

The Contract with God Trilogy: Life on Dropsie Avenue Study Guide

**The Contract with God Trilogy: Life on Dropsie Avenue
by Will Eisner**

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Plot Summary

"The Contract with God Trilogy: Life in Dropsie Street" is a graphic novel by Will Eisner, which depicts the rise and fall of the Dropsie Avenue neighborhood in the Bronx. Each of the stories in the novel focus around Dropsie residents, and how their lives play out and intersect with one another.

In the first part of the novel, "Contract with God", Eisner tells four stories. The first story is of Frimmie Hersh, who loses his young daughter, and is horrified because he believes that God has broken a contract with him. The next story is about Eddie, the Street Singer, who has a chance for greatness, but his alcoholism and abusiveness cloud his judgment. There is the story of a brutish superintendent who is robbed by a sexually-active young girl, and then commits suicide when the police are called on him. And there is the story of the residents of Dropsie Street in summer, whom all leave the city for upstate New York.

In the second part of the novel, "A Life Force", Eisner weaves together the stories of multiple people and incidents. For example, there is the carpenter Jacob who assists his rabbi neighbor with building a room for the rabbi's mentally imbalanced wife; and Jacob begins a lumber business with fellow carpenter Angelo, who becomes involved with the mob. Jacob's daughter, Rebecca, marries a Christian man named Elton Shaftsbury, and Elton helps to keep Jacob's business in order. Jacob almost leaves his wife, Rifka, to marry Frieda Gold, newly arrived in America, and Jacob's old flame. In the end, Jacob stays with his wife.

In the third part of the novel, "Dropsie Avenue", Eisner tells the story of the rise and fall of the neighborhood itself, beginning in the 1870s when most of the Bronx was still farmland. Over time, English settlers bought the land and built houses, which were in turn bought and lived in by the Irish. Over time, the neighborhood's private homes were sold and torn down for tenement buildings and railway stations, which in turn draws in minorities, drugs, and crime. Hoping to navigate the tricky waters is Abie Gold, a Jewish lawyer, who together with former Dropsie resident, the elderly Mrs. Rowena, buy the area and build single-family homes. Inexorably, the cycle begins to repeat itself once more.



Part I: A Contract with God

Part I: A Contract with God Summary and Analysis

Summary:

Part I, A Contract with God - Frimmie Hersh lives at 55 Dropsie Street, a tenement building in the Bronx. Hersh has just returned from burying his daughter, Rachele, and the skies have opened up in a downpour. Hersh was born in Russia in 1881, and his parents die when he is 10 years old. Hersh sets out to help his community by running errands and delivering goods, and defending others against the Tsar's troops. Believing Hersh is favored by God, survivors pool their money to send Hersh to America. The elderly Reb Lipshitz is selected to bring Hersh to the coast, and Reb explains that God is always just. So Hersh decides to make a contract with God, writing it on a small stone he brings with him to New York.

In New York, Hersh sets out to study with the Hassidic Jews and to help the community, adhering to his contract. Hersh becomes widely respected and trusted, with the Synagogue even giving Hersh its bonds to safeguard. When a baby girl is abandoned on his doorstep, he adopts and raises the girl as his own daughter. Rachele falls ill, and dies. Hersh is furious, believing God has violated their contract. Hersh throws the stone out the window into the alley, and the rain continues falling for the next several days. When it stops, Hersh prays the morning prayer for the last time, shaves his beard, and buys 55 Dropsie Avenue with the Synagogue's bonds as equity.

Hersh raises the rent by ten percent, at the protest of the building's superintendent, Mr. Cragg. Year by year, Hersh makes money and buys building after building, buying and selling, though he never sells 55 Dropsie. Hersh takes on a mistress, who wonders why Hersh will not sell 55 Dropsie. One night, Hersh walks all the way to the Synagogue to return the bonds, with interest. Hersh asks the Jewish elders there to write a new contract with God for him. The elders at last come up with a contract for Hersh, who gives control of 55 Dropsie to the Synagogue. Hersh then suffers a massive heart attack, and dies. Later, a fire breaks out in the neighborhood, but 55 Dropsie is miraculously spared. A boy named Shloime Khreks saves three children and leads old Mrs. Kelly to safety. A short while later, Shloime is accosted by three rough youths, and he hurls stones at them to drive them away. There, he discovers Hersh's contract with God, and decides to enter into a contract with God as well.

Part I, The Street Singer - During the Great Depression, street singers were commonplace. Their rewards are coins thrown from windows. One day, a street singer receives a note from Diva Marta Maria, widowed from an abusive husband. Marta decides she will be the street singer's coach, and names him Ronald Barry. She makes love with him, gives him money for a new suit, and tells him to come back the following morning for lessons. Meanwhile, she embarks on a quest to book him. Ronald, meanwhile, uses the money to buy whiskey, and returns home. His name is actually



Eddie, and he has a kid and a pregnant wife named Sophie. Eddie is an ex-accountant, a drunkard, and beats his wife and child. But Eddie forgets to write down the address of the Diva.

Part I, The Super - The super at 55 Dropsie is now Mr. Scuggs, a brute of a man who isn't very nice. The job of a super is not an easy job, for he has to deal with hostility, gossip, and complaints. One day, Scuggs hears banging on the pipes and goes up to see Mrs. Farfell, who is angry the boilers haven't been started yet. She complains her ten year-old niece has had to bathe in ice water. Scuggs goes back down to his room, the walls of which are plastered in images of nude women. To pass the time, Scuggs drinks and looks at his pictures, but there is a knock on the door. It is the ten year-old girl, who for the price of a nickel, allows Scuggs to look at her naked. While he isn't looking, she poisons his dog and steals his money box and runs into the alley. All of the tenants shout him down, and he returns to his room. The police arrive, and Scuggs commits suicide.

