



The Living End

Stanley Elkin , Curtis White (Afterword)

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A quintessential Elkin protagonist, Ellerbee is a good husband, a good employer, a good sport who cares greatly about his fellow human beings--until he is killed during a senseless liquor-store hold-up. Suddenly smote by a deity as indifferent as history, Ellerbee is off on a whirlwind tour of a distressingly familiar theme-park Heaven and inner-city Hell--to learn, along with his late coworkers and a marvelously vivid cast of characters, that much of what they've always heard about God's love, God's wrath, and the afterlife is, unfortunately, quite true.

The Living End Details

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From Reader Review The Living End for online ebook

Jonathan says

While its satirical targets may be a little dated, and a little unsubtle, there are enough flashes of brilliance and paragraphs of perfectly polished prose to make this well worth reading. A minor work by Elkin, to be sure, but a fun ride. I found the first section to be the least successful, so keep going if that does not float your boat...

Andrew says

There was an article not too long ago in our alternative paper out here in Seattle saying that the sign of a good bookstore is how many Stanley Elkin novels they stock. Beautifully laconic, this is a Divine Comedy for the David Foster Wallace set. Very funny, very Middle American, and very elegantly cynical.

Leo Robertson says

The first story/ chapter, The Conventional Wisdom, is gruesome, absurd, cool, enormously evocative, insightful, essential reading. Here it is! (probs no more than half an hour, so if you see this link, grab a coffee and read it- you won't regret!) <http://www.ivampiresbook.com/Fantasy/...>

The second and third stories/chapters are re-hashes of the first's world-building, not that interesting, tiringly riff-packed and dialogue is mostly weak ripostes.

- Oh yeah?
 - Who says?
 - I'm God!
 - You're a God? (haw haw haw. You know this crap. You type long enough and it comes out and it appears to have a witty back-and-forth effect but it's actually tedious!!)
-

Alasse says

This is Dante's The Divine Comedy on acid. Lots of acid.

It starts out with Mr. Ellerbee, a kind-hearted man who, after getting shot at his own liquor shop, gets sent to hell for thinking that Heaven looks like a theme park. Part II follows Ladlehaus, one of Mr. Ellerbee's assailants, as he gets relocated to a Purgatory of sorts for putting God in the uncomfortable position of making a mistake. Finally, part III features Quiz, a groundskeeper who is randomly killed by God because he wouldn't let him concentrate. It all comes together in a rather bizarre Last Judgement scene.

It's funny how down to earth (tee hee hee) everyone is, though. God is a bit of a loser, Jesus whines, Mary feels her privacy has been violated, and Joseph wonders when he'll be allowed to shag her already.

Dark and absurd and priceless stuff. It's also amazingly well written, in case anyone cares.

Justin Evans says

The best satire is beautifully written (thus, consign almost all 'satire' to the garbage can); it can be enjoyed by people who disagree with the author on large matters (a religious person should enjoy *The Living End*, because they will agree on the smaller absurdities that Elkin deals with so well, and his treatment of God is nuanced rather than new-atheistical); and ultimately is less about what the book hates and more about loving something (here: humanity) that the object of hatred seems to be inhibiting.

And *The Living End* is very good satire indeed. I hear that this is 'minor' Elkin, which makes me very excited to read his other works, but also apprehensive. 'Minor' in what way? Because it's short (usually a good thing)? Because it's weird (again, a good thing)? Because it's unclear whether he's using religion as an allegory for literature ('God,' who is supposedly an object of satire, seems very much to be Stanley Elkin by the end of the book) or literature as an allegory for religion? Because it's three interconnected stories rather than one novel? Because Joseph speaks cod Yiddish?

I do not know, and won't know until I read the rest of Elkin, which I certainly plan to do now. Funny but serious authors are ridiculously scarce (there is surely an essay waiting to be written about 'literary fiction,' grief-porn, memoir, post-New-Yorker short fiction, America, and the scarcity of serious writers who are funny). Elkin writes beautiful sentences when he chooses to, and doesn't choose to all the time, because it's easier to be funny when your sentences aren't funny--but he also chooses not to be funny all the time. It's this sense that he's choosing what to do that sets him apart as a serious author. Elkin has not found his 'voice.' He gets to decide what voice he writes in. Also, I could write a dissertation about theology, literary criticism, and this book. Anyone who reads it as straightforward and easy satire on Christianity is missing *a lot*.

