

## Will Eisner's Contract with Comics

Michaela Weiß

### ABSTRACT

The paper deals with formal innovations in *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* by Will Eisner, one of the forefathers of modern American comics. Eisner realized that comics had much greater potential and started experimenting with its form and content. He wanted to free comics of the superhero label and create artistically more complex works. When he published *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, it was advertised as "a graphic novel". Since then the term has been widely used by publishers, critics and writers, even though not all of them agree on its definition. Moreover, as the title suggests Eisner's book is not a novel but a collection of short stories written in the form of American Jewish immigration narrative, combining autobiography, memoirs and fiction. In this graphic novel Eisner not only revived the immigration narratives in a new medium, but also crossed the boundaries of American comics by presenting a vital and original form that influenced following generations of artists.

### KEYWORDS

Will Eisner, graphic novel, American Jewish comics, immigration narrative

### Comics and Graphic Novels

In 1978 Will Eisner (1917–2005) published a comic book *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* which significantly changed the development of American comics. Until then the medium was regarded mainly as amusement for children and adolescents. In the 1940s many organized groups, such as women clubs, church groups and parent-teacher associations started making lists of objectionable comics and forcing the newsstand dealers to remove such items from sale. In most cases, they were successful.<sup>1</sup> Their concerns about potentially corruptible nature of comics graduated in the 1950s when two committees were established to study and monitor the comic books and their impact on children and adolescents.<sup>2</sup> Their findings were summarized in a Senate report that, however, did not propose any law limiting or censoring the industry, which would be in opposition with the democratic principle of a free press. Instead, the responsibility for acceptable contents was placed on the publishers.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, comic book publishers founded The Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA), which in 1954 issued a Comics Code Authority that was meant to regulate the content and form in order to avoid potential investigation or banning of the

publication.<sup>4</sup> The publishing houses themselves thus orientated themselves on the traditional and secure market: children and teenagers.

Even though these regulations turned comics into what Will Eisner called "literary fast food,"<sup>5</sup> Eisner recognized the unused potential of comics and started experimenting with its format. In the "Preface" to *Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* he remembered how he gradually realized that the audience of his first comics series *The Spirit* (1941–1952) was more sophisticated and demanding. He believed that comics could deal with meaningful themes: "Certainly there was more for the cartoonist working in this technique to deal with than superheroes that were preventing the destruction of Earth by supervillains."<sup>6</sup> What made Eisner think of comics as a medium capable of transmitting more complex stories and art were, among others, the woodcut novels of Lynd Ward (1905–1985), whose *Frankenstein* (1934) and *God's Man* (1935) he read. He used a similar format in *The Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*.

The larger space allowed Eisner to change the traditional panel arrangement. Each story from the collection required different framing and "was written without regard to space."<sup>7</sup> That meant that Eisner used buildings or their parts as frames and the illustrations grew in size, sometimes one image was covering the whole page.<sup>8</sup>

These techniques require higher level of participation from the reader and actively engage his imagination. Eisner noticed that most computer games or TV programs provide the readers/viewers with pre-fabricated, non-stimulating images and he believed that comics could and should be different:

The media have had a tremendous effect on storytelling. A young reader's sense of wonder is very quickly satisfied by electronic media. It will generate things that a more limited medium like comics can only allude to. For example, a comic strip about space travel cannot compete with the experience delivered by the film *Star Wars*. So you have to deal with this generation in terms of its own experience, and part of that experience is MTV. I've been trying to watch MTV to figure it out, but I can't watch too much of it or my eyes bump into each other. What they're doing is using visual clichés over and over. You can connect into their message by using the experiences you've had watching other films or videos. The message doesn't come from your own real-life experience. It comes from artificial experience. But those of us who are trying to tell a story must pay attention to that.<sup>9</sup>

The story should grow out of "real-life experience" of the author but, at the same time, appeal to "real-life experience" of the audience which for the younger generations includes also the "artificial experience." He was well aware that comics was rising in popularity but this trend was not necessarily permanent. That is why he was urging young potential artists to rely more on meaning:

4 See Sabin, *Adult Comics*, 251.

5 Will Eisner, "Foreword," in Stephen Weiner, *Faster Than a Speeding Bullet: The Rise of the Graphic Novel*, ed. N. C. Christopher Couch (New York: Nantier Beall: Minoustchine, 2003), ix.

