

“I Think I Know Most of My Readers by Name”: Dick Gibson, Stanley Elkin, and the Issue of Audience

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I can relate to what happens to Marshall Maine early in *The Dick Gibson Show*. Marshall—he hasn’t become Dick Gibson yet—works at a Nebraska radio station with the call letters KROP, “the Voice of Wheat.” The station is owned by a family of wealthy farmers whose eight enormous, contiguous farms are so distant from other human listeners that the brothers keep the station going only to entertain themselves and their employees and to provide a conduit for their political advertisements when the brothers are competing with each other for the few elective offices in their isolated, self-gerrymandered district. Marshall is aware that this family—he calls them Credenza, invoking the God-like character he ascribes to them—has complete power over his position at the station, and he consequently begins his stint at KROP by identifying with his oppressors and shamelessly flattering them on the air. When this strategy fails to win their commendation, Marshall, like a Dostoyevskian believer seeking to compel God into revealing Himself by sinning so flagrantly as to coerce a divine response, begins purposefully subverting his broadcasts. Marshall collects the blandest recordings of the dullest American songs he can find, and when playing these duds stirs no criticism, he begins delivering on-air opinions about which of the Credenzas needs to lose weight and about the adulteries he claims family members are committing with one another. The reason that even this behavior sparks no reprisal from Credenza is because they—like their employees, like the engineer checking the levels of his broadcast—have stopped listening. Characteristically, Elkin elaborates a number of extended similes through which Marshall illuminates what has happened on the eight farms constituting KROP’s listening audience:

“without consulting anyone each of them had become bored, without even recognizing the moment when they no longer cared to listen to their own radio station, . . . and so there was just this piecemeal tuning me out, just this gradual lapse as one loses by degrees his interest in a particular magazine he subscribes to, just this sluggish wane, just this disaffection. . . . They were all so bored that it was simply something personal, taking boredom for granted, almost as if it were something in the eye of the beholder with no outside cause at all, just a shift in taste, as one day one discovers that he can no longer eat scrambled eggs.” (42)

I’ve given away the punch line of this remarkably inventive Elkin episode—that KROP, Maine acknowledges, “doesn’t have a single listener. Not one”—because I’m going to discuss Elkin’s career-long disappointment with the size of his own audience, and I hope to account for some of the reasons for it. I can relate to Marshall’s KROP experience, too, because, as someone who, like all of us contributing to this casebook, writes criticism on a writer who complained about the size of his readership, I’m aware of having come a lot closer to not having a single reader than Elkin ever did. (It was from a particularly bad

funk that Elkin grumbled to me that my book—Reading Stanley Elkin—had probably outsold the Rabbi of Lud. I didn't have the heart to tell him how many copies a book about Stanley Elkin's novels sold.) My consolation, of course, is that literary criticism is not supposed to have any audience, that many of the people who want to know what I have to say about The Dick Gibson Show this time around are also contributing their own reconsiderations of the novel to this website—views which I will, in turn, of course, read with keen interest. Elkin's miniscule audience is, I think, more difficult to account for, arising as it does as much from literary choices that Elkin very deliberately made throughout his writing career as from limitations in taste or intelligence of the American reading public. Rather than offering here—as I did in Reading Stanley Elkin—another extended explication of what I imagine to be Elkin's thematic purposes in The Dick Gibson Show, in other words, I want to use The Dick Gibson Show as exemplary of the reasons that Elkin continues to have a “fit audience, though few.” In my Review of Contemporary Fiction interview with Elkin, I suggested that his novels may alter readers' lives more than he was willing to acknowledge. Elkin responded, “Yeah, but you're not going to go out and buy something.” “Maybe another Stanley Elkin novel,” I helpfully proposed. Elkin replied, “Probably not. I mean I think I know most of my readers by name” (20). My purpose here is to offer a frankly evaluative, highly subjective portrait of Elkin's literary techniques, focusing upon those elements in The Dick Gibson Show that should, because of their extraordinary literary virtues, recommend it to a larger audience, and those that, because of their extraordinary literary virtues and Elkin's characteristic intransigence, limited it to the small audience his fiction attracted with depressing regularity.

Lest any of my fellow Elkin readers anticipate that I'm going to self-indulgently upbraid the idiocy and tastelessness of the American reading public here, I'm not—that game is too easy, and it seems to me that Elkin's fiction contains sufficient reasons for its limited appeal to obviate any necessity to expatiate on the literary myopia of Stephen King/Danielle Steele/John Grisham fans. At the same time, I'll contend that my project makes sense with Elkin (as it wouldn't, say, with William Gaddis or Richard Powers, serious writers whose work contains no obvious appeal to a popular audience) because one element of his work has so much allure for the mass of readers: humor. So what's funny?