Gabriel says

A big book succinctly told (only 143 pages in my edition). Don't be fooled by the "Inferno" references-- less and less about life and the living than about the metaphysics of death (there is a great collection of philosophical essays by this title, by the way) and consolation for those who think that the whole Santa's village aspect of Heaven is likely to bite them in the ass when they pass. Elkin's God is Old Testament/authorial, aware of his mistakes, and His creatures are all cranks and Augie Marches, looking for an angle or a grift.

Rand says

Hell of a read.

Give me an atheist's depiction of the afterlife any day ±this one condenses the entire gestalt of the Divine Commedia into one snappy refusal to submit to the stricture of belief for the sake of belief. This is belief for the sake of life, for the sake of death, for the sake of cognition, for the sake of meaning, for the sake of meanness, for the sake of an inconvenient trip to the convenience store and a freak off-ing, an offering to all that is and was and ever could be to remember that every moment is a sacred act—that the essence of being

is part and parcel with every absent thought or action, from attempting to purchase a pack of smokes to asking WHY???

BlackOxford says

Miracle Was My Metier

Watching the new Sherlock Holmes series on the BBC last night, I was intrigued by the script's repetition of the Americanism "It is what it is" as a designation of inevitability and fatefulness. C.S. Lewis had used the phrase in his 1943 *Mere Christianity*, possibly for the first time. But its origin is much more ancient. It is one of the many possible translations of one of the biblical identifiers of God. Hebrew is inherently metaphorical and has only limited ways to express past, present and future tenses. Yahweh, *ehyeh asher ehyeh* in Hebrew, one of the principle biblical names of God, can alternatively be translated as "I am Who I am," "I will be What I will be," "He is What he is," or indeed, at a stretch, "It is What It is."

"It is what it is" could well be the catch-phrase for Stanley Elkin's *The Living End*. Its protagonist is a divine being who as inexplicable as the phrase implies. From the point of view of the world this unpredictable being has created, the theme could be "No good deed goes unpunished". Or less laconically but more philosophically, "A good man in an evil world is a misfit and deserves some form of punishment." Elkin's principle human subject, Ellerbee, is just such a man. And Elkin's God has few scruples about making his life and everyone else's not only a misery but also a complete waste of time.

Despite being condemned to the hell of Hell, "where even the disciplined reflexes of martyrs and stylites twitched like thrown dice", Ellerbee, a man of remarkable charity while alive, can't stop trying to make even the lives of the damned better. He digs channels to drain vomit and puss. He tries to organise community.

Until he discovers that it is precisely the need to socialise, to make contact with those in similar agony by projecting their own images into others that is the motive force, the engine, of Hell. Heaven on the other hand is filled with all manner of "high-echelon" celebrities, the Elect. A reversal that's a bit much to digest, even for a saint.

Ellerbee, like the biblical Job, can only pray in a blasphemous litany to the "Lord God of Ambush and Unconditional Surrender...Power Play God of Judo Leverage, Grand Guignol, Martial Artist...Browbeater...Bouncer Being, Boss of Bullies... Old Terrorist, God the Father, God the Godfather." Accurate names, if not particularly praise-worthy.

More insistent than the biblical Job, Ellerbee demands an explanation even after an attempt by God at intimidation. Ellerbee is informed that, although he did indeed act decently and humanely throughout his life, he technically had broken many of the commandments - keeping his shop open on the Sabbath, blasphemous usage of the divine name, and participation in various other suspect activities like dancing, driving automobiles, and smoking cigarettes.

Although more than a bit burlesqued, the God that Ellerbee confronts is no more insane than that described in the Bible, even if He is a bit more inventive. Turns out there are worse places than Hell, as Ellerbee's murderer, and lately pal in the nether regions, Ladlehaus, finds out when he sasses the Almighty. A place not of pain but of utter aloneness, one's earthly grave, from which one can plead with a completely unresponsive living world for succour.

Except eventually there is a response: from a sadistic paedophile, Quiz, who takes acute pleasure in feeding Ladlehaus misinformation about what's happening in the world. Quiz also schools his young victims in how to be interlocutors with the interred Ladlehaus, but even this concession is withdrawn by the Almighty for no apparent reason.

Ladlehaus's experience of this Hell beyond Hell is one of uncertainty, half-heard conversations, and constantly dashed hopes - more or less life without the worst parts. Until, provoking God to precipitous lethal action, he causes Quiz's death. Not bad for a twice-damned wraith.

Quiz, the paedophile, is outraged, "I make no charges, I've got no proof, but a thing like that, all that wrath, those terrible swift sword arrangements, that's the M.O. Of God Himself! ...I was Pearl Harbor'd ...December Seventh'd by the Lord." Surprisingly, this rage surprises even God. First He is surprised that he is surprised; then he is surprised that upon reflection, He thinks he might have over-reacted in killing Quiz.

