

"Because Everything Has a Perfectly Reasonable Explanation." Our Ticket to Elkin's Magic Kingdom.

Introduction by David C. Dougherty

Because everything has a perfectly reasonable explanation. Everything. Wars, earthquakes, and the self-contained individual disasters of men. Courage as well as cowardice. Generous acts out of left field and the conviction that one is put upon. Everything. Man's fallen condition and birth defect too, those San Andreas, Altyn Taugh, and great Glen Faults of the heart, of the ova and genes. They're working on it, working on all of it; theologians in their gloomy studies where the muted light falls distantly on their antique, closely printed texts, as distant as God (which, God's exorbitant aphelion, outpost, and mileage – the boondocks of god – also has a perfectly reasonable explanation); scientists in their bright laboratories where the light seems a kind of white and stunning grease.

Everything has a perfectly reasonable explanation.

The Magic Kingdom, 150.

Several years ago poet and self-proclaimed protégé Brother Antoninus praised Robinson Jeffers's little-known and longest poem *The Women at Point Sur* with the epithet "the far-cast spear" (Everson 99-162). He confirmed privately and publicly, to anyone willing to listen in fact, his intention to make a case for that much-ignored work, in which Jeffers pushed the aesthetic and thematic envelope further than he ever had before or would again. Jeffers's reach may have exceeded his grasp, as Robert Browning's character says in a much more famous poem,¹ but for Antoninus, and for me as well, this attempt to over-reach his previous efforts, to push his themes to, perhaps even beyond, their limits was an honorable one, and more than justified any artistic excesses or blemishes the poem may continue to display. The several

aesthetic problems *Point Sur* may exhibit are a direct consequence of an artist pressing his poetics, as well as his thematic imagination, to extreme limits.

Similarly, Stanley Elkin (1930-1995) cast his spear as far as he ever would with his sixth novel, and his ninth book, *Stanley Elkin's The Magic Kingdom* (1985), but, although the critical community hasn't quite figured this out yet, unlike Jeffers or Browning's fictional Renaissance painter, his reach didn't exceed his grasp. He literally stretched his already-considerable literary skills to get to his magic kingdom. Even the hubristic title,² which was changed at the suggestion of editor Bill Whitehead after the cover art was complete, suggests a radical departure for this writer; it is, however, a play on the cross-over (from the recording industry) title of a collection of previously published work, *Stanley Elkin's Greatest Hits*, which won the 1981 *Southern Review* prize. Typically Elkin's titles reflect his characteristic picaresque narrative strategies – the name of a character, like *Boswell: A Modern Comedy* (1964) or of the main character's vocation, like *The Franchiser* (1976), or of a key attribute of the character, like *A Bad Man* (1967). This amended title – until November 1985 it was simply “The Magic Kingdom” but Elkin was not at all unreceptive to the author-stroking Whitehead's change implied -- suggests, as many of the essays in this collection will discuss, that the real magic kingdom is the book itself, not the location serving as its nominal subject. He had done much daring and original work before this, and would take the mystery novel, a sub-genre he professed to despise, to unexpected dimensions with *The MacGuffin* (1991). But he had never before, and would never again, reach as high and succeed quite as brilliantly as he did with *The Magic Kingdom*. Yet it is in many ways his least typical novel, as Robert Morace argues in “Stanley Elkin's Magic Carnival,” the lead essay in this collection. I shall much later in this introduction offer one explanation for the atypical deployment of point of view and the several challenges to

the conventions of social realism. Although *The Magic Kingdom* remains, ten years after Elkin's death, less widely read and discussed in the critical press, in the academy, and in general intelligent conversation, than several of his earlier books, notably *The Living End* (1979), *The Franchiser*, *The Dick Gibson Show* (1972), or *A Bad Man*, it is the high point of a distinguished literary career. Moreover, it's likely to be a book by which future generations will remember Elkin most vividly, both for its aesthetic merits and for its thematic richness – in short, for its originality and its many virtuoso performances.

For the virtuoso moment is eternally the hallmark Elkin aesthetic. He delighted in that show-stopping moment, the “to be or not to be” spotlight (he alludes to *Hamlet* more often in *The Magic Kingdom*, at least seven times, and in his other books than any other single literary or cultural source) when everything else comes to a sudden, absolute stop and the rhetoric, that lovely, self-indulgent, full-voiced, seemingly improvisational, pure word-love, takes over. And on and on it goes, with the action stopped, and the language in sumptuous lava flow. Enough? Enough is never enough for Elkin. It never can be. One of his most celebrated *bon mots* is the riposte to Random House editor Joe Fox, who tried in the early 1970s to persuade Elkin of the minimalist credo, “less is more.” Elkin quipped, “I had to fight him tooth and nail in the better restaurants to maintain excess because I don't believe that less is more. I believe that *more* is more. I believe that less is less, fat fat, thin thin and enough is enough” (LeClair 59). But as we who love Elkin's prose know, enough is not enough – it is never enough—it can never be enough -- only more could be enough, and even more than that is better. As Marc Chenetier puts it, “Ouvrir un livre d'Elkin c'est courir le risque d'être emporté dans un maelström d'énergie verbaile: la virtuosité rhétorique emporte sur son passage nombre des limitations imposées à la langue[. . .]” (“Voix d'un Maître” 2)³. A spectacular example of this rhetorical outpouring

occurs in the novel's closing pages, simultaneously echoing and parodying the final section of *Ulysses*, when the toxic-wombed Mary Cottle lies (yes, biblically) with mild-mannered Eddy Bale. Mary approaches orgasm and "accepts infection" from baleful Eddy in a deliberate moment of propagation that furiously and manically defies our mortal inheritance of infection and suffering. Here's a tiny sample of the rhetorical outburst that is our ticket back home from this Magic Kingdom:

Thinking of monstrosities, freaks, ogres, and demons, conjuring werewolves, vampires, harpies, and hellhounds, conjecturing man-eaters, eyesores, humpbacks and clubfoots. Thinking *Now now now now now* and inviting all cock-eyed, crook-backed, torturous bandy deformity out of the bottle, calling forth fiends, calling forth bogies, rabid, raw-head bloody bones. *Now*, she thinks, *now!* And positions herself to take Bale's semen, to mix it with her own ruined and injured eggs and juices, to make a troll, a goblin, broken imps and lurching oafs, felons of a nightmare brood, fallen pediatric angels, lemurs, gorgons, Cyclopes, Calibans, God's ugly, punished customers, his obscene and frail and lubberly, his gargoyle, flyblown hideosities and blemished, poky mutants, all his throwbacks, all his scurf, his doomed, disfigured invalids, his human slums and eldritch seconds, the poor relation and the second-best, watered, bungled being, flied flaw, his maimed, his handicapped, his disabled, his afflicted, delicate cachexies with their provisional, fragile, makeshift tolerances (316-17).

Amazing as it may seem, this is but a tiny excerpt from a Whitman-Ginsberg-Dreiser-Faulkner-Joyce-Pynchon catalogue in which every word testifies to the rhetoric of excess, and not single a word cannot be eliminated, not a phrase or clause cannot be trimmed back – and from *Boswell* to *Bliss* editors nagged Elkin about cutting down his prose – and the 'sense of the thing' could easily remain. Editor Whitehead looked at the original typescript with respect and considerable awe, but he admonished Elkin that "several scenes" and "several conversations" go on much too long (Whitehead to Elkin, 20 June 1984). We could probably blue-pencil substantial portions of this excerpt with little loss of meaning: Cottle deliberately "accepts infection" by conceiving, thereby continuing a species condemned by its creator to radical imperfection. Careful – and patient – readers will see a deliberate progress, from Mary's vision of what she will conceive, to

a questioning of the divine plan for creation that includes “bungled being” at the micro-level and “human slums” at the macro-system. Then again, we can assume that Elkin, not Mary, is doing the questioning of Divine Plan and human suffering. After all, he’d taken up these themes in *The Franchiser* and *the Living End*, but not with the complication that all procreation is bringing disease and death into the world. As he somewhat cynically put in his final interview, “every time you fuck, you create a monster” (Bailey 24).

