

***A Contract with God: And Other Tenement Stories* by Will Eisner**
Reading Questions by Cantor Sarah Beck-Berman
(Be warned: the questions below include spoilers for the stories!)

General/Overall

1. How does the art complement the writing? How does the writing complement the art?
2. Do you agree with the artist-author that the writing and art are inseparable?
3. If you read the preface(s) to the book by the author before reading the book, did that affect your experience of reading the book?
4. How does the morality or immorality of the characters compare to our idea of how people behaved back then? What about compared to today?
5. Which of the stories/characters did you like? Why?
6. Each story is dark in its own way. Did you find anything especially disturbing or dark?
7. Each story has different examples of marriage/relationships and sexuality. What examples do we find inspiring? Relatable? Pitiful? Healthy or unhealthy? Disturbing?
8. Many (although not all) of the featured characters are Jewish. Is their Jewishness critical or incidental to the stories the author is telling? Could the same sort of stories happen to characters who aren't Jewish? Would the implications of the stories be any different if that were the case?

A Contract with God

1. What do you think about Frimme Hersh's contract?
2. Were the villagers right to tell young Frimme that "God will reward [him]"?
3. Is Frimme Hersh's belief that God violated the contract correct, given what we know from the story?
4. Why do you think Frimme waited to change his lifestyle until after shiva was over?
5. Did Frimme ever stop believing in Divine power or Divine justice?
6. Why do you think Frimme commissioned a new contract?
7. How do you think the contract will work for Shloime Khreks?

The Street Singer

1. Does knowing about the historical backdrop of the Great Depression change how you read this story and understand the characters?
2. The two "main" characters in the story both have two names: a birth name and a stage name. Do you think this reflects a duality in their lives?
3. Why does the street singer, Eddie, choose to sing instead of look for a job, as his wife asks him to do?
4. Why do you think Diva Marta Maria (aka Sylvia Speegel) chooses to trust the street singer with money and stake her failing reputation on him, having only met him once?

The Super

1. The author says in his introduction that the Super in this story is loosely based on a real-life person, however it is *not* clear that any of the events in the story had any correlation to reality. Why do you think the author would choose to tell this kind of story?
2. Certain stories can act as a mirror, or a Rorschach test, of our own biases and beliefs when we read them. Did you have any reactions to the characters and actions in the story which struck you in that way?
3. Do you think the anti-Semitism of the Super affects any level sympathy you may have for his character?
4. Why do you think the Super killed himself?
5. Why do you think the story ends with a close-up image of the “Super wanted” sign?

Cookalein

1. At the beginning of the story, Willie’s mother tells him he will *not* be permitted to “hang around the streets this summer with those rotten kids.” Was he any better off for leaving the city?
2. Why do you think Sam does not leave Fannie, even though he professes his intention to leave her to Kathleen?
3. What assumptions do we see the characters making about each other? Are any of the assumptions warranted? Does the narrative turn any assumptions on their head?
4. The romantic/sexual encounters in this story were at best questionable and at worst violently awful. Why do you think the author chose to include these examples of human interactions and not include, for example, a happy marriage or a straightforward well-boundaried courtship?
5. The author calls this story a “combination of invention and recall” and “an honest account of my coming of age.” Is the character representing the author Willie? What do you think Willie is thinking about in the last two pages of the story?