

Books

THE CONTRACT WITH GOD TRILOGY: LIFE ON DROPSIE AVENUE WILL EISNER (NORTON)

The Granddaddy of the Graphic Novel

A year after his death, Will Eisner finally gets some respect.

By Whet Moser

By the mid-1970s Will Eisner was already an eminence grise of the comics world. He'd started out during the Depression as a 19-year-old prodigy, drawing for the short-lived kids' publication *Wow, What a Magazine!* When that folded he cofounded a lucrative comics studio; three years later, in 1940, he created *The Spirit*, a seven-page, full-color weekly now famous for its visual innovation. Despite a detour to serve in World War II, he kept the strip going until 1952, launching the career of *Spirit* assistant Jules Feiffer along the way. After that he started a graphics company and settled into a teaching career at the School of Visual Arts in his native New York City. The Eisners, the comics industry's annual awards for excellence, are named in his honor. But despite his reputation as a visual genius and canny businessman, when Eisner decided to venture back into the comics medium in 1978 he had trouble selling his first property—a bleak, elliptical quartet of stories about tenement life titled *A Contract With God*. Eisner wanted a large publishing house to lend legitimacy to the ambitious, uncategorizable work, which he called a “graphic novel,” but had to settle for Baronet Books, publishers of the Great Illustrated Classics line. When published, the book was critically acclaimed but found little popular success.

Eisner died this past January at 87, and this winter, in a bit of dark irony that could've come from one

of his books, the genre he legitimized has finally legitimized its founding work: Norton, which published his final original novel last spring—*The Plot: The Secret History of the Elders of Zion*—is now rereleasing 14 Eisner works, beginning with a handsome hardcover volume that combines *A Contract With God* with two related books, *A Life Force* (1988) and *Dropsie Avenue* (1995).

Readers familiar only with the current generation of graphic novelists—with Chris Ware's quiet, stuttering loners or Ben Katchor's dreamy, cryptic sketches of city life—will find Eisner very, well . . . cartoony. While contemporary artists often go for a stylized, emotionally subtle look, Eisner is a master of the outsize gesture. His characters are quick to tears, quick to violence. Aspiring to literary significance, he aped the writers of his youth, combining O. Henry's telegraphed morality with the social realism of Dos Passos, and his scratchy technique hums with the vitality of the big city.

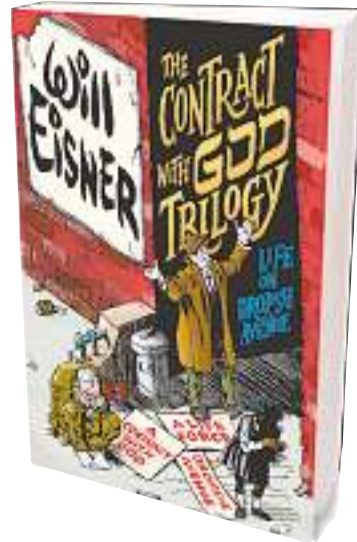
Eisner wrote *A Contract With God* while grieving the loss of his only daughter to leukemia, and the book is drenched in a kind of existential bad luck, a sense that the only order in the world leads things to work out the way they shouldn't. The title story concerns an idealistic young Russian who, orphaned and then sent by his village to America to escape a series of pogroms, inscribes a contract with God into a stone he carries with him, promising a life of good works

in exchange for good fortune. Aiding the elderly and committing himself to a New York synagogue, he enjoys a modicum of success until a baby is left on his doorstep and he undertakes his most generous project—raising the anonymous child. When she dies from an unknown illness, he spits on the contract and hurls it out the window.

Thus released from his obligation to behave morally, he amasses great wealth and lands a pretty shiksa girlfriend. Near the end of his life, however, he has a change of heart and has a group of rabbis write him a new contract. On the day he's given the document, he promises to rededicate himself to God and promptly dies of a heart attack.

As Eisner increases the number of plot threads in each story, the hammy tragedies mount and the body count increases. His storytelling is visually as well as structurally striking—Eisner uses the vertical landscape of his tenement childhood to dramatic effect. And in addition to his literary influence, he owes a clear debt to the hard-boiled moralizing of early Cagney movies and the operatic excesses of the tabloids of the day.

The trilogy's final book, *Dropsie Avenue*, departs from *Contract's* lean fables by charging through the history of the fictional Bronx street where the first two take place. Beginning with the 19th-century Dutch farmers (the Van Dropsies) who originally held the land, it follows the area through waves of immigration and eco-



nomie cycles, touching on civic corruption, the Mafia, race riots, the drug boom, and white flight. The result is a time-lapse narrative that relies on cliché to keep up the breakneck pace.

It's the second novel, *A Life Force*, that uses Eisner's theatrical, compressed narration to best effect. A series of interconnected life stories, it's no less than a social history of New York during the Depression combined with a philosophical investigation into the self-conscious nature of mankind. It opens with a moving if maudlin scene in which an unemployed carpenter named Jacob carries on a one-way debate about the purpose of life with a cockroach that he's saved from the foot of a passerby. Later, when his wife asks how his day was—a day when he's been fired—he responds, “Today?? Today I saved the life of a cockroach.”

This act of benevolence is fol-

lowed by better fortune, but only with the help of a mob-connected Italian carpenter and a down-on-his-luck Yankee with big-business ties who has eyes for Jacob's daughter. Over 140 pages Jacob endures a wedding (his son's), a divorce (his own), a reunion (with a Holocaust escapee from his past), a Mafia hit, Marxist revolutionaries, and a fire.