6 Will Eisner, "Preface," in *A Contract With God and Other Tenement Stories* (New York, DC Comics, 1996), n.p.

7 Eisner, "Preface."

8 Original use of framing and background can be already found in one of the most famous early comic strip *Krazy Kat* that was being published by George Herriman in the 1920s.

9 "Eisner Wide Open", interviewed by Tom Heintjes, *Hogan's Alley: the online magazine for cartoon arts* <http://cagle.msnbc.com/hogan/interviews/eisner/home.asp>

1 There were two main organizations responsible for reviewing comics and requiring removal of comics with harmful content from the news stands, namely National Office for Decent Literature and Evaluation of Comic Books in Cincinnati. See Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of Comics Code* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 23.

2 The Committee of the Child Study Association was established in 1943 and The Senate Judiciary Committee of Juvenile Delinquency was founded in 1953. See Roger Sabin, *Adult Comics: An introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 147.

3 For more information see U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency: Interim Report*, 83d Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1955.

There was a time when movies were novel simply because they were moving pictures. Now, you take the medium for granted. You don't go to a movie because it's a movie. You go because of the content. That's the one thing I always tell students and other young cartoonists: It's content. If you have nothing to say, then you're just selling wallpaper. It's almost like pornography. They're not selling a story; they're just selling images.<sup>10</sup>

And it was story that Eisner was selling in the *Contract with God*. It had a strikingly different format than other comics. Moreover, the stories, illustrations, layout and lettering were created by one artist, which was not a usual practice at that time. Even though *Contract* is a collection of four thematically interconnected stories with historical commentaries, it was advertised as "a graphic novel" on the softcover edition (though not on the hardcover).

Since then innumerable comics volumes have been published or republished under this heading, yet their quality varies. Many artists have therefore openly rejected the term. As Art Spiegelman remarked at Yale Graphic Design Symposium in 1986:

[Comic books] were dubbed graphic novels in a bid for social acceptance (personally, I have always thought Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* was an extraordinarily graphic novel, and that what I did was . . . comix). What has followed is a spate of well-dressed comic books finding their way to legitimate bookshops. Sadly, a number of them are no more than pedestrian comic books in glossy wrappings.<sup>11</sup>

Similar view was expressed by a critic Robert Fiore:

A 'graphic novel' is a long comic book. The term is essentially a reflection of the industry's yearning for unearned status. Rather than improving the image of comics by improving comics themselves, it tries to enhance its status through semantic jiggery-pokery. Throughout most of the world, a comics story or collection of stories in book form is referred to as an album.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, even though the term graphic novel has been over-used and often misused, it still reflects a difference among individual comic books. Authors like Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, or Grant Morrison have produced graphic novels (even with superheroes) that are attractive for adult readers and are published by mainstream publishers. Due to their commercial success they can be now found on separate shelves in book shops.<sup>13</sup> The term has become so successful because it provided the medium with its own critical terminology and classification.

As can be seen on the example of Eisner's book, graphic novel is not necessarily a novel length story. It can also refer to a collection of interlinked stories as in *Contract with God*. All stories take place in the 1930s at fictional street in Jewish ghetto in New York. The buildings and street often serve not only as a setting but also as panel borders or frames. The scenery introduced at the beginning of the book thus serves as a connecting device. The street is getting more attention in each of the subsequent stories and eventually becomes one of the protagonists.

10 "Eisner Wide Open."

11 Art Spiegelman, *Comix, Essays, Graphics and Scraps: From Maus to Now to Maus to Now* (New York: Raw Books & Graphics, 1998), 81.