These are after all profound philosophical questions this novel raises, with a vehemence surpassing even that of Elkin’s other great Jeremiad, *The Franchiser*, or the bitterly cynical comedy of *The Living End*. How can God permit or condone, to say nothing of create and sustain, a universe that includes such doomed human creatures, such “bungled being,” as the anything-but-magnificent seven Bale escorts to Disney World? And if God condones, should we as responsible human agents take measures to prevent the suffering of children by refusing to bring “his doomed” into the world? Without going further into these dark and profound philosophical issues at this point, I suggest that what makes Elkin Elkin is that, although we could easily reduce or minimize the passage to resemble the spare prose of Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, or John Updike when the minimalist bug hits him, only a butcher would want to hack away at those magnificent rhythms, those majestic cadences, those amazing alliterations, those loops of repetition and reinforcement that synergize the sexual act of conception with the simultaneous acceptance and defiance of the radical imperfection of the world explicit in this particular character’s conceiving.

As Rick Moody remarks in his introduction to the Dalkey Archive press edition of *The Magic Kingdom*, these moments resemble a saxophone solo by Paul Desmond or Julian “Cannonball” Adderley (actually, Moody mentions Wayne Shorter and Johnny Hodges): “And

this, to my mind, is how Elkin structured his novels, in bursts of musical invention, which came to a conclusion when the breath of a speaker [. . .] exhausted itself” (Moody *viii*). Although Elkin in many of his later interviews attested to the primacy of plot in the construction of his novels, Moody’s hypothesis leads very us close to the core of this novel’s unique power to engage us. Moreover, it’s tempting to claim that there are more magic moments, when the plot goes to the back burner and the characterization goes dormant, in this than in any other Elkin novel – and perhaps anyone else of the latter half of the twentieth century in English, though one should probably acknowledge that Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason and Dixon* or Robert Coover’s *John’s Wife* could give the kingdom a run for its rhetoric.

Although some critics and readers have found this temptation toward show-stopping rhetoric a limitation rather than a virtue, and a few have charged Elkin with aesthetic self-indulgence, it is his fundamental rhetorical signature, the stylistic method that momentarily supersedes the plot to pay homage to the root cause and medium of all narrative, language itself. As Elkin himself once said, “[f]iction gives an opportunity for rhetoric to happen. It provides a stage where language can stand. It’s what I admire in the fiction of other people and what I admire in my own fiction” (Sanders 132-33). This statement succinctly and figuratively summarizes this writer’s aesthetic, really more a poetics than a fictive one, in which the medium, language, takes precedence over plot, characterization, or theme. But this position also reverses the reader’s expectations about the relationships among traditional elements of fiction: we ordinarily expect plot, characterization, theme, and motif to be complemented by rhetoric, which usually assumes a supporting but vital role in the reading experience. Most readers have been conditioned to expect these as the dominant elements, especially when they encounter any novel as long as this one. To complicate matters exponentially, the density of Elkin’s prose from time

to time makes demands on the reader's concentration very like that of a modernist poem by Ezra Pound or Wallace Stevens, or more recently John Ashberry. I have in other venues commented on the suitability of the novella or the short story form for a writer with Elkin's penchant for verbal density and rhetorical excess, and his novellas may one day become a centerpiece of his literary legacy, even though *The Magic Kingdom* will emerge as his masterwork. Sadly, he very nearly abandoned the short story form after his very successful collection, both critically and commercially, *Criers and Kibitzers, Kibitzers and Criers* (1966). When he did, the English language lost a potential master short story writer.

In general, then, it's useful to think about the aesthetic that drives this, and most of, his novels as more the poet's than the novelist's aesthetic. Once Elkin joked that he'd "rather have a metaphor than a good cigar" (Sanders 132-33); like the comment quoted in the previous paragraph, this emphasizes the medium rather than the meaning – the metaphor itself is far more important than any "tenor" we may derive from it. In yet another interview he quipped, "I sincerely believe that the sentence is its own excuse for being.[. . .] In the twentieth century, fiction can do any goddamn thing it pleases. And the thing it pleases me to do is to sound good" (Bernt 16). Now this is ultimately a matter of degree – few novelists place no emphasis at all on rhetoric or style; but we often forgive the many clumsy passages in Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, D. H. Lawrence, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, or even Saul Bellow, one of Elkin's acknowledged mentors, because of the earnestness and originality of their vision, the power of their characterization, or the mimetic appropriateness of their plots, and in some cases the pure rhetorical power of their purple passages. By contrast, Elkin's emphasis on the primacy of voice places him considerably closer to the theory and practice of the poet or rhetorician than to the chronicler—a position he happily shares with several novelists whose work influenced him,

including Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner, on whom Elkin wrote his doctoral dissertation at the University of Illinois. This is not to say that Elkin belongs in quite that distinguished company. But I want to point out that his emphasis on the rhetorical moment is not unique among fiction writers – that it in fact places him in the best of company among the great storytellers of the twentieth century. And one great virtue of *The Magic Kingdom* is that he seldom got as carried away as he did in this novel.

Origins and Context:

Elkin conceived of this project in 1980, when his professional career was at its high point – and when he was thinking about abandoning the writing of novels altogether. Over the previous two decades, he had emerged from the status of an *enfant terrible* of American letters, with Pynchon, Coover, William H. Gass, John Barth, Donald Barthelme and Philip Roth (among others) challenging the aesthetics of mid-century American prose style and content. He was by 1980 generally considered one of the most important young authors to emerge from the 1960s. Yet he constantly felt himself mis-read and underappreciated among the literary establishment, though except for *Boswell* (1964) reviews of all his novels were strongly positive, few so much so as *The Magic Kingdom*, for which the praise was nearly unanimous and enthusiastic.⁴ And he absolutely hated the fact that his novels never sold out his usually generous advances. By 1982, he had decided never to write another novel because he was bitter that critics didn't say nice enough things about, and the public didn't buy enough hardback copies of, what he considered his greatest novel, *George Mills*. Because of his frustration over the finite number of reviews of Mills (generally enthusiastic), and the cold unignorable silence at the bookstores, compounded when the returns poured back to the publisher, his masterwork very nearly didn't come into being. He for a while flirted with the idea of becoming a screenwriter instead of a novelist, even

though his work in Hollywood during the 1970s had brought him neither the satisfaction nor the fame he craved. As he told a St. Louis journalist, the investment in time, and the loneliness, of the “literary novelist” was taking its toll:

I figured I'd done my bit. I didn't mean I'd break my pens or burn my books. I meant that, well *George Mills* took me six years to write. That's a long tome to delay gratification, even though there was another book that came in the middle there [*The Living End*]. I figured, 'That's too long.' I'd like to write movie script. I'd like to write plays. Some essays. Things that don't take forever. (Hahn 17)

Although he flourished as a familiar essayist during the 1980s, it was only serendipity, to use one of Elkin's favorite terms rich in plot connotations, that directed him back to the novel form two years later. And when he resumed his craft, he surpassed the experimental nature of his most distinctive works.

