

[Reflections and Reminders]

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EDITORS' NOTE: When we decided to compile a special feature on Stanley Elkin for *NER*, we invited a range of contemporary writers to whom we thought he might have been especially important—as a model, a literary influence, a colleague, or simply a friend—to contribute a few paragraphs of general observations, anecdotes, or reminiscences. The response was enthusiastic and surprisingly forthcoming: Elkin clearly still holds a vivid place in the life experience of these writers and in their thinking about fiction. Since almost every one of the writers included in this gathering suggested the names of others who might have valuable things to say, we soon recognized that we could have gone on collecting testimony for a very long time. We welcome readers to send us their own words about this author; in the meantime, we are most grateful to the following writers for agreeing to share their thoughts and memories.

Helen Vendler

It was Stanley's voice I heard first—a voice half-indignant, half-cajoling, half-incredulous (Stanley's voice had at a minimum three halves, and often more): the voice was saying, "You mean there's *no* typewriter? *Nothing* to be had? Who ever heard of an English department that didn't have a few banged-up typewriters hanging around? Are you *sure*?" I walked into the department office (this was at Smith) and said to the unknown disconsolate and outraged person, "You could have the typewriter in my office, in the mornings—I never use the office till the afternoon." Stanley (the Professor-for-a-Year-as-Writer-in-Residence, on leave from Washington University) was overjoyed, and the shared typewriter made us friends.

I would enter my office in the afternoon and find an intoxicatingly buoyant half-written page on the desk or in the typewriter. Stanley and Joan and their son Philip began to go around with me and my son David, and it was only then that I saw the full range of Stanley's genius. We would all have gone to some fair where there had been a horse-pulling contest. My un-novelistic mind would see the horses, and see how it was done, and who won, and how the children enjoyed it—but only that. Scrolling from the typewriter the next day would be the fair as seen by Stanley—every nuance, every bit of comedy, every heave of muscle, every horse—all sheer exuberance and wit. Stanley was the first novelist I ever knew well, and he made me see what being a novelist was like—Technicolor over drabness, gaiety over downtrodden earnestness, grotesquerie pervading the ordinary. The ordinary, to Stanley, didn't seem drab or earnest or "normal": it was a lit-up world. "Music I heard with you was more than music," was the line that occurred to me whenever I was along on a Stanley-excursion; "Life I saw with you was more than life."

I asked Stanley if I could audit his course in the novel, perceiving an opportunity to be taught novels from the horse's mouth (they had not been interestingly taught in graduate school, and I really felt I didn't understand what novelists had in mind when they made up fictions. I was a truth-and-reality sort, myself, fond of autobiography, letters, and memoirs). Stanley let me come to his lectures, and I sat enthralled. First we read a "nurse novel" (I think it was called *Casino Nurse* and took place in Monte Carlo); and then an Agatha Christie. Stanley amused himself imagining for us other "nurse novels" on the same template: I don't remember exactly what they were, but it would be on the order of *White House Nurse* or *Vatican Nurse*. From absurdity we went to murder: Stanley's point was that we didn't fall a-weeping when the vicar was discovered dead on the library floor. "You really care about the vicar, don't you! Isn't his death a tragedy!" And from these examples of Fake Fiction we went on to Faulkner and the Real Thing. It was all superbly entertaining, very funny (till it got serious), and extremely instructive. I wasn't any better at liking fiction, perhaps, by the end; but I certainly understood better why people wrote it and how hard it was to write it well. He was sometimes enraged by the passivity of the students: once he made a whole class act out aloud the ritual of the Plumed Serpent, just so that they could hear, from their own mouths, the preposterous lengths to which Lawrence was prepared to go. He made novels real on every plane they touched.

Then Stanley went back to St. Louis, and I went on to Boston, but we kept in touch, and more than that. When I broke down and cried over the phone about a failed romance, Stanley (knowing I had no spare money) said, "Can I send you a ticket and you could come down here and visit?" It was such a munificent gesture I found a different sort of tears in my eyes. He was always surpassingly kind to me and my son. (Years later, my son's car gave out in St. Louis, and a garage named an immense sum to fix it. "Call Stanley," I said, "and go to his garage," and for a fairly small sum they agreed to get the car running again, but not till the next day. Stanley gave David a bed for the night, and when David returned he said to me, "Do you know what Stanley does when he's upstairs typing?" "No," I said, unable to think of anything you could do while typing. "He laughs," said David. Stanley his own best audience.)

