There Goes the Neighborhood:
Cycling Ethnoracial Tensions in Will Eisner’s Dropsie Avenue

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Unlike many of Will Eisner’s graphic novels, texts concerned primarily with Jewish families and communities, Dropsie Avenue (1995) takes on the broader theme of American ethnoracial relations and the dynamics of urban assimilation. It offers a critical and even neo-naturalistic reading of the traditional “melting pot” myth, resistant to any romantic notions of multicultural nationhood. In drawing together the various actions that occur throughout the text, Eisner employs several highly revealing, and visually sophisticated, graphic signifiers that dramatically underscore the violence and alienation that can result within multi-ethnic communities: a metaphoric emphasis on windows, references to fire, and the presence of “For Sale” or “For Rent” signs. These cyclically recurring images function as a form of illustrated shorthand for the seemingly never-ending attempts of diverse populations to work out their differences. Furthermore, they also serve as formal visual links between the assorted sequences that, taken together, emphasize the social fragmentation of the modern urban landscape.

In his Contract with God trilogy Will Eisner, one of the earliest and most vocal advocates of the graphic novel, sets out to narrate the life of Dropsie Avenue, a neighborhood in the Bronx housing residents of diverse ethnic backgrounds. His first two books in the trilogy—A Contract with God (1978) and A Life Force (1988)—focus primarily on the lives of Jewish families caught in the struggles of Depression-era America, reminiscent of both Isaac Bashevis Singer’s shtetl portraits and the kind of Jewish social realism found in the work of Anzia Yezierska and Michael Gold. However, the third book in the trilogy,
Dropsie Avenue: The Neighborhood (1995), is strikingly different from its predecessors in that it is not restricted to an individual family or a cast of three or four characters. What is more, and also unlike the previous works in the trilogy, Dropsie Avenue does not primarily concern itself with Jewish issues, culture, or families. Instead, Eisner's story is projected onto a much broader canvas, American ethnoracial relations as a whole and the process of urban assimilation. The narrative sweep of the graphic novel encompasses Dropsie Avenue residents from the 1870s to the late twentieth century, revealing its multi-ethnic evolution and the turmoil generated by such diverse encounters. What is significant about the last in Eisner's trilogy is the ways in which the author uses comics to represent the ongoing dynamics of the modern ethnic neighborhood. Through both word and picture, Eisner offers a critical—if not downright cynical—reading of the traditional "melting pot" myth, resistant to any romantic notions of multicultural nationhood that any "cartoony" representations might initially suggest. On the contrary, the very form of his efforts—the fluid sweep of his graphics, his non-traditional uses of framing, and his employment of contrastive tones—reveals a rather stark, even neobourgeois, analysis of relations between American ethnic communities. As

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1Will Eisner, Dropsie Avenue: The Neighborhood (1995; repr., New York: W. W. Norton, 2006). Throughout this essay, I will reference the most recent Norton edition, since not long before his death Eisner provided four brand-new illustrations for the new version, and, as I will argue, some of those additional drawings are important when determining the book's tone.

2In this way, my reading of Dropsie Avenue differs from that of comics critic and artist, Danny Fingeroth. He reads the book as part of a series of graphic novels in which "Eisner was preoccupied with Jewish subjects" (Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero [New York: Continuum, 2007], p. 140). While I would agree that many of Eisner's later works such A Contract with God and To the Heart of the Storm (1991) directly engage with and are primarily focused on issues of Jewishness, Dropsie Avenue provides a much broader context, with Jewish concerns being only one of many ethnoracial voices heard in the text.

3The term "graphic novel"—a label commonly applied to a variety of comics, regardless of genre, length, and subject matter—is highly problematic and raises a number of challenging questions within comics studies. However, despite the baggage of this label, I will nonetheless use it when referring to Dropsie Avenue, if for no other reason than because Eisner himself employed the term and is (mistakenly) seen by many as its originator. As Bob Andelman points out in his biography, Will Eisner: A Spirited Life (Milwaukie, OR: M Press, 2005), pp. 290–96, although Eisner was not the first to use apply "graphic novel" to his work, he is largely responsible for popularizing the term, thereby lending more "legitimacy" to comics as a literary form (pp. 295–296).
Laurence Roth says of the three Dropsie Avenue narratives, “the special contracts promised between America and its citizens ... are redrawn by Eisner as distinctly unglamorous and unfulfilled agreements.” What is more, Eisner’s bittersweet rendition of the Dropsie Avenue neighborhood (much like the one in which the author grew up) is further complicated by what he apparently sees as the cyclical nature of ethnoracial tensions—a fitting metaphor, given the fact that the book itself is part of a larger graphic narrative cycle.