Part I, Cookalein - Summer arrives, and a new class of tenants appear: vacationers. Fannie and her family are going up to Fegel's Farm in the mountains, to a cookalein -a hotel where Fannie does the cooking herself. Sam will be visiting them on the weekend. Fannie's husband, Sam, is a furrier, who has the dream of making his own line. Goldie, one of the secretaries at Pinkus Furs, has bought two new outfits in anticipation of the summer. Bennie, who works at the skin cutter's, Cohen's, is also going on vacation. Benny rents a Studebaker to go. They all take the train to Mountaintown, in the Catskills. The Fegels are happy to receive Fannie and her two sons, Willie and Pete.

Goldie, and a kind medical intern named Herbie from the train, are staying at Grossman's Farm. Herbie is working there for the summer, and because of this, Goldie won't give him the time of day. Benny arrives, and Goldie mistakes him for a rich man. Benny mistakes Goldie for a rich woman. Meanwhile, back in the city, Sam visits his mistress, Kathleen, who wants him to marry her. Sam agrees to tell his wife on Friday when he heads up to the mountains. He will take his brother's car, and agrees to bring Irving Minks, a salesman, up. Mrs. Minks is unfaithful, and dances with Willie. Fannie knows about Sam's mistress, and acknowledges keeping it a secret. She says that if Sam was a better provider, they could have a better life.

Mrs. Minks, meanwhile, sleeps with Willie in the barn. Then Mr. Minks shows up, and is enraged. He and Mrs. Minks argue, and then go up to her room. Pete, meanwhile, has roomed with a neighbor girl, and the two sneak out to spy on grownups. They come across Benny and Goldie. Goldie wants to be married, but Benny wants to have sex with her immediately. When Benny discovers that Goldie is not rich, he rapes her. Goldie runs back to the hotel, and Herbie takes care of her. Herbie then puts her to bed and goes to work, to play with the band. Outside, he comes across Benny, who is hitting on a rich girl, and Herbie condemns him.

The summer ends, and the residents return to the city. Goldie is now engaged to be married to Herbie, and Benny will be marrying the rich girl, whose father wants to bring



him into the diamond business. Meanwhile, Willie is made the man of the house because his father will be traveling frequently.

Analysis:

Part I: A Contract with God - In Depression-ravaged New York, the residents of Dropsie Avenue fare no better and no worse than residents anywhere else in the country. Eisner paints a moving and haunting portrait of the people who make their lives and stake their claims on Dropsie. Dropsie itself is a nondescript, and stereotypical city tenement slum. It is dirty, full of pollution, and its residents eke out a living day by day.

In many instances, the only hope and inspiration residents have is God, such as Frimmie Hersh. His hope for life arises from a contract he has entered into with God, and his respected position in the Jewish religious community help to give him a sense of purpose. Other stories, such as that of the Super, involve characters with no higher sense or moral purpose, and such characters without some kind of contract with God meet ugly ends (the superintendent kills himself). The Street Singer is another example of such an existence. Indeed, the street singer portrayed is so consumed with alcohol above all else that he misses his one chance to get himself out of the gutters.

The fourth story in the first part ("The Cookalein") foreshadows the kind of deft and intricate story-weaving that Eisner will commit to in the following two parts of the novel. It is the only part of the novel that occurs outside of Brooklyn, outside of Dropsie Avenue, and occurs in the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York. Interestingly enough, whether intentional or not, Eisner seems as well to foreshadow the coming storm that will be known as urban decay. The city itself is not the source of crime and lowlife behavior, but rather, it is the people in the city that create such conditions. In the fourth story, a handful of city characters of the lower class are taken out of the city, and placed in the country -and their problems, flaws, and failings as people come with them. This, as well, can be seen as the people themselves having no sense of higher religious or moral purpose.



Part II: A Life Force, Izzy the Cockroach and the Meaning of Life - The Enchanted Prince

Part II: A Life Force, Izzy the Cockroach and the Meaning of Life - The Enchanted Prince Summary and Analysis

Part II, Izzy the Cockroach and the Meaning of Life - It is the mid-1930s, and the Depression is in full swing. Jacob Shtarkah, hired to build a study hall on the Shul, is nearing the completion of five years of work. The hall will be not be named after Jacob, and he is horrified. Jacob feels as if he no longer has a purpose in life, and doesn't feel any different from a cockroach. In an alleyway, Jacob collapses from a mild heart attack.

Meanwhile, Jacob's wife, Rifka, is preparing for the Sabbath. She wonders where her husband is. Shortly thereafter, a cockroach named Izzy falls from two flights up, hitting the pavement beside Jacob. Jacob begins having a philosophical conversation with Izzy. For Izzy, it is enough to be alive; for Jacob, he needs to know why he is alive. Jacob prevents a man from stepping on Izzy. Jacob then recovers, and heads home. Izzy also recovers, and heads home.

Part II, Escapee - Manhattan is seen as the Promised Land to those in the Bronx. Jacob's son, Daniel, has become a doctor in Manhattan. Daniel doesn't want to come home for dinner on Friday, because his mother doesn't like his non-Jewish fiancée, Theresa, and won't come alone. Rifke pretends to have an attack, and Daniel promises to be right over. Meanwhile, Jacob returns home, having spent the day at the Carpenter's Union Hall, seeking a job that could not be found. Their daughter, Rebecca, teaches in night school. Rifke is happy to announce that Daniel will be coming over for dinner as always.

Part II, On the Top Floor, Back, Lived God - Rabbi Bensohn teaches the young at a reduced rate for those who cannot afford regular educations. Rabbi Bensohn is strict, but fair. His wife, Becka, is not right in the head, and he hires Jacob to build him an extra room for her to stay in. The boys that Rabbi Bensohn instructs believe Becka is an angel, for she interrupted their studies.