Appearing on the radio as Bill Barter, emcee of a program through which listeners trade possessions with each other, Elkin's protagonist talks to one woman willing to exchange two cemetery plots for a washer and dryer and then to another who insists that she will take only used puppets in trade for her sixty-pound bow and set of newly refeathered arrows. Although Elkin's adoption of this bargaining format effectively foreshadows Dick's subsequent giving over his microphone to his listeners on his Miami call-in show, Elkin's very brief transformation of his protagonist into Bill Barter is there primarily to allow us a few laughs at the expense of the hilariously focused desires which the barterers/listeners tune in to gratify. The “refugee,” an English-challenged caller to Dick's show, is even more patently introduced into the narrative for laughs: he's included because he can't keep straight “good” and “well” (“it's always a well idea to be

friendly”) and “how” and “why” (“I just wanted to call and tell you why things are going” (277)).

On a larger scale, the Credenizas and their privately owned radio station constitute a funny extended plot conceit, a shaggy-dog story spread over twenty-five pages that affords Elkin endless opportunities to imagine a radio professional doing precisely the opposite of what they actually do on American radio to please their bosses and court audiences: “[Maine’s] weather reports were jeremiads,” Elkin’s narrator explains. “If the sun was shining in northeast Nebraska he found a storm gathering in western Canada and spoke darkly of the prevailing gravity of weatherflow, its southern and easterly shift from its fierce source in the Bering Strait” (34-35). Similarly all four monologists who provide the “The Dick Gibson Show” narratives in part 2 of the novel are telling protracted black-humor narratives, extended jokes on themselves or others: Pepper Steep tells how Arnold Menchman, the “memory expert,” sacrifices his superhuman mental grasp of material reality to become glamorous, losing the world to gain grace and suavity; pharmacist Bernie Perk’s access to the private medical secrets of his customers culminates in his falling in love with a customer whose oversized genitals render her like the women in dirty jokes who secrete motorcyclists and their vehicles inside themselves, and so on. These narratives are, admittedly, related to each other by their exemplification of “The private life. That everybody has. Being loose in the world. On your own” (48), a theme to which I’ll return, but the personal confessions Behr-Bleibtreau elicits from Dick’s guests are nonetheless at least as entertaining as they are thematically enhancing.

Funnier still, and for me more imaginatively resonant, is the extended Shobuta (sounds like showboat) myth retold by Mr. Sansoni (reads like lacking Sony) and the dodo pursuit it inspires on Mauritius, in which American and Japanese troops compete to capture the sole survivor of the extinct species on the island. And maybe nothing is funnier in The Dick Gibson Show than Norman, the caveman all of whose fellow Kunchachagwans expired when they discovered fire, his tribesmen getting asphyxiated because fire was too new for them to understand that it works less well in caves than out in the open air. Taught English by the anthropologists who found him “as he wandered helpless and distraught outside the opening of his cave,” Norman describes the night he became the last survivor of his tribe on Dick Gibson’s Night Letters: “Oh, awful, . . . eberyting hot, eberyting in flames. Burn up our mores, artifacts an’ collective unconscious. Eberyting go up hot hot. Young bucks burn totems, taboos, cult objects and value system, entire shmeer go up dat ebening. Whole teleology shot to shit” (258).

Similar scenes in *The Living End* provoked one of the most amusing and most apt single sentences ever written by a critic about Elkin’s work: Geoffrey Stokes’s comment that, “The Brooks that comes to mind with Elkin is not Cleanth but Mel” (32). But Mel matriculated—without a college sophomore’s knowledge of anthropological terms, the jokes in Norman’s monologue probably fall flat. Elkin always claimed that he never tried to be funny—that he simply wrote sentences that came out funny. He had little patience, consequently, with the idea that his fiction is too funny to be good, the accusation that his work is really shtick masquerading as literature, insisting a little peevishly in one interview that any critics’ accusation that his books are loosely structured is groundless:

“Even though there are these tales that apparently have nothing to do with what is going on in [The Franchiser], I know what they are doing there” (qtd. in Bernt and Bernt 25). In another interview, he told Thomas LeClair, “I do not do schtick. What I do are organized routines and connected schtick—schtick upon schtick upon schtick until we have a piece of carpentry” (85). Because of its episodic structure, *The Dick Gibson Show* is particularly vulnerable to the schtick critique, and even some of Elkin’s most sympathetic critics have had trouble believing that the novel’s more extreme elements—I nominate Dick’s obsessively role-playing family members, who can’t talk to him without assuming pop-cultural personae—are necessitated as much by thematic design as by entertainment motives. In the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* interview, in fact, Elkin compared *The Dick Gibson Show* negatively with *The MacGuffin*: “I think *The MacGuffin* is superior to *The Dick Gibson Show*,” he suggested, “because it’s constructed so much more carefully—I had a bubble machine. I thought *The Dick Gibson Show* had a plot, but it wasn’t as careful a plot as *The MacGuffin*; it was more the fireworks of episode.” “Good episodes,” I countered. “Right, but put ’em all together and I’m not sure they spell mother” (Bailey 25).

When Elkin’s work is at its most effective, I’d argue, it makes conflicting and contradictory feelings co-exist in the reader so that the jokes that threaten to demolish the drama end up deepening it instead. Bob Hope backhandedly compliments Marshall’s audience warm-ups by invoking an analogous paradox: “Imagine,” Hope marvels, “not to glut an audience with jokes, but merely to depress them so that when the laughs come the people are actually grateful and laugh harder” (68). Sansoni’s recounting of the Shobuta myth, for instance, is so perfectly pitched between sacred narrative and self-parody that the narrator’s helpful explication of Japanese idioms his American listeners may not recognize—“what will be will be,” “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence”—ironically heightens the emotional authority of the myth he is articulating rather than exploding it. One only has to think of the conflicting tonalities of drama and humor in Elkin’s *The Franchiser* (which often makes the symptoms of multiple sclerosis seem grimly amusing) or *The Magic Kingdom* (which gets laughs from the last visit of doomed kids to Disney World) to recognize how dedicated his fiction was to mixing moods, melding modes, and—to quote one of his oft-quoted assertions about his fiction—“upsetting the applecarts of expectation and ordinary grammar” (qtd. in Sanders 133). This penchant for commingling emotional modalities and subverting easy patterns of audience response is, of course, another explanation for the smallness of his audience.

There are, admittedly, moments of direct emotional appeal in *The Dick Gibson Show*—the denial in which the Sohnschilds, two of Dick’s callers, are living regarding their blind baby is sincerely heartbreaking, as is the account of the woman who keeps her car alarm wailing because “it’s what mourns. I need it. It’s what says that everything isn’t okay. It’s my gadget for grief” (298). More complicatedly moving, however, are Dick’s two departures from his Pittsburgh home. In his first departure, he takes no boon from his eccentrically self-conscious family to help him in reshouldering his apprenticeship; in the second, he relinquishes his lover, Carmella Steep, to his brother, Arthur, and heads out on the road once more, his apprenticeship on him again. Moving moments, certainly, but for me the emotionality of the latter scene is intentionally ironized by the lovely description

of Marshall's thoroughly mediated response to the realization that Carmella loves Arthur: "For Marshall it was as if all the torch songs he had played all those years on the radio were suddenly coming true, a delphic Tin Pan Alley. His heart was breaking. It was terrible, but not unpleasant" (247). The insistence upon the mediating presence of Tin Pan Alley (and its odd crossover with "delphic") distances the reader from the character's desolation, reminding her/him of the unexceptionality of Dick's condition at the moment, while the "not unpleasant" description reinforces the idea that this emotion is supportable because it is familiar from the radio. Elkin was not above, in other words, sacrificing his characters' solidity and authority for the sake of a good line (Arnold Menchman, for instance, becomes "the elegant lonely man, like Frank Sinatra on an album cover" (181)), and I'd suggest that that was partly because Elkin had little reverence for notions of the integrity of human personality.

Elkin's fiction proliferates with characters for whom character is provisional, artificial, imitative: in addition to Dick's family members, Carmella Steep is probably the most conspicuous example in *The Dick Gibson Show* in her desire that her self exemplify "the normal and ordinary and the public"; therefore, she limits herself to behavior (in public, at least) compatible with canons of American normalcy, and she worries when out with Marshall that they seem insufficiently like "the couple next door." Elkin's assumption that the human personality is a somewhat shabby construction, a fabrication imported from images out in the world, often arises in his fiction (see Boswell, *The Franchiser*, "The Condominium") and is one unlikely to appeal to readers seeking character-driven, self-apotheosizing fiction. Best-sellers are seldom fashioned out of views like the following that Elkin attributes to Dick Gibson, but which sounds more like the guy who created him: "How motiveless the world is, when you stop to consider, how unspiratorial is the ordinary bent of humanity, how straightforward that bent" (64). I'll let Dick Gibson's own unavailing quest for identity serve to epitomize the ephemerality of self in Elkin's fiction.