In drawing together the various actions that occur and recur, cycle-like, throughout the text, Eisner employs several highly revealing and visually sophisticated graphic signifiers that dramatically underscore the violence and alienation that can result within multi-ethnic communities. They include a metaphoric emphasis on windows, references to fire, and the presence of “For Sale” or “For Rent” signs, and it is the use of these visual themes that will be the focus of the current essay. These cyclically recurring images function as a form of illustrated shorthand, coded disclosures of the seemingly never-ending, and apparently futile, attempts of diverse populations to work out their differences and live in mutual respect. They serve as visual leitmotifs that not only underscore the pessimistic tone of the graphic novel, but also interlink the sprawling action of the narrative—assorted sequences that, taken together, can certainly be read as a metaphor for the breakdown in American ethnoracial relations. In other words, the many references to windows, fire, and signs serve the paradoxical function of binding together into a cohesive whole a series of varied and disjointed episodes that are intended to emphasize social fragmentation.

The plot of Dropsie Avenue is fairly simple. It begins in 1870, in the living room of the Van Dropsies, a Dutch family from New York’s earliest wave of immigrant settlers, where they are discussing the relatively recent arrival of the English into their neighborhood, a region that we now know as the Bronx. Dirk Van Dropsie complains that the English are gaining the economic upper hand on the Dutch residents, and on one drunken night sets fire to a neighbor’s crops as an act of protest. In the process Dirk accidentally kills his niece by immolation, he is then shot by his brother-in-law, the Dropsie family goes into seclusion until their house is eventually destroyed by fire, and then soon after a “For Sale” sign is placed on the property. Several years later, the

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5 In 2005 all three of Eisner’s interconnected Dropsie Avenue narratives were for the first time collected in one volume, The Contract with God Trilogy (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2005).

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newly rich O’Brien family purchases the lot, wanting desperately to move up in social circles and enhance their lifestyle in the now predominantly English neighborhood, and then just as the Van Dropsies had earlier scrutinized the English, the O’Briens are scrutinized by the English neighbors across the street. These early scenes in this graphic novel set the stage for many of the images and themes that will recur throughout. “Established” residents will become unsettled by the arrival of newer immigrants, complain about the “colorful” changes—color as signifier of difference resonates throughout this work—eventually sell their homes and move away from Dropsie Avenue. The newer immigrants will then become the “established” neighbors, eventually bemoaning the fact that an even newer and more “colorful” group of arrivals have started to move in. This continues throughout the graphic novel, with the English being replaced by the Irish, who are replaced by the Italians, followed by the Germans, Jews, and Hispanics (primarily Puerto Ricans), and then finally by the African Americans.  

The central figure in this drama is the Dropsie neighborhood itself, a setting that becomes a character, metaphorically living and breathing with a life force all its own. In fact, several times throughout the graphic novel individuals comment on how neighborhoods have a life cycle much like people. As one of the book’s dominant figures, Abie Gold, speculates, “Maybe a neighborhood has a life cycle . . . like people?” And if the neighborhood is the central character in this novel, it is one that is as chaotic and fragmented as the relationships among its inhabitants. What binds these various episodes together are a series of interlocking themes and images—such as those of fire, signs, and windows—that connect, or cycle, its long string of individual stories. In this way, Dropsie Avenue is much like Eisner’s 1979 graphic novel, A Contract with God, a text that relies on the short-story cycle form as way of bringing together its seemingly disparate narratives. However, Dropsie Avenue is more, and in the fullest sense, novelistic than the earlier work, with its more tightly woven scenes and

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6 Asian immigrants are curiously absent from Dropsie Avenue, but at the very end of the novel there is an ambiguous reference to new and even more “colorful” boat arrivals, which could include Vietnamese, Chinese, or any number of other ethnic figures—see Figure 13.  