God then goes into conference with Christ, His Son, to thrash out, apparently for the first time, some old, unresolved issues - like the Father's throwing the Son under the bus in Jerusalem. Christ clearly has a smouldering grudge, but not against humanity. "What did those poor bastards ever do to me?", he says. It's Pa he's got the grudge against.

Christ quickly gets to the point he's been brooding on for eternity. In a tone of "rage cornered" he says: "Absolve Me, shrive Me, wipe My slate, Put me on your tab, pick up My check. Carry Me. Forgive Us Our debts as We forgive Our debtors, Luv." Pa, however, remains implacable.

But lo and behold the juice of Hell gets turned down, perhaps even off. Behind the scenes, possibly, the woman with the "fruity womb", Jesus's virginal mother living in a sort of heavenly house arrest, has been inserting some rationality and common sense into the divine thought processes. Whatever the motivation God turns down the heat.

Respite gives those in the nether world time to consider their situation. The meaning of death for example, about which some can wax philosophical: "Death made no sense but it meant something." And the meaning of death? "The meaning of death is how long it takes."

This and other secrets, like the name of Kennedy's assassin as well as the mysteries of suffering and divine retribution, are revealed by an increasingly (and suspiciously) avuncular God. And why exactly did God engage in a creation in the first place given the all-round misery it has caused? God finally comes clean: "Because it makes a better story is why."

With that revelation, the dead of all ages begin to rise from the ground and the depths. "Like elopers they left their burials." But there is no general joy and jubilation. There are complaints. The world is cold after the fires of Hell, amputees and organ donors are left at a disadvantage, the stench is overwhelming.

But no matter. God assembles everyone and everything for a universal pow-wow. His final announcement is explicitly theatrical. "I never found my audience.", He repeats over and over to Christ, the angels, Mary (now divinely expecting once again) and the assembled masses. And then he inexplicably and summarily... extinguishes it all. He annihilates everything that exists. Including Himself.

Omnipotence is tiring after all. And it is what it is: A story. And stories must indeed have an audience.

So perhaps there is/was/will be (to be a bit Hebraic) such a God and we are but his thoughts, as some

philosophers have surmised. And perhaps such a God can learn, that is, become self-reflectively conscious of his own thoughts, as he appears to do in the Bible. Is that really such a good thing? His very consciousness of Himself and the somewhat random nature of His thoughts might just be enough to provoke an Elkin-like implosion. The last unfortunate miracle.

Graham P says

In the afterword of 'The Living End', critic Curtis White pretty much nails what Elkin does in this indulgent, painfully brief yet hilarious short novel:

"Artists like Elkin want to tell you something that makes no sense, not even to themselves, but it is precisely because they have given up on the truth that they are burdened by and free to say this crucial thing-that-makes-no-sense."

An acidic ramble about God and his children, Heaven & Hell, redemption and suffering. I never read a novel so close to a Looney Tunes cartoon, and this, despite its upending (yet playful) spite is really a sad novel about existence, all done in the reversal of fates, the heavenly hierarchy framed with the brevity of a sitcom. Mother Mary, the reluctant mother; Christ, the crippled hippy; Joseph, the Jewish uncle questioning fate; and the devil, no where in sight. A frustrating novel because you want it to be so much more, but in the end, the polarities of Heaven and Hell are just the same as a street corner and the nearest alleyway, and the brevity of absurd parable is what makes 'The Living End' so very worthy. I'd love to see this on a syllabus for theological fiction. But sadly we probably won't see that.

Bandit says

Every so often there is just a book that profoundly doesn't work for you. This is one of those books. And it's frustrating, because judging by reviews this is a much loved and appreciated work from a much loved and appreciated author and the description was propitious and the first third of the book was too and then...it just sort of dissolved into a stylistic language exercise on eschatology. William Gass (the perfectly named critic) once compared Elkin's writing to jazz riffing and it's actually a perfectly apt comparison, I seem not to care for both. This is a short novel and it took just over an hour to read, but it was neither enjoyable nor rewarding, maybe only good for ruling an author out of a reading repertoire. It's the sort of thing that definitely has its audience, much like jazz, but not for me, cover and description promise aside. Lesson learned.

Mark says

3.5/5

Well that was different. If The Living End were a mathematical equation, it would look something like this:

Bible + (Voltaire / Postmodernism) x The Master and Margarita = The Living End.

Lots of linguistic gymnastics. A couple funny moments (not enough). Characterization all over the map

(some good, one great, most plastic chess pieces).

