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Stanley Elkin , William H. Gass (Foreword)

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Ben Flesh is one of the men "who made America look like America, who made America famous." He collects franchises, traveling from state to state, acquiring the brand-name establishments that shape the American landscape. But both the nation and Ben are running out of energy. As blackouts roll through the West, Ben struggles with the onset of multiple sclerosis, and the growing realization that his lifetime quest to buy a name for himself has ultimately failed.

The Franchiser Details

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From Reader Review The Franchiser for online ebook

Brent Legault says

I respect Elkin's writing, but that doesn't mean I like it. He presses hard. He thinks big. He wants his words to swallow the world. But often, he just sputters and flaps. I don't know, it could just be an older sense of humor that doesn't travel well, that's overripe, that bruises easy. Remember when Milton Berle was funny? Neither do I.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

William Gass remembers Stanley Elkin (audio).

Rita says

I guess I don't need to read about another 1%er who helped make the united states the messed-up place it is today.

Graham P says

Ben Flesh. Born from the sweat of immigrants, cut from the cloth of mass-produced materials, force fed The American Dream from an all-you-can-eat buffet. The Franchiser is about America told through a capitalistic insanity, a modern-day road novel about a sick man traversing a sick country during its bicentennial celebration, a man not only on a mission to acquire businesses--the golden arches, the dairy queens, the car washes--but have his voice heard in each of the 50 states, only to find himself losing meaning, losing himself.

What makes this novel so brilliant is its language, especially Elkin's dialogue coming from the mouths of the morally unhinged, the ribald and ever so random moments of glorious madness. It is downright fucking hilarious at points, and terribly sad at its core. Case in point, his surrogate family made up of twins and triplets, and all of them stricken with carnivalesque illnesses (one born with her heart outside her lungs, and another born with rampant, uncontrollable racism), and of Flesh's MS, where his body betrays his senses, disallowing him any comfort in the modern luxuries of modern living, the tactile losing all its textures. This is a brilliant novel. Stanley Elkin is a genius and it's a shame we don't hear his name much in the literary circles of today.

(advice from a hitchhiker)

"Get a normality. Live on the plains. Take a warm milk at bedtime. Be bored and find happiness. Grays and muds are the decorator colors of the good life. Don't you know anything? Speed kills and there's cholesterol in excitement. Cool it, cool it. The ordinary is all we can handle. Now beat it. Goodbye."

(Ben Flesh on hiring the disenfranchised)

"Bringing on line entire generations of those who live with expectations lowered like the barometric pressure, who neither read the fortune cookie nor spell out their own horoscopes in the funny papers. Can you imagine such indifference? Not despair, not even resignation finally, just conditioning so complete you'd think bad luck was a congenital defect or a post-hypnotic suggestion...last hired, first fired...strange, unexplained lacunae in their curriculum vitae."

Rand says

Novel as manic excess of Americana made taut by the panic of existence.

In what other book does the main character lick Colonel Sanders's fingers and then proceed to discuss authenticity with the Chicken Prince?

Moments of sheer hilarity, (very) brief interludes of tedium punctuated by brilliance following still yet more brilliance. Elkin's consummate style is sustained throughout. If you've read any of his other books, you'll want to read this one too. One character from another of his novels even makes a brief cameo!

excerpt:

He rises, intending to go to his room, when his eye is caught by the map on the big display board opposite the registration desk. The concentric hundred-mile circles make the states behind them a sort of target, twelve hundred miles of American head as seen through a sniper's scope. He goes up to the map, to dartboard America, bull's-eyed, Ptolemaic-Ringgold. He examines it speculatively. And suddenly sees it not as a wheel of distances but of options. It's as if he hasn't seen it properly before. Though there are dozens of road maps in the glove compartment of his car, he has rarely referred to them. Not for a long while. Not since the Interstate made it possible to travel the country in great straight lines. Why, there are signs for Memphis and Tulsa and Chicago in St. Louis now. Signs for Boston and Washington, D.C. in the Bronx. Seen this way, in swaths of hundred-mile circles like shades in rainbows, he perceives loops of relationship. He is equidistant from the Atlantic Ocean, from the Gulf of Mexico and Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and Centralia, Illinois. He could as easily be in Columbus, Ohio as in Petersburg, Virginia. New Orleans rings him, Covington, Kentucky, does. He is surrounded by place, by tiers of geography like bands of amphitheater. He is the center. If he were to leave now, striking out in any direction, northwest to Nashville, south to Panama City, Florida, it would make no difference. He could stand before other maps like this in other Travel Inns. Anywhere he went he would be the center. He would pull the center with him, the world rearranging itself about him like a woman smoothing her skirt, touching her hair.

Krok Zero says

An amazing panoply of rants, gags, absurdities, theses, vignettes; an overwhelming orgy of language, a brilliant exercise in aestheticized awareness; a spirited allegory of bicentennial America, the Great Gatsby of the '70s; a set of outrageous comic conceits, ever-expanding, shocking, puzzling — yet not a cartoon, always inclusive of a wide range of authentic human experience to transform, mangle, mock or respect. Stanley

Elkin: the funniest great American novelist or the greatest funny American novelist that you probably haven't read. So stop probably not having read him.

