers are observing Willie through the comic's "window," the individual comic panel. The significance of frames and panels should not be taken lightly when approaching Eisner, especially given his stylistic choice of forgoing overtly drawn panels much of the time.

¹² See, for instance, the events that take place on pages 127, 134, 156–57, all of which occur before his encounter in the hayloft.

¹³ Indeed, the autobiographic implications of this new illustration highlight the cohesive nature of this entire graphic cycle. In his correspondence with me, Denis Kitchen indicated that with the new "Cookalein" image, "Will [Eisner] wanted to show the character completely alone in his thoughts, with his conflicted feelings about family and romance, and with a lifetime of decisions ahead. Since the character is named Willie and there are autobiographical elements in the story, I suspect it was Will's retrospective glance back at himself stepping into the future." What is more, Frimme Hersh provides an additional autobiographical reference. As both Andelman and Schumacher suggest in their biographies, the death of Rachele is a fictional manifestation of Eisner's own loss. His daughter, Alice, died at about the same age as Frimme's daughter, and Eisner's reaction to her death, a turning away from God, parallels that of his protagonist. If, as I have been arguing, the links between "A Contract with God" and "Cookalein" bring unity to the text, then the autobiographical foundations of both Willie and Frimme further underscore that structure.

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Figure 1: Frimme's contract from Will Eisner, "A Contract with God" (2006, 18).



Figure 2: Shloime's contract from Will Eisner, "A Contract with God" (2006, 61).

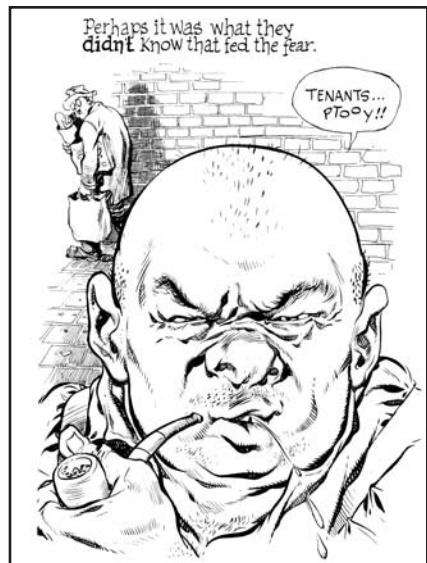




Figure 6: Goldie on porch from Will Eisner, "Cookalein" (2006).

Figure 5: Departure scene from Will Eisner, "Cookalein" (2006, 133).



Figure 7: Willie on the fire escape from Will Eisner, "Cookalein" (2006, 179).



Figure 8: Final illustration from Will Eisner, "Cookalein" (2006, 180).

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