I came to England while Stanley and Joan were on sabbatical there, and Stanley met me at the London airport terminal. "How *are* you, Stanley," I said joyfully. "I'm dying," he said—and I was upset that he would joke like that. "Don't even say that as a joke!" I protested—and then he told me he had been diagnosed with MS. From that year until he died, Joan saw him through progressive debility, keeping his spirit and his work alive within his increasingly ravaged body. Late in his life, he said to me that he had never been happier. "How is that *possible*?" I said, looking at the wrecked body in the wheelchair. "Because now words will do what I want them to do," he shot back. He never stopped working on making words do what he wanted them to do—to equal his fantastic comic imagination.

The comic imagination was never absent. Once, when I was spending a term as the Fanny Hurst professor at Washington U., Joan and he and I went to a foreign movie. In St. Louis at that time they alternated nights when the movie was dubbed with nights when it was shown with English subtitles (which many Americans dislike).

Stanley went to the ticket window. Ticket-seller gloomily warns him, "It's got *subtles*." Stanley (in mock indignation), "I can read!" The comedy extended even to the household adjustments to his illness. When I visited, he displayed his new stair-chair: "Want to try it?" "Sure." So I got in at the top of the stairs, secured the lap-bar, and rode down; as I lifted the lap-bar and stepped out, Stanley said gleefully, "Now what do you feel like?" "I dunno, Stanley, what *do* I feel like?" A *deus ex machina!*" he pronounced triumphantly.

In St. Louis, as we sat, mornings, at the famous coffee-room table in the English department, the mail would come and we'd open it. "Big bucks, Helen?" Stanley would say in pretend-competition (always knowing that his movie options would outdo my lecture stipends). His poet friends John N. Morris and Howard Nemerov became my friends too—and then went and died on us, as a child might put it: two very original voices gone. When Stanley left this world—which he had so illuminated with his fiction-fables of commerce, theme parks, radio shows, and compulsive monologists, and with his wry nonfictional pieces about his heart attack, his cortisone-mania, or his tuxedo—America's luster, we felt, dimmed perceptibly. As for our hearts, they were dimmed too, and still are.

John Irving

As a young writer, I was extremely sensitive to the opinions of my work held by older writers; I was never sensitive to the opinions of critics, having been told early on, by Stanley Elkin, "Most of them don't write fiction; what do they know?" Among those older fiction writers, Stanley and Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller and Peter Matthiessen were instrumental in giving me encouragement.

I overlapped at the Iowa Workshop with Stanley one winter term. We were both teaching there. I remember watching a downhill ski race on television—a party at Jack Leggett's house, some guy in Austria racing against the clock. Stanley shouted: "Fall! Break your legs!" People looked at him, appalled. But he had MS—other people's athleticism drew his scorn.

One spring break, I was in St. Louis visiting Stanley. We were throwing a ball out at the swimming pool. My two older boys—maybe twelve and eight at the time—were swimming with Stanley's kids, who were a little older. Molly Elkin spotted my son Brendan at the bottom of the pool. Brendan said later that he got tired and decided to lie down. Anyway, Molly saved him. Stanley said, "Well, we were spared the headline." "What headline?" I asked him. "CHILD DIES WHILE WRITERS PLAY CATCH," Stanley said.

He was quite a guy.

Robert Coover

It was 1972 and Stanley Elkin was in London on a sabbatical, Joyce Carol Oates, too, John Gardner; the old pre-Common Market island town was still pretty cheap and everyone was still relatively healthy. We were living on the English Channel in Kent that decade and a young professor friend at the university in Canterbury wanted to invite Stanley down to give a reading, but he had no money to offer. Stanley was a great reader of his own work, his voice filled him up and he loved to take center stage and let go of it—for free if need be, money meant little to him, only pride. When pressed, my friend agreed he could come up with £25. That's enough, I said. Just tell him I gave a reading and you paid me £10. That worked and led to Stanley's legendary performance of "The Making of Ashenden" in the Great Hall of the Carmelite monastery at Allington Castle in early March.

