



## A Bad Man

*Stanley Elkin , David C. Dougherty (Introduction)*

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Breaking the law in a foolhardy attempt to accommodate his customers, unscrupulous department store owner Leo Feldman finds himself in jail and at the mercy of the warden, who tries to break Leo of his determination to stay bad.

## A Bad Man Details

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## From Reader Review A Bad Man for online ebook

### Derick says

"i've been moved, roused. lumps in the throat and the heart's hard-on. i'm telling you something."

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### Connor says

little too K A F K A E S Q U E for me, elkin shows clear technical prowess but i didn't feel like he explored the various themes he introduces very well.

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### Lemar says

This is a really ambitious novel. That can mean a slog but in this case, minor slogging but primarily unexpected detours into in the sure hands of a good writer. As he talks about growing up in the midwest on the edge of the diaspora, his father selling reclaimed items from a pushcart, attempting to sell the "unsalable" item", he is able to express a moment that textbooks would fail to. The book is often funny and extremely odd as he uses the main character's year in prison to bring out what it is to hold oneself accountable, to defend, one's actions of a lifetime. Elkin is unflinching in this quest and it makes for an exciting read. The book is odd in that it takes the reader a while to get his bearings and in that it reminded me of a modern The Trial.

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### Alan Newman says

Part of the Jewish Renaissance in literature in the 60's , Elkin is rarely talked about today--which is unfortunate. He is a great comic writer, a moralist, and most definitely worth reading. Here his protagonist is a true antihero, a man imbued with the vitality of the second generation Jewish Americans, but who is unabashedly perverse and self interested, his life an act of anger at society. He is the anti-Augie March-- and Elkin more a precursor to Roth than a successor to Bellow. Not my favorite of his books--but this is not a writer who should be forgotten

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### Tony says

A BAD MAN. (1967). Stanley Elkin. \*\*\*1/2.

This is the first book by Mr. Elkin that I have read. He had quite a list of books under his belt. It seems as if his books were successful among the critics, but less so among the general reading public. Note that two of his books were winners of the National Book Critics Circle Award. This book was a bit strange. There is no doubt that Elkin was influenced by the works of Kafka. The setting of this novel reminds you strongly of "The Castle." The publishers of this edition hit a summary of this plot spot on, and had this to say on the back cover: "Sentenced to a year in jail for providing his customers with everything they needed – drugs for the nervous, abortions for the unintended, guns for the crazed – department store owner Len Feldman finds himself in a Kafkaesque prison. Labeled a "bad man," Feldman is treated as a fool, made to wear a clownish

version of his business suit with oversized button holes too big for the buttons and miscut legs and pockets. While incarcerated, he's forced to come to terms with his criminal self – a man always on the make, one who can't avoid overselling to the poor and lying to the trusting – in this grey-stone purgatory run by a sadistic prison warden who enforces a set of elaborate, ever shifting rules.” This is a relatively long novel, and you have to give the author credit for his over-flowing imagination as Feldman is introduced to more and more confusing rules and regulations governing his conduct and existence within the prison.

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### **Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says**

Must be a classic of what was then known as black humor. I do wish I had run across Elkin already back in the day when Vonnegut und Heller were staples of my diet.

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### **Bill says**

strange - exuberant language wedded to what is ostensibly a prison and punishment story, but in which the prison exists in no real space or time, and which appears to be really a story of guilt and retribution related to the satisfaction of needs and desires. Almost a cross between Flann O'Brien and Philip Roth.

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### **Leonard Pierce says**

I'd never heard of Elkin when I first read this book. He's now one of my favorites, and this book is hilarious and well-written.

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### **Cassandra Ridenhour says**

This is a very strange book! At first I thought I didn't like it, but the author had me laughing out loud more than once at this strange nonsensical story about a man who goes to prison and figures out just how bad he really is...sort of...I think...not sure, but it's definitely entertaining...sort of.

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### **BlackOxford says**

#### **Vendibility**

In that mysterious place between the conscious and unconscious, that murky reality after sleep but before waking, that long lonely road... well, from the Lower East Side of Manhattan across the Brooklyn Bridge to Williamsburg, there writes Stanley Elkin. *A Bad Man* is Elkin at his most outrageous and surreal best. A comedy of crime and punishment in which the latter literally fits the former like a suit of ill-made clothes.

