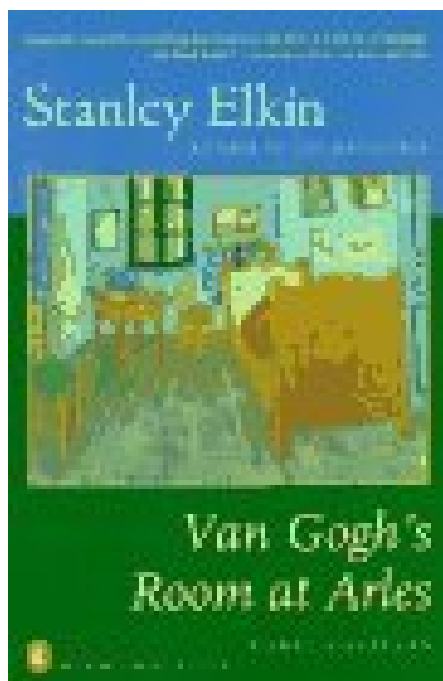




Van Gogh's Room at Arles: Three Novellas

Stanley Elkin

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These three delicious novellas, from "a master of language and black humor" (New York Times), demonstrate the author's mastery of the roller-cosater sentence, hair-pin narrative twist, and the joke that leaves readers torn between tears and laughter.

Van Gogh's Room at Arles: Three Novellas Details

Date : Published April 1st 1994 by Penguin Books (first published March 1st 1993)

ISBN : 9780140236590

Author : Stanley Elkin

Format : Paperback 320 pages

Genre : Fiction, Short Stories, Literature, 20th Century, Humor, Cultural, France



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From Reader Review Van Gogh's Room at Arles: Three Novellas for online ebook

HomeInMyShoes says

Why do I read Elkin?

The tops of the pizza boxes had been torn from their bottoms, and everywhere, teetering on the arm of the sofa, on the coffee table, left on a seat cushion, on a stereo speaker, in the makeshift dishes, the smeared, greasy, bronzed mix- and-match of the cardboard china, lay pieces of cold, uneaten pizza like long slices of abstract painting, their fats congealing, fissures opening in their cooling yellow cheeses, burst bubbles of painterly cholesterol, chips of pepperoni raised on them like rusty scabs. Bits of green bell peppers, tiny facets of oily onion, bright hunks of tomato like semiprecious stones caught Schiff's eye, glinted up at him from the carpet. Crumpled paper napkins, like the soiled sheets of wet beds, soaked up spilled Coke. There was an aluminum rubble of crushed cans.

Tony Roberts says

Elkin's writing can be beautiful, but the sentences became too convoluted for me to parse. Thus, I lost connection with the story and just drifted along hoping, finally, to encounter a full stop so I could take a bathroom break.

I was dispirited after the first novella and considered finding another book, but there was enough intriguing about the writing so that I kept going hoping the second or third story would resonate. Sadly not for me.

Molly Klodor says

One of the worst books I've ever read. The writing was far too descriptive for my tastes, and it was, in a word, boring.

Mark says

(N.B.: The novella read was *Her Sense of Timing*, only available as part of this collection of three.)

A farce, with the twist of being recognized as such by its central character. Frequently hilarious, to the point of inducing a number of rare out-loud laughs, and Elkin has a knack for jabbing university life and Schiff's pretensions with precision, but never manages to produce any response besides laughter. I briefly, very early on, due to the university setting and aspects of Schiff, thought I might be in for *Pnin*-light, but that was a mistake. The wit and acute observations here are merely here for their own sake, to no notable end, only for the purpose of serving as strictly a light entertainment; it reminded me very much in this way *The White Boy Shuffle*, another amusement with *something* on its mind, but no way of conveying it or binding it to the humor that fuels the story.

Despite the fact that Schiff is basically an open wound for the entire book, he's so self-pitying that it seems unnecessary for the reader to spare any of his own; the parting line, an abject admission of his situation, couched in a gag, is a neat, clever (maybe overly so) ending that initially felt a bit unearned and too abrupt of an advance in Schiff's arc, but it's growing on me (very slightly) in both regards. The latter is especially hard to judge, as Schiff is intentionally painted as wildly paradoxical, especially but not only in his the fiercely protected artifice of his public self-presentation vs. his obsessive and neurotic private self (the two of which horrifyingly merge over the course of the novella), so it can be hard to track his exact progression along his fairly predictable path. Muddling things further is Elkin's use of comma-studded run-ons, frequently interrupted by em-dashed asides and parentheticals, that seem clearly intended to evoke stream of consciousness but feel much too consciously constructed and mannered for that intention to be fulfilled most of the time.

I read this for a quite dubious reason, because Elkin was suggested by a film critic, Glenn Kenny (whose tastes don't much align with mine) as being a potential influence on the Coen brothers, who I greatly admire, so despite the fact that I picked for my first Elkin a title that seemed the closest to their sensibilities, this was probably my own fault. That said, I still have *A Bad Man* and *The Franchiser* out from the library and will likely give at least the first a shot, in the hope that it's not a comparable trifle; there's an unmistakable wit to Elkin's writing, and if paired with a slightly less convoluted voice and more incisiveness, I could certainly see him producing something at least a little more noteworthy.