At the end of the story Jacob is left in his apartment with his ex-wife, saving a cockroach from her rolled-up newspaper. Eisner's cornball fearlessness carries him through this overstuffed, circular narrative. It requires as much suspension of disbelief as the social realist classics that inspired the story, but the graphic novel turns out to be a good—perhaps better—format for such cinematic sweep. Eisner, whose *Spirit*, after all, was a criminologist masquerading as a superhero who lived out of his own grave, recognized that an inherently fantastic medium made such bathos permissible.

More importantly, the overflowing drama of *A Life Force* provides its own moral—don't sweat the big stuff, because it will be overshadowed by even bigger stuff. The first time Jacob rescues a cockroach, it contrasts modestly with the narrative that follows. The second time it reframes the melodrama as a modest narrative in the grand scheme of history.

Eisner's heirs—who include heavy hitters like Art Spiegelman and Frank Miller as well as Ware

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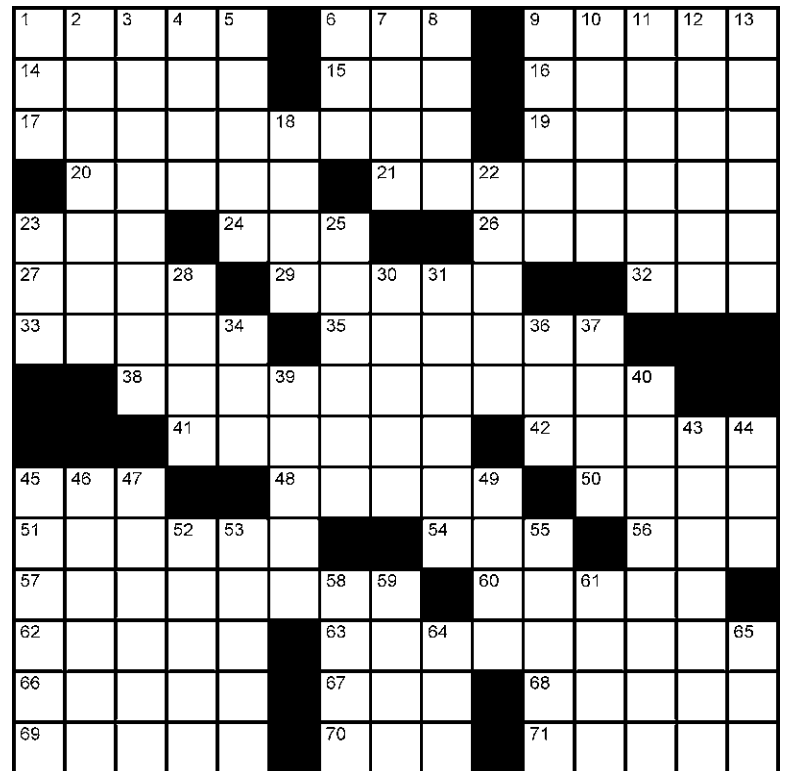
ACROSS

1. Embattled
6. "Oh, how adorable!"
9. Domesticates
14. It may go down on one knee
15. Acupuncturist's life force
16. Multiple choice choices, perhaps
17. Casual Encounter: hotel employee seeking partner for a discreet ____
19. Cattail's locale
20. El entrance
21. In Search Of: Southeast Asian boyfriend; maybe you can work out as my ____
23. Zeta follower
24. The norm; abbr.
26. Good times
27. Material in a trucker cap
29. Make your case
32. Parts of pts.
33. Optimal
35. Broken candy dispenser
38. In Search Of: Central European guy who swings both ways; hoping to receive a ____
41. Skull & Bones members, for instance

42. Violet variety
45. Includes on a memo
48. Having more rings, in the forest
50. Sit at a light
51. They've got your back
54. Crossed (out)
56. North Avenue Beach objective
57. Missed Connection: You gallantly lent me your umbrella during a down-pour, then disappeared—my ____!
60. Back at the track
62. Former Department of Homeland Security head
63. In Search Of: Lady friend for a foreign exchange student in Yorkshire—where can I find my ____?
66. Astral hunter
67. It may be stroked or massaged
68. Principle
69. Is inclined
70. Snare
71. "Giant" of pro wrestling

DOWN

1. Pecs' neighbors
2. Had confidence (in)
3. "Keep yer pants on!"
4. When "Good Morning Baltimore" plays in *Hairspray*
5. Where film winds up
6. King topper
7. Stimulate
8. Spanish con, here
9. Language of Sri Lanka
10. Addis ____
11. To a greater degree
12. Artificial
13. Downhiller's run
18. Physical prefix
22. Crosswise, on a ship
23. Daft Punk's label
25. TV host with a PhD in psychology
28. Unclear
30. Taunted
31. For boys and girls alike



34. Meadow
36. Start the keg
37. Jai ____
39. Well acquainted
40. How tables may be placed
43. Sling mud
44. Craving
45. Subject of a myth about night vision
46. Danes of *Shopgirl*
47. Paul Simon's "Slip ____ Away"
49. Yanks' foes
52. U.S. coin motto starter
53. Utopias
55. Mississippi triangle
58. "Couldn't have said it better myself!"
59. Baltic capital
61. New driver, usually
64. Type of story or sister
65. Quebec place name starter

and Katchor—have taken a step back into a cooler, more subtle form within a more mature medium. In that context his grandiosity seems dated, even quaint. Eisner's excess of ambition, however, expanded the possibilities of the nascent genre. Social history, religious fable, character-driven miniatures, explicit sexuality, cinematic violence—the explosion of narrative forms Eisner compiled into the trilogy can be as enervating as it is enthralling. But in creating a world too big for one book, he created a world big enough for those he inspired to make their homes in, and they've been working in the light of his creation ever since. **B**

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