7 Dropsie Avenue, p. 141. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.  

its structuring imagery. In fact, it is a graphic novel whose visuals dramatically outweigh its verbiage in narrative significance.9

Inside Looking Out, Outside Looking In

Perhaps the most common theme in *Dropsie Avenue* can be summed up by the fatalistic adage, “There goes the neighborhood.” Individuals from one ethnic community are constantly throwing up their hands at the arrival of individuals from another ethnic group, and this throwing up of the hands can be read at different times as resignation, resistance, and relocation. The resignation comes in the form of moderate voices within an established community, accepting the presence of a new group of residents and aware of the potential for growth and progress among different people. In Eisner’s text, this pragmatic approach to ethnic diversity is often clothed in religious garb—for instance, there are occasions when Father O’Leary (67), Father Gianelli (142), Rabbi Goodstein (78), and the African American reverend Dr. Washington (143) acknowledge the reality of the changing neighborhood and adjust their outlooks accordingly—but it also comes in more secular forms. Abie Gold and Polo Palmero, a lawyer and a political boss, are two of the most developed characters in the novel and understand the social necessity, as well as the personal profits, that come of good community relations.

While examples of resignation and even understanding can be found throughout *Dropsie Avenue*, scenes of resistance and relocation are far more plentiful. One way in which Eisner represents ethnoracial discord is through the use of windows as a visual theme.10 The artist uses windows and glass imagery not only to illustrate (literally) the various barriers separating one ethnic group from another, but also as a commentary on the process of obtaining “insider” status. In this way, we can read *Dropsie Avenue* as a visual

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9 Not all graphic novels do this. Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003) and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), for instance, are works that rely more heavily on dialogue and voice-overs as a thematically propelling force, and Eisner’s final work, *The Plot: The Secret Story Of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (2005), is by and large a text built more upon words than graphics. These are what Scott McCloud would call examples of “word specific” comics—where pictures illustrate, but do not significantly add to the text—or “duo-specific” combinations—where words and pictures generate essentially the same message (*Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* [1993; New York: HarperPerennial, 1994], p. 153).

10 I wish to thank my colleague, C. J. Stephens, for initially drawing my attention to Eisner’s abundant use of window imagery and its thematic import.
discourse on whiteness, or the means through which certain individuals and
groups identify themselves as "white," thereby positioning themselves within
a perceived middle class—or at least distinctly separate from what they see
as common laborers or recent immigrants—and assuming the various entitle-
ments and privileges such a status provides.11 Window imagery functions as a
way of representing both insider and outsider status, and the graphic novel is
filled with examples of "privileged" characters inside their domains looking out
at others, or perspectives of individuals outside looking in on those in posi-
tions of authority. As such, Eisner provides us not only with examples of eth-
noracial identity formation, how individuals contextualize themselves within
certain ethnic and racial groupings, but also with the process of what Karen
Brodkin calls "ethnoracial assignment," which is "about popularly held classi-
fications and their deployment by those with national power to make them
matter economically, politically, and socially to the individuals classified."12

The opening episodes of Dropsie Avenue are an effective demonstration
of this. In the first scene, Hendrik Van Dropsie, the Dutch landowner whose
father bought the property from the Van Bronks, is looking out of his win-
dow and talking with his family about the growing presence of the English.
Hendrik's brother-in-law, Dirk, complains that the English are buying up ev-
erything and, standing by the window, claims that soon the new residents will
"make things bad" for the Van Dropsies (4) and damns them for not belonging
(6). A similar context is drawn after the Van Dropsie house is burned to the
ground. When Sean O'Brien, a nouveau riche Irish owner of a construction
company, builds a mansion in the neighborhood, the Skidmore family (part

11 "White," in this sense, is not necessarily defined through (Western) European an-
cestry or skin pigmentation—though skin color does figure into a larger understanding of
"whiteness"—but, much more important, is a privileged social position that is understood in
contrast to an "other," usually those who have been associated with "blackness" and/or have
been traditionally excluded from various social, economic, and intellectual arenas. As such,
race is regarded as socially constructed, and that which is defined as "non-white" is used as
a justification for discrimination. For further discussions on whiteness and the process un-
der which individuals are considered white, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Racial
Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge,
1994), Noel Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White (New York: Routledge, 1995), Karen
Brodkin, How the Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America
(New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), and Matthew Frye Jacobson, Whiten-
ess of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race (Cambridge, MA:

12 Brodkin, How the Jews Became White Folks, p. 3.
of the now dominant English presence on Dropsie Avenue) stands by their window and bemoans the O'Briens' presence (Fig. 1). Looking out at their unwanted neighbors, they complain that Mrs. O'Brien walks down the street "as if she owns the neighborhood," and laugh at them because "they don't even know they don't belong" (14). This use of window imagery occurs repeatedly throughout the graphic novel, linking together the separate episodes and demonstrating patterns of exclusiveness among the various ethnic residents of Dropsie Avenue.