As his numerous names suggest, Dick Gibson is a man of many voices, a difficult character for himself—and for readers—to pin down. He undertakes his apprenticeship in the hope that it will give shape and meaning to a life he experiences as being indeterminate and random; when the "famous general" tells not-yet-Dick Gibson that he was saved from driving off the highway by hearing Marshall Maine's voice on the radio in the last days of Marshall's KROP employment, Elkin's protagonist exultantly assumes that the mythic trajectory of his life has declared itself, and he celebrates by applying to himself a plethora of the cant phrases ("Let the clichés come," goes his tearful apostrophe, "I open myself to the great platitudes" (108)) Americans have generated to affirm the individual's progress to the next stage of being. Much of the joke (or, perhaps, point) of *The Dick Gibson Show* is, of course, that there is no next stage of being, no end to the apprenticeship—the "great unfocused struggle of [Dick's] life" (333) remains unfocused because Behr-Bleibtreau never reappears, no enemy ever arrives. Belief in such forms of mythic perception is what Dick is mocking in throwing the dead dodo in the air at the end of the Mauritius episode: as many of us Elkin critics have pointed out, his explanation that "It's all in the wrists" (133) suggests that it is American know-how

and not magic that is responsible for the dead bird's soaring in mock-fulfillment of the myth.

Despite his adoption late in the novel of the magical name of Dick Gibson, Dick's personality remains sketchy to both himself and the reader, the protagonist constantly making comments such as "I have no character; I am what I think. And what I say on the radio" (209) and "Dick Gibson, WBOX, and all I know is what you tell me" (238). Once he has survived Behr-Bleibtreau's attempt to steal his voice on *The Dick Gibson Show* (because Dick has no character to expose, no confessions for the psychologist to elicit), he admits that he has had a "close call," but he nonetheless reaffirms his belief that "there is no astrology, there's no black magic and no white, no ESP, no UFO's. Mars is uninhabited. The dead are dead and buried. Meat won't kill you and Krebiozen won't cure you and we'll all be out of the picture before the forests disappear and the water dries up. Your handwriting doesn't indicate your character and there is no God. All there is . . . are the strange displacements of the ordinary" (229). Whether Elkin really believed this eloquently disbelieving disclaimer is one of those things we Elkin critics like to debate by citing similarly secular and nihilistic speeches from certain Elkin works or invoking manifestations of irresolvable mystery from others, but the most important aspect of Dick's sign-off sentiments for that episode of "*The Dick Gibson Show*" is how completely in character they are.

Dick Gibson remains an enigmatic character because he is so much a radio show, so much a self-designed projection ("all I know is what you tell me") of his listeners' needs. (It's telling that the cover art of so many editions of Elkin's novel have pictured a microphone—often with a mouth—rather than a person.) In his early days in radio, Marshall's chosen message is "Please stand by, please be easy," and that message never really changes: throughout the novel, he very much wants to be the voice of reassurance and solace that the *Credenzas* expect their announcers to be; he longs to speak the "steady steady-as-she-goes pep talk of trouble shooters who routinized the extraordinary" (5) by remaining calm, by not breathing into the microphone, and by punctiliously repeating his time checks. The significance of Dick's choosing, in part 3, the talk show as his format is that he has succeeded in doing what Behr-Bleibtreau failed to accomplish: he has stolen his own voice, relinquishing it to his audience. Not surprisingly, the audience perceives its on-the-air role very differently from Dick's conception of it: rather than being a fount of optimism and communal reassurance, they constitute a cacophony of complaint and anxiety so overwhelming that Dick has to chasten them over the air: "All those calls tonight. What's happening to my program? What's the matter with everybody? Why are we all so obsessed? I tell you, I'm sick of obsession. . . . Where are my Mail Baggers, the ones who used to call with their good news and their recipes for Brunswick stew and their tips about speed traps between here and Chicago? How do your gardens grow, for Christ's sake? What's with the crabgrass? What'll it be this summer, the sea or the mountains? Have the kids heard from the colleges of their choice? What's happening?" (321-22).

