

## DROPSIE AVENUE: THE NEIGHBORHOOD

**Author:** Eisner, Will

**Artist:** Will Eisner (illustrator)

**Publisher:** Kitchen Sink Press

**First book publication:** 1995, 2006 (*The Contract with God Trilogy*)

### Publication History

As the third in the trilogy of Will Eisner's narratives centered on a neighborhood in the south Bronx, *Dropsie Avenue* was originally published in 1995 by underground comics pioneer Denis Kitchen, under his Kitchen Sink Press. *A Contract with God* (1978) and *A Life Force* (1988) complete the trilogy. When Kitchen's company went out of business in 1999, DC Comics bought the rights to Eisner's catalog, including not only his graphic novels but also *The Spirit* reprints.

DC republished *Dropsie Avenue* in 2000 as part of its Will Eisner Library series. Like the 1995 original, the reprint was issued in both hardcover and paperback formats. In 2006, when W. W. Norton acquired Eisner's catalog, *Dropsie Avenue* was reissued once again, this time as part of the hardcover single-volume *The Contract with God Trilogy: Life on Dropsie Avenue*, which also included *A Contract with God* and *A Life Force*. This was only the second Eisner title released under his new publisher, the first being an original graphic novel, *The Plot: The Secret Story of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The following year, Norton reissued *Dropsie Avenue*, along with the other two graphic novels in the trilogy, as a separate paperback edition.

### Plot

Eisner began his Dropsie Avenue trilogy with the 1978 publication of *A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories*, a work that is, mistakenly, considered by many to be the first "graphic novel." He returned to the same setting ten years later with *A Life Force*.

It is appropriate that Eisner ended his trilogy with *Dropsie Avenue*, because it has an epic scope and functions as a kind of summation. While the previous two works focus on the lives of just a few Dropsie residents, *Dropsie Avenue* is a multifaceted, composite

work in which the main protagonist is arguably the neighborhood itself. While several major characters recur throughout the narrative, no one figure commands the spotlight. Instead, each shares the stage with a large cast of minor or walk-on actors, and together they reveal the dynamic life force underlying the neighborhood.

*Dropsie Avenue* can be read as an example of American realism, adhering to verisimilitude and emphasizing growth through the various choices individuals make. A more accurate analysis would place it in the naturalist tradition, in that the book's many characters (and the neighborhood itself) seem at the mercy of forces beyond their control. At different times throughout the graphic novel, individuals note the cyclical and inevitable nature of the events.

The events begin in 1870, at a time when the area was farmed by Dutch immigrants. The Van Dropsie family notices how the English are beginning to settle in the region, realizing that the neighborhood is changing. In order to stave off the impact of the new arrivals, the drunken Dirk van Dropsie sets fire to the English crops, inadvertently killing his niece; he is then shot by his brother-in-law. These events set the stage for what follows: an episodic and cyclical series of ethnic entrenchments, followed by efforts to resist newer arrivals from other ethnic communities, leading inevitably to bigotry, classism, violence, and destruction.

As the narrative unfolds, the Dutch are supplanted by the English, who become upset at the arrival of the Irish, who hound out German immigrants and eventually find themselves competing against the Italians. The Italians then contend with an emerging Jewish presence and eventually confront an influx of Puerto Rican families, who ridicule the arrival of a Hassidic sect and then find themselves living among a growing African American population.

Along with its racial strife and class warfare, the Dropsie Avenue neighborhood undergoes suburbanization, transit modernization, tenement housing, gang violence, urban decay, conflagration, and, finally,

gentrification. The graphic novel ends with black and white neighbors, apparently living harmoniously, discussing the “foreigners” who have moved onto the block and who decorate their houses with “weird colors [and] dinky ornaments.” In the final panel, a “For Sale” sign is planted outside one of the new homes.

### Characters

Given the ensemble nature of *Dropsie Avenue* and its focus on the evolution of an area in the south Bronx, one could argue that the neighborhood itself functions as the main figure in this graphic novel and that its multiple facets and the many changes it undergoes are analogous to a rounded and dynamic character.

- *The Van Dropsie family*, whose name comes to mark the neighborhood, is made up of Dutch farmers who lament the encroachments of the English in the 1870’s. Dirk van Dropsie’s disgruntlement and drunken rampage not only bring ruin to the family but also serve as a thematic blueprint for the events that follow.
- *Sean O’Brien* is a nouveau riche Irish immigrant in the construction business. His rivalry with the O’Leary family introduces class antagonism into the narrative, and the turmoil of his children, Neil and Coleen, comes to represent the prejudice the Irish experience at the hands of their English neighbors.
- *Danny Smith* functions as an all-American everyman. He is a hero in World War I and brings a French bride back from Europe. He gets a job as a Bronx city planner, and although wanting to be a selfless public servant, he is eventually corrupted by Big Ed Casey. Big Ed manipulates Danny into building a train station near his tenement property, thereby enriching him, and it is this action that brings rapid urbanization to Dropsie Avenue.
- *Rowena Shepard* is a wheelchair-bound idealist with a passion for gardens. With the help of her deaf-mute husband, Prince, she builds a successful flower business and leaves Dropsie Avenue. Late in the graphic novel, she returns as a millionaire to finance the redevelopment of the burned-out neighborhood, creating Dropsie Gardens as a residential community.
- *Izzy Cash*, a Jewish ragman with a pushcart, accumulates enough money to purchase a Dropsie Avenue tenement building during the Great Depression; he amasses a fortune in the real estate business. His initial resistance, and then acceptance, of housing integration ignites many of the ethnic conflicts throughout the narrative.
- *Polo Palermo*, a boxer who defeats Irish Mike, becomes the hero of the neighborhood’s growing Italian community. He eventually becomes a public leader whose political club oversees the development of Dropsie Avenue. His efforts with Abie Gold to clean up drug trafficking in the neighborhood lead to his murder.
- *Abie Gold* and his parents, fleeing the growing Nazi presence in 1930’s Europe, are one of the earliest Jewish families to move onto Dropsie Avenue. His gifts for argument and conflict resolution, as well as his love of the neighborhood, make him not only a successful lawyer but also a city council member. Of all the figures in the graphic novel, he comes closest to being a central character.
- *Father Gianelli* and *Rabbi Goldstein* are the primary religious leaders of the neighborhood. Their teamwork mirrors that of the Leone and Gold families and they are two of the few inter-ethnic relationships built on cooperation and mutual respect.
- *Sven Svenson* is a Swedish-born superintendent who wins the lottery and uses the money to buy the tenement building where he works. His property eventually becomes a central location for racial conflict, symbolically represented by a boiler explosion that nearly destroys the building.
- *Ruby Brown* is one of the first African American residents on Dropsie Avenue. Her father works for Sven Svenson until the latter has to sell his building. Years later, she becomes the deputy mayor for city planning and works with both Abie Gold and Rowena Shepard to create Dropsie Gardens.
- *“Crazy” Bones* is a pusher who buys Svenson’s building and uses it as a central house for his drug running. He orchestrates the murder of Polo

