



Stanley Elkin's the Magic Kingdom

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When Eddy Bale's son finally dies after a long and painful illness, and an equally long and painful regime of futile experimental treatment, Eddy's life seems to be at a standstill. His devastated wife left him for Tony the Tobacconist soon after the funeral, and he long ago abandoned his own career to devote himself full-time to raising money for his son's escalating medical expenses, becoming in the process England's best-known beggar.

The injustice of the treatment of terminally ill children still obsesses him, however, and he finally puts together a scheme to rescue a handful of England's neediest cases and take them on a final holiday to Disney World in Florida. Bale manages to get an audience with the Queen and convinces her to support the project. Seven children are selected, each with an unpronounceable disease and a typically Elkin-esque name: Charles Mudd-Gaddis, Tony Word, Lydia Conscience, Rena Morgan, Benny Maxine, Janet Order, and Noah Cloth.

Fans of Elkin's work have learned not to expect much in the way of action, and there is not a lot of suspense or excitement in *THE MAGIC KINGDOM*. The trip merely provides a way for Elkin to let his bizarre and touching characters interact, forcing us to reevaluate our everyday notions of health and disease, strength and weakness, meaningful and meaningless existence. As always, Elkin's prose is a linguistic tour de force, turning the arcane terminology of disease and chemotherapy into a baroque comedy extravaganza. The book's message, in spite of the heartbreaking subject matter, is affirmative in an almost mystical sense. *THE MAGIC KINGDOM* is certainly one of the most unusual novels of this or any season and shows one of America's greatest writers at the peak of his powers.

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