His early novels, *Boswell: A Modern Comedy* (1964) and *A Bad Man* (1967) had certainly defined him as a writer who would never be content merely to follow the fictional practices of a generation struggling to define its own possibilities in the wake of the massive innovations of Woolf, Joyce, Faulkner, John Dos Passos, and Samuel Beckett, or the “new realism” of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Robert Penn Warren (remember, it snows only in Disney World, not in Orlando, but within the “boundaries of the Park itself” [91-92] shortly after the Bale expedition arrives, thus reinforcing our sense that *The Magic Kingdom* isn't social realism). His Boswell is a sycophant and a clown; his Leo Feldman is a thoroughly wicked man and a self-absorbed narcissist. Yet Elkin demanded that readers identify with and critique these characters simultaneously -- a suspension of judgment compounded by the privileged point of view in both novels and by the picaresque tradition to which each contributes. First-person narrator James Boswell (a method Elkin generally abandoned until *The Rabbi of Lud*, the novel following *The Magic Kingdom* and by most estimates his least artistically

successful novel since *Boswell*) tells his sad tale of unlove and abandonment, with the lifetime cultivation of celebrities as a compensation mechanism⁵. A complicating pattern in *Boswell*, one that in some ways anticipated a central theme of Elkin's own artistic life, is that, as soon as he achieved a goal, Boswell would act unconsciously to devalue or subvert that objective. Initiating the more typical, mature, Elkin variation on the picaresque tradition, *A Bad Man* uses limited omniscient narrative, with strategic, unannounced shifts to first person and into fully omniscient, to tell the life history of a merchandiser who, because of egotism and a relentless pursuit of merchandising thrills, becomes a moral monster who never quite loses the reader's empathy as he becomes the obsession of a manic prison warden.

By the late 1970s, then, Elkin had evolved from *enfant terrible* to a central position among emerging American writers. His reputation as a serious force in American fiction had been manifested by awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, nomination for a National Book Award (for *The Dick Gibson Show* in 1972), a *Southern Review* Prize, and a long run of residences at Breadloaf Writers' Conferences (his cabin was known as "the Dragon's Den") at which Stanley's holding forth on the porch, on whatever subject was at hand, was something aspiring and veteran writers alike looked forward to as a conference high point. Moreover, his Breadloaf commitment had led to the writing of his most commercially successful project, a "triptych" of novellas he eventually called *The Living End* (1979). He told an interviewer a decade later that the first two novellas were in effect "assignments" for consecutive mentoring posts at Breadloaf in 1976 and 1977. The amazingly positive response there -- from, of course, aspiring and established writers, lovers of words and cadences -- and subsequently on the lecture circuit (at which Elkin was in constant demand and a smashing success, with his booming baritone, his animated readings, and his skill as a raconteur, as well as the merits of his

works and the intensity of his critique of other writers' works) of "The Conventional Wisdom" and "The State of the Art" led to his completing the triptych and releasing it under a title suggested by Kathleen Shea, the spouse of a Washington University colleague, as *The Living End*.⁶ The novella remained tremendously popular and controversial, both on the lecture circuit and in the bookstores. It was Elkin's greatest commercial success, and it even resulted in his appearance on the nationally syndicated *Dick Cavett Show*. With its combination of the book of Job, a mercurial showman God, a dysfunctional Holy Family, and the end of the world, *The Living End* excited outrage and admiration throughout the reading community. It was more widely reviewed, more widely praised, and more vigorously condemned than any book he had ever written. In 1979, Stanley Elkin had the literary world's undivided attention.

But for him *The Living End* had been more a diversion than central project. While writing it he was more focused on what he conceived as his *opus maximus*, a semi-epic novel about a family cursed over a millennium to blue-collar existence. The popularity of *The Living End* created a very positive climate for his new novel, and the book brought generally positive reviews, but disappointing sales. His frustration continued throughout the decade, and he never quite completely forgave Peter Bailey (author of *Reading Stanley Elkin*, 1985) or me (*Stanley Elkin*, 1991) for not liking *Mills* enough. In a letter he came as close as possible for Elkin to acquiescing in my judgment that *Mills* may not have been the masterwork he thought it was: "You make a pretty good case for THE MAGIC KINGDOM. Maybe GEORGE MILLS isn't my best book, and, if it isn't, TMK is" (SE to the author, 18 March 1991).

It was in the climate of exhilaration over the commercial and popular success of *The Living End* and grim disappointment over the lukewarm response to what he considered his most important book that Elkin reluctantly took up his most daring project, a radical departure from

his work to date. He had been resisting the temptation to begin a book about the relatively recent practice of offering a dream holiday to terminally ill children since a London trip in 1980. This was his method; he planned the narrative that would emerge as *The Magic Kingdom* while completing *George Mills* and seeing *The Living End* through publication.⁷ The story of the inspiration has been widely reported. In a British hotel, the Elkins were preparing to go out. While Joan finished dressing, Stanley's attention was caught by a BBC story covering the departure of several terminally-ill children from Heathrow for Disney World. Here's one of the earliest versions:

Well, it's The Magic Kingdom, which is Disney World. Seven dwarfs, seven-year old kids. . . No seven seals [Elkin was a great film fan, and the resonance of plague and divine purpose in Ingmar Bergman's masterpiece *The Seventh Seal* (1957) undoubtedly brought him a great deal of satisfaction]. Seven dwarfs and seven – also the fact that I got the idea when I was in London with Joan and [. . .] we had tickets for a play, and we were waiting to go out. Joan was getting ready and I was watching the news on television, and I saw this three-minute filmclip of these kids being taken off to Disney World – British children – and there were seven of 'em. At the time, I said to Joan – first of all, tears were rolling down my face. This was the saddest thing I'd ever seen in my life. And I said 'Joan' – this is what I do with the sad things in my life – 'this would make an incredible novel. It would be wrong to do it, but it would make an incredible novel.' [. . . W]hen I said it would be wrong to do, I meant that the temptations to be maudlin, opportunistic, sentimental, and manipulative would be immense. I mean, [. . .] the material is so fraught with that, with those things, that it would be wrong to try and write a novel and succumb to those temptations. (Cuoco, 1985)⁸

With this inspiration, qualified by concerns over the liability of such a narrative toward sentimentality, Elkin eventually embarked on his version of academic research. He called two physician friends, then the reference desks at Washington University Medical Center and the Olin Library, to collect information on the pathology of various diseases. His archived papers contain photocopies of entries from *Dictionary of Medical Symptoms*, 2nd edition, ed. Magalini (1981) and *Current Pediatric Diagnosis and Treatment*, 6th edition (1980) on each of the diseases that are killing the children in the novel. There's also a handwritten entry, though not in

Elkin's hand, listing symptoms for these seven deadlies. On one he didn't need much research. Charles Mudd-Gaddis suffers from progeria, or premature aging, a disease with whose symptoms Elkin was already familiar, having written the play *The Six-Year-Old Man* for Columbia pictures in 1968⁹. It was never filmed, but a truncated version was published in *Esquire* later that year. His library research complete, he began his campaign to mooch a free visit to Disney World.

It is axiomatic among his friends that Elkin hated to pay his own airfare. Partly because airfares are expensive, but mostly on account of the principle of the thing. After all, he felt, if someone wanted to hear from an important writer, that institution should pick up transportation and lodging checks. Compelling the organization to do so was a measure of his success and his prestige. So he began angling for a trip to Disney World, where he could conduct the very best kind of research – hands on and free. He immediately turned to his editor at *Playboy*, Alice K. Turner. The magazine had committed to publishing two sections from *George Mills* (November 1982) and Elkin had a long if checkered history with *Playboy*, going back to his submitting the story “On a Field, Rampant” to then-editor Robert Coover in March 1961, which was rejected despite Coover's vigorously positive recommendation, after a lengthy internal fight.¹⁰

In addition to his long history with the men's magazine, Elkin had been fascinated with Disney World as a microcosm for transformations occurring in American consumer culture at least as far back as *The Franchiser*, in which Ben Flesh's grand design is to take advantage of new travel habits associated with the new theme park. After calculating the average driving time from several mid-western cities to Orlando, Ben sold or mortgaged his many successful franchises to build a motel in a small Georgia town that would be an ideal overnight stop for tourists from Cincinnati, Indianapolis, or St. Louis heading for the magic kingdom. And readers of *The Living End* will recall that Ellerbee, Elkin's most explicit Job-figure, aroused the

Almighty's Eternal Wrath when he compared Heaven with a theme park. Professionally, Elkin had developed a substantial following as an essayist in the 1970s, writing irreverent, personal essays on subjects as diverse as the Kinsey report, a minor comic named Lenny Kravitz, and actress Elizabeth Taylor. One, a study of French actor Jean-Louis Trintignant, had earned the desired airfare and fee, under contract by *Esquire* magazine in 1971, but *Esquire* elected to pay a kill fee rather than print the essay and the finished product was ultimately printed in an adult magazine of somewhat more unsavory reputation than *Playboy* – a publication called *Oui* (January 1973).