Part II, Shabbasgoy - Elton Shaftsbury, heir to the Shaftsbury Axe-Handle company fortune, wants to pursue a social life rather than business. He sells the company and invests everything in stocks. The crash takes everything, and Elton is reduced to selling apples on the street corner. The bank forecloses on his house, and Elton moves to the Bronx, to 55 Dropsie. There, on the Sabbath, Rifke pays Elton fifty cents to turn on their stove and electrical appliances. There, he meets Rebecca, who takes an instant liking



to him. Elton, meanwhile, goes on the job hunt. He becomes a runner for a stock broker. Rebecca invites Elton to go skating, much to the chagrin of her mother. They both fall for one another quickly. Meanwhile, an Italian mobster takes an interest in Elton because he is a bond runner, and they want to finger him into the gang.

Part II, The Black Hand - The Black Hand is a Sicilian mafia group responsible primarily for enforcement and discipline. Their signature calling card is a black hand on a paper. Of those in the Black Hand are Moustache Pete and his right-hand goon, Lupo. They take on Angelo, who owes the Black Hand money, to watch for Elton Shaftsbury. Meanwhile, Jacob comes to see Angelo to ask for his help in building Rabbi Bensohn's room. Angelo is happy because he believes that he can pay the Black Hand something, and they won't force him to watch out for Elton.

Part II, The Enchanted Prince - Aaron, a handsome and happy child, suffers from a mental handicap of fear and grand dreams, and moves into 55 Dropsie. In anonymity, he learns and writes and speaks to ghosts. But one day, he gathers enough strength to go out into the world. Meanwhile, Moustache Pete and Lupo trail Elton. In the alley, Lupo tries to scare away Aaron, but ends up shooting himself in the process. Elton arrives home as the ambulance arrives to take Lupo away, and Aaron returns to his dark apartment.

Analysis:

Part II: A Life Force, Izzy the Cockroach and the Meaning of Life - The Enchanted Prince - Eisner constructs the second part of his novel, which will take place entirely within the bounds of Dropsie Avenue. As mentioned in part one, the tenement buildings there are like "ships anchored in concrete" in which the entire lives of people play out. Such is the case with the second part of the novel as well. We are introduced to the character of Jacob, who will become instrumental and pivotal throughout the second part. Jacob is seeking a purpose in life, and his philosophical conversations with a cockroach underscore the point that there are people in tenement slums who have much greater depth and sophistication than their circumstances and situations might otherwise intimate.

Jacob proves to be one of those few individuals who transcend their circumstances, and the cockroach -living just to live- can be used to metaphorically typify nearly all others in the tenement slums. No one is looking for a higher moral purpose, a reason to be alive, a reason to live at all, except Jacob. Jacob is torn by the question of why he exists, what God has planned for him -where others, like his wife, seems primarily preoccupied with getting her son to come home for dinner; and Angelo, who seems primarily preoccupied with getting away cleanly from the mafia.

As if to underscore the point that the situation and the squalid circumstances do not make a neighborhood (or the person), Eisner presents the character of Elton Shaftsbury, whose only purpose is his social life. Indeed, he wastes his family fortune in stocks because he doesn't want to work, and ends up having to work harder than he may have had to had he not given up his father's company.



Part II: A Life Force, The Enchanted Prince - Survival

Part II: A Life Force, The Enchanted Prince - Survival Summary and Analysis

Part II, The Revolutionary - In 1934, socialists, Communists, anarchists, and other revolutionaries descend upon Dropsie Avenue. Willie, the son of Morris and Sophie, becomes a member of the revolutionary movement. He invites Ben and a special friend over to his house after school to print up information. At a meeting, Mr. Vostrov, from Soviet Russia, addresses those gathered. He recommends putting small children and babies at the front of protests, and agitators from behind will then throw rocks, forcing the police to attack the demonstration, and giving the newspapers photos of police assaulting small children and women. Meanwhile, local businesses are forced to join unions under penalty of violence. Morris and his foreman, Max, are the victims of such union bullying. Max suffers brain damage from his attack, and Morris is beside himself. When Morris discovers his son creating Communist posters in his house, he becomes enraged. Willie decides to stay with his family rather than join the Communists.

Part II, Upturn - Jacob and Angelo begin planning for Rabbi Bensohn's new room. Hoping to buy supplies at Lombardi's Lumber Yard, they discover that Lombardi has been foreclosed upon. Meanwhile, Elton and Rebecca struggle with their Jewish-Gentile relationship. Elton goes outside to sit on the steps sadly, and runs into Jacob. Jacob explains his problem, and Elton offers to help. Elton convinces Mr. Smith to leverage the lumber yard and then take it public. Elton is then promoted to underwriter, and Jacob and Angelo become partners in the lumber yard.

Part II, Sanctuary - As Nazism rises in Germany, Frieda Gold sends a letter to America asking for help. She is Jacob's old flame before he married. He goes to Elton for help, and Elton arranges so that Jacob will become responsible for Frieda when she arrives. Meanwhile, the lumberyard business is picking up. Jacob will have to borrow money from the business to bring Frieda over. Meanwhile, Immigration Services discovers that Frieda Gold has a family. They list the papers as improperly filed, forcing them back through channels. Jacob, meanwhile, doesn't appear to be doing so well, but he continues working anyway. Angelo asks Moustache Pete over to see if he can help Jacob in his dilemma. Jacob pays Moustache Pete \$50 in down payment for Pete to push his Immigration Services friends along. Angelo arranges for a place for Frieda to stay. Jacob has not told his wife about Frieda, because he thinks he might be in love with her once more.