This was also the year Stanley learned that he had multiple sclerosis, though it was not easy for him to find out. He'd had a heart attack by that time in his young life and any number of other ailments, one finally landing him in a London hospital. He was submitted to a battery of tests and when he asked afterwards what it was he had, the doctors seemed reluctant to tell him, replying with baffling Latinisms. Feeling patronized and belittled, he stormed down the corridors to the doctors' offices, which he found locked, and banged on them awhile, demanding the naked truth. Finally, he just pulled a bathrobe on over his hospital gown and strode out of the hospital, crossing over to a pharmacy with medical information books, wherein he got the dismaying news—news that soon found its way into his brilliant comic novel, *The Franchiser*, with its central character Ben Flesh and his famous Mister Softee routine.

But that came later. This year in London, Stanley had just completed a new novella called "The Making of Ashenden," a kind of long shaggy-bear story, and he was eager to try it out before an audience willing to sit still for an hour or more. The Kent professor discovered that the monastery, originally built by Henry VIII for his ill-fated second wife and Queen Elizabeth I's mum, Anne Boleyn, and used primarily as a religious retreat, was now available for literary evenings; he booked it, chartered a bus down from Canterbury for his students, who were in turn joined by the contingent from London and some of our Kentish neighbors. The monks saw it as a modest entrepreneurial enterprise. They offered to serve us pizza and wine and provide the chairs and the space—a great stony medieval hall with a fireplace as big as a room—for 70 pence a head. It was a nice crowd and they were pleased with this new innovation.

"The Making of Ashenden" is a story about a young gentleman who has everything: he is handsome, gifted, of impeccable character, charming, brave, educated, fun-loving, and rich. He falls in love with a young aristocratic heiress who also has everything, even a charitable soul and a fatal illness. Perfect. He woos her at a castle (this reading venue

was also perfect) somewhat modeled after the estate of the Duke of Bedford with its wildlife preserve. When dear fragile Jane slips into sleep, Ashenden, “exhilarated by his virtue,” steps out into the moonlit castle grounds to take a meditative stroll, and as he wanders through it he recognizes the settings of many of the world’s famous paintings such as Rousseau’s *Sleeping Gypsy* and Cranach the Elder’s *Stag Hunt*. They have all come here to paint their masterpieces; it’s like walking through their studios. “I am in art, thought Brewster Ashenden . . . ‘I’m glad to have lived in the age of jet travel, and to have had the money for tickets.’”

The reading of all this took the better part of an hour. The monks meanwhile had prepared the food and they were afraid it might get cold, so instead of waiting for the end of the reading, they began tippytoeing through the rapt crowd, bent over double like field workers, trying to make themselves invisible, delivering first, without plates, a slice of pizza, then a hot baked potato, and then, when everybody’s hands were full, a glass of wine, which added to the mounting hilarity. Meanwhile, Brewster Ashenden had discovered, there in the moonlight, what he was certain was the setting for Edward Hicks’s *The Peaceable Kingdom*. “It was one of Ashenden’s favorite paintings and he was thrilled to be where lion and fox and leopard and lamb and musk ox and goat and tiger and steer had all lain together.”

Whereupon, just as an enormous she-bear in rut, emitting “love’s gassy chemistry,” stepped out of the woods—almost literally in Stanley’s wonderfully expressive performance, he being in those days still a big bear of a man himself—a group of people on religious retreat returned from their evening meditations and, hearing that there was a literary event in the main hall, slipped into the back rows. I glanced at the glass-windowed kitchen door and saw the pallid wide-eyed face of a horrified monk literally slide down behind the wooden paneling. This is an uproarious, delightfully prolonged, and viscerally vivid rape scene, and Stanley had most of us rolling about in our dropped potatoes. Those folks on retreat who’d missed all the preparations, on the other hand, were frozen where they sat, as this enormous creature with “a black patent-leather snout like an electric socket,” began strumming her enflamed genitals like a guitar, a description of which, when Ashenden’s whole arm goes in, is unparalleled in world literature and is, though no doubt it went largely unrecognized as such on the night, a true religious experience, as it was for the transformed Ashenden, who, falling in love, prepared to leave Jane and civilization behind for wilder places.