So Elkin, seeing these three things in alignment – a renewed and profitable relationship with *Playboy*, a lasting fascination with the social and cultural implications of Disney World, and a track record of developing personal essays about subjects of general social interest -- approached Turner about the possibility of doing an impressionistic essay on Disney Culture for the magazine. He gathered brochures on the theme park and make-a-wish foundations. Turner's reply suggests something about the strained relationship between *Playboy*, at that time considered *outré* and a "men's magazine" and the sanitized world-view promoted by Disney and satirized by Elkin in the novel:

I have some interesting news for you on the Walt Disney front; not only can you not use us for credentials, you're dead if you mention our name. The reason is the attached piece, which ran in the December 1973 issue and permanently pissed off the Disney people [that issue contained "A Real Mickey Mouse Operation" by D. Keith Mano][. . . Y]ou are going to have a very hard time getting backstage at Disney World with any sort of credentials—they'd as soon have a family of tarantulas as a writer back there. The image of the whole park is predicated on magic, and they don't want the world to know what turns its wheels. They don't want you to know that inside the Mickey shell is a teenage girl hunchback, and they will go to great lengths to steer you clear of such knowledge. (Turner to Elkin, April 6, 1982).¹¹

With that option dead on arrival, Elkin decided to take his younger son, Bernard, and his daughter Molly to Disney World in 1983. His agenda was of course to collect information and

impressions, but as he told several interviewers, the monument to fantasy and conspicuous consumption struck him as underwhelming. While the children were amused with the rides and the animation displays, Elkin was bored and attributed his boredom to the children as well. He summarized the visit tersely: “you know, the rest of the magic kingdom is just rides and bullshit” (“Conversation” 191). Shortly after his visit, he groused to *Miami Herald* columnist William Robertson that he had just arrived in south Florida after “freezing my butt off in Orlando,” a place he recalled visiting in the 1960s as well. Looking back on the visit, he decided Disney World is “no place to take a terminally ill kid because I don’t think he would last out a week if he went on all that stuff. However it’s a marvelous place to take them in a novel” (Robertson, 20 February 1983).

On the trip he saw three things that were going to affect his composition of the book, but for the rest he could have stayed in St. Louis: he was intrigued by the sophisticated animation in the Hall of the Presidents, and that seamless artistry forms the centerpiece for the sub-plot in which Colin Bible becomes involved with Disney World employee Matthew Gale in order to acquire schematics to give his lover, a wax artist at Madame Tuassad’s. Elkin also watched with fascination the nearly endless parades that take place in the Kingdom – his archive contains several photos of Disney parades -- and these morphed in his imagination to arguably the most important scene in the novel, the “people parade” Bible takes the children to see, in which watching the watchers proves to be the most therapeutic element in their visit to Florida. Elkin also cited photographs by Diane Arbus, his friend Howard Nemerov’s sister, as a source for this scene (“Conversation,” 190). And Elkin’s children loved the lake and the speedboats, the scene of the most engaging and splendid rhetorical moment of the novel, probably in all of Elkin’s prose. His son Bernie tells this amusing story about the final day of their stay: Stanley was less

than enthusiastic about the children's going out on the lagoon once more because they were scheduled to leave the park shortly. Besides, it was one of the more pricey attractions at the resort. Against his wishes, the children rented motor boats, but Molly's broke down. Bernie maneuvered his boat to hers, and they abandoned hers in the lagoon. As they limped Bernie's boat toward the shore, they saw Elkin furiously beating the dock with his cane in impatience and concern (interview with Bernard Elkin, June 2002). In an interview that aired on National Public Radio shortly after the novel's publication, Elkin credited Bernard with the inspiration for the second grand and therapeutic moment in *Magic Kingdom* (Cuoco, 1985). In the Discovery Island sequence Bible once more takes charge of the expedition, and, with Cottle's assistance, bullies and flirts with the young man who rents the boats, then leads the sickly seven to Discovery Island, where they sunbathe and enjoy a magic moment of privacy and, amazingly, an appreciation for their frail, broken bodies that the public spotlight and the medical attention preclude their having at home or in Florida. The language that concludes that chapter (III, 5) is the most astonishing, the most elegant, the most beautiful, in all of Elkin. A brief excerpt:

And it was wondrous in the negligible humidity how they gawked across the perfect air, how, stunned by the helices and all the parabolas of grace, they gasped, they sighed . . . how, glad to be alive, they stared at each other and caught their breath. (*TMK* 257)



Stanley and Bernard Elkin overlooking the Lagoon at Disney World. Photo, Elkin Collection, Olin Library, Washington University. Cropping to the original snapshot by the editor. Reprinted by permission of Joan Elkin.

To several interviewers, Elkin mentioned the main thing he discovered while at Disney World – the room Mary Cottle rents to get privacy for the “bouts of furious masturbation” to which she resorts to soothe her nerves. It became for him the real magic kingdom, and the magic is by no means limited to the visual distortion of the false Mickey and Pluto as seen through an inverted door lens: “That’s why” (276).

Thematic and Aesthetic Issues

With these elements in place – the room, the haunted mansion, the lake, the parades and spectators, the mandatory silence among Disney’s “cast,” and the lagoon – Elkin was ready to embark on an artistic journey that would lead him into deeper, murkier, more perilous waters than any he had encountered in his art, to a subject that seems to be philosophically and aesthetically a dead end. Nothing is sadder, or more frustrating, than terminal illness among children. The “Make-a-Wish Foundations” seem naïve and perhaps even exhibitionistic in their good intentions, and one can hardly support or condone a practice that rubs the child’s nose in the fact of her/his impending doom, even if the child gets to meet a major leaguer, a rock star, or

Mickey Mouse. In the novel, only one child, the allegorically-named Lydia Conscience, actually wants to go to Disney World. Benny Maxine (probably punning on Pynchon's Benny Profane in that send-up of the quest romance *V*) would much prefer Monaco to this "tarted-up Brighton" (47). Yet one feels compelled to do *something*, even as one acknowledges that whatever one may do is futile. We must empathize with Eddy's reconsideration of his and his ex-, Ginny's, frantic, failed search for cures for their dying son, Liam, dragging him from chemotherapies to operations to holy places to quack cures in a desperate effort to prolong his life. As he tells the Queen of England, "We never rewarded him or his death. He should have lived like a crown prince, Queen" (17). One of the novel's most touching moments comes when Eddy half way through the journey conjures Liam's presence, to apologize for insisting on painful therapies, quack cures, visits to Lourdes, all focused on the illusion of bringing about an impossible cure and in the meantime imposing suffering on a child who would never experience his childhood. So what's an adult to do? Try for the magical cure, or pack them off for a week in Disney World? Of course, the one unimaginable, unconscionable, thing to do is nothing.

And if there isn't a humanly reasonable explanation for everything in the world in which we deal with disease and death at their worst, when they happen to children (there can be in a book about dream holidays) there is an unremitting logic of cause and effect here. If we act, there are risks. If we do nothing, the child will die and we'll never forgive ourselves. If we take the extreme cure route, the child will still die and we'll second-guess ourselves as Eddy does. And if we take the Dream Holiday, the child will die – despite "Mr." (Dr., a peculiarly British affectation Elkin relishes in his portrait of the mad physician) Morehead's careful selection based on the survivability of the patients, one does on this journey and another did before it, opening the envelope to announce his selection – we'll still be wondering what we might have done.