13 Other notable examples include Sean O'Brien looking out his window at the up-and-coming O'Leary family (17); his son Neil looking out at the factories across town (29); Rowena Shepard's grandmother looking out of her window—one of the few remaining private houses on Dropsie Avenue—at the tenements that crowd her (45); neighbors, bootleggers, and prostitutes looking at the protest, and subsequent death, of Lilly O'Reily (57, 59); Rowena's neighbors watching her and Prince as they leave Dropsie Avenue (62); the Irish residents looking at the newly arrived Italians as they move into a tenement building (67); Father Gianelli, Rabbi Goodstein, and their neighbors looking out onto the streets that have "abandoned" their children (81); politician Polo Palermo looking out his window as he plans on getting the support of the Jewish population (92); white residents looking out their windows as African Americans move into their building (112); tenants looking down on Puerto Rican and Italian gangs fighting (125); kids looking out their windows as they drop a water balloon on the new Hasidic arrivals (148); and the closed, lighted win-

Figure 1. Reprinted from Dropsie Avenue by Will Eisner. 14. Copyright © 1995 by Will Eisner, Copyright © 2006 by the Estate of Will Eisner. Used with permission of the publisher, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
Windows are also used to establish authority and privilege from an inverse perspective. There are a number of scenes where Eisner forces the reader, through visual framing and perspective, to look in on those with economic power, individuals who have "made it" in the neighborhood and who now have some political voice. One of the most frequently recurring characters in the graphic novel is the Ashkenazi ragman, Izzy Cash, so called because of his singsong cries as he pushes his cart down the street: "I cash clothes" (65). He becomes the central economic power on Dropsie Avenue, and even his name suggests as much. He is one of the only figures in the novel who is observed through windows from an outside perspective. When he buys his first building from the borough bank, we are introduced to this transaction as if we were standing outside the bank window looking in (73). When he is present at a hearing because he is accused of being a slumlord, we observe the action from the outside and through the door's windows (90). And before Izzy begins selling off his property, having a "bad feeling about Dropsie Avenue" and realizing that it is going downhill, we see him discussing this matter with his assistant as if we were looking through the window of his office door (131) (Fig. 2). The latter example is particularly telling, in that as we observe Izzy Cash through the door window—as if we were outside of the room—he is looking outside of his office window at the crumbling neighborhood below. In other words, the distance between the haves and the have nots is compounded. In these scenes with Izzy, the outsider is the focalizer. It is as if the reader is serving as a narrative proxy for the disempowered other as he or she looks in on, and is separated from, those with economic clout.

Eisner also uses windows to represent the pent-up rage that can result from prejudice, fear, and imposed ethnic divisions. These come in the form of broken glass. Soon after the United States enters the First World War, Irish children overhear their parents talking about the "krauts" and the "damn buns" who have moved into the neighborhood. They act out by throwing rocks through the German immigrants' window (32). When Italian youth retaliate after the Puerto Ricans beat up one of their own, the ensuing fight shatters the plate glass of Herman Gold's tailor shop (96). Later, the glass storefront of Joe Leone's shoe repair business, next door to Gold's shop, is smashed by Puerto Ricans enraged by what they perceive as disrespect from an Italian priest (124). And finally, Gold's shop window is once again destroyed when his landlord tries to burn him out so that he can get the lease back and legally increase rents (146).
Indeed, windows are also thresholds of transgression, the crossing of which can be linked to urban poverty. Rowena Shepard's future husband, Prince, is first seen climbing through a window after he is caught stealing from a tenement apartment (46–47). Six pages later, Prince catches three young thugs, intent on robbery, as they climb through the window of Rowena's new flower business (53). In Sven Svensen's former building, now owned by a major drug dealer aptly named Bones, homeless men can be seen through a broken windowpane. Their drunken carelessness causes a fire that destroys the building, and flames are shown shooting out the apartment window (130). This image of a flaming window is repeated seventeen pages later when an African American father sets fire to his own apartment so that he can qualify
for public housing assistance, which includes clothing and moving costs, as a burned-out family (147).