Part II, America, America - Frieda Gold arrives in America, and is met by Jacob at Ellis Island. Jacob agrees to hire Frieda at the lumber yard. Frieda reveals she broke off their plans for marriage because her mother didn't approve of Jacob wanting to be a sculptor. Meanwhile, Rifka wants Jacob to speak to Rebecca, believing she is around Elton too



much. Meanwhile, Moustache Pete comes to the lumber yard to see Jacob and Angelo. Pete arranges to sell them half-price lumber, payment due upon being sold. At the same time, the lumber yard's profits soar, and Elton is congratulated by Mr. Smith and Mr. Weiss for his successes. The public offering that is planned will bring in \$5 for 75,000 shares.

Jacob and Elton discuss Rebecca. Jacob opposes Elton marrying his daughter because he is a Gentile, and because of the antisemitic fervor in the world which could cause the two of them problems. Frieda, however, encourages Jacob to let them marry and not to interfere with their love. Frieda also finds it suspicious they pay cash for Pete's lumber.

Part II, The Gunfighter - A little boy named Yussie goes off to ride the merry-go-round. He brings his cowboy hat. His imagination runs wild, and he pretends he is a gunfighter. While playing in the lumber yard, he comes across a body, which he tries to tell to Willie, but Willie is busy. He comes in to see how Morris and Max are getting along. Max, who is like family, is brain-damaged from the union attack, and Morris and his wife now take care of him. Willie is told he will work for Morris, delivering coats. Outside, Yussie tells Elton and Rebecca what he has seen. The body is now gone, but the clothing he wore is in the trash can, along with a flier for lumber distribution from Pete.

Moustache Pete, meanwhile, discovers what his henchman Gino has done. Gino accidentally dumped the body in the lumber yard, but has since put the body in the river. Elton checks up with Jacob and Frieda about their purchases from Pete. Elton is suspicious. Jacob, meanwhile, is rejected by Frieda, who tells him to go home to his wife. On his way home, Elton sees Pete's boys knock out lumber truck drivers and steal their lumber. Elton's bosses, Mr. Smith and Mr. White, net \$400,000 from the public offering, and make him a partner in the company. They could care less about mafia being involved in the company, but it doesn't sit well with Elton. Rebecca and Elton decide to marry right away, because Rebecca is pregnant.

Part II, Survival - Willie continues working for his father, Morris, and Morris has Willie bring along Max on deliveries. Max sees Gino -the man who beat him before and caused his brain damage- and follows him. Gino has discovered the dead man in the lumber yard was a federal agent. Meanwhile, Jacob has asked for a divorce from Rifka, and it is revealed the two were promised to one another in the form of an arranged marriage.

Gino goes to the lumber yard and beats up Angelo, tearing the place apart looking for the dead man's clothes. He inadvertently starts a fire, and Max carries Angelo to safety. Max then goes in after Gino. Jacob goes to Frieda's, to announce that he is seeking a divorce, As they are about to make love, the police arrive with news of the fire, and the discovery of two bodies. Because the fire is ruled accidental, Elton reveals the insurance company will cover a new, modernized lumber yard. All of the records of dealings with Pete are destroyed in the fire, so Jacob and Angelo can have a clean start. Elton also reveals that the day before, he and Rebecca were married at City Hall. Frieda's daughter, meanwhile, has gone to Palestine, and Frieda has decided she will also go there -without Jacob. Jacob then returns home to Rifka.



Analysis:

Part II: A Life Force, The Enchanted Prince - Survival - The second half of part two sees events in Eisner's Dropsie Avenue reach their crescendo. Each of the lives of each of the characters continue to cross with, and join the paths of others. Jacob's character is revealed to be even more complex than previously understood, as his heart is stirred by the arrival to America of his old flame, Frieda. Before, Jacob's personal life was in place securely, where his career was in existential jeopardy; now, Jacob's professional career is soundly in place with the lumber yard, but his personal existence is in existential jeopardy.

At the same time, Elton works his way back up the social ladder, making more and more money and successfully becoming a partner at the brokerage firm he works for. Jacob and Angelo, at the bottom of the rung begging for work once upon a time, are now at the top of their game, overseeing a booming lumber yard. Eisner's depiction of Elton's fall and resurrection, as well as the rise of Jacob and Angelo, illustrate that once again, the circumstances and situations people are born into, or thrown into, do not mean they are fated to the same squalor. Each of them, however, succeed for different reasons. Elton was lucky to have been born into a business, but he refused to use his knowledge until it became necessary; Angelo was the beneficiary of good grace from Jacob; and Jacob, seeking his higher moral purpose, crosses paths with Elton who lives in the same building. Each one of these characters didn't have to succeed, but each one of them made and seized opportunity.

At the end of the novel, Jacob returns to work and to Rifka - if somewhat uncomfortably. While a new, modern lumber yard and better business is in their future, Jacob and Rifka are once again given the opportunity not to take advantage of their opportunity, but they nevertheless do so. Rifka could easily have given up on Jacob when Jacob wanted to leave, and didn't have to welcome him back, but she has. Jacob didn't have to return to work and to his home, but he did. There is a sense of strength in their will as people, and in their personal motivation and drive.



Part III: Dropsie Avenue

Part III: Dropsie Avenue Summary and Analysis

Part III, Dropsie Avenue - Among the earliest settlers of the Bronx are the Dutch, including the Von Dropsie family, who own a farm there through the 1870s. The English begin moving into the area, building small towns, which enrages Dirk. He sets fire to English crops in a drunken rage, and kills his niece, Helda, in the process. The girl's father buries her, and then kills Dirk and buries him. A neighborhood grows up around the Dropsie place. The house later burns down, killing both Dropsie and his wife. The lot is the last open lot in the neighborhood, which is itself a good neighborhood. The neighborhood becomes exclusively English in ancestry, until the Irish O'Brien family moves in. The neighbors are unhappy about it, and few ever attend O'Brien parties. The next door neighbors, the Skidmores, leave for Connecticut, and the O'Learys move in. The O'Briens believe the O'Learys lower the class of the neighborhood. Mr. O'Leary wants his son, Neil, to work for the company, but Neil doesn't like the corruption.