The aftermath was somewhat cruel. One of the women on retreat rather hysterically declared Stanley to be the Antichrist, to the menacing amens of many. The monks refused to take our 70p, saying it was the tainted lucre of Satan, and the white-lipped prior came bravely up to Stanley and said: “Well, if you are what an American capitalist is like, it’s a good thing we don’t have more of them over here!” Stanley was somewhat stunned by all this, nothing like it had ever happened before at his readings, and he was, for a short time at least, full of remorse: perhaps he should have been less graphic in his gestures. When word got back to the university, the Carmelites expressing their outrage to the administration, the young professor nearly lost his job, and needless to say this reading was both the first and the last in the monastery’s announced “series” of literary evenings. Nothing but prayers from now on. We forgave ourselves and went

on to party away the weekend at our cottage in Kent, following Brewster Ashenden's own advice: "Let's enjoy ourselves I say. Let's have fun." But the rumor, according to those who claim to have visited the Allington Castle in later years, is that the Great Hall is still imbued with the ripe odor of bear.

Robert Pack

One evening Stanley Elkin took me aside and told me that I was not paying him enough for his arduous teaching responsibilities at Bread Loaf. I replied that I paid all the senior staff at the Writers' Conference the same amount. I told another senior staff member of this exchange, and we decided to play a little joke on Stanley by having his writer colleague let slip, inadvertently as planned, a fictitious amount he was being paid, twice the salary Stanley was receiving. Stanley immediately came to see me in a state of high indignation. After asking him if he didn't agree that his esteemed fellow writer was worth twice the salary he was getting, I hastened to confess to the joke. Stanley's imagination was stirred by the thought of what any writer might be worth, if anything at all, and, entertained, he speculated what God might do if he had enough money. "Maybe he would work one day and rest the other six," Elkin surmised. Then, pleased with his speculation, he revised his thought: "Or maybe he would work for four days and rest for three." Then, rapt in thought, cane in hand, he walked off into the evening light.

Elkin had a wicked wit which showed him to be free of all sentimentality. One evening at Treman Cottage, the informal gathering place for writers on the Bread Loaf staff, a group of people were discussing the midlife illness of a well-known fellow novelist.

A sympathetic lady in the group, in a moment of cosmic speculation, asked: "How can one explain a universe like this in which a gifted person is stricken right in the middle of his creative life?" Without a moment's hesitation, Elkin replied: "Very simple, madam. God reads."

I was walking across the Bread Loaf campus with Elkin and a lady admirer after Elkin had completed a reading from his own work. The breathless lady said to him, "Mr. Elkin, that reading was just terrific," to which Stanley replied, "What do you mean *just*?"

I first encountered Stanley Elkin's work in a graduate seminar given by Charles Newman at Johns Hopkins. Entitled "The Situation of the Fiction Writer in the Last Third of the Twentieth Century," it was an introduction to postmodernism and the sorry response of readers and publishers to the phenomenon. As texts, we used mostly past issues of *TriQuarterly*, which Newman had edited and brought to international prominence. We had read, fairly baffled and unmoved, numerous pieces of fiction and essays from the magazine. Elkin's "The Making of Ashenden," about a man who sexually satisfies a bear, was the first piece that aroused our genuine enthusiasm. It was a *story*, something we had all of us loved since childhood, before we thought of being writers and were simply readers.

"Ah," said Newman, with satisfaction, "but why?"

A certain jarring note seemed to have been sounded amidst our hymns of praise.

"Why do you like it?"

Narrative drive, it turned out, was something to be suspicious of, something like the candy with which the witch decorated her house to entice greedy children. Elkin's story was to serve as object lesson in our retrograde tastes. But it had been published in *TriQuarterly*—there had to be something worthwhile about it. The verbal energy and inventiveness we could legitimately admire, even if we had to deplore the narrative impulse. Thus, accurately or not, Elkin came to stand in my memory as the postmodernist who had managed to smuggle narrative drive back into postmodernism.