As these many examples clearly demonstrate, Eisner’s use of windows emphasizes the economic and social divisions resulting from ethnорacial turmoil, and it reveals the almost cyclical process through which immigrant communities establish themselves in order to be considered “white” . . . or the violence that can result from being excluded from such social privilege. The window imagery also helps to give form to his sprawling narrative, with the repeated use of windows binding together the book’s many episodes. In fact, one can even read the recurring image as a metafictional device. It is as if Eisner is drawing our attention to his project by showing us that windows are visually similar to the various panels that make up the comic page. This becomes apparent toward the end of the graphic novel, when we see the last remaining tenement building minutes before it is demolished. And at the Dropsie Avenue Reunion, the pictures on “The Old Neighborhood as We Remember It”

Figure 3. Reprinted from Dropsie Avenue by Will Eisner. 158, 161. Copyright (c) 1995 by Will Eisner, Copyright (c) 2006 by the Estate of Will Eisner. Used with permission of the publisher, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

display board recall the multi-paned building just three pages earlier (Fig. 3). The reunion photographs can even be seen as “windows” into the past. Yet, as these final visual references suggest—the boarded up windows and the pictures of a dead past—Dropsie Avenue no longer embodies the dreams of its earliest residents. Even the final attempts to revive the neighborhood, bankrolled by the Rowena Plant Corporation, fall prey to the suspicions of and prejudices against the ethnic other.
Firestorms of Ethnoracial Animosity

Another way in which Eisner reveals fear and bigotry in Dropsie Avenue, and also gives form to his narrative, is through fire imagery. Throughout the text, fire is directly linked to the anger and discontent among the neighborhood residents, and they come in a variety of forms, from budding embers of personal resentment to full-scale emotional explosions from the community at large. In fact, the graphic novel more or less begins with such imagery. In the opening scene, Dirk’s anger at the growing English presence is expressed through conflagration (Fig. 4). He attempts to destroy the English crops, thereby removing any economic threat that the new arrivals may pose. Screaming “Burn them out!” (7), Dirk literalizes the inner fires of his hatred, and in doing so he ignites a flame that consumes not only the English crops, but also his niece, Helda Van Dropsie. In these opening pages of his graphic novel, Eisner is pointing out, rather overtly, the underlying nature of the Dropsie neighborhood, illustrating through its very namesake the fire-laden forces of destruction that will propel the rest of the narrative.

While the opening scenes with the Van Dropsie family may be a rather heavy-handed way to symbolize hatred, other scenes in the book reveal a more nuanced use of fire imagery. One such episode occurs in a brief exchange between Coleen O’Brien and her brother Neil (Fig. 5). It is around 1900, approximately thirty years after the opening crop fire, and the O’Brien family currently owns the old Van Dropsie property, now centrally located within a largely English population. In this scene Coleen tells her brother about her affair with Charles Livermore, from a well-to-do Anglo ancestry, which ended because the Livermore family would not let their son marry, in Coleen’s words, “a low class Irish girl” (19). What is significant about this series of panels is the way in which Eisner uses Coleen’s cigarette smoke as a means to revealing ethnic resentment. As she pours out her story to Neil, her words are literally framed by the smoke that she exhales. Unlike the opening scenes with Van Dropsie, the hate portrayed in this episode visually begins as a small flame at the top of the page and then is slowly revealed through the burning down of Coleen’s cigarette, the smoke of which encompasses the insult and rumor leveled against the young Irish woman.

Eisner uses a similar technique several pages later, when a group of neighborhood residents, now primarily Irish, congregate to discuss the recent immigrant arrivals (Fig. 6). It is the early days of World War I, and the “Dropsie Avenue Property Owner’s Association” has gathered to discuss a possible solution to the growing German population. “Them Krauts is movin’ in,” one resident exclaims, and the men decide to hold a patriotic block party as a way of "cleaning up the neighborhood" (31). Their frustrations, as well as their
Figure 4. Reprinted from Dropsie Avenue by Will Eisner. Copyright © 1995 by Will Eisner, Copyright © 2006 by the Estate of Will Eisner. Used with permission of the publisher, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
Figure 5. Reprinted from Dropsie Avenue by Will Eisner. 20. Copyright © 1995 by Will Eisner. Copyright © 2006 by the Estate of Will Eisner. Used with permission of the publisher, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
unfounded fears, are initially revealed through their tobacco smoke, and this framing device immediately follows the image of a "For Sale" sign, a panel that serves as a segue between Neil O'Brien's story and the owner's association's clash with their German neighbors (more on the use of signs later in the essay). Tobacco smoke is also closely associated with Big Ed Casey, the owner of a construction company that builds the neighborhood's first tenement houses. In every instance of his brief appearance in the graphic novel (36–42), he is shown with a cigar. Not only is Eisner visually stereotyping the powerful and crooked fat cat—the cigar as a sign of authority and consumption—but he is also directly linking Big Ed's cigar smoke to much of the abuse and violence underlying the narrative. It is Big Ed, after all, who corrupts the idealistic city-planning director, Danny Smith, and who indirectly causes the death (or murder) of the city investigator. Perhaps even more significant, Big Ed's cigar smoke is visually linked to the construction of the Dropsie Avenue tenements,
an event that will accelerate ethnoracial discord. It is as if the chances of harmony and stability within the neighborhood have gone up in smoke, disappearing into thin air like Danny Smith's integrity.\(^{14}\) It is no accident that the final panel of this event—as with the previous O'Brien episode—foregrounds a “For Sale” sign, with Danny and his wife deciding to move out of the Dropsie neighborhood now that they can afford to do so.