Thomas says

Three fish-out-of-water stories from a master of the parenthetical expression. The first and third stories are academic farces -- in the first, a kindly old wheel-chair bound professor is abandoned by his wife right before his annual house party, during which his graduate students turn his house upside down. In the third story a community college professor is inexplicably invited to schmooze with the full tenure crowd in Arles, where he is placed in the Yellow House at 2 Place Lamartine and is visited by the descendants of the people Van Gogh painted. The middle story revolves around the failed engagement of an English Prince to a commoner.

All three stories express a kind of helplessness and rely on Elkin's finely tuned style and self-effacing sense of humor. Not knowing any better, I would guess that Elkin wrote the first story as a semi-autobiographical spoof, and the second two on holidays in England and France. All three stories are great examples of his style and sense of humor, but taken individually they seem a bit overworked.

Paul says

Aggg. So great. So great. While the second novella didn't really resonate with me (it was told in first person, with a lot of framing going on, as opposed to the first and third novellas' simple third), the other two most definitely did. Super super funny, but weighty as well. Dialogue is great, manages to pull off multiple-paragraphed rants without seeming satirical. At his worst, especially in "Her Sense of Timing," Elkin sounds a little like bad Nicholson Baker, but those moments are rare. At his best, or even just at cruising-speed, Elkin, is reminiscent of Gaddis -- just as funny and just as witty (close to it, anyway). The two are definitely kindred spirits, but Elkin's voice is his own. Ah, the joy of discovering a new writer! Especially one as prolific as Elkin. This guy is my new favorite. I can't wait to read his other stuff.

Ted Wong says

None of the characters are likable--in fact, they're horrible people with all of their ugly prejudices and selfishnesses on full display--and everything that happens is awful. And yet all of the characters are dripping with poignant humanness, and everything that happens is hilarious and poetic. And the writing--from the overall structure to the frequent weird syntactic ambiguities--makes for challenging, interesting reading.

Sharon McNeil says

Clever! I'd never read Elkins before.

Josh says

Elkin's second-to-last book, this collection of three novellas about people in over their heads (a disabled geography professor whose wife leaves him the day before the annual party he throws for his students, a commoner navigating her way through sudden fame, politics, and the weight of history when she falls in love with a member of the royal family, and a mediocre community college professor out of the country for the first time and surrounded by Ivy League elites at an academic retreat in France) is funny, sad, and high on the possibilities of language, but also a little thin, a milder echo of past glories. Still, his terrifying ability to keep his hands on the wheel of his wild, virtuosic sentences, steering them toward and away from chaos, is present in even his minor work, and the last few pages of the final novella hit as hard as Elkin in his prime.

Esther Marlowe says

I read the first of 3 stories and can't recommend it. A college professor has a debilitating progressive condition and is totally dependent on his wife at home. The book doesn't say how he manages twice a week at college. The day before a house party for his students, she ups and leaves him with an empty refrigerator. The story covers the events leading up to and including the party, and afterward. I didn't even realize the story was over. I read partway through the second story of a girl having a fling with royalty on an island and couldn't connect it to the first story because it wasn't connected. The first one ended that abruptly. Didn't even try the 3rd story.

Eric says

uneven

Erik Wyse says

Another fine work by Elkin. As inventive and stylistic in his prose and plots as any other writer. The third, titular novella proved to be devastatingly tragicomic, as it detailed the flails and humblings of a Hoosier Prof amidst a group of truly elite intellectuals.

Roberta says

This is a collection of three short stories, and I have provided both reviews and excerpts of each.

Book One—*Her Sense of Timing*

This book begins with the protagonist's wife leaving him—literally in the opening lines. We learn of her calm demeanor (she kisses his cheek and cheerfully says goodbye on the way out), his outrage and disbelief, his severe physical debilities, and quickly thereafter, of his *challenging* personality! At first, I found his running, self-absorbed commentary, (or non-stop whining, if you prefer) to be difficult. I nearly stopped reading the book, but pushed through the first dozen or so pages, and by then was fully hooked. What was going to happen to this poor man who had the character of burning tires (acrid, unpleasant, and unfortunate)? As I pushed through, I almost began to enjoy his philosophical, self-absorbed, deeply dependent and alternate-personality style fierce independence. What happens in this book occurs over a period of hours—probably a full day, if counted accurately—but it gives you a fully developed glimpse into his life. What you're left with is a funny, if not altogether *fun* story. While you cannot help but feel sorry for this man who goes through his own sort of hell, you also feel that he deserves every bit of lesson that his wife and students teach him.

Schiff (the protagonist) is a college professor of political geography whose wife has unexpectedly left him just before his annual party; a party that he started a couple of years ago in an egotistical effort to force his students to somehow remember him fondly in the future. He is jealous that some of his contemporaries have students who call, write, and visit *years* after graduation and he has slowly become aware that none of his students either contact him or ever seem to go into the field of political geography, which is both his specialty and his passion. This is his desperate attempt to change his fate before time runs out.