My introduction to Elkin the person came later, when I taught at Washington University in St. Louis. I first spoke with him at a cocktail party, where he was holding court from a large armchair. He already could not walk. After cursory pleasantries, he asked me when my next book was coming out and what I'd been paid as an advance. I told him. "You're not in my league, baby," he said. He wasn't joking.

Elkin was notorious for this kind of disparagement, I soon learned. Everyone had a story. Students in writing workshops were regularly in tears. "If you weren't a cripple," Newman (on the faculty too) had told me he'd once told Elkin, "I'd punch your lights out." I shouldn't take any of it personally. But, I thought, but. . . . I had been ready to sit at his feet. And he thought I was a twit.

I remained wary, but whenever I mentally took a dismissive attitude toward him, he did something to re-earn my admiration, grudging as it may have been. In student thesis defenses, unencumbered by the compunction to put a positive spin on things, he'd make a brilliant comment that got right at the heart of what was wrong with a piece of work. He was mordantly funny. But I admired him most for never giving up. So weakened by MS he could hardly hold his head up, he still worked much of every day. More than anything I think of Elkin as a writer whose characters work, have jobs, as in *The Dick Gibson Show* or his great novella "The Bailbondsman," where work is

not peripheral, an attribute to be mentioned and dispensed with in order to get to the real story, but central, the backbone of their lives, and as a subject inextricable from the energy of his prose.

Stanley Bates

I got to know Stanley Elkin during the late 1970s and 1980s when he was regularly a staff member at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and I was serving as administrative director. There was a lot of continuity on the staff over those years, and the fiction writers included John Irving, Tim O'Brien, John Gardner, Hilma Wolitzer, Gail Godwin, and Lynne Sharon Schwartz. Though I think that throughout his career Stanley felt undervalued as a writer (this certainly comes through in various of his literary interviews), at the Writers' Conference he always received a tremendous response to his readings and lectures—some of the response no doubt because they were inevitably incredibly funny no matter how painful or searching the topic. He was also at the center of some of the literary discussions that seemed to take place almost continuously during those years. As the years passed, he became increasingly disabled by his MS, and finally the physical challenges of Bread Loaf made it impossible for him to continue.

Overall, my memories of him center on his sardonic wit. A couple of examples: One year, Stanley was conducting one of his workshops in a large classroom in the Bread Loaf barn. In that era, people were permitted to attend the workshops as spectators, so there was a large standing-room-only audience. Stanley came into the crowded room and sat at the table at the front. He began to talk about what he planned to do in this workshop session. Almost immediately, it became clear that a young man at the rear of the room had come to the wrong workshop because he was trying, unsuccessfully, to make his way out of the room quietly. This proved impossible, since people had to move themselves and their chairs out of his way to allow him to pass as he came to the front of the room. Stanley never looked at him. However, just as the student reached out to open the door, Stanley turned to him and said, "How am I doing so far?"

On another, later occasion Stanley had come, in the late afternoon, into Treman Cottage, where the staff often gathered. He had painfully shuffled to a sofa and had sat down with evident relief. It was obvious that he was having a bad day with his MS. A moment or two later, a member of the administrative staff who was a serious athlete, came in after his afternoon six-mile run, collapsed on a chair, and said, "My legs are killing me." Stanley immediately turned to the person next to him and said, in a soft voice, "I complained that I had no feet, until I met a man who had no shoes."

William Gass

Stanley was a great story teller. He traveled in order to compose. He would visit this school or that city, gather his material, and on his return polish his adventure for presentation at the next soiree. The room would gather around him as if the chairs were motorized, and we would wait like children for the magical adventures of Stanley in Tinseltown or Stanley at a religious retreat in Kent. His stories were often told against himself: he had read a raunchy piece to an audience of two nuns; at a restaurant he had experienced what he called “order envy” and had begged, successfully, to trade his entree for another’s. The details made the plot, its victims and villains, hilarious. He often did mildly outrageous things to make usable additional material. He was never a downright liar. He was mostly an upright one, an embellisher, and his taste and timing were perfect. Above all, what rushed through his tales was life itself, his greed for it, his relish of it, his belief in it. My favorite is too long to recite, and really needs Stanley’s voice and vocabulary (the retreat in Kent), but I’ll summarize another that’s got to be one of the more glorious moments in writing workshop history. He was a bit of a classroom bully and more than once sent students of both sexes from his seminar in tears. Outraged by the prose (and bad unambitious work made his anger very genuine), he said to a young lady, “Miss X, I hope you fuck better than you write.” Miss X replied at once: “That’s something you’ll never know, Professor Elkin.” He loved it. We all loved it. We still love it.