Such visual links to animosity and strife seem tame compared to many of the images that follow. Elsewhere, Eisner uses much more dramatic means to express ethnic discontent (Fig. 7). In illustrating the U.S. entering the Second World War (83), he juxtaposes images of Dropsie Avenue (the street shot at the top part of the page) with scenes of destruction from the war, a conflict that was largely waged over issues of ethnoracial differences. With both the newspaper headlines screaming war and the mushroom cloud on the left hand of the panel, Eisner links the ethnic resentments on Dropsie Avenue with images of war-ravaged Europe. What is more, the bright streetlight at the bottom right of the page not only pulls the eye downward from the pre-war scenes of Dropsie Avenue, thereby facilitating a condensed temporal segue, but it also centers the subsequent action in midis of ruin.\(^{15}\) This is the only time in the graphic novel that Eisner takes his story, albeit briefly, outside of the Dropsie Avenue setting. And it is significant that it is Berlin, of all places—now a burned out shell of a city—that becomes the symbolic embodiment of destruction and is directly linked to the Dropsie neighborhood. These images of fiery destruction gain even more import when compared to scenes near the end of the novel, when the last standing building along Dropsie Avenue is destroyed (Fig. 8). In an effort to stem crime and further economic decay, the city

\(^{14}\)Not only do rings of cigar smoke prominently accompany the revelation of the city investigator’s death (41), but Danny’s gradual corruption is treated in similar fashion. The whirl of dollar bills that frames Danny’s horse betting—Big Ed’s attempt to indebted the young city planner to him—visually calls to mind the dispersing clouds of Big Ed’s puffs (39).

\(^{15}\)At risk of applying fire imagery too freely, it is worth noting the number of times bright lights and streetlamps, perhaps reminiscent of fire, are prominently featured in the text—and the contexts in which they appear. They appear twice in the book’s opening scene at the Van Dropsie’s (4, 10), immediately before Coleen O’Brien is arrested for prostitution (21), the boxing match between Irish Mike and the Polo Palermo (69), the aforementioned scene in Berlin (83), Polo’s attempts to sabotage Izzy Cash’s buildings with acid (88), the beating of Rockie (an Italian) by a Hispanic gang (95), the boiler explosion at Svensen’s building (117), the car bombing of Polo Palermo (141), and the demolition of the last building on Dropsie Avenue, this final instance featuring a streetlamp with a busted globe (159). What all of these visuals have in common is that they appear during episodes of violence.
planners decide to demolish what is left of the “bombed out” (157) neighborhood so as to start anew, a situation that parallels the decimation of the Nazi capital. The parallel is thematic as well as visual. The explosive cloud from the demolition is a graphic echo of the atomic cloud found in Figure 7—down to
its mushroom shape—and the aerial shot of the leveled buildings on Dropsie Avenue are likewise a direct link to the bombed out buildings of Berlin.