Elkin's prison is a “*guilt factory*” in which those who are resistant to the significance of their various immoralities are educated by a complex, perhaps incomprehensible, system of procedures and traditions to

recover their lost humanity, including ill-fitting parodies of their civilian attire. Both the reader and the book's characters are in the dark about why. "*The oldest lifers are still learning. Not even the warden knows everything about it.*" This is a slapstick version of Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*. Or, equally possible, a parody of Freudian psychotherapy. A master class, perhaps, in how to be *goy*; or how to be Jew, or that particular Jew, Jesus, who of course annoyed a great many people by performing a great many unauthorised and illegal favours for his friends.

Leo is the bad man in question. The son of a *schiksa* and an itinerant Jewish seller of schlock who spent his life trying to be the only Jew in town, Leo must learn that he is bad. "*In this prison, in this small cell no bigger than the rooms where he had slept out his childhood, guilt came as hard as righteousness.*" But so did identity. After all "*As far as he knew he had never seen a Jew except for his father.*" Is the guilt he is meant to have about being a criminal, or about being Jewish; or for that matter about not being Jewish enough? Life is complicated.

Leo's climb out of the gutter had not not been without adverse consequences. Despite legitimate commercial success, he does a Bernie Madoff and scams, defrauds and cheats everyone he knows. Or perhaps, like Bernie, he was merely meeting customer expectations. Or were the rules rigged to begin with? In any case, rehabilitation beckons. Will Leo be able to welcome guilt into his heart? Will he earn an indistinctive prison uniform? Will he become just one of the gang of reforming inmates? Or will he set up a new Ponzi scheme inside the walls?

According to the warden, "*Crime is a detail-evasion technique.*" But Leo is certainly a detail man. He doesn't avoid it, he cherishes it. So it's an even bet on which way the prison will go. Especially since the warden lets him in on a trade secret: "*civilization is forms.*" Leo can only try to follow his father's laconic advice: "*Everything is vendible. It must be. That's religion. Your father is a deeply religious man. He believes in vendibility.*" So why not rules and regulations... and forms? As vendible as anything else one supposes.

*A Bad Man* provokes me to wonder what's happening with Bernie Madoff in his North Carolina federal prison. Bernie's 150 year sentence gives him plenty of room to set up some pretty snazzy deals. If I were warden there, I'd keep an eye on his prison-library withdrawals. Anything by Elkin should mean immediate solitary.

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## **MJ Nicholls says**

Last 45pp unread. No more please. Another virtuoso performance, with Elkin's logorrhoeic shtick restrained for the first one hundred until his momentum builds and we have the unstoppable torrent of another fast-talking moral vacuum protagonist, and that maxi-prose with its descriptive prattle pumped to eleven until the skimming and eye-rolling begins. This novel is (for the first 200pp), a captivating and blackly comic romp inside a surreal prison, less interesting when depicting the protagonist's obnoxious antics outside—Elkin falls into the "dated humourist" camp again with these sections. As it happens, *The Magic Kingdom* is an absolute masterpiece and one of the finest American novels, so we forgive his transgressions, and we forgive that missed 45pp at the end. More Elkin? Not probably.

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## **Mark Holtzen says**

Amazing writer. Another master of setting and plotline - I hadn't read any of his stuff before. Saw it on

Writer's Almanac e-mail.

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### **notgettingenough says**

I loved this when I read it, but I can't remember why. It's still on my shelves because I thought I'd read it again, but I'm a bit scared I'll change my mind about it. So it waits.

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### **Josh says**

An intimate epic of tragic hilarity. Elkin knows that the worst parts of us are hopelessly fused to our vigor and essence, and he writes about this sad, ridiculous truth with such understanding, empathy, pleasure, and dark humor. His exaggerated, impulsive characters and settings somehow avoid caricature and come much closer to our actual emotional lives than a lot of realist fiction. If my blather is not specific or concrete enough, I'll make a limited comparison. This book, in tone and style, would pair up nicely with an imaginary Kafka adaptation by the fantasy duo of Mel Brooks and John Cassavetes.

"Like acid on bourbon." - Hacky J. Fakecritic

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### **Sam says**

I read most of this but put it down and forgot about it. It was a good read for the most part. I will update the review if I ever finish it.

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