12 Gary Groth and Robert Fiore, eds., *The New Comics* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1988), 5.

13 See Sabin, *Adult Comics*, 247.

Eisner is trying to describe, mainly from his own experience, the city life of first generation Jewish immigrants who were dreaming of economic and social success in the New world. Eisner also questions the value of Jewish heritage and the varying attitudes of immigrants to their culture. He thus transplanted the immigrant narrative<sup>14</sup> into the comics medium. As he remarked: "I have tried to tell how it was in a corner of America that is still to be revisited. The people and events in these narratives, while compounded from recall, are things which I would have you accept as real."<sup>15</sup> In other words, Eisner brought realism into comics. Moreover, the stories are partly autobiographical, and partly memoirs. The characters are not black and white, but most of them develop. As Denny O'Neill remarked in the "Introduction" to *Contract with God*:

The Good Guys don't win and the Bad Guys don't lose because there are no good guys and bad guys. Instead, there are lonely, frightened, and ambitious people, immigrants seeking relief from poverty, despair, and the dread that, unhappy as the present is, the future may be worse. A man remembering that is not likely to depict heroes and villains; rather he will be compassionate toward everyone, winner and loser alike, and compassion is the pervading, unstated theme of Eisner's work.<sup>16</sup>

Even that was quite unusual, as most of the comics production was using the strict opposition of the Good fighting and eventually overcoming the Evil. Since then the blurring of these boundaries, psychological development of characters and complex plots became a standard in graphic novels.

### "A Contract with God"

The first story is called "A Contract with God". Already the lettering<sup>17</sup> suggests what religion is meant here. Even though it is written in English, the letters have a shape of Hebrew characters. The protagonist is called Frimme Hersch, Frimme meaning "pious" in Yiddish, whereas Hersch (an Ashkenazi variant of Hirsch) means "deer".

Frimme has just lost his daughter Rachele. When he is coming home from the funeral, it rains heavily. It is so called "eisenshpritz", named after Will Eisner. As Douglas Wolk remarked: "There's a certain kind of rain that falls only in comics, a thick, persistent drizzle, much heavier than normal water, that bounces off whatever it hits, dripping from fedoras, running slowly down the windowpanes and reflecting the doom in bad men's hearts."<sup>18</sup> Frimme sees his tenement house as the floating ark of Noah. As if God punished men again and sent another Flood and took away his Rachele. He feels as if she was taken from his arms "by an unseen hand – the hand of God."<sup>19</sup> Even though he knows that

14 See e.g. the works of Abraham Cahan (1860–1951), Mary Antin (1860–1951), or Anzia Yezierska (cca 1880–1970).

15 Will Eisner, "Preface," n.p.

16 Denny O'Neill, "Introduction," in *A Contract With God and Other Tenement Stories* (New York, DC Comics, 1996), n.p.

17 Lettering reflects the individual style of the artist and can enhance the meaning of the scenes. Unlike in books, where letters are mainly printed, the style of the author is sustained.

18 Douglas Wolk, *Understanding Comics: How Graphic Novels Work And What They Mean* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2007), 166.

19 Will Eisner, "A Contract With God," in *A Contract With God and Other Tenement Stories* (New York, DC Comics, 1996), 12.

such things happen to many people, he is sure that it should not have happened to him, as he had a contract with God.

Frimme was born in 1882, the year when Tsar Alexander II was murdered. The first to blame were the Jews, many were persecuted or murdered. Frimme's parents soon died and he, as an orphan, had to help everyone in the village. All he ever received for it was a blessing "God will reward you."<sup>20</sup> After another anti-Semitic attack, the elders of the village sent him to America. On the way Frimme remembered the promised reward and decided to make a contract with God and carve it onto a small stone tablet.

In America he became a respected and successful member of the Hasidic community. One day he found an orphaned girl on his doorstep. He kept her and raised her. Yet she fell ill and soon died. Frimme felt that God broke their contract and decided to confront Him: "If God requires that men honor their agreements... then is not God Also so obligated???"<sup>21</sup>

He threw the contract out of window and mourned his daughter. After the end of the shiva days, the sun appeared a sign from God that the world would go back to normal. But that day Frimme said his morning prayer for the last time.

Since that time he has stopped behaving like a "pious deer". He shaves and decides to buy the whole house. Yet he does not have enough money so he uses the bonds that were only entrusted to him by the synagogue members. For the first time he lies in the bank. As he is a respectable man, nobody questions his credibility.