You could look at this as an early entry in the bizarro genre. If you're a fan, you may find this at least a four star read.

For me, the most interesting aspect was the alliterative passages (there were many). When I get to a PC, Goodreads review box, I'll add some. (I do appreciate you being nice, not crashing as I 2-thumb this.)

But first, listen (I won't say which of the three chapters this is from so as not to post a spoiler since it's kinda long but gives such a nice intro to Elkin's deluxe style):

Because it was the fate of the damned to run of course, not jog, run, their piss on fire and their shit molten, boiling sperm and their ovaries frying; what they were permitted of body sprinting at full throttle, wounded gallop, burning not fat—fat sizzled off in the first seconds, bubbled like bacon and disappeared, evaporate as steam, though the weight was still there, still with you, its frictive drag subversive as a tear in a kite—and not even muscle, which blazed like wick, but the organs themselves, the liver scorching and the heart and brains at flash point, combusting the chemistries, the irons and phosphates, the atoms and elements, conflagrating vitamin, essence, soul, yet somehow everything still within the limits if not of endurance then of existence.

Isn't that fun!? I like language, but over the last several years I've become a more character-oriented reader. If, from the beginning, the characterization had been as dense as the language, this would have been an easy 4-stars for me.

Did I mentioned it is organized as a triptych? Like Bosch and Bacon, only in a written work.

As the novel opens, we meet Ellerbee and his nagging wife. Throughout the opening chapter I had a problem connecting with Ellerbee. He seemed no more than a chess piece for Elkin to play around with. Everything about him screamed *stock!!*. I should qualify that by saying that I'm not the biggest fan of satire for this reason. The characters are usually just vacant pods the author uses to prove a point. Some authors go out of their way to make an interesting character or characters with which to make their point. Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* springs instantly to mind. All of Wolfe's characters had robust lives. They felt real. In Elkin's opening chapter, Ellerbee felt like a third-string cartoon character from Warner Bros.' back lot.

Something peculiar happens to Ellerbee and from there the story begins to get interesting. Ellerbee finds himself in Hell. The Hell. Literally. We meet more folks in Hell, several of whom eventually take center stage. Ellerbee is jettisoned to the back lot where he belongs.

For satire, I found only one or two scenes chuckle-worthy. Either Elkin and I have different senses of humor, or this shit isn't meant to be funny, just scathing.

It was kind of a mish-mash too. While it's fun to never know what to expect from a novel, quite a lot of the scenarios in *The Living End* were so far out of left field if felt as though Elkin were making this up as he went along, no rhyme or reason, only bothering to edit the language of the sentences, not what they said. That kind of thing is fun for a while, but over the course of an entire novel—even one a mere 144 pages--it grew tiresome.

A couple times there were some embarrassingly dated instances of Seventies slang.

This is a nice image, though. Let's read it together:

Ladlehaus remained motionless, motionless, that is, as possible in his steamy circumstances, in his smoldering body like a building watched by firemen. He made imperceptible shifts, the floor of Hell like some tightrope where he juggled his weight, redistributing invisible tensions in measured increments of shuffle along his joints and nerves. All he wanted was to lie low in this place where no one could lie low, where even the disciplined reflexes of martyrs and stylites twitched like thrown dice. And all he could hope was that pain itself—which had never saved anyone—might serve him now, permitting him to appear like everyone else, swaying in place like lovers in dance halls beneath Big Bands.

Man, if he had put as much thought into the characters as he did crafting pretty-sounding sentences, he and I could dig on some things together.

If you're a language fan, definitely give this a look. If you're more in to character, prolly not worth the trouble.

Steven says

I wonder, as Elkin's God does, about the audience for this book. It is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the biblical worldview. Elkin doesn't stop with the book being a *reductio*, a vast percentage of his sentences are *reductios*—that seems the main narrative strategy. Take a position and then keep piling on. He does a good job of exposing the absurdity. I wonder if he needed this much space, if it could have been done shorter, but then it is hard to take on eternity with a few short words. So who's the audience? Is he trying to sway fundamentalists? They just burn the book. And non-believers? For them he's preaching to the choir; it's right-on and ha-ha and give it to 'em. The mass in the middle then? Or is he just strutting his stuff for his fellow academics? The ending is quite fitting. God as an artist. Making a mess of things because it makes a better story that way. And given a second chance at *creatio ex nihilo*, a chance to make things, perhaps, better, God chooses to annihilate everything. This really is a beautiful example of how to start with a hallowed belief, take it seriously, follow it all the way through until it implodes upon its inherent absurdity, and finally tumbles into farce. Elkin does this best in the Hell section—how long could you burn anyway? For eternity? Really? Well let me just riff on that for awhile and we'll see what that would be like. That strategy works well following the realistic beginning, Ellerbee's hell on earth as it were. Almost as if Elkin is saying, You think it can be worse than this? Let's see what Heaven and Hell have in store. After all, you can't write about the Void; just circle it the way Beckett did.