Because the unacceptable answer is the true one. There's nothing we can do. In his final interview, Elkin told Peter Bailey he began the novel knowing one child would die, but he "[d]idn't know who wouldn't [survive]. It was love – it was beauty killed the beast. It was love that killed the kid because cystic fibrosis is a lung disease, and she can't get past the orgasm. The punishment fits the crime" (Bailey 25). All of which introduces yet another sadly reasonable explanation: these children will be denied not only life but its most intense pleasure. Another touching moment occurs when Benny Maxine asks Eddy about sex, a subject he'd avoided with Liam. When the surrogate son asks the surrogate father if sex is "all it's cracked up to be," Eddy mournfully tells Benny what he wasn't man enough to tell Liam: "I'm afraid so" (183). So there we have it. That's why. The children can contemplate the happiness from which they will be excluded, much as Noah Cloth can briefly indulge his acquisitiveness in the mother of all shopping sprees once the children learn they can charge purchases to the room. But in the more personal, intimate forms of happiness, there are extreme risks if the children attempt to experience the pleasures from which they will be excluded. And if Rena and Benny attempt any kind of intimacy, the risk is that they will accelerate their death process (Donne and the metaphysical poets got that right, too, when they used the metaphor "die" to substitute for sexual climax). Rena's death in Room 822, with her reaching out to Benny, whom she has come to love, is moving enough that Mickey Mouse – actually park employee Lamar Kenny -- weeps inside his costume. But it is the opposite of the clichéd death of a young lover, the stuff of sentimental ballads about a love frozen in time and memory and the Top 40 charts. This is a grim reminder that these children, like Moses, may glimpse the promised magic kingdom of sexual maturity, but they're never going to get there.

The Magic Kingdom is paradoxically the most objective and one of the most personal of Elkin's novels. Although the point of view is uniquely objective among his works -- a point we'll develop momentarily -- the novel is in some ways Elkin's most intensely personal since *The Franchiser*, in which Ben Flesh's three journeys to inspect his franchises very closely resemble the itinerary Stanley's father Phil,¹² a successful traveling salesman, used to traverse the vast Midwestern territory he covered. On one of those trips, young Stanley accompanied him, and memories of that journey, and this contact with salesmen and clients, what he would later come to call "the shop-talk of personality," left a lasting mark on the impressionable youth. But as many familiar with Elkin's work know, the identification with Flesh is even more intimate than the affiliation with Phil Elkin's itinerary. Ben is the first of two among Elkin's heroes to suffer Stanley's own neurological affliction, diagnosed in 1972, though some symptoms presented a decade earlier. The author steadfastly denied any therapeutic intention in attributing Multiple Sclerosis to this character. In a 1989 interview, he became most vehement among his several denials:

It would be easy, maybe even a cheap shot, for me to say, "It was cathartic." It wasn't cathartic. It just struck me as a particularly good metaphor for the times. This was the time of the great energy crisis in the United States. *The Franchiser* came out in 1976, the year I started to use a cane. Really, though, all I was feeling while I was writing it was some sensory discomfort ("Conversation, 186).

Perhaps. Then again, perhaps the gentleman doth protest too much. Elkin was a self-absorbed person, and his disease, coupled with a heart attack four years earlier, confirming his life-long obsession with his father's death at age 56, would logically lead to a form of distanced lyricism in the novel he was working on as he and his family processed the diagnosis. As his own condition worsened, and went through phases of remission, his attention turned to the afflictions of his characters, not to observe morbidity, but to reflect on the frailty of human existence. As

Ben Flesh observes in *Franchiser*, “Plague builds its nests in us” (331). Instead of hoping for remedy, Ben learns to hope for relief. His most poignant moment occurs when he cries out, “*I want my remission back!*” (196, Elkin’s italics). The point is that remission is not remedy, that wholeness or recovery simply isn’t a realistic option. Plague builds, and builds, and eventually what’s happening inside our bodies is going to do us all in. “Because everything has a reasonable explanation” – and in a clinical way, nothing is more reasonable than the existence or progress of disease. Poet Karl Shapiro wrote in a wonderful poem “Auto Wreck” (1942), that “Suicide has cause and stillbirth, logic; / And cancer, simple as a flower, blooms [. . .]”. Consider moreover the central journey of *George Mills*, in which the blue-collar protagonist (who suffers chronic back pain) accompanies the spoiled heiress-wife of a university dean to Mexico in search of a miracle, or quack, cure to the carcinoma that’s consuming her, much as Coretta Scott King, the widow of the great Civil Rights leader, did during the final week of her life. The fascination with disease and human vulnerability continues into the 1990s: Bobbo Druff in *The MacGuffin* is a cornucopia of ailments, both physical and psychological; and Professor Jack Schiff, after Flesh Elkin’s most autobiographical character, suffers from advanced stages of MS, as did Elkin when he wrote the novella.

Clearly, then, Elkin can identify with the death sentence under which each of these doleful seven suffers, with his own MS an incurable and progressive disease as early as 1982 necessitating a wheel chair so he could take his kids to Disney World. It would be a grave mistake, however, to approach *The Magic Kingdom*, or any of the works mentioned above, as a sentimental portrayal of disease and fragility. His morbid humor (he despised applying the term “black humor” to his fiction, but its aptness is clear from the following example, as well as dozens from the novel) goes over the top in his description of the absurd illness and the eighteen

Finsberg twins and triplets whom Ben comes to care for. Each dies of a preposterous extension of her/his symptoms, and Elkin's omniscient narrator concludes that there are no absurd deaths, only "ludicrous life, screwball existence, goofy being" (*TF* 307). Similarly, the portrayal of the un-magnificent seven in *The Magic Kingdom* is, perhaps excessively, unsentimental. Benny Maxine, the moxy Jewish kid with Gaucher's disease, on a crash course with mortality and sexual maturation, tries to bum a cigarette from the chain-smoking Cottle; when she refuses because cigarettes aren't good for growing children, he mopes, "If I'm old enough to die[. . .] I'm old enough to smoke"(233). To paraphrase Emily Dickinson, much black humor is divinest sense. But these kids can be testy, not sentimental. Lydia calls Janet Order a "bitch and a ball-breaker" in the novel's climactic moment, when Mickey Mouse and Pluto have morphed into tormentors – the anti-Mickey Mouse! --and Tony Word is having a tantrum and Rena is undergoing what will prove to be a terminal attack of cystic fibrosis. Charles Mudd-Gaddis's tantrum at the Haunted Mansion ride will remind most parents of the most unmanageable experience with a child they may ever have had. While writing the book, Elkin told Marc Chenetier, "I hope that by the time I'm through with the book the readers will want those kids to die. Because they're essentially vicious children" (Chenetier 32).

Yet, while Elkin may have wanted us to dislike the children—a position I'm convinced he modified substantially in the process of writing the novel – there's little of the savage Elkin humor in the way he represents them. One might argue that the scene in which Rena dazzles theme park employee Lamar Kenney with her dexterity managing tissues to control her symptoms, and the scene in which Benny Maxine hassles Kenney in the Pluto costume are hilarious. And one would be right to say so – but the humor in these scenes comes not from the children's pathologies, but from the inability of other characters to deal with their infirmities,

their compensation mechanisms, or their, well, adolescent irreverence. Even the cigarette episode mentioned above tells us with black humor more about the absurdity of our inability to apply medical protocols logically than about a dying kid's desire to experience a pleasure reserved for an adulthood he'll never live to experience.