Other images of conflagration are even more straightforward. In one episode, for instance, the inner frustrations of the neighborhood’s residents are
given outward expression in the form of an explosion (Fig. 9). At one point, Sven Svensen, the owner and super of one of Dropsie Avenue’s tenement buildings, is bombarded by complaints from his occupants. His is perhaps the most ethnically diverse residence on the block—Svensen was one of the first owners to integrate his building—and here Eisner is showing how the slow growth of ethnically generated animosity (revealed through grumblings over rent, utilities, and undesirable tenants) can build into a much more destructive force, something on a metaphorical scale of a boiler explosion. This graphic allegory is given more direct expression twenty-four pages later, when Abie Gold and Polo Palmero ruminate on the changes in the neighborhood (Fig. 10). Abie, now a city councilman for the Dropsie Avenue district, is talking with Polo about the growing problem of drugs. In this scene, Abie waxes philosophical about the cyclical nature of neighborhoods, and Polo equates the chaotic “jungle” of the streets with the growing presence of even more ethnic and racial minorities. They have just had the police jail the drug dealer Bones, and in retaliation the dealer has someone rig Polo’s car. Not only does Eisner use these fiery explosions to represent the extremes of ethnic tensions—the underlying animosity and hatred that can at any time express itself in violent and unpredictable ways—but he does so by linking them visually, thereby underscoring their effects in the narrative. The explosion in Figure 10 directly parallels that in Figure 9, down to the very detail of both sharing the same lower right-hand space on the page. Furthermore, these explosions come at two key moments in the text. The explosion at the Svensen building leads directly to neighborhood’s downward spiral at the hands of Bones, and the assassination of Polo immediately follows Abie’s musings on the neighborhood’s “life cycle” and its death as a “force of nature” (141).

References to fire and ethnoracial discord appear more frequently in the last half of the text, as if the graphic novel is building to a crescendo ending with Dropsie Avenue’s final destruction. Abie breaks up a brawl between Italian and Puerto Rican gangs by asking women to boil water and pour it down on the heads of fighters below their windows (97). The old Svensen building is burned to the ground due to the drunken carelessness of vagrants (130–131). Another tenement building is destroyed when its owner hires finishers to strip all of its plumbing and heating fixtures, in an attempt to force out its undesirable—ethnic—residents. A fire occurs as a result of a tenant’s igniting a trash barrel in order to keep warm, and then having that barrel knocked over during a fight with one of the “dopers from upstairs” (136). As mentioned earlier, Abie Gold’s father, a tailor and a refugee from the Nazis, has his business burned out (he suspects) by his own landlord. As the firemen extinguish the flames,
Figure 9. Reprinted from *Dropsie Avenue* by Will Eisner. 117. Copyright © 1995 by Will Eisner, Copyright © 2006 by the Estate of Will Eisner. Used with permission of the publisher, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
Figure 10. Reprinted from *Dropsie Avenue* by Will Eisner. 141. Copyright © 1995 by Will Eisner. Copyright © 2006 by the Estate of Will Eisner. Used with permission of the publisher, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
Abie's father screams "It's Berlin again! Berlin again! Again!" (146). And finally, the aforementioned African American sets fire to his apartment building so that so that he can receive public assistance (147). In each of these cases, Eisner uses fire imagery to reveal the underlying animosity in our modern and ethnically diverse urban space.

**Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign**

Given the violence and the desperation that seems to permeate the text, it should come as no surprise that an outside force, some *deus ex machina*, may be needed to bring any promising change to Eisner's neighborhood. This "saving" force comes in the form of Rowena Shepard—and her suggestive surname—a once youthful and innocent gardener who lived in the shadows of the tenements occupying the neighborhood's last remaining private home. In the 1970s, after demolition teams have completely leveled the area, she returns to work with Abie Gold and Rubie Brown, an idealistic African American City Planning Director who had grown up on Dropsie Avenue, in rebuilding the neighborhood. Rowena is now an aged millionaire, having successfully transformed her love of gardening into a thriving floral company, and she wants to use her money to recreate the neighborhood. In Figure 11, Abie reads Rowena's letter—whose text is framed in dreamy and reminiscent word bubbles—about her memories of Dropsie. Throughout the text, Rowena is associated with magical transformation—in earlier scenes in the novel she sits in her wheelchair among her many roses, calling herself the princess of a "magic garden," a place where she meets a young mute boy whom she calls her "prince from an enchanted kingdom"—and "magic" is what she attempts to bring back to Dropsie Avenue. It is here where Eisner's text flirts most closely with sentimentality, potentially providing unrealistically easy answers to the complex problems underlying his fictional landscape. Indeed, Eisner has been known at times to stray into the world of schmaltz, turning otherwise serious and provocative premises into maudlin storylines. This can be seen in such texts as *Fagin the Jew* (2003), his graphic narrative revision of Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, or even *The Dreamer* (1986) and *Minor Miracles* (2000), stories that rely heavily on the melodramatic.

