Stanley Elkin's The Magic Kingdom Short Guide

Stanley Elkin's The Magic Kingdom by Stanley Elkin

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Contents

Characters

Unlike many of Elkin's novels, characterization is the special strength of The Magic Kingdom. All the characters are individuated and each deserves special attention, from the zany physician Mr. Morehead, to the nurses Colin Bible and Mary Cottle (both are flawed, but both share love and concern for the children and each is in some ways an effective care-giver). Bale, England's greatest beggar, is a complex combination of humanistic, serious person seeking to do good, and frustrated, unhappy man who cannot face his present situation without a compensating illusion. Cottle, a nervous, unstable woman, is portrayed sympathetically as someone who can give authentic love, whereas nanny Nedra Carp, whose vocation would lead us to believe she is an able care-giver, proves to be parochial in her preferences and to invite factionalism among the children. She is not, significantly, a factor in any therapeutic experience the children have in the book. Colin Bible, in some ways the book's real hero, engages in one nasty liaison, and gets the children's consent to be memorialized in a wax museum — but he does it out of love for his partner, a wax artist; and he brings many of the dying children, including Eddy's late son, close to peaceful self-acceptance.

The refusal to see character as simple or as uniform persists as well in the children. Some are nasty, others heroic, in their response to their diseases.

Some have developed elaborate strategies for coping, but others have not come to terms with their condition.

Several learn profound lessons from their experience in Disney World; a few learn practically nothing. The power and art of this novel depend on the fact that each child is represented, not as a type, but as an individual.

Thematically, Elkin's point is that each deserves to be treated as a person who is dying, not as a member of the class "dying children." He drives this point home powerfully by representing the children, and their care-givers, as ranging along a broad spectrum from truly noble to mendacious — pretty much the range of human personality in the real magic kingdom, the world in which we live.

Social Concerns

Although Elkin determined, after completing George Mills (1982), to give up writing because he felt that he had put everything he had into that novel, a fortuitous event inspired the book that will prove to be his masterpiece. While in London he saw on the BBC a long report about the departure of an airplane carrying terminally ill children to America for a dream vacation in Disney World. The writer's conflicting emotions were overpowering, and this conflict led him to compose a new novel. On the one hand, he felt overwhelming sorrow and compassion for children doomed to die and forced on public display with the disfigurations from their maladies in plain view. On the other hand, the artist in Elkin was repelled by the exhibitionistic spectacle of dragging these children to an amusement park and rubbing their faces in their mortality. Thus the odd, recent practice of providing a dream vacation for terminally ill children becomes a central question of this very distressing novel.

It is an issue Elkin treats with divided sympathy. The venture is wellintended. As he said in an interview, it is a "very grotesque good" intention, but one that raises the thematically central issue of how can we not try to do something, however hopeless, about the vicious fate these innocent children have inherited. As human beings what choices have we but to try to do something about the raw deal others, especially innocent others, get? But in our desire to do good, should we descend to the bizarre, the exhibitionistic? As Elkin portrayed cultural morbidity and sentimentality in the accounts of Jerry Lewis telethons and Meals-On-Wheels in George Mills, at what point does our compassion and determination to help others cross over to the grotesque?

Theme parks and amusement centers are relatively new phenomena in the American landscape, and these concepts have recently been exported to Europe and Japan. Elkin, who has longingly chronicled what he calls the "crap of our culture," found in Disney World a level of mendacity and hucksterism that put off even his cosmopolitan sympathies. The ironic element of the title of this book (to some degree modeled on the parodic Stanley Elkin's Greatest Hits, 1980) is that the "magic" occurs not in the rides or the illusions, which the children find banal, but in the privacy and shared affection they have been denied because of their illness. The kids are disappointed by the rides and exhibits at Disney World, but each find his or her magic in privacy, in shared mortality, and for two of the dying children, in love.

Techniques

The Magic Kingdom is among Elkin's less technically innovative novels, but it is brilliantly constructed around the paradox of a commercial enterprise called a "magic kingdom" in which little that we can call magic really happens, and in which the real magic is finally something we need to travel inward, not outward, to discover. Unlike his typical books, however, this is divided among the narratives concerning many of the care-givers as well as the eight dying children.

He does, moreover, interpose two distinctive narrative techniques in a book rich in purple passages, Whitmanian catalogues, and powerful metaphors. As the group rides to America, what appears to be a collective dream occurs, in which the dream of one character merges with those of another.

The narrative offers the somewhat facile explanation that smoke from Cottle's cigarette causes each to dream a shared experience. In fact the episode foreshadows Elkin's theme of shared human experiences and the children's need for love and shared experiences.

Moreover, there are recurring episodes in which Eddy Bale talks with, and asks approval from, his dead son.

These episodes ground Eddy's obsession with helping the children in a reasonable psychological state — an unresolved grief — and remind us that children who die are not the sole victims of childhood illnesses.

Perhaps the funniest episode in all of Elkin occurs when Eddy gets an audience with Queen Elizabeth to support his quest. It is a perfect example of Elkin's offbeat, zany humor, while approaching a serious subject.