Neil's sister, Coleen, following an affair with the neighbors, feels as though she is in prison, and she decides to leave Dropsie. O'Leary's son becomes a priest, while Coleen becomes a prostitute. Coleen's situation drives her parents to the grave. Neil saves his sister from her pimp, and sends her to Canada. Neil then gets married and moves to the country. Meanwhile, the neighborhood becomes more populated and more compact, with smaller houses and smaller yards. The Dropsie Avenue Property Owners Association is formed to keep more German people from moving into the neighborhood. Danny Smith comes home from the war with a French girl, and moves into his old house. He becomes a planning director with the City Transportation Department. Trains, stations, and rails are being laid. Property owners look to the northern end of Dropsie to build cheap tenements, hoping the cost makes up for the inconvenience of the train noise. Danny is drawn into a circle of businessmen and swindlers, and they make sure to keep their power and their money. Danny and his wife move to Manhattan.

With the railroad through Dropsie, tenements spring up everywhere, replacing private homes. Among those who remain in a private home is Mrs. Sheppard, who is dying, and her wheelchair-bound granddaughter, Rowena. Rowena helps hide a youthful thief, believing him to be her Prince Charming. The boy is a mute and cannot speak. Together, they plan to marry and begin a flower business. Meanwhile, new immigrants move into the neighborhood, and some youths plan to rob the flower business but fail miserably when Rowena's boyfriend beats them up. The youths are then inducted into a bootlegging circle. Mr. Slade's drug store is forced into the business. Whorehouses spring up, and Mrs. Reilly rallies the neighbors in protest to the changing neighborhood. Mrs. Reilly is then pushed off her roof. The neighborhood continues to deteriorate, and Father Tim O'Leary presides over Rowena's wedding, and she and her husband move out to Westchester. Meanwhile, Italians and Jews begin flooding the neighborhood, and the locals are up in arms, but the neighborhood changes again.



The Depression hits. Prices are cheap. A little local clothing seller named Izzy buys a building and rents to Jews escaping persecution in Europe. Abie Gold, a Jewish boy, and Marie Leone, a Catholic girl, plan to marry when Abie gets out of college. It is jarring to local residents, both Jewish and Catholic. Rabbi Goldstein and Father Gianelli, Father O'Leary's replacement, help unite the neighborhood around the wedding. Abie Gold, representing both Gianelli and Goldstein, goes to Izzy to press charges against him for violations of the health code in his buildings unless Izzy gives them a store, rent-free, for a children's club. Izzy concedes.

World War II breaks out. Abie Gold becomes a military lawyer, and defends Aldo Nero and Dino Torresi, two Dropsie Avenue residents from selling government issued supplies to the black market in Europe. Aldo and Dino come home to a changed neighborhood, with a new round of foreigners. Aldo and Dino are hired by Polo Palermo, who wants to organize a political group to get the neighborhood back into shape. Aldo and Dino vandalize buildings to unite residents against landlords, and to rally them to Palermo. Abie Gold gets the fines dropped if Izzy agrees to fix his buildings.

By the time of the Korean War, Hispanics begin moving into the neighborhood. Fights break out between Italians, Jews, and Hispanics. Abie is nominated for council by Palermo. Meanwhile, Mr. Svenson, the super of one of Izzy's buildings, wins the lottery and buys the building. He then hires a black man named Jim from Alabama to work as the caretaker of the building. Ruby, the daughter of the new caretaker, befriends Rosie, and the two eat lunch at Rosie's house. Rosie's neighbors are not at all happy about it. Meanwhile, Consuelo and her husband, Adolfo, are having marital issues, and an Indian shaman pretends to turn Adolfo into a dog so Adolfo can flee to San Juan.

The 1960s and Vietnam arrive at Dropsie Street. Red is drafted, and wants to go fight in the war. His girl, Wanda, can't understand why he won't go to Canada. At the same time, Father Gianelli and Rabbi Goodstein continue to get Izzy to donate money to charity. Abie has won his election to council, and Izzy asks him for help with taxes. If Izzy will integrate his buildings, his taxes will lessen. Izzy is forced to concede, and blacks begin moving into his buildings, to the chagrin of the other tenants, who begin moving out. The boiler blows in Mr. Svenson's building, and the lack of money and repairs forces Mr. Svenson to lay off Jim. Svenson is forced to sell his building for a tenth of what he paid for it. Jim is meanwhile hired to help take care of the Shul on Burley Avenue. Meanwhile, Consuelo's dog dies, and Father Gianelli won't perform last rites. The locals take it as an Italian attack on Hispanics, and the Hispanics target Italian businesses and homes. Riots break out. Abie is put in charge of quieting things down, and he plays into racial hatred to elect an Hispanic to the council in response for peace.

The Svenson building becomes derelict, and bums and drug addicts begin living there. It burns to the ground after it is raided by police. Izzy sells 44 Dropsie Avenue, and it is then resold to a finisher, who sells all the fixtures for scrap. The tenants then decide they will not pay rent. The building is insured for more than what it is paid for, and a fire breaks out, burning the building down. Red, years after the war, becomes a drug dealer, running Dropsie Avenue. Aldo is brought in to forge an alliance with Palermo, but they both refuse, and Red has them blown up in their car. Many people begin moving out.



Father Gianelli goes to Italy. Reverend Washington, a black clergyman, become the unofficial leader of the block. Abie decides to leave the council and go back into private practice. Abie's father and father-in-law at long last decide to leave after their stores are vandalized. The neighborhood continues to deteriorate, and the Jews are targeted by other minorities. Izzy sells all of his buildings, and hires Abie to manage his estate. Abie and his family then decide to move to Westchester.