Elkin invests much of the humor aligned with disease not on the afflicted, but on their caretakers. The protagonist, Eddy Bale, is a serio-comic Chaplainesque, a mild man on a grave mission that is foundationally absurd. Readers cannot fail to feel for Eddy's suffering over the loss of his only son and the consequent loss of his wife to the local tobacconist. In Florida, he dreams that he's explaining his decisions about medical options to Liam (chapter 4) ending with the poignant "*How'm I doin'?*"(88). Moreover, he delays reading Ginny's dear Eddy letter until after the expedition has created an inevitable disaster. That letter explains that she left Eddy because he became morbidly obsessed and shameless in his advocacy for dying children. These are indeed touching moments. In fact, Eddy is more the sad clown than any character in all of Elkin. Whereas most of his protagonists are verbally aggressive, using language as a weapon, Eddy is stubbornly passive-aggressive, wrapping himself absurdly in the role of "the U.K.'s most visible, most recognizable beggar" (6). His visit to the Queen to gather support for his enterprise is among the funniest scenes in all of postmodern fiction if one has a taste for black humor, and is worth the price of admission all by itself. But his external deference manifests a man plagued by self-doubt and the complete absence of self-confidence -- the one thing few Elkin protagonists lack. Despite the fact that the expedition was his idea, the product of his organization and his begging, Eddy is surprised when Bible, the nurse he recruits, designates him "Chief":

Chief he'd never been, yet as soon as Bible spoke Bale perceived the change in the room, the simple fact of the matter. He was their chief, the responsible one in the bunch. The organizer. The enforcer. In *their group madness* they had, as *madmen* have always done—even those with *delusions of grandeur* – looked for someone at whose feet they

could *dump their delusions*, fetching them to him with the pride of cats with dead mice, birds, cleverly preparing their *loophole lunacy*. (38, emphasis on madness added)

This quotation points up two features of this novel that mark thematic and technical departures from the Elkin rhetorical signature. First, Eddy is unique among Elkin's protagonists, perhaps since the early story "Cousin Poor Lesley and the Lousy People," in that he is deferential rather than aggressive. It never occurs to him that he's in charge simply because he's not the kind of man who takes charge. His shameless begging has not been done out of moral principle or a sense of obligation to relieve the suffering of dying children, but as a matter of psychological compensation – it has been the only thing he could think of, in order to relieve his guilt and suffering over Liam's death, and being "England's foremost beggar" gives him at least a semblance of an identity. Suddenly discovering that someone depends on him, that even the physician defers to his leadership, gives Eddy a sense of importance he has never before experienced. In a stunning ironic twist, as the novel unfolds the real leadership of the expedition evolves to Colin – it is he who manages airport clerks, Disney employees, and more to the point, it he who provides the only meaningful therapy among all the caregivers.

The second thing the quotation suggests is the constant suspicion among the caretakers that this is not only a futile enterprise, but quite possibly a form of mass hysteria. If that's the case, Eddy's being the 'chief' simply means that he is the focal point of a collective illusion. After all, the omniscient narrator describes Nedra Carp, the wannabe Mary Poppins who compensates for an outrageous series of step-brothers and sisters as parents and step-parents keep dying off in her youth, as "one *muy loco parentis*"(83). As this analysis suggests, Eddy is anything but the typical Elkin hero, a driven, obsessed, often absurdly self-confident individual, who may have a manic commitment to a preposterous idea. Consider Leo Feldman, the

obsessive merchandiser of *A Bad Man*, who subordinates everything to the idea of making a sale. Characters like Feldman don't need anyone's confirmation that they're the chief. They dominate the novels they occupy, both in rhetoric and in intensity.

This has an effect on the "fragmented" point of view of *The Magic Kingdom* as well. In every previous Elkin novel, the form is picaresque and the point of view, except for *Boswell*, is predominately limited omniscient. Thus, the voice of the novel, observing the hero in the process of interacting with his environment, reflects the character of the hero. One important variation occurs in *George Mills*, in which sixty per cent of the novel focuses on the adventures of the contemporary Mills in the United States and Mexico, whereas the first (and best) section privileges the point of view of "Greatest Grandfather Mills" in England, and later Poland, while on a crusade and founding the curse of the Mills men; the fourth section, nearly one hundred pages, uses first person central and limited omniscient to tell the life story of the forty-third Mills, living in England and later a prisoner in a Turkish harem.

This leads us to discover that once again, form follows function. Although Elkin told Bailey that Bale is his protagonist (Bailey 19), the fact remains that Bale is simply not sufficiently forceful to carry the burden of being the narrator or point of view character. Therefore ("everything has a perfectly reasonable explanation") Elkin distributes the point of view among a large variety of characters: each caretaker is introduced with a life history in which (s)he is the main character – sort of a mini-picaresque – as is each child. Mr. Morehead is the central character of his private Florida adventure, interviewing a holocaust survivor to corroborate his zany if profound theory that the predisposition to disease is the key to human pathology.¹³ Mary Cottle is the protagonist of her adventure, leading from failed pregnancies to the refusal to have her tubes tied, through her noxious cigarettes and her resorting to

masturbation as a means to controlling her nerves, to the renting of Room 822. A lengthy digression flaunting probability and realism, recalling the Finsberg twins and triplets in *The Franchiser*, tells about the sequential displacements of Nedra Carp's family, leading to her compensatory identification with nannies, particularly Mary Poppins, and her carping preference for those children assigned to her care, against the interests of those assigned to Bible, Morehead, and especially Cottle – she becomes in the book's funniest line, “a patriot of the propinquitous” (125), but one who, despite the detailed psychological portfolio Elkin creates for her, never quite captures our readerly affection or sympathy. And so on.

A few paragraphs back I hinted that Colin Bible becomes the most forceful – and to Elkin's artistic credit, the most flawed at the same time – character in the novel, and Bible appropriately takes over the lion's share of the point of view without actually dominating it, organizing the two outings that prove therapeutic to these dying children (watching the “people parade” and venturing to Discovery Island), and eventually taking charge of the disposition of Rena's body because Bale is too grief-stricken and weak to function against bureaucracy or authority – besides, he's getting ready to “make his move” in Room 822. Thus, perhaps unconsciously -- then again, Elkin seldom did anything unconsciously -- emulating Faulkner's masterpiece of the macabre, *As I Lay Dying* (1930), by employing a wide variety of points of view, both internal and external, to chronicle an absurd yet heroic journey among the obsessed, the insane, the dying and the dead. To pursue this literary debt just one step further, it's worth noting that Cash Bundren's maturation as a reflective character (in his first narration Cash taciturnly lists thirteen reasons for building his mother's coffin on the bevel) and his consequent increase in quantity and depth of verbal behavior parallels Colin's emerging as the most authoritative and therapeutically viable character in *The Magic Kingdom*, though Eddy is “Chief”

and Morehead is a physician whereas Colin is a nurse.¹⁴ And at no point does Elkin minimize or explain away Colin's manipulative or exploitative acts, such as having sex with a park employee to get drawings for the animatrons (and leaving Gale with a lover's broken heart and desire for revenge which propels the plot to its bizarre and cruel climax in Room 822) or his performing good deeds for the children in order to get their consent that his lover may make wax representations of them, for a museum notorious for its exhibitionistic use of sensational figures in the press, from Jack the Ripper to Princess Diana to Liam Bale.

It is, therefore in some ways Elkin's most unique book, but it remains the one in which he pushed the precarious balance between sympathy for the characters and their circumstances, and a morbid fascination with disease, death, and the inevitable entropic processes of life further than he ever had before or would again. And no writer of his half-century has been able to capture quite so empathic and satiric a portrait of our collective human frailty as he did in this book. The rhetoric is over-the-top, vintage Elkin. But the triumph of the novel is its simultaneous humor and empathy, a point we'll attempt to illustrate in closing by taking up the yet one more link between *The Magic Kingdom* and the literary and popular culture traditions concerning childhood. Much of the power of this novel is Elkin's successful resistance of the inherent tendency of his subject matter toward sentimentalism. From Dickens to Flannery O'Connor to sentimental romances to made-for-TV-movies, all a writer needs to do to get the tears flowing is kill off a kid. Although he has his choice of seven, and does eventually sacrifice one, Elkin ruthlessly undermines the sentimentality this situation may invoke by means of four elements: his concentration on the symptoms of disease, not the suffering children; his treatments of the trip's organizer and chaperones as complex, but ultimately zany, guides (Nedra's carping, Mary's masturbating, Morehead's obsession with 'the Jews,' Bible's prostituting himself to get

schematics for the animations in EPCOT Center, Eddy's frequent doubts about his own sanity); and the general avoidance of the childhood mystique presented by both his descriptions of the physical as opposed to emotional or psychological symptoms of disease (in all this Janet Order may well be the exception that proves the rule); and the capitulation to bourgeois capitalism in the compensation fantasies of certain children, like Benny Maxine's gambling fantasies or Noah Cloth's shopping obsession.