Themes

The key theme of Stanley Elkin's The Magic Kingdom engages a philosophical and ethical paradox. Because we share mortality, we feel some obligation to help those less fortunate than we, and especially those on whom life has played a cruel joke. There can be no more sympathetic figures than dying children, and no more powerful reminder of our powerlessness in the face of fate or inevitability. What, then, are our obligations to one another? At what point do these obligations become self-serving?

Elkin does not answer these questions, but the dignity with which these children face their mortality supports his theme of compassion and obligation. No one could refuse to try to help. Yet what can anyone do? His hero, Eddy Bale (among the first Elkin protagonists not identified by his vocation) throws all his energies into planning this expedition to compensate for his loss of his terminally ill son and the subsequent failure of his marriage. In the several conversations Eddy has with his dead son, Elkin suggests that this effort is psychologically self-serving. In fact, although most of the characters who accompany Bale on his adventure are motivated by altruistic desires, many have secret or suppressed agendas. At what point do our altruism and our self-interest intersect?

A related theme is the dignity and fragility of life, however flawed. Quite deliberately, Elkin portrays human existence as flawed and even grotesque. His portrait of the Disney World parade emphasizes the thin line dividing the grotesque appearance of the terminally ill children from those of other parade viewers. Seeing how mis-formed everyone else is gives the children — and the reader — a new perspective on their shared condition.

One of the boys describes this epiphany eloquently: "Jesus . . . weeps for all the potty, pig-ignorant prats off their chumps, for all the . . . deadfrom-the-neck-up dimbos, . . . for all his chuckle-headed, loopy muggins and passengers past praying for."

With this epiphany, the reader and children realize that the difference between these fated children and the rest of us is a matter of degree, not of kind. We're all mortal; we will all suffer and die sooner or later. We're all "passengers past praying for."

This is not a morbidly somber thought for the kids or for the reader.

They learn, briefly (see the truly beautiful scene in which they hijack boats and find privacy from the crowd's stares at the aptly named Shipwreck Marsh), to accept their mortality and to savor the moments they have before they die — moments best invested in the company of people about whom we care.

Finally, the novel integrates this ambivalent, postmodernist version of the traditional carpe diem with a concern with the strategy of avoidance.

Many of the characters who nurture the dying children have learned to avoid emotional vulnerability. Some of them learn to take risks, even if the consequences are likely to be cata strophic. Eddy Bale has practiced celibacy since losing his son and his wife, while "gray lady" Mary Cottle has avoided sexual contact because her previous, terminated pregnancies have resulted in deformed fetuses. Eddy has become a monk, tied to an ideal of public service, and Mary has become dependent on masturbation. When the expedition unravels with the death of one of the children, they unite in profoundly procreative copulation, "to make a troll, a goblin, . . . gorgon, Cyclopes, Calibans, God's ugly, punished customers, his obscene and frail and lubberly . . ." With their resolve to create an imperfect future, Elkin powerfully reminds us that we are all dying children, and that only in accepting risks and finding love can we make our lives worth living.

Key Questions

Reading groups might find sharing their responses to Elkin's version of Disney World valuable, especially in that most of us have experience of that or other theme parks. How just is his portrait of this cultural icon? Are entertainment centers like Disney World apt metaphors for a culture many perceive as in decline? Several characters' behavior is worth discussing, and, even more than in most Elkin novels, the intense rhetoric of individual pages or sections may be profitably read and shared.

1. Is Eddy Bale's role as "England's foremost beggar" believable? Can you think of other philanthropic organiza tions whose leaders assume deferential roles to attract investment? Could such behavior become obsessive?

2. Is Colin Bible's treatment of Matthew Gale justified? Is Gale's revenge responsible for Rena's death?

3. Examine the long collective dream the children share. To what extent is each character's individual contribution to the dream a compensation for his or her illness?

4. Does Nedra Carp grow spiritually (early, Elkin calls her "a patriot of the propinquitous") as a result of the trip and Rena's disaster?

5. What are we to make of Colin Bible's assuming practical responsibility for the end of the dream vacation?

Is this a result of Mr. Morehead's and Bale's weakness, or of Bible's growth?

6. Does Mr. Morehead's reason for making the trip, to validate a bizarre theory of genetics, undermine or qualify our sense of the high moral purpose of the trip?

7. Does Rena's death undermine the altruistic purpose of the whole enterprise?

Literary Precedents

An interviewer once asked Elkin what other writers were doing the kind of thing he was doing, and Elkin answered that, as far as he knew, none was; he continued, "I hope nobody else is doing what I'm doing. I hope I'm doing what I'm doing." The Magic Kingdom is like that. Although it resembles other traditional and modern novels in minor ways, it is a thoroughly original and unique work of fiction.

The hard fates of children was a popular subject in Victorian fiction, and Dickens portrayed child victims sentimentally, as, to a lesser degree, did Hardy. Elkin's child victims are presented with compassion, but not sentimentally. In fact, some of them are quite nasty and hostile because of their condition.

Cultural icons have been the fictional stock of such contemporary novelists as Max Apple (The Propheteers [1987] studies the creation of Disney World) or E. L. Doctorow (Ragtime [1975] looks back on the Morgan Library, and The Waterworks [1994], is formed around a cultural signifier).

Again, The Magic Kingdom is really a study in the phoniness of the cultural landmark, and a compelling analysis of our mortal condition.

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