It is an interesting, fun, and challenging story. I particularly enjoyed the philosophical ruminating and have included an example below in the excerpt! It blends very nicely with beer swilling, smoking, and an "Animal House" type of party.

EXCERPT:

Schiff, a stiff and somewhat formal grown-up better than twice their age who called them "Miss," who called them "Mister," supposed them in on their professor's domestic secrets, supposed himself (one of those—he supposed they supposed—hotshot, crisis celebs, a consultant in times of national stress to movers and shakers with means at their disposal—their bombs and high-tech devices—quite literally to move and shake the very political geography that had hitherto been merest contingency, simple textbook, blackboard example, his finger—their professor's—on the planet's pulses, its variously scant or bumper crops, its stores of mineral, vegetable, animal, and marine wealth—currents where the advantageous fish hung—an advisor—he supposed they supposed—to presidents, kings, and others of the ilk, who could determine a vital interest simply by naming it, pronouncing it, pointing to it chaltalk fashion on a map, virtually talking the hotspots into being) fallen in their youthful, fickle estimation, emotional, skittish as a stock exchange. So no wonder they seemed so nervous around him. His wife had left him, he stood as exposed as a flasher. His wife had left him, and now they perceived Professor S. as one who evidently—and oh so feebly—pulled his pants up over his uncovered ass one damaged leg at a time; a man, in the absence of crisis, not only like any other—his wife had walked, had taxicabbed out on him—but maybe even more so. He was revealed to them here on his—the political geographer's and erstwhile hotshot, crisis celeb's—very turf as one more

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This is a story about a woman who becomes almost inexplicably engaged to the heir of the British throne—of course, the characters are all jumbled from the current British royal family (in the fairness of changing names to protect the innocent, and all that; although, the royal prince depicted here reminded me a bit of P. Charles with his stuffy demeanor!). The ensuing story—details how the couple met, the engagement announcement, meeting the royals, the “royal engagement tour,” and the idle royal’s mischief and pointless existence—is hysterical.

EXCERPT (the first paragraph of the story):

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This last story in the set was difficult for me to finish, which is one of my rules of reading. If one begins a book, one should have the good grace to finish the book. Not always easy!

The bright side was the delightful descriptions of the area in and around Arles, the described images of the artist's famous paintings of the area, the random meetings of descendents of people forever immortalized—who go to some effort to look like (dress, hair, makeup, moustache, and so forth) their famous predecessors—and of the general experience of the intellectual scholarly retreat.

EXCERPT:

"Do we know each other?" Miller said. "You seem familiar to me."

"Oh," laughed the doctor, "This is a common mistake I have so the likeness of my great-great-grandfather, Dr. Félix Rey, the médecin of Vincent Van Gogh, whom he attended for the amputate of his ear." He took a card from the breast pocket of his suit coat and handed it to Miller. It was a postcard from a museum gift shop with a reproduction of Van Gogh's "Portrait of Dr. Félix Rey."

"You do," Miller said, "you're his spitting image!"

"Not a handsome man," said Dr. Rey.

It was true. Both grand-grand-grandpère and grandfils had thin, vaguely Oriental faces like inverted equilateral triangles that were made to seem even more triangular by both the long, dependent Vandykes at the bottom of their chins and their flat, dark, brushcut hair. Astonishingly, like points of interest, the prominent left ears of the two young men (for they were young; both Miller's physician and Van Gogh's could not have been more than twenty-five or -six years old) seemed to flare out from the sides of their heads red as shame and exactly matched the shade of their full, pouty, Kewpie doll lips. (As they stood out against the general jaundice of their complexions.) Both men wore handlebar mustaches. Both evidently plucked their eyebrows.

Guttersnipe Das says

First things first: regardless of how this book is listed on Amazon, it is neither out of print nor unavailable. If necessary, contact Dalkey Archive directly -- they're delightful people.

To me, a novella is the perfect length for the jazzy dense madcap diatribes of Stanley Elkin. Not for nothing does Francine Prose rate this Elkin's best book. If a prince ever falls in love with you and you're struggling about how to behave among royals and paparazzi -- you'll find the second novella indispensable. Community college lecturers and any of us prone to feeling catastrophically lackluster in company will want to seek out the third.

But for me, the first novella, "Her Sense of Timing", is the one that's essential. This is one of the most acute (and hilarious) accounts of disability and humiliation I've ever come across. As a person with a disability, I cheered this edgy and all-out account of what it really feels like to live in a messy human body. Hooray for Stanley Elkin, who isn't shy to tell the truth about the human condition and who can make literature out of ongoing struggles with an overfull pee bottle.

Christopherseelie says

Stanley Elkin was a shot in the dark read. Mainly I was interested in how he composed novellas; if there was any structural difference or unique characteristic to the medium.

I ended up giving this book to my father after reading two of the three stories. I think he'll like it more.

Elkin's narrative voice is very American and verbose. His satire is veiled in the plot rather than becoming the plot. And in the tradition of satire, the characters are not very likable, which was refreshing.