After buying the house he raises the rent, even for widows, reduces the heating system and stops paying for any repairs. Within one year he makes enough money to buy another house. He finds a non-Jewish lover and abandons traditional lifestyle, hoping that property, power and sex will make him happy and free. Yet, there are still some memories he wants to keep: mainly his life with Rachele in the old tenement house. He keeps coming back to watch it and refuses to sell it, unlike all his other houses.

When he earns enough money, he returns the bonds to the synagogue and asks the elders to write a new contract for him in exchange for one tenement house. He claims that when he was writing it, he was young and stupid, whereas they are so learned that their version must be more valid. At first they are not sure, but eventually they decide to do it for him. As one of them says: "He is asking us to provide a guiding document – so that he might live in harmony with God . . . Can we truly deny him this?"<sup>22</sup>

The new contract fills him with hope. He thinks that this one is real and valid. He is determined to change his life, be charitable, marry and have a daughter. He confronts God with it: "This time, You will not violate our contract! This time, I have three witnesses!"<sup>23</sup> At that moment he gets a heart attack and dies. A lightning strikes even though there is no rain, only a rough wind. The houses seem to tremble. The weather is the same as on the day when Frimme ended the contract. By midnight all houses burned down, except for no. 55.

Yet Frimme's legacy and contract are not lost. When the houses were burning, a young immigrant boy named Shloime Khreks saved lives of many tenants. He is pious and innocent like Frimme used to be. When he finds the stone tablet with Hersch's contract, he takes it home, signs it and thus renews it.

20 Eisner, "A Contract With God," 20.

21 Eisner, "A Contract With God," 29.

22 Eisner, "A Contract With God," 52.

23 Eisner, "A Contract With God," 56.

Even though protest and revolt against God form an essential part of the Jewish tradition, (e.g., Job or Abraham), these protests were always directed against injustice and never in the form of threats or violation of contracts. "Inscrutable are the ways of God" and no one can decide his fate.

"A Contract with God" belongs to Eisner's most autobiographical stories. In 2004 he confessed that this story reflected the death of his only daughter Alice and his own attempts to understand God's will.<sup>24</sup> Unlike Frimme, Eisner started to devote more time to his work. The story presents the dilemma of the essence of human contracts with God and their validity.

### "Street Singer"

The "Street Singer" tells a story of an aging opera singer Marta Maria. She is a lonely, frustrated and forgotten woman who tries to present herself as an Italian diva, but her real name is Sylvia Speegel. To feel younger and wanted again she seduces a young street singer Eddie by promising him a great career.

Eddie is married and has a child, but he does not even attempt to search for job. Instead he is trying to make some money by singing. He is an alcoholic, violent to his wife and child: "All that whiskey would kill a horse! Eddie, y'gonna drink yerself into the grave!" "Shaddap shet that kid's mouth!"<sup>25</sup> His wife is in many ways similar to Marta Maria, she is hysterical and demands attention. She yells at him that she gave up her successful career as a dancer only for him, making him feel even more as a failure. The next day they both feel sorry and Eddie is determined to visit Marta Maria who promised to start his singing career, only later does he realize that he does not have her address and can never find her again.

In this story Eisner concentrates on the effects of the Depression on common people. Similarly like Clifford Odets (1906–1963) in his *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) he depicts the loss of dignity and innocence. Marta is dreaming of Hollywood-like career, at least as somebody's producer, while Eddie is willing to do anything to fulfil his dreams.

Unlike the first story, the characters in "The Street Singer" and their motivations are less complex: ageing star, young man who tries to make money on his talent but cannot, and his hysterical but loving wife. The characters do not develop, only uncover, and are more or less stereotypical.

### "The Super"

Similarly uncomplicated is also the next story, "The Super". The protagonist is a tenement house superintendant Mr. Scuggs. He speaks with German accent and has an evil guard dog. In one conversation it is revealed that he hates all Jewish tenants:

24 See Denis Kitchen, ed., "Editor's Note," in Will Eisner, *Life, in Pictures: Autobiographical Stories* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 14.