karen says

years ago, during the height of oprah's book club reign of terror, greg proposed that i start my own club at our store, in which i would create a series of stickers to be put on books, larger and more offensive than oprah's, showing my feelings about the book.

basically - a thumbs-up for books i loved

a thumbs-down for books i hated:

and something like this:

for "who knew i would like this book with such an awful cover and not-very-interesting premise even though both greg and tom have been telling me for years to read stanley elkin because i would like him and it turns out i do??"

it was a complicated system.

and, naturally, we never actually did anything towards this plan, but if we had, i am sure i could have toppled oprah off her couch.it was only a matter of time.

and it was only a matter of time before i finally read a stanley elkin novel. and i am so freaking glad i did. it is my understanding that this is one of his "lesser" works, and that's fine. i think it is a good starting point - i got a sense of his humor, his language, the clarity of his vision, and his comedic irony. and i liked it. truthfully, i liked the first part best. i was hooked by the third paragraph, and i fell in love with ellerbee; a good man who always tries to do the right thing learns, after his untimely death, that god really does mean all that fine print. i thought it was perfect. the rest of the book was also good - a sort of riff on dante that goes to some extremes dante would not have touched with a barge pole, but my heart belongs to ellerbee.

and i vow to read at least two more elkin novels before the end of the year.*

you heard it here first.

watch your back, oprah.

*edit - i did not keep this vow. i am the worst.

come to my blog!

Vit Babenco says

If Dante Alighieri wrote the sad *Divine Comedy* then **Stanley Elkin** contributed the hilarious *Divine Tragedy*. The merriment is on the black side of mirth though. The first part of the book, *The Conventional Wisdom* is simply brilliant but further on *The Living End* becomes a bit inconsistent and uneven.

“Hell was the ultimate inner city. Its stinking sulfurous streets were unsafe. Everywhere Ellerbee looked he saw atrocities. Pointless, profitless muggings were commonplace; joyless rape that punished its victims and offered no relief to the perpetrator. Everything was contagious, cancer as common as a cold, plague the quotidian. There was stomachache, headache, toothache, earache. There was angina and indigestion and painful third-degree burning itch. Nerves like a hideous body hair grew long enough to trip over and lay raw and exposed as live wires or shoelaces that had come undone.”

Just one circle of such Hell is enough for anyone. And, of course, there is God in Heaven – omnipotent and omniscient as it was promised in the Bible.

“He had smote the Egyptians, knocked off this tribe or that. Well, it was the worship. He was a sucker for worship. To this day a pilgrimage turned His heart, the legless, like athletes, pulling themselves up the steps of great cathedrals, the prostrate humble face down in dog shit.”

The problem of this world is that we have our own notion of sins and virtues and God has his own. And those notions seem to differ radically.

Anthony Vacca says

A compact triptych of divine comedies that were first published separately in various literary journals, *The Living End* may not have the tight abs of a hardbody novel, but what it lacks in soundly structured narrative Elkin more than makes up for in prose that launches off the page like vitriolic V-2s of satirical wrath, all of which are target-locked onto the great Emperor of Ice-Cream in the sky, Mr. G Himself. In Elkinland, Heaven's a plastic theme park, Hell a purulent undercity, and sandwiched in-between is the waking world: the place where you and I eagerly await our eternal desserts as dubiously determined by the fine print found interleaved among the billion pages of that book people love to talk about but hardly ever read. Part One finds a decent, long-suffering man given an eternal shafting on account of a few pedantic quibbles brought up by our loving Lord (a “goddamn” muttered in a moment of distress, making ends meet by working on Sunday); Part two runs a gag on the Lazarus parable by presenting how much of an “oops” it would be to resurrect someone buried six-feet under dirt in a wooden box; Part three hits all caustic cylinders with a panoramic view of the never-ending domestic passive aggressions among the very dysfunctional Holy Family, as lorded over by a juvenile, irrational windbag of an Alpha and Omega. While considered a lesser title of Elkin's, *The Living End* is my first dip into the author's works and I very much enjoyed the linguistic swim. Recommended for literature lovers who have a beef with the irredeemably incongruent nature of the “greatest story ever told”; Burpo believers should read elsewhere.