Soon, only one building remains standing on Dropsie Avenue. It is razed to the ground, and Red is killed in the explosion. Years pass by. A reunion is held for old members of the neighborhood, including Abie, and Ruby Brown, now a deputy mayor for city planning. Rowena, now a millionaire and in charge of a very profitable business, buys Dropsie Avenue. Abie Gold acts as her lawyer. When she dies, Abie Gold is given the project to handle himself. Dropsie Gardens is built, and a better class of people move in. But the neighborhood again becomes prey to foreigners and corruption, and begins heading downhill once more.

Analysis:

Part III: Dropsie Avenue - Will Eisner chooses to focus on the Dropsie Avenue neighborhood itself in the third part of his novel. As if to highlight his point made at the end of the novel - that people make a neighborhood - Eisner focuses on the story of Dropsie's rise and fall. Each wave of residents in the area bring their own character and influences to bear on the landscape, and the identity as people ultimately affect the neighborhood, not the other way around.

The Dutch-American settlers of the Bronx are farmers, who tend to quiet fields and live quiet, staid lives. Their land and homes are clean and well-cared for. English-American settlers build houses and bring a tremendous sense of culture and class to the area, turning the place into an actual neighborhood and street. The English take care of their homes and their neighborhood, but the arrival of the ascendant Irish class compels most English residents to leave and relocate. Each successive wave of residents means smaller houses and more compact lots, with less and less space and foliage. By the time the 1920s roll around, most of the neighborhood consists of tenement buildings. There are few private homes remaining.

The tenements prove to be the irrevocable stain on the neighborhood. Everything from cheap apartments to rent control bring in surges of immigrants and minorities of lower and lower class, who brings drugs, vice, disease, and corruption to the area. All attempts to save the neighborhood are done away with in one way or another. It is in such a background that people like Jacob, and then later Abie Gold, Elton Shaftsbury, and Ruby Brown manage to make their way and thrive. Each of them are different races with different religions and backgrounds, yet their common denominator is a higher sense of purpose. They are not consigned to a fate, but rather transcend their circumstances. Theirs is a path that many others could have followed if they had chosen to do so, but for whatever reasons, those others refused to follow.



Characters

Frimmie Hersh

Frimmie Hersh is a Jewish resident of 55 Dropsie Street, a tenement building in the Bronx, New York. He is a much-respected and trusted man in the Jewish community, and is a native of Tsarist Russia. Facing death at the hands of pogroms, Frimmie's friends and neighbors send him to America. On the way, he carves a contract with God in stone, so that God will always bless him for doing good. In America, he studies Hassidism and becomes well-known. A baby girl is left on his doorstep, which he raises as his own daughter. He names her Rachele. When Rachele is a teenager, she succumbs to illness, and Frimmie is beside himself. He believes God has broken His end of the contract, and so leaves the Jewish community after throwing the contract through the window.

Frimmie becomes a real estate mogul, but ultimately gives back to his community's synagogue in exchange for a new contract with God. Yet, shortly after he receives the new contract, Frimmie dies of a heart attack, and his contract is found by a little boy, who then begins his own contract with God.

Frimmie is the semi-autobiographical character of Will Eisner, who lost his own daughter in a similar way.

Herbie

Herbie is a medical student and intern who goes to stay in upstate New York for the summer, where he works as a musician. He is kind, wears glasses, and is friendly. He meets a beautiful girl named Goldie, whom initially snubs him because she is looking for a rich man. Yet, after she is raped, Herbie comes to her rescue, and the two end up marrying one another.

Goldie

Goldie is a young secretary at a fur company, and has in her mind that she will marry a rich man. She vacations in upstate New York, where she meets Herbie. She initially snubs him, because she wants to marry a rich man. She mistakenly believes a man named Benny to be wealthy, but Benny is only looking for a rich woman. When he discovers Goldie is not rich, he rapes her, and Goldie is treated and cared for by Herbie, whom she ends up marrying.



Jacob

Jacob, the elderly husband of Rifka, and father to Rebecca and Daniel, is a carpenter by trade who lives on Dropsie Avenue. He is kind and caring, and believes his existence is matched by his purpose. When he finishes a five-year project at the Synagogue for a study hall, he believes he no longer has a reason to live. He discusses such philosophy with a cockroach in the alley outside his building, and goes inside for dinner. He is hired by Rabbi Bensohn to build a room for the Rabbi's wife, and to do this, he partners with Angelo, an Italian immigrant who is also a carpenter.

Jacob and Angelo become friends, and with the help of Elton Shaftsbury, a stockbroker, they come into ownership of a lumber yard. Jacob then receives word that his old flame, Frieda, is fleeing persecution from the Nazis, and he arranges for her to come to America. Jacob, whose marriage with Rifka was arranged, seeks a divorce to marry Frieda, but ultimately returns to Rifka when Frieda goes to Palestine. Jacob's daughter, Rebecca, later marries Elton.

Elton Shaftsbury

Elton Shaftsbury, the heir to a family fortune in axe-handle manufacturing, sells the business to invest in stocks so he can focus on his social life. When the stock market crashes, he loses everything, and moves to Dropsie Avenue where he works as a runner for a stock company. Later, he meets Rebecca, and helps her father, Jacob, to acquire a lumber yard and makes it a successful business. Ultimately, Elton and Rebecca end up married.

Frieda Gold

Frieda Gold is the old flame of Jacob, who comes to America seeking to flee Nazi persecution. She works at the lumber yard, and Jacob wants to divorce his wife to marry Frieda, but Frieda rejects him. Frieda ultimately goes to meet her daughter in Palestine.