Robert Cohen

Though I have read pretty much everything he wrote, and think and talk about the man all the time, I met Stanley Elkin only once, in 1992. He was visiting Cambridge. A dinner party had been arranged, and though I was new in town I was invited because he had given my first novel a nice blurb and apparently either wanted to meet me or consented to do so out of politeness. Politeness! I’d read enough of his work to know better. Politeness was not Elkin’s thing. Candor was his thing. Rudeness was his thing. The rage and wit and pressure of consciousness against that frail bag of bones, the body, that was his thing. (“A captive’s captive,” he writes in *A Bad Man*. “It’s no joke, it costs to live.”) He roared into the room in his wheelchair, a shrewd tough Jew, ready for commotion. People were milling around, talking about trips they’d

either just taken or would take soon. Elkin would have none of it. Or rather, he'd have *all* of it. "How fucking great it must be to be ambulatory!" he hollered. "Why don't you all just shut up." If this was shtick, it wasn't *only* shtick: he really meant it. And why shouldn't he? We were upstairs at the Harvard Faculty Club, the china shop to end all china shops. There were distinguished literary people eager to meet him. Seamus Heaney was seated to Elkin's left; the poor man had to keep diving under the table to retrieve Elkin's cutlery, which he did with great good humor, even after Elkin began with the kibitzing about how overrated Joyce was. "All that moo-cow shit," he said, "how do you stand it?" Joan was across the table, lovely and bemused; I had the sense that many of the outrageous things he said that night were for her benefit, to make her laugh. And she laughed a lot.

Meanwhile Elkin looked awful. His color was poor; his hands shook; his lids were melting and droopy. Otherwise, though of course I had nothing to compare it with, he seemed in pretty good form. At some point in the dinner he appeared to make the decision to go ahead and eat and let other people say things for a while, though you could see he'd have preferred not to. Then at last the coffee came, and he turned to me. "Liked your book," he said. "So now, let me ask you something."

I nodded eagerly. I'd been waiting for this, it occurred to me, my whole adult life. He was the greatest writer I'd ever personally sat next to, perhaps the greatest I'd ever personally sit next to, and he wanted to ask me something, something witty and penetrating, something that would, I felt sure, get to the heart of things about my work, such as it was, or maybe even that other thing, my life, such as *it* was. So I leaned forward.

"What kind of rent you pay?"

I heard someone bark out a laugh. It may have been Joan, it may have been Elkin, it may even have been me. I told him my rent; he was appalled. I was, too. We went on to talk for a while about the indignities of quotidian life. Then he grew tired, and even paler and more papery than he'd looked when he came in, and he called to Joan and she wheeled him out—early and abruptly—to wherever they were staying. A couple years later he died. I no longer paid rent by then, I'd bought a house. The price of that too was appalling. But as a master wrote, it costs to live.

Damien Wilkins

As a graduate student in the early 1990s I was lucky enough to get Stanley Elkin in his last great puff. Heart, lungs, MS. It was painful for him to turn a page. My first workshop I'd used a paperclip to hold my story together. It fell off in Elkin's hands

and all the pages ended up on the carpet at his feet, from where he couldn't retrieve them. "Goddamn it," he yelled, "haven't you people heard of *staples!*" We could have killed him by throwing a small book at his chest. Of course it was Elkin who killed us—every Tuesday and Thursday morning. The graduate fiction workshop met in his living room; the four-hundred-meter wheelchair ride from his house to Washington University campus was too much for everyone. Whenever we asked him if he was going over to the department to hear a visiting writer, he would point at his legs and grin. "On a Thursday? They've got someone reading on a *Thursday* night—what are they, they don't get the *TV Guide*?" He didn't go to Derek Walcott and he didn't go to Toni Morrison. Joseph Brodsky didn't get Elkin either. He was a Nobel no-show.