Dick's listening audience has become the opposite of what he is: his self-effacement meets in them an answering self-obsessiveness; his desire that they discuss ordinary life

topics from which other listeners can benefit encounters their need to expose on the radio their most intimate secrets and anxieties, as if Behr-Bleibtreau had hypnotized them, as he had “The Dick Gibson Show” guests, into committing public self-betrays. Dick continues to offer spurious reassurance to his Mail Baggers and other callers, but most of them—like Norman, the dispossessed caveman, like Henry Harper, the nine-year-old living alone because of the sudden deaths of all his relatives, like terminally ill Mrs. Dormer—have problems too deep for calm recitations of “please be easy” or “This is Dick Gibson” to be persuasive or redemptive.

In the end Dick Gibson’s ministering to the public fails, arguably, because it really isn’t about ministering to the public—it’s really much more about “this idea about what my life would be like. . . . That it would be as it is in myth. That maybe I might even have to suffer more than ordinary men. . . . [T]hat I’d have enemies like Dorothy had the Witch of the West. . . . That I’d have this goal, you see, but that I’d be thwarted at every turn. I’ve always been in radio. I thought maybe my sponsors would give me trouble, or my station manager. Or the network VP’s. Or, God yes, I admit it, the public. That somehow they’d see to it I couldn’t get said what needed to get said” (270). Since he deliberately hands over his show to his audience, Dick becomes himself the enemy who is thwarting him, the adversary who facilitates the public’s capacity to “see to it I couldn’t get said what needed to get said” by managing his air time so that Dick has nothing of his own to say. (In part 3 of the novel, Behr-Bleibtreau supplies both Dick and Elkin with exactly the same function: he is a plot-engendering absence, a projection of Dick’s paranoia who gives Dick’s life and Elkin’s novel what shape they have in part 3.) At the end of the novel, Dick continues to remember the consonant narrative he hoped his life would turn into but which has failed to materialize: “What I wanted . . . was to be a leading man, my life to define life, my name a condition—like Louis Quatorze” (334). The condition Dick Gibson has come to define by the end of the novel is a blend of self-effacement and egocentricity far too complicated to engender myth: having sought to embody a culturally abandoned communality, he has now become a broadcast conduit of American narcissism, a medium for the audience’s aural preoccupation with self finally no greater than Dick’s own. Dick Gibson hopes that by symbolizing his listeners, he will rise above them as their reified image and mythic incarnation. Instead, he simply becomes one of the “scrambled I Am’s” of Miami station WMIA, all of them “blameless as himself, everyone doing his best but maddened at last, all, all zealous, all with explanations ready at hand and serving an ideal of truth or beauty or health or grace. Everyone—everyone. It did no good to change policy or fiddle with format. The world pressed in. It opened your windows” (331).

We Elkin experts could find many other examples in the oeuvre in which the protagonist’s ostensible devotion to normalcy and communality conceals a fervid commitment to self: it was Elkin, after all, whose most categorical assertion about his work was, “There is no particular religious tradition in my work. There is only one psychological assertion that I would insist upon: the SELF takes precedence” (qtd. in LeClair 60). The self may be for Elkin a jerry-built contraption comprised of “Gestures, gestures, saving gestures, life-giving and meaningless and sweet as appetite,” but it’s all we’ve got; we are, as Dick thinks late in the novel, “delivered by gestures and redeemed

by symbols, by necessities of our own making and a destiny dreamed in a dream” (331). Behr-Bleibtreau constitutes Dick’s dreamed destiny. I want respectfully to suggest that that principle of the self’s precedence constitutes another reason for Elkin’s work’s failing to draw a large audience. In the end *The Dick Gibson Show* is a complexly constructed narrative that supplies few easy handholds for readers (thus affording us Elkin critics a socially constructive clarificatory role) and one that very much enacts the “SELF takes precedence” credo. More than sending up signals for the reader pointing to the thematic intentions of his novel, Elkin characteristically devoted his best literary energy to the creation of language, since the primary value of fiction for him was there: “What I enjoy about fiction—the great gift of fiction—is that it gives language an opportunity to happen,” he told Thomas LeClair. “What I am really interested in after personality are not philosophical ideas or abstractions or patterns, but this superb opportunity for language to take place” (64).