Abie Gold

Abie Gold is a Jewish lawyer and city council member who tries to help racial and ethnic tensions on Dropsie Avenue. He is kind and patient, as well as incredibly intelligent. He serves as a retainer for local real estate mogul Izzy Cash, and is ultimately hired by Rowena to purchase the Dropsie neighborhood and to turn it into an area of single-family homes. Abie ultimately moves with his family to Westchester.



Izzy Cash

Izzy Cash is a self-made man who buys and sells clothing out of a wagon he pulls, until he can afford to buy an entire building. He is a cunning and ruthless landlord, but ultimately comes around to make major donations to local charities. He hires Abie Gold on retainer to manage his money after he dies.

Rowena

Rowena is a beautiful girl, bound to a wheelchair, and living in one of the last private family homes on Dropsie Avenue in 1925. She marries a boy who is mute, and together, the two build a flower company empire. She becomes extraordinarily wealthy, and hires Abie Gold to oversee her dream of returning the Dropsie Avenue neighborhood to what it once was. She passes away a week before the final sale goes through.

Ruby Brown

Ruby Brown is a beautiful woman who serves as deputy mayor to city planning. She was the first black child on Dropsie Avenue, and like Abie Gold and Rowena, wants the neighborhood to be restored. She helps and guides Abie and Rowena through the process of buying the neighborhood.



Objects/Places

The Bronx, New York

The Bronx, a borough of New York City, is the setting for Dropsie Avenue. It is a melting pot of different peoples and races, emerging from quiet farmland to a chaotic and crime-riddled cityscape.

Dropsie Avenue

Dropsie Avenue, located in the Bronx, is the main setting for nearly all of the novel. Once land specifically owned by the Dutch Von Dropsie family, the farmland is later turned into private home lots, which are then compacted and made into smaller and smaller homes, which are in turn torn down for tenement buildings. With them come crime, drugs, and vice, and ultimately, the area resembles a war zone. It is ultimately purchased by Rowena, an old millionaire resident of Dropsie, and turned into a quiet neighborhood for single-family homes.

55 Dropsie Street

55 Dropsie Street is the tenement building where most of the first part of the novel takes place. It is a run-down place, full of sad, angry, and depressed people, who are fully aware of their stations in life. 55 Dropsie Street is the only building to survive the fires that later consume the neighborhood, but is ultimately torn down so that single-family homes can be built.

Dropsie Gardens

Dropsie Gardens is the name of the single-family home community that is built on Dropsie Avenue.

The Lumber Yard

The Lumber Yard is a lumber business, bought and run by Jacob and Angelo. It is burned to the ground during a mafia-related incident, and later rebuilt and modernized.

The Contract With God

The Contract with God is a written contract with God, scribbled on a stone by Frimmie Hersh before coming to America. When Frimmie's daughter dies, he throws the contract out the window, where it is later found by a little boy.

Fire

Fire is the major force of physical destruction in the novel, claiming the lives of Dropsie Avenue residents and buildings. Fires are usually started as the result of either carelessness or drug and crime-related activity.

Drugs

In the 1970s, Dropsie Avenue is deluged with drugs and drug-addicts. Drugs are bought and sold in the neighborhood, proving to be a successful and dangerous trade.

Fixtures

Fixtures, such as pipes, are sold by finisher agents, in the attempt to get residents to move out of buildings. When residents do not move out and refuse to pay rent, they can then be evicted.

Lumber

Lumber is needed for construction and repair on Dropsie Avenue. It is sought by Jacob and Angelo to build Rabbi Bensohn's room, and later bought and sold by Jacob and Angelo when they run their lumber business.



Themes

Family

Family is a major theme in Will Eisner's novel "The Contract with God Trilogy". Family affects each part of the novel, and affects each of the characters in the novel in different and important ways, proving to be a positive, yet also heartbreaking, thing.

In general, families on Dropsie Avenue stick together - from Jacob and Rifka and their children, to Rowena and her grandmother, to Abie Gold and his family. For Jacob, his family offers him a source of stability and comfort in life, especially when his career as a carpenter in the Great Depression is seemingly at an end. Both parents rely on their son, Daniel, a doctor, for support and medical treatment. Rowena, an orphaned girl with a physical handicap, would have nowhere to go if it hadn't been for her dying grandmother taking her in. That love and kindness Rowena experienced on Dropsie Street helps propel her to purchase the neighborhood after it has burned to the ground. For Abie Gold and his wife, their love of family compels them to convince their elderly fathers to leave New York for Florida when minority violence gets out of hand. With no one else to depend on in the rough and tumble streets of tenement districts, families depend on themselves.

Family can also be a heartbreaking experience, most notably with Frimmie Hersh, who loses his teenager daughter to illness. This propels him to leave the Hassidic community in which he has grown up, and to become a wealthy landlord. He then has written a new contract with God, and years later, when the neighborhood burns to the ground, his old tenement building escapes unscathed, again and again.

Religion

Religion is a major theme in the novel "The Contract with God Trilogy" by Will Eisner. Religion profoundly affects many of the characters, and thereby profoundly affects the course of human events on Dropsie Avenue. It serves both positive and negative ends.

Positively, religion serves to be a uniting force in the community, and a source of inspiration for residents. The greatest examples of such interfaith cooperation occur in marriages between Jews and Gentiles: Rebecca marries Elton, a Christian; and Abie Gold marries Marie, a Catholic girl. The forging of families between faiths helps secure strong bonds between them. Indeed, later in the novel, Father Gianelli and Rabbi Goodstein work together to bring positive change to their community, invoking their common belief in God and goodness, and getting local wealthy landlord Izzy Cash to donate to charity and to help provide a place for vagrant youths to socialize and stay out of trouble. Belief in God also compels men to be inspired and act in good fashion. Jacob finds solace in the questions of life by talking about life and God to a fallen cockroach; and Frimmie Hersh seeks a new contract with God in order to better his life.