Palermo and, along with Red (a Vietnam veteran and paraplegic), brings decay to the neighborhood through his illegal enterprise.

### Artistic Style

Like Eisner's other graphic novels, *Dropsie Avenue* is presented in black and white. His drawings are highly realistic, underscoring the kind of style he laid out in his theoretical and instructional texts, *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (1996), and *Expressive Anatomy for Comics and Narrative* (2008). His lines are primarily clean when representing characters, and he makes substantial use of shading to capture the nuances of lighting. Along with this, Eisner often relies on a bold, heavy inking (especially of backgrounds, but also in terms of silhouettes) to accentuate the dilemmas in which characters find themselves. This stark black-and-white contrast is analogous to the moral conflicts that constantly arise in the narrative, suggesting that characters find themselves trapped by extreme forces over which they have little control.

The art of *Dropsie Avenue* is also defined through another hallmark of Eisner's style: his unconventional use of panels and framing. While there are many pages of the book that adhere to a more traditional use of paneling, more numerous are the instances of panel rupture. Here, as in most of Eisner's other comics, the integrity paneled segments are compromised by the intrusion of word balloons, a part of characters' anatomies, or elements of the background from another panel on the page. The result is a "bleeding" of one narrative segment into another. Similarly, Eisner often forgoes symmetrical, angled panels altogether. Instead of containing an event within a traditional straight-lined perimeter, he uses detail from the panel's background, or even elements from an adjacent segment, to frame a portion of the page's story. For example, the fire of a burning building, a window casing, the smoke of a cigarette, or even the streets of the neighborhood serve as borders that separate one narrative event from another.

On some pages, there is a complete absence of any sort of panel, and events on one part of the page blend seamlessly with others. Eisner's distinctive style of framing and paneling, while not unique to *Dropsie*

*Avenue*, is nonetheless part and parcel of the book's themes. Just as one panel intrudes upon another, the individual lives on Dropsie Avenue are in constant conflict with those living around them. The visual clash between panels suggests the ever-present tensions underlying the neighborhood's many constituents. Furthermore, the breakdown or the absence of solid frames gives the narrative a greater sense of flow, where one event follows naturally from another. This stylistic effect not only drives the narrative forward, but it suggests a causal link between events that creates a sense of inevitability.

### Themes

The overriding theme of *Dropsie Avenue* concerns ethnoracial conflict. Not only does the clash among the many segments of the neighborhood reveal the darker side of the American Dream, but also the interethnic struggles generate almost perpetual action, and this propels the plot forward. These constant conflicts are symbolized through icons of barriers and destruction. Windows, fire, and "for sale" signs proliferate and are woven throughout the story.

If the graphic novel is read within the tradition of literary naturalism, then Eisner's message about ethnic relations is a bleak one. It exposes the myth of the American melting pot as a useless fiction, and it questions multicultural idealism. While there are pockets of hopefulness in the narrative (such as the philanthropy of Rowena Shepard, the dogged determinism of Abie Gold, and the civic-minded efforts of Polo Palmero and Ruby Brown), the final tone is one of somber inevitability. As such, Eisner broaches a larger philosophical theme regarding human destructiveness and ongoing civil discord.

### Impact

While nowhere near as groundbreaking as *A Contract with God*, *Dropsie Avenue* is nonetheless significant in that it completes a larger graphic cycle that, for many, best defines the final stage of Eisner's career. When W. W. Norton acquired the rights to Eisner's non-*The Spirit* catalog in 2005, *The Contract with God Trilogy* was the first volume of material the publisher chose to reissue.

*Dropsie Avenue* is also important in that it mitigates the charges of sentimentality in Eisner's comics. In graphic novels such as *The Dreamer* (1986), *Minor Miracles* (2000), *Fagin the Jew* (2003), and even the other works in *The Contract with God Trilogy*, there is a slight strain of melodrama that, at times, threatens to undermine the socially critical edge of Eisner's narratives. In concluding the multifaceted portrait of Eisner's south Bronx setting, *Dropsie Avenue* throws into question any easy or unequivocal interpretation of Eisner's text and, as such, adds to a grittier, hard-edged, and more realistic reading of the landmark trilogy. While scholarship on Eisner's comics is still relatively sparse, what does exist focuses primarily on the texts that compose *The Contract with God Trilogy*.

Derek Parker Royal

#### Further Reading

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**See also:** *American Splendor; A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories; The Spirit*