Casual readers will probably never appreciate the quiet brilliance of Marshall’s painstaking attempt to articulate exactly the unconscious parameter of boredom that leads each of the Credenza brothers to shut off their radios without knowing that the others are doing the same; only a writer paying very close linguistic attention could imagine that drop-off of interest as precisely the same as one feels about a magazine that still arrives in the mail but somehow never gets read any more. The same sort of attentiveness is devoted to the patient description of Marshall’s becoming a “greenhorn to ordinary life” (51): after his apprenticeship fails to metamorphose him, his fellow passengers on a bus debating what will make him most comfortable and how his change of buses in Des Moines might best be negotiated; the same care of expression went into the choice of analogies Elkin used to describe the rehabilitation culture of Morristown, New Jersey, into which Marshall moves with Miriam Desebour: “It seemed to me that all the afflicted people of the world were stuffed into Morristown. It had all it could handle, a cornered market of gimps, a secular Lourdes, but not, withal, ungay. We were a community of arrested diseases, patient patients, developers of fortitude and resignation—all the loser virtues, all the good-sport resources” (55). It’s in trials of precise articulation like these, in Elkin’s getting the exact shades of similitude down on the page, that the reader—not the casual one, not the King/Steele/Grisham fan—feels the real passion and excitement Elkin brought to fiction.

Ah—I’ve got another one: Marshall Maine’s attempt to explain why it is heartbreaking to watch Bob Hope walk off an airplane. “Mr. Hope travels first class but alone. The private life,” Marshall informs Hope’s audience during warm-up. “And it would break your heart to see him come down the ramp from the plane with his coat over his arm and his briefcase in his hand. He brings the script, you see, he carries it with him. And even if some flunky fetches his baggage, why at least Hope has to hand him the claim checks. And most of the time he picks it up himself, if you want to know” (46-47). Marshall’s point in this extended, continuing monologue is that “There’s no way of greasing all of life” (47): even Bob Hope has to fend for himself in the world some of the time, must descend from his celebrity in order to remember to retrieve his coat and script. Everyone experiences similar moments, Marshall maintains—he uses the example of a man who cuts himself while shaving on a business trip—when we are isolated by our personal

situations, stranded by the immediate circumstances our private lives impose upon us. “That’s what I’m talking about,” Marshall continues, “—your daddy bleeding in a stuffy little room in Indianapolis. Where’s the dignity? Where’s the authority? Do you see? Do you see what I mean? Do you follow?” (48).

Marshall’s anxiety that he isn’t being understood is well-founded, given that comedy warm-up acts are supposed to get the audience laughing rather than prompting them to contemplate “the private life. That everyone has.” The King/Steele/Grisham fans probably wouldn’t follow his drift (and it probably is a drift) because they wouldn’t have an aesthetic category for valuing what Elkin is doing here and in many other places in *The Dick Gibson Show*—attempting to make language reproduce highly subtle psychological impressions and insights. Elkin’s work proliferates with small linguistic triumphs like these, moments in which he is willing to stall the flow of plot in order to, as he said in a combined interview with William Gass, “get down the colors of baseball gloves—the difference in shade between the centerfielder’s deep pocket and the discreet indentation of the catcher’s mitt. And let us refine tense so that men may set their watches by it. Let fiction be where the language is” (qtd. in Duncan 77). The locally stunning effect, the quick linguistic illumination, the patiently expanded literary trope, were often of more interest to Elkin than “spelling mother,” and those of us who love his work do so less because of the perfect construction of his plots than because of his sentences’ ability to surprise us suddenly into recognition. In his interview with Scott Sanders, Elkin admitted that the intensity of his focus upon language had a cost in terms of audience: “Probably when one is doing one’s best work, one is turning the reader off,” Elkin suggested. Sanders: “Because one’s own interest in the subject exceeds the reader’s?” Elkin: “Yes, it’s a kind of absorption which almost excludes him” (136).

So Elkin never produced anything approaching a best-seller, and all the admiring reviews of his books by and appreciations from writers such as Gardner, Coover, Irving, and Updike failed to make the slightest dent in the King/Steele/Grisham audience’s reluctance to give his fiction a try. (“Is it fair to say,” I asked him, “that you write your novels to be reread, not just read?” “No, that’s not fair to say,” he responded. “I don’t even write them to be read—it certainly ain’t happening” (26).) But we Elkin experts, small and exclusive band though we may be—we’re like the “famous general” whose fortuitous hearing of Dick’s KROP broadcast prevents him from driving off the highway in the middle of nowhere Nebraska and initiates the protagonist of the mythic life that never transpires. Nobody can tell us that we haven’t, at moments in our lives, felt saved by the voice of Stanley Elkin.

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