However, although *Dropsie Avenue* may at times threaten to become sentimental, the text ultimately resists such trite responses to ethnic turmoil. Eisner does this with another visual motif that runs throughout the text: the

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16Thus, another link to ethnic violence and the devastation of Berlin, as seen in Figure 7.
"For Sale" or "For Rent" sign. Whenever there is dramatic change in the neighborhood, the threat of racial hatred, or a new ethnic minority moving into a building or onto a block, "For Sale" or "For Rent" signs are never far behind (Fig. 12). This use of signs functions as an almost fatalistic counterweight to the optimism that springs from the neighborhood's more hopeful residents. As mentioned previously, these signs appear immediately after the episodes with Neil O'Brien (30) and Danny Smith (43). They also occur after a German family is shunned by their Irish neighbors (34), in the wake of the stock market crash of 1929 (71), when Izzy Cash decides to integrate his buildings (112), after Svensen rents to gypsies and other "undesirables" (113), and when Rafa Gorgol—an abusive and unkempt man who is drawn to represent an East European "other"—is shot by his wife (116). And as with the window and fire
imagery, the repetitious use of "For Sale" or "For Rent" signs brings together the diverse episodes that make up the narrative.

Eisner uses this image most effectively in the final pages of the graphic novel. One day, after the Rowena Corporation has used its millions to "magically" create Dropsie Gardens, a residential community of affordable single-family homes, two neighbors, one black and one white, are out doing yard work and comment on their recently-arrived neighbors (Fig. 13). We never see these new residents, but according to the homeowners they are families who have arrived "on leaky boats" and who decorate their houses in "weird colors" and "dinky ornaments" (171–172). Again, "color" has infiltrated Dropsie Avenue, the neighbors are resentful, and the "For Sale" signs begin to go up. It is a "there goes the neighborhood" attitude all over again, and residents are once more suspicious and unsettled by ethnic diversity. As if to drive this point home, in the most recent edition of *Dropsie Avenue*—published in 2005 as a single-volume trilogy, and including *A Contract with God* and *A Life Force*—

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Eisner added two new illustrations. These are the final graphic commentaries of the graphic novel, and they show the Dropsie Gardens community slipping into disorder. In the first of these illustrations, the new houses on Dropsie Avenue are shown in disarray. Accompanying this image are the words of an extradiegetic narrator explaining,

As it often happens to neighborhoods[,] Dropsie Avenue’s ethnic mix began to change. The simple inexpensive home attracted a new group of people. Poorer and immigrant, they came with different cultural tastes and a less responsible attitude [sic] toward ownership and community. Soon they added brightly colored improvised structures to accommodate their large families. As earlier residents moved out, its character changed ... visible evidence of implacable growth. (173)
This detached, almost clinical, voice-over is then immediately followed by the book’s final image (Fig. 14). In it, we see the rain-drenched neighborhood sprinkled with “For Sale” signs, moving vans standing ready to assist in the relocation. It appears that the “fairytale” quality of the planned community is undermined once again by the cycles of violence and distrust, and not even Rowena’s magic can change this fact.

Will Eisner’s message in Dropsie Avenue isn’t uplifting. Unlike the endings of some of his other graphic novels, this one is dark, blunt, and uncompromising. One could even call it neo-naturalistic, a fatalistic reading of ethnic relations in American. It is significant to note that this is the final text of the Contract with God trilogy, a series of narratives that explore interactions among disparate individuals and systems of faith. But whereas the earlier stories in the trilogy may have held out for the possibility of personal redemption, either through faith or even through art, there seems to be little chance of that happening within the larger community. Dropsie Avenue shows us a localized neighborhood trapped in the grip of ethnic intolerance, and even if its message is bleak, it is one that we should nonetheless heed, especially given our country’s continued acts of racial intolerance, our ongoing rhetorical posturings concerning patriotism, and the current debates on immigration.

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17Eisner’s rain drawing is reminiscent of the opening pages of A Contract with God, where Frimme Hirsch walks home in a downpour after burying his daughter, Rachele. Given the fact that A Contract with God is the first work in the 2005 collected trilogy and Dropsie Avenue is its closing narrative, we can read this final rain-drenched page as part of the trilogy’s visual frame. It both begins and ends with gloomy, rainy weather. This is yet another way in which Eisner ties together, or even cycles, the various events in his text.

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Figure 14. Reprinted from Dropsie Avenue by Will Eisner. Copyright © 1995 by Will Eisner, Copyright © 2006 by the Estate of Will Eisner. Used with permission of the publisher, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.