Negatively, religion serves to be a dividing force in the community. Jews, Christians, including Catholics, look down on interfaith marriages, and even on in-faith marriages between people of different races. Rather than creating a sense of community in some instances, people of all races allow their faiths to serve as the final dividing line between themselves and others.

Urban Decay

Urban decay is a timeless and major theme in Will Eisner's "Contract with God Trilogy". Urban decay involves social, cultural, moral, and physical breakdown of any given neighborhood or community. Urban decay is on full display on Dropsie Avenue.

Dropsie Avenue was, once upon a time, quiet farmland owned by Dutch settlers. Slowly, English settlers began buying up land and building homes, until the farmland was all bought out. These large homes were soon crowded out by small homes, and then by even smaller homes. Each resident generation believed the succeeding would negatively affect the area, and in each instance, were proved correct. The smaller, private homes soon give way to tenement buildings, which then bring in the poor, crime, drugs, diseases, and vice. After enough upstanding citizens are assaulted or murdered for standing up to these negative ways, the rest back down, surrender, or move away.

By the 1970s, Dropsie Avenue is so riddled with crime, drug-addicts, and minority violence, that no one wants to touch the place. Eventually, fires claim the entire area, and Rowena, a former resident-turned-millionaire, buys the entire neighborhood, razes what is left, and has single-family homes built. The homes are beautiful, and the neighborhood is quiet, but like before, when deluged with foreigners and crime-riddled residents, the area begins the cycle of decay once more.

Style

Perspective

Will Eisner tells his novel "Contract with God Trilogy" from the perspective of a third-person omniscient narrator, who might well have been a resident of Dropsie Avenue himself/herself. This third-person omniscience allows the reader to traverse the dirty streets, moving from one event to the next, and from one person to the next, without being bogged down with different and switched perspectives. This is especially important given the sheer sweep of characters, their classes, their beliefs, and their identities.

Tone

The tone of Will Eisner's "Contract with God Trilogy" is one of tragic, poetic reminiscence. Because much of the work is autobiographical, Eisner tells the story in a way that readers can relate to, as though one were talking to a grandparent about the past. Eisner recounts with tender gentleness stories such as "Contract with God" and "On the Top Floor, Back, Lived God", and uses no soft words to describe the drug scene and dangers of 1970s New York in "Dropsie Avenue". Eisner thus creates a Gothic background full of street philosophers, innocent beauty, and tragedy - all involved in the rise and fall of a New York City neighborhood.

Structure

Will Eisner divides his novel "Contract with God Trilogy" into three separate parts, and each part (except for the third part) is further subdivided into chapters which tell specific stories. This is done in order to tell the story of those who live on Dropsie Avenue, as well as the story of the neighborhood itself, allowing for some distinction between the parts, but ultimately weaving together a tapestry of events.

The first part of the book deals with the 1930s on Dropsie Avenue, and how the residents - from Frimmie Hersh to Herbie and Goldie - manage to navigate the Great Depression. The second part of the novel deals with the lives and events of the people who live and work on Dropsie from the Great Depression through World War II. Part three focuses on the Dropsie neighborhood itself, telling the story of the neighborhood from its rise and fall to its resurrection.



Quotes

Not so unusual, a father brings up a child with care and love only to lose her... plucked as it were, from his arms by an unseen hand -the hand of God.

-Part I, A Contract with God, p. 8

The tenement was like a passenger ship anchored in a sea of concrete.

Part I, The Super, p. 95

Most tenement dwellers remained holding fast to their beachhead, simply because they had only just arrived from other more hostile places. They carried with them the tabernacle of a life force they hardly understood.

-Part II, Izzy the Cockroach and the Meaning of Life, p. 185

Believe me, Angelo! When you're drowning you don't ask a log floating in the water "How big?"

-Part II, The Black Hand, p. 237

How can I explain a... a might-have-been that might yet be?

Part II, Sanctuary, p. 274

Jacob, I've had marriage! What I've lived through has left me dead inside... I want now to have peace and safety... I'm here in America... It's enough for me now.

-Part II, The Gunfighter, p. 296

Oh dear, how Dropsie Avenue has grown in the last five years... All these tenements!! The neighborhood is so changed now... It saddens me.

-Part III, Dropsie Avenue, p. 369

I'm beginning to get bad feelings about Dropsie Avenue, Missis Bernstein!

-Part III, Dropsie Avenue, p. 455

Dropsie is dying! You can see it now and you can smell it. Buildings are rotting... People are leaving... Druggies are creeping in like lice! The jungle is coming, Abie!

-Part III, Dropsie Avenue, p. 465

Who can mark the point at which neighborhoods start to die?

-Part III, Dropsie Avenue, p. 490

You were right, Abie. Dropsie Avenue as we knew it is gone. Only the memory of how it was for us remains. In the end, buildings are only buildings, but people make a neighborhood.

-Part III, Dropsie Avenue, p. 493



Topics for Discussion

What is Frimmie Hersh's contract with God? How does Frimmie believe it has been broken? Why does Frimmie seek out a second contract with God, and what are that contract's consequences?

Discuss the theme of family in the novel "Contract with God Trilogy" by Will Eisner. Why is family so important in the novel? What purposes does family serve? Is family portrayed as helpful or harmful? Why?

Discuss the theme of religion in Will Eisner's novel "Contract with God Trilogy". What purposes does religion serve in the Dropsie community? Is religion a positive force, a negative force, or neither? Why? Provide evidence to support your claim.

Why does Jacob give up on his plans to divorce Rifka and marry Frieda? What possible consequences will this have? Do you think Jacob is better off with Rifka? Provide evidence to support your claim.

Discuss the theme of urban decay in the novel "Contract with God Trilogy" by Will Eisner. What is urban decay? How does it affect Dropsie Avenue and its residents? Do the residents try to stop urban decay, and if so, are they successful? If not, what do residents do, and why?