About this Collection:

Despite its intrinsic artistic merits, *The Magic Kingdom* has received far less critical attention than it deserves. In an effort to begin a critical conversation on what is surely Elkin's most challenging, and intricate, novel, this collection deliberately seeks to present diverse, fresh views that illuminate unexpected richness in this complex work. These authors (and the editor) disagree on several points concerning the text and its merits, but perhaps a starting point might be these areas of agreement:

- Elkin does not enjoy the audience he deserves (he joked to Bailey, "I think I know all my readers by name" 20), and some of that critical and popular neglect traces to things over which Elkin had a great degree of control, his insistence on a rhetoric of excess and his stubborn, lifelong refusal to yield to conventional ideas about plot and narrative organization – *The Magic Kingdom* is, as Elkin pointed out many times, an extraordinarily carefully plotted novel, but the "physics of plot," to pun on his favorite metaphor, aren't those we learned in college or even by reading Dickens or Stephen King. Henry James or Faulkner, maybe.

- The novel contains many magic moments, but in almost everyone's list includes the Discovery Island sequence (part III, ch 5, excerpt quoted above), the final scene in which Eddy and Mary copulate with the intention of creating a flawed progeny (part III, Ch 5, excerpt quoted above); and the "human parade" Bible takes the children to see, which I maintain is the single most therapeutic moment in the book (III, chapter 4). I point this out because it illustrates two things – despite our different readings of the book and its themes, these are formidable rhetorical moments, but they are also rich in plot importance and thematic signification.

In order to attain diversity of views and to cast fresh lights on this multi-faceted novel, the following strategy developed: invited to contribute were a well-established scholar in American fiction between 1950 and 2000, with limited published work on Elkin, to suggest new context for discussing *The Magic Kingdom*; a fiction writer who counts Elkin as her mentor, to reflect on ways this work affects a creative writer; and an emerging scholar, who has never published on Elkin, but whose work suggests great promise, to provide new insights into this work and this writer. One of the most wonderful things about editing this collection is that each of the writers agreed to do it. A little coaxing may have been involved in some cases, but these are people with busy teaching, administering, and publishing schedules, who took time away from their commitments to reflect on a work that rewards close study and extended commentary. And what essays they produced!

Leading off, Robert Morace in "Stanley Elkin's Magic Carnival" offers a fresh, vivid and fertile context for the novel by exploring relationships between Elkin's Disney World and Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque and his related concept of Carnival. This approach opens new ground by insisting on the physicality of disease and its symptoms in *The Magic*

Kingdom. While many reviewers and commentators have seen illness among the children as a signifier, of the absurdity of all life which is bounded by disease and death – as the obsessive diagnostician Mr. Morehead says (proving once again Dickinson’s maxim about much madness), “Disease, not health, was at the core of things” (64), Morace’s application of Bakhtin forces us back to the fundamental facts of the novel, the physical manifestations of illness and its symptoms. The strategy also foregrounds the many exhibitionistic features of the novel (a carnival is at one level a social construct, containing exhibitions): the commercial enterprise that *is* Disney World, a strategically manipulated environment that covers over the unpleasant facts of reality, substituting animated presidents, pretend mice and dogs that are really park employees ordered by their supervisors to be silent, allowing the painted smiles and mandatory waves and hugs to stand against the world of sorrow the patrons seek to escape; the perhaps inadvertent exhibitionism of the make-a-wish enterprise itself, in which the dying children become objects of attention, in Elkin’s novel competing with the rides and exhibits as objects to be observed; and finally, the most important carnival of all, the riot of language by which Elkin outrageously, obsessively catalogues everything, details with nether blush nor trepidation the most distorted aches of the body and the most debauched aching of the heart, to make his carnival point that the Master Puppeteer is Death, and that our knowledge of it will not free us, nor our defiance save us. But somehow, even in this wild ride, we are affirmed, in our brokenness, like that “*lame and tainted Mickey Mouse*” Mary calls upon at her climax (317).

The second essay, “The ‘skirls and screams’ of ‘the deserving dead,’ Stanley Elkin’s Death-Defying Maximalism” offers a fellow writer’s reflection on this work, and as the title says, the rhetoric of excess that is Elkin’s rhetorical signature. Although she now teaches at Washington University, Kellie Wells never actually met Elkin – even though the garrulous,

cranky ghost of “Stanley” can still be felt in many rooms of Duncker Hall, where he held court in the now partitioned coffee room until his health became so bad that he had to hold his seminars in his home. As Wells’s essay tells, us, however, Elkin’s work was an inspiration during the years when she felt the pressures many young writers in the University workshops faced (and still do) if they dared question the aesthetic of minimalism and social realism that became academic dogma about the time *The Magic Kingdom* was being written. Assaulted by instructors and fellow students alike because of her intuition that the language of fiction should be, well, the language of fiction, not a language of the marketplace (which marketplace, from John Cheever’s suburbia to the Raymond Carver bar to Bobbie Ann Mason’s K-mart-infested south?) that recedes quietly into the background and lets the quotidian event be read in unobtrusive language, Wells found a simpatico spirit when she chanced on “The Making of Ashenden.” As she cleverly puts it in those days when the current minimalist orthodoxy was at its height, the “more anonymous, the more invisible you are, the more admirable goes the paradox (*Highly foregrounded language calls undue attention to itself—cover your ankles, harlot!*). And the woman writer whose aesthetic is, well, eye-catching, can expect to be doubly damned, doubly marginalized, cheeky trollop!” One value of Wells’s essay is that it reminds us of something academicians tend to forget when talking about literature – it’s never a simple movement, like “modernism” or “metafiction” (in which Elkin’s work has roots he himself grumpily and consistently denied) or “minimalism,” the temporary ascendancy of which has dried up the market for Elkin stock – how dare a writer indulge in “foregrounded language?” -- but a matter of competing rhetorics and practices, and that young writers need to be offered more models than the Carver clones lauded at workshops and writing conferences. Innovation in writing may in fact depend on the inspiration of one who marches to a different drumbeat, and Elkin can offer

an amazing model for the writer to remember that the medium of writing is language. While he often overstates the case stridently, who ever listened to a minimalist prophet? Amos and Jeremiah weren't litotes-geeks.

Valuable as the narrative of finding the inspiration to nurture her own voice, not that legislated by her teachers or classmates may be, Wells offers an insightful reading of her favorite among Elkin's novels as well. As a writer she's infatuated with his language, seeing nuances in rhythm and connotation the rest of us might miss. But she also takes a fresh look at the theme, concentrating on the relation of rhetorical excess with the defiance of death. Exploring Elkin's theory that realism is itself an illusory palliative, Wells examines the ways in which invention, both in plot and rhetoric, arms Elkin to take on the most disillusioning subjects imaginable. There's something bracing, and no small amount discomfiting, in her conclusion, that the rhetorical power of the novel offers an apparent solace, that the beauty of art is our compensation for the awareness of suffering and mortality, then subverts that very illusion, the stuff of romantics, sentimentalists, and many realists, to assert that these beauties may indeed distract us – but they don't ultimately compensate, and we recognize in great art our ultimate defeat and the defiance that is all we can 'squirk' in the face of necessity.