25 Will Eisner, "Street Singer," in *A Contract With God and Other Tenement Stories* (New York, DC Comics, 1996), 97.

“Yah!...Back in Chermany things is different! There, they haf **respect!** Yah, **there** nobody talks like that to the super! Soon someday we will have discipline here too! Yah, its coming... Ordnung!”<sup>26</sup>

He is sexually frustrated and it is his lust that makes him lose his money and work. When he is dealing with Mrs. Farvell's complaint over hot water, he meets her 10 year old niece. He is immediately attracted to the girl who looks and acts much older. Yet she is not a delicate, innocent flower. There is a look of evil on her face. Since then he cannot think of anything else but sex with her. Yet, surprisingly, it is not him who is hunting the child. She comes into his room alone, unexpected. Moreover, she is not shocked to see the walls covered with erotic pictures, he is the one who is embarrassed. She even offers to put up her skirt a bit for a nickel. All Scuggs can see is the little girl's knee but he forgets the world around him, not noticing that in the meantime she poisons his guardian dog, steals his money box and runs away. Only then does he realize what happened and starts chasing her. When he is close to her, the whole house is watching: “Murderer! Animal! I never trusted that super... he's a sex maniac!”<sup>27</sup>

Hurt and confused, he returns to his room, prepares the hot water for the whole house and is crying over his dog. To avoid police investigation he shoots himself. Everyone is confused except for the girl, who is sitting outside the house, counting the stolen money. Nobody could believe that he molested the child even though he was always feared and hated.

The stereotypical roles are reversed here. At the end, it is not Scuggs who is the evil person without scruples taking advantage of other people's weaknesses. Unfortunately, from the very beginning she is portrayed as a sly, evil child. Thus she cannot be even for a while be seen as an innocent, passive victim, which would make the encounter more complex. The motivations of the characters are set from the beginning. The only slight change appears in the super who cries over his poisoned dog and proves that he is a lonely and isolated man, rather than a victimizer.

### “Cookalein”

The last story of the collection is more complex. It follows the stories of more characters going for a vacation into the country hotel called Cookalein. Each character has a different motivation for leaving town. Some are seeking rich husbands or rich wives, others just want to enjoy themselves.<sup>28</sup>

The main emphasis is put on the stories of individual members of one family. Only the mother Fanny and her two sons go to the farm. The husband, Sam, stays at home. They do not have enough money for everyone to go, and moreover, Fanny will work there as a cook. After his family leaves Sam organizes a card playing evening but soon leaves to see his lover. When he goes to see his wife on the weekend, he wants to have sex with her which she refuses. She sends him to his “shikseh”:

“Ha... some man and wife! You think I don't know about your shikseh??  
“Maybe if you was more interested in sex!!”

26 Will Eisner, “Super,” in *A Contract With God and Other Tenement Stories* (New York, DC Comics, 1996), 103.

27 Eisner, “Super,” 120.

28 The story is similarly structured as Elmer Rice's (1982–1967) play *Street Scene* (1929), where he follows the stories of individual inhabitants of one house.

“Shhah, don't use dirty words!”

“Look at me...I'm fat and old...with an ugly body!! With hands like sandpaper from the housework – I got high blood pressure also...”

“So what do we do?? A divorce?”

“I ain't giving you no divorce! We got kids to think of – you wanna play around with your shikseh?? . . . Go!! I'll hide it from the kids so they won't be ashamed!”<sup>29</sup>

In the meantime the oldest son Willie, who is only 15, pretends that he is much older to impress Mrs. Minks who is there without her husband. He is nervous when he is only dancing with her. To his great surprise, she comes to him at night and seduces him. Yet his first sexual experience is unexpectedly interrupted by her husband who is furious at first but then he realizes that Willie is only a boy. He beats his wife and then makes love to her which gives Willie another lesson. From a young innocent boy he turns into a more mature man who lost the naïve view of life.

It is not only Willie who loses his innocence but also his younger brother. For the first time he finds out that there is a difference between boys and girls:

“Your ma and pa wanna sleep together – you know **why?**”

“To talk private...or maybe fight – I dunno!”