Elkin's brilliant meanness was legendary. He was no good for a lot of people who came through the program—and these were not necessarily sensitive souls or bad writers. Chemically they didn't mix in the Elkin solution. What the legend failed to communicate was that there was nothing gratuitous about Elkin. He was not awful on purpose, or at least not just on purpose. He was awful with a purpose.

One time Mark wrote a story about a medical equipment salesman. The salesman goes door-to-door with his bag of demonstration models. He shows doctors and hospital staff the new tools and gadgets. But this is not quite what the story is about. The salesman's personal life is in bad shape—an unhappy wife, a difficult child, the landlord on his back. While he talks up his trade with the doctors, jollies them into their purchases, the domestic gloom settles like glue.

We each had our turn, called upon by Elkin. "Mr. Bumas?" "Mr. Hughes?" "What about you, Mr. Tysver?" Our comments fell on the carpet; Elkin looked at them. He was dangerously glum. We finished. Silence.

Now, Elkin's father was a salesman. The salesman is everywhere in his own fiction. Work, the special languages of trades, the professions' prose—we all felt that Mark was about to learn a terrible lesson. Hadn't Elkin, once a tall, athletic fellow, given up his legs, almost his *life*, to be the best at shop-talk? The lesson, however, was a little different from the one we imagined, and it would return again and again throughout that astonishing year.

"Turn to page six," said Elkin finally. "I want you to read that list, Mr. Bautz. The things in his bag. Read that." Mark read the list—there were stethoscopes and various gauges with medical names, other doctory stuff. "What's wrong with that, Mr. Bautz?" Mark didn't know; perhaps the grammar. "Not the grammar," said Elkin. "I'm talking about the *list*. What this guy has in his bag. What he's supposedly showing these supposed doctors. What the hell has he got in there? Listen to this." Elkin read the list. He looked at us. Peter tried his luck: perhaps the salesman had too many things in his bag; maybe he'd be carrying the stuff in his car. "No!" shouted Elkin.

Silence. All of us looking at our shoes or out the window or at Mark's ghastly flawed list. (You tried not to look at the walls since they were covered with his wife's far-too-accurate paintings of Stanley.)

"The things in this bag are not just of different weights and sizes," Elkin said. "And some of these things the guy would need a goddamn truck to shift. These items are of different orders. They're not the same. They belong in different parts of the zoo,

do you understand, Mr. Bautz? It would be like a jeweller selling shoes—do you understand what I’m saying, Mr. Bautz?” Mark nodded slowly. “Now,” said Elkin, “let’s see what’s in here.” Elkin started on the first item and worked from there, throwing nearly everything in that bag out on the floor and kicking it.

It’s important to distinguish what Elkin was up to here. If he was simply making the objection that the real High Street runs north-south so how could the Town Hall’s clock-face be drenched in morning sunshine, he would not have been a great teacher. He would have been a pedant, a pain. What I think he was demanding was total dedication on our part, a scout’s two-fingered pledge that we meant everything we said and wrote. To be read was to be sworn in.

Under cross-examination—and all of Elkin’s workshops had the nausea, the odd moments of nervy boredom, the excitement, the elongated orderliness of the courtroom—Mark admitted that he’d decided *at the last minute* to make his character a medical salesman. He could be something else, said Mark. This was a terrible confession for Judge Elkin to hear. If the job was whim, everything was whim. The unreality that hung around the bag infected the life.

This emphasis on accuracy everywhere in a story, on getting the world exactly *right* in your fiction, was a strange shock—a peculiarly affecting one. Wasn’t Elkin the master of exaggeration and excess? Didn’t he just riff? In fact he loved fact. He needed evidence of all kinds. (“I *love* psychology!” he shouted when one of us muttered something about not being so interested in psychological fiction. “Psychology is all there is!”) And he taught by testing every piece of fiction in the workshop against the most compelling evidence there was: his own experience of the world. The irresistible force of Elkin anecdote and aphorism was brought to bear on even our most puny offerings. This sort of attention could be hilarious or harrowing, helpful or not; it was also terrifically moving. We knew that the night before, instead of watching TV, Stanley Elkin had read us; once only of course—as he gleefully informed us early on in the semester, “Faulkner is what you read twice.”