MJ Nicholls says

This frustrated and tickled me in equal measure. I adored the frenetic pace, the comedic chutzpah and cartwheeling craziness in the manner of Ishmael Reed or D. Keith Mano's *Take Five*. The language was serpentine, maximal and gushed out like golden fonts from a tyke's diaper (or nappy, if you're British, which you aren't, are you?) BUT. And here's a big but . . . I like big butts and I cannot lie. This exhaustive style, in today's hypertwitchy reading world, lends itself to the weary page-scan, the lazy skip-scan-skip until the dialogue kicks in or a paragraph break finally pops up from the descriptive shrubbery. So I think that's Elkin's downfall as a novelist: he's too damn sesquipedalian in this age of the decircumlocutious. But I thought the ride was a scream: Ben is a sublime comedic schmuck, a perverse inversion of the American Dream, and his adopted family of afflicted brothers and sisters tenderises the savage. BUT. There are moments of sexual wish-fulfilment (i.e. seventies retro stuff), a little tasteless satiric cruelty (killing off his cast of lovelies in ha-ha-disgusting ways), and that endless gush of words floods what would otherwise be a bitter and lean satire. Elkin's own troubles with MS are channelled through Ben in a detached but "recognised" way, i.e. he doesn't drown the problem in humorous abandon. But he leaves us too mired in his vast imaginative bog to touch a tangible emotion. I will read another Elkin. [P.S. This book has the ugliest cover Dalkey has ever designed! Look at it!]

R. says

Since the conclusion of hostilities in the American Civil War, that mysterious "they" that throw the levers and push the buttons that make the country run, that "they" has pursued the single minded goal of transforming the United States from a plural mass to a singular amalgamation. No longer is the United States an "are" it has become an "is". Fueled by the efficiency of one size fits all retail America, driving through Dodge City is driving through Tallahassee is driving through Amarillo is driving through your town.

Elkin's book "*The Franchiser*" captures the mid-life crisis of a consumer age, where comfort is found in the repetitive sameness of modern amenity and the activism of unadulterated consumerism. In "*The Franchiser*", Elkin traps Ben Flesh in a familial version of this sameness with a collection of twins and triplets, his god-cousins, to whom he is bound by a death bed promise of the vig. Flesh translates his personal sense of duty to this unified mass of unrelated family into a personal conquest of the nation's highways and bi-ways as Flesh becomes a commanding officer in the war to spread uniformity to the masses through the purchase of franchise businesses. Flesh spends half an adulthood providing for and pleasing the god-cousins while he drives, alone and sullen, across the country checking on his fleet of franchises.

In the midst of his travels, Flesh becomes symptomatic of multiple sclerosis. The man who spent his early years engulfed in the sounds and smells of suburbia, and all that its wage earners have to offer, suddenly has a terrifying internal short circuit of the senses. In large part, Flesh's MS focuses his attention to the vast gulf between himself and any real family.

While the book is celebrated for its frenetic reference to the stalwarts of the consumer culture (it is, it seems, the economic companion to Robert Coover's 500 page pop culture pre-Wikipedia titled "*The Public Burning*")

or a literary link to Tom Wait's lyrics to "Step Right Up"), many modern readers will struggle with the prose and the pacing. Still, "The Franchiser" is a good Polaroid of what we collectively once were when oil and inflation supplanted email and Facebook as a mis-mash of culture and national security.

Terry says

I chortled! Silly, intriguing, fun!

Jonathan says

Elkin is my comfort food, my junk-comfort food - all those lovely flamboyant calorie-filled sentences that fly by and tickle me in all the right places.

I have loved others of his more than this, which felt a little unsubtle and obvious in its satire at times, but would still recommend it without hesitation.

Vit Babenco says

The Franchiser is the best **Stanley Elkin's** novel that I've read so far and it is a unique masterpiece. Consumerism is evil. The more we consume the emptier we become. Consumption and hedonism corrupt personality, society and culture. *The Franchiser* is a tale of the ultimate consumerism that turns the main character into the human pulp.

Thus, ends are justified by means, since all means, if they work, are ultimately equal, that is, efficient. It is only ends which are unequal. We would both agree that some ends are nobler than others. Since means are interchangeable then, it is only ends which ever need to be justified.

We live in a constant search for our due place in the world but in the process both we and our world keep deteriorating slowly.

Matthew says

Elkin's a master of the huckster's cant, everything always lurching into the transcendent ecstasis of the mundane. I always like visiting this fantasy palace he built out of 2x4s and three-penny nails, where the impure and the average are exalted, where the implausible voice is the only thing to hang onto, where the characters spin wildly out of control in the still-steady hands of an author who always knew what the hell was really going on.

He was a mean old son of a bitch, in the words of a friend who knew him--threatening even from his wheelchair--and I wish I hadn't driven tired and newly poor into Saint Louis, ten years too late to meet him.

Erik F. says

A dazzling wordsmith and satirist.

Cody says

It's been too long now since I read this to give it a proper review. It's Elkin, so read it. May I recommend my erotic memoir, *My Bed, My Prison: Confessions of an Polymorphously Perverse Bed-Ridden Autoerotic*, as well?

Scott says

"Past the orange roof and turquoise tower, past the immense sunburst of the green and yellow sign, past the golden arches, beyond the low buff building, beside the discrete hut, the dark top hat on the studio window shade, beneath the red and white longitudes of the enormous bucket, coming up to the thick shaft of the yellow arrow piercing the royal-blue field, he feels he is at home. Is it Nashville? Elmira, New York? St. Louis County? A Florida key? The Illinois arrowhead? Indiana like a holster, Ohio like a badge? Is he north? St. Paul, Minn.? Northeast? Boston, Mass.? The other side of America? Salt Lake? Los Angeles? At the bottom of the country? The Texas udder? Where? In Colorado's frame? Wyoming like a postage stamp? Michigan like a mitten? The chipped, eroding bays of the Northwest? Seattle? Bellingham, Washington?

Somewhere in the packed masonry of states."

...I will never be this good.