“Dumbell!! You don't know nuthin! Hee, hee, hee, hee, hee!!”

“Hey!! Leggo that hees my peepee, Hilda!”

“Y' wanna feel mine: Go on!”

“Yea, haw you ain't got one! Just a hole!”

“Dumbell!! Girls are different!”

“You mean you can pee outta **that** hole? Gosh!”<sup>30</sup>

Both children then go and watch a date of other two characters, Goldie and Benny, whose disastrous romance represents the second action line.

Goldie is a naïve young girl who works as a receptionist but pretends to be rich to find herself a wealthy husband. Benny works as a skin cutter and is looking for a rich wife. Even though they are almost neighbors, they do not know each other. Both buy new dresses and suits, hire cars and act as if they could afford it. They start dating and seem to be in love, even though Goldie is shying away from Benny's intimate touches. She wants love and respect, not only sex. To calm her down Benny proposes to her. After she accepts, he confesses to her that is not a rich manufacturer but only a poor skin cutter. Goldie starts laughing and also tells him the truth. She is still willing to marry him, as long as he loves her. Not so Benny.

The whole scene turns gradually darker when frustrated and humiliated Benny decides to rape her. Goldie goes back to her room, crying. Fortunately, she meets Herbie, the future doctor, whom she refused at the beginning because he told her he was having his meals with the help in the kitchen. He promises to take care of her and love her even though she is not a virgin anymore. Yet that is not completely true as is shown later. Herbie is not so innocent either. He presents himself as a savior who does not care about virginity but he tells Benny that he might have a sexual problem:

29 Will Eisner, “Cookalein,” in *A Contract With God and Other Tenement Stories* (New York, DC Comics, 1996), 163..

30 Eisner, “Cookalein,” 170-171. Cf. Henry Roth, *Call it Sleep*: “Yuh know w' ea babies comm from?” “N-no.” “From de knish” “-Knish?” “Between de legs. Who puts id in is de poppa. De poppas god de petzel. Yaw de poppa.” Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (1934; New York: Avon Books, 1964), 53.

“You might like to know that Goldie is O.K., Benny!”  
 “So?? Ha!!... That phoney t’mater! A cheap secretary... a nice body tho’.”  
 “You don’t get it, Benny!”  
 “You didn’t even penetrate... you are sick, Benny... I mean sexually... you need medical help... do you understand?”<sup>31</sup>

By the end of the vacation all characters have changed. What is more, all changes were caused by their erotic adventures. Willie was forced to mature and would become the new head of the family because his father would be often gone. Goldie has found her caring doctor and her future is secured as she had wished. Moreover, she believes that he saved her reputation and is still willing to marry her. Herbie, who is not very attractive, got grateful and beautiful woman, and Benny who wanted a rich wife met an old ugly woman whose father was in a diamond business. As he is impotent and cares only for money, he also found his perfect match.

## Conclusion

The individual stories are written in the form of American Jewish immigration narrative which flourished in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, the stories can be seen as a memoir on the boarder of nonfiction. Yet, it is not only the theme that was innovative but also the form. Eisner changed the traditional page organization and used lettering and color as sources of meaning and information.

He crossed the boundaries of American comics by presenting a vital and original form which influenced and inspired following generations of American comics writers, such as Frank Miller, Neil Gaiman, or Art Spiegelman. Eisner proved that comics has a great potential and is able to express complex artistic ideas. Nowadays, comics has already its place in book shops, libraries, museums and since the 1990s it has become a part of syllabi at schools of all levels. The medium has captured the interest of wide audiences and critics alike. From the “literary fast food,” it has developed into an appreciated and still-evolving artistic form as Eisner hoped it would.

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<sup>31</sup> Eisner, “Cookalein,” 179.

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**Michaela Weiß** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and American Studies at the Institute of Foreign Languages, Silesian University of Opava, Czech Republic. Her research concentrates on American Jewish fiction and the development of American comics. She has published a study *Jewishness as Humanism in Bernard Malamud’s Fiction* (2010).