Charles Baxter

Having spent only a few days in Stanley Elkin’s company, I possess anecdotes rather than stories, and though I could write at length about his wonderful fiction, I’d rather tell the anecdotes. As a young writer with one book to his credit, I first met Stanley in 1985 at a writers’ conference in Vermont, where I sat in on one of his workshops. Each day, Elkin (I thought of him as “Elkin” back then) would workshop a single story, often with frightening results. In passing, he would set out a number of idiosyncratic rules, none of which I had ever heard before. “Never put a dream into a story,” he told us the first day. (In fairness to Elkin, I have to add that he then

went on to explain *why* he thought you should never put a dream into a story: dreams never lie and are therefore facile thematically.) “There’s a sensitive adolescent in this story,” Elkin cried out in dismay, the next morning. “I *hate* sensitive adolescents.” He claimed that they were ubiquitous, and tiresome, in fiction. On the third day he seemed quite alarmed. “Nobody goes to work in this story.” He glowered at us. “How do these characters make any money? I don’t see *anybody* working here. Are they all on welfare? And where’s the shoptalk? I don’t hear any. Get in the shoptalk.” On the fourth day, he was more disturbed than ever. “There’s a love scene here!” he announced with horror. “If you can’t write a love scene better than Faulkner did, you shouldn’t try to do it at all.” There was a long pause in the classroom, as we all furtively tried to remember William Faulkner’s love scenes. Where were they? All I could remember was Popeye’s corn cob. And there was the “stallion surge” of the protagonist in *The Wild Palms*. Was that what Elkin meant? Grotesque sex, as enacted by the likes of Popeye? Then I remembered another love scene between one of the Snopeses and—was it a cow? Was he referring to that? As it turned out, yes, that scene was *exactly* what he was referring to.

“Would anyone care to describe that scene for us?” Elkin inquired. Another silence. “No one? Has no one read it? I *grieve* for literature,” he exclaimed in mock-sorrow, or was it mock-anger? You could never be sure with him. He practiced workshoping as a stand-up comedic instruction; he kept you guessing.

Seriously shaken, I went home from this experience and wrote a story full of insensitive but hyper-verbal comic characters. I had almost finished this effort when I realized that I was writing a Stanley Elkin story, though without the quality controls he possessed. I had been instructed or perhaps initiated into a few of his private rules. His teaching was a great gift, in its way, but I now regard it as a stealth operation, useful for those who want to spy on how an author works, but somewhat misleading for the credulous squares.

Years later, Elkin came to Wayne State University’s English department—where his friend Arthur Marotti taught—for a reading. *Stanley Elkin’s Greatest Hits* had just been published. Stanley sat in Room 400 on a warm spring afternoon and read sections from that book, and at one point in the reading he was interrupted by a nearby, and very loud, police siren. This was Detroit, after all. Instead of being an irritation, the racket delighted him. “My kind of town,” he sang, interrupting his own reading.

And then, years after that, I found myself as the visiting Hurst Professor at Washington University, sitting in on his workshop in his home. Joan welcomed me in. I passed the David Levine caricature of Stanley lounging in a bathtub, the cartoon framed and hanging in the front hallway. I discovered Stanley in the kitchen, eating a bagel and reading *The New York Times*. “You’re early,” he said. “At least you’re not a student.” We had a wonderful conversation and then made our way into the Elkins’ living room, where Stanley, who was by then quite disabled, led one of the most intelligent and probing workshops I had ever attended. All the same, his students were still intimidated. They spoke in near-whispers. “Speak up,” Stanley said. “I can’t hear you.”

Good advice, the best advice, from a writer who had perfect pitch. He heard

Americans speaking and swearing and selling; the crazy obsessive comic energy of this culture of commerce was never lost on him. He especially liked the music when it was loud. I feel gratitude toward him. As a character in his last novel says, “Muchas gracias very much.”