Our third essay, Skip Willman's "Misrecognition and the Gaze in Stanley Elkin's *The Magic Kingdom*," offers new insights from outside the Elkin mainstream. A principal goal driving this collection was to invite an emerging scholar who has not yet written about Elkin, but who has demonstrated expertise in postmodernism. After hearing a provocative conference paper on political paranoia in Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*, and chatting about our shared interest in paranoia as postmodernist trope, I asked Skip to write an essay for this collection. While he was initially hesitant, eventually he agreed, and his essay brings us a fascinating new

angle on this novel. Basing his analysis on the work of Lacanian theorist Slavoj Žižek, Willman explores the strategies, both psychological (the characters and the represented culture) and artistic (the novelist), behind deliberate and unconscious “misrecognition” in the novel. This approach addresses something that seems to me to be missing in most analyses of the novel, my own included: that although rhetoric is the standard of Elkin’s novels, and although plot is unusually intricate in the later ones, and although the theme is defiantly and mercilessly focused on our shared imperfections, novels are first and foremost about characters. And one way a postmodern novelist can approach the notion of character is to concentrate on the substitutions that character makes to avoid facing her or his reality (or Žižek’s “big Other”). Those substitutions may be based in our uncritical acceptance of cultural conventions, or in our own constructing an alternate means of viewing reality (a “gaze”). For example, the essay discusses how several characters create false systems to avoid facing their true fears or what they unconsciously know to be true; the “misrecognition” concept offers a thoughtful and systematic way of thinking about these.

This perspective offers provocative insights on the macro-system of deception as well, for example the efforts of Disney Culture to camouflage our flawed mortal condition, and Elkin’s strategic deconstruction of the Disney myth. Willman acknowledges that Disney World has been a frequent subject of postmodernist discourse, and I’ve mentioned elsewhere in this introduction its ubiquity in Elkin’s fiction since *The Franchiser*, but the essay resists the temptation to see the novel exclusively in post-modernist terms and to concentrate on its handling of the ways in which cultures and individuals misrecognize reality in order to avoid facing what we unconsciously know we must. This approach provides a wonderful reading of two of the novel’s most important scenes, the “Haunted Mansion” episode and the dream Bale

has explaining the venture to Liam. It also offers several new insights on the sentimental elements in *The Magic Kingdom*. Although Elkin's fiction is anything but sentimental, in this novel he more effectively and strategically plays off the clichés of sentimentality than in any other among his books. Even the ending, as Willman's essay points out, is a parody of the sentimental endings of popular fiction, in which lovers are united after overcoming obstacles. But they don't unite quite the way Bale and Cottle do, not even in R-rated films or cable TV.

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Endnotes

¹ “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp/ Or what’s a heaven for?” Browning, “Andrea Del Sarto” (c. 1853) lines 97-98: 184-190.

² To ensure some unanimity in the collection the title shorthand will be *The Magic Kingdom* in all essays, including this introduction. Quite literally, Whitehead suggested the addition of ’s after the author’s name, in the original cover art. Subsequently, he revised the cover art to read STANLEY ELKIN’S THE MAGIC KINGDOM. The title appears in that fashion on the cover, the spine, and the title page of the 1985 Dutton editions, but as “The Magic Kingdom by Stanley Elkin” on the 2000 Dalkey Archive edition.

³ “To open an Elkin book is to risk being transported into a maelstrom of verbal energy; the rhetorical virtuosity transports us beyond several of the limitations imposed by language” (translation by the editor).

⁴ Appendix II is a bibliography of reviews of *The Magic Kingdom*.

⁵ It’s worth pointing out how closely this theme parallels the minor character Nedra Carp in this novel.

⁶ Conversation with Dan Shea, Washington University, 17 June 2002. Dan’s copy of the book is inscribed, “To Kathleen, who gave me the title for this book.” At a party in 1979, Stanley challenged everyone to suggest a cliché for the title of the collection, following the use of a cliché as the title of each story. When Kathleen shouted “The Living End,” Stanley announced, “That’s it!” Elkin’s close friend and fellow author Al Lebowitz also claims credit for suggesting the title. The original jacket and catalogue advertisement for the book referred to it as *the Conventional Wisdom*, the title of the first story.

⁷ One illustration of Elkin's practice of thinking at least two books ahead: I interviewed him in 1989, shortly after the publication of *The Rabbi of Lud* and before the California journey that led to the writing of those marvelous personal essays, "An American in California" and "At the Academy Awards." During the two days of conversation, Elkin offered a detailed account of his work-in-progress, *The MacGuffin* (1991), a developed plan for a novella "about the vocation of being a princess" ("*Town Crier* Exclusive, Confessions of a Princess Manqué: 'How Royals Found me "Unsuitable" to Marry their Larry") and a somewhat less developed plan for an 'autobiographical' story about someone whose multiple sclerosis resembles Elkin's, whose wife leaves him on the eve of a party for his graduate students ("Her Sense of Timing"). Both novellas appear in *Van Gogh's Room at Arles* (1993). Elkin didn't, however, mention the title story in 1989, but it's not necessarily inferable that it wasn't in the planning stage then. It simply may not have come up. For the interview, see "A Conversation with Stanley Elkin."

⁸ Elkin tells a similar account of the genesis of the novel in *Chenetier*. In that account, Elkin adds, "And I said <<God! that's a novel! It would be wrong, but it's a novel.>> I mean I saw what the dangers were. I mean, it was dangerous because it could so easily turn into a piece of bathos, go sentimental." Elkin's conclusion about the novel, in the revision process at the time, sheds light on the author's intentions concerning Bale's quest, which is a subject of this and several other essays in this collection: "If you can't cure terminally ill children, why, then, by God, one might as well do something for them that they can enjoy, instead of schlepping them from hospital to hospital" (32). The earliest, least developed, version of this story appears in the Hahn interview: "So anyway I saw this clip and I said to Joan, 'Boy, this would make a terrific idea for a novel. But it would be wrong to write this. Still, it's a terrific idea for a novel'" (17). He offered a variation in my 1989 interview: "There were the lame, the halt, the blind, kids who were absolutely bald from their cancer treatments, boarded onto this British Air airplane to go to Disney World. I thought, this is crazy. Touching, but it's crazy. They'll never come back alive ("Conversation, 189) And in the final formal interview of his life, Elkin told exactly the same story, with only minor variations in the details. See Bailey, 25. That version is quoted in Robert Morace's "Stanley Elkin's Magic Carnival," the first essay in this collection.

⁹ His representation of Charles Mudd-Gaddis's disease echoed profoundly with one writer, Steve Hoffman, who asked for Elkin's help in publishing a book on Meg Casey, "the world's longest-living and best-known progeriac." In March 1986, Hoffman sent Elkin an outline and asked asks for suggestions and permission use Elkin's name in his efforts to attract a publisher (Olin Library Special Collections, Box 13, Folder 56).

¹⁰ All information and quotations in this paragraph are from the Stanley Elkin Collection, Series I, Olin Library Special Collections, Washington University, St. Louis. Box 1, folder 3.

¹¹ Elkin Collection, box 1, folder 21.

¹² The association was first pointed out by Bergen, "Orphan Adopted."

¹³ Yet once more it's tempting to point out a Faulkner correlation, if not direct influence. In Faulkner's masterwork, *The Sound and the Fury*, the alcoholic paterfamilias of the Compsons says, in response to his wife's invoking sickness as the justification for her brother's laziness, says "Bad health is the primary reason for all life. Created by disease, within putrefaction, into decay." – David Minter, ed, *the Sound and the Fury* (1929), Norton Critical Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987): 27. Of course the contrast between the mad, energetic physician and the passive, bibulous patriarch is limited to this instance of cynical rhetoric on Compson's part and an obsession on the physician's part that is based on sound empirical observation, if taken to obsessive excess. Remember, Morehead is an excellent

diagnostician: “he believed himself to be – an in fact may have been – one of the best diagnosticians in the world. [. . .] He handicapped death” (242). Of course, everything has a reasonable explanation.

¹⁴ Elkin wrote his Ph.D. thesis on religious themes in Faulkner’s fiction under the direction of John T. Flanagan at Illinois. He often and generously credited Faulkner as a mentor in matters of style and substance. For example, he told Bailey that he owed certain “plot maneuvers” in *The Magic Kingdom* to Faulkner (Bailey 22); he earlier acknowledged to me that the “Cassadaga section” of *George Mills* was deliberately indebted to *Absalom, Absalom!*