

Being that I've spent a good portion of my life writing about music, particularly jazz and rock, you would think I'd be able to cite any number of music books that influenced or inspired me – that convinced me it was not impossible to capture notes in words, a task Thelonious Monk (allegedly) said was about as easy as dancing about architecture.

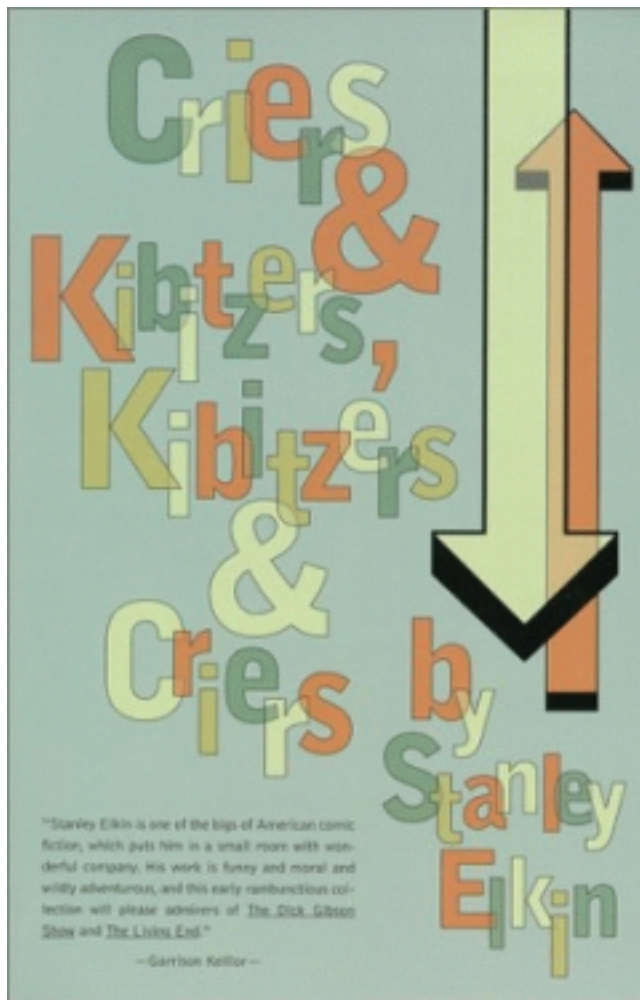
But while such obvious classics as Greil Marcus' *Mystery Train* (which marked its 40th anniversary in 2015!) and Peter Guralnick's *Lost Highway* surely left an imprint on my sensibility, opening me up to the deepest meaning in the rawest sounds, I was shaped to a greater degree as a critic by fiction writers who created their own special music on the page. These masters thrived (and in some cases thrive still) on offbeat rhythms, soaring notes, complex tones and bracing themes and variations in much the same way, and with much the same delight, as the musicians I most admired.



One of my great favorites was Stanley Elkin, who may have been a less-vaunted member of the Jewish American Novelists club, but whose originality was unsurpassed by any of his bunkmates. During his lifetime (he died in 1995), he commanded a relatively modest following,

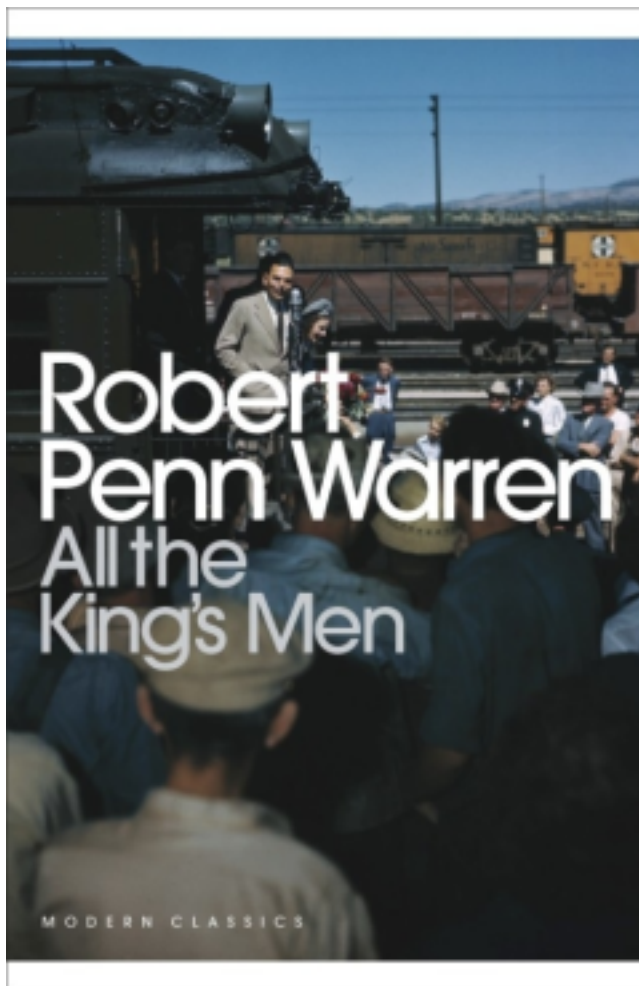
largely because he was socked away in St. Louis as the Merle Klinger Professor of Modern Letters at Washington University. But if you haven't read masterpieces of his such as [The Living End](#), [The Dick Gibson Show](#) and [The Magic Kingdom](#), don't worry. His books are as binge-able, still, as the latest season of *Orange is the New Black*.

Reviewing Elkin's 1992 odds-and-ends collection, *Pieces of Soap*, in the Chicago Sun-Times, I enthused about the way he celebrated language by "rodeo-riding it, spurring it with outlandish opinion." One of the great wranglers of vernacular, he viewed "the nature of good dialog" as "confrontational, some Friday-night-fight-nite ring to things, or no, better, quotes from the weigh-in, a suggestion of the dangerous."



Sometimes, that suggestion of danger risked offending. This from Elkin's 1965 story, "A Poetics for Bullies," included in the collection [Criers and Kibitzers, Kibitzers and Criers](#): "I'm Push the bully, and what I hate are new kids and sissies, dumb kids and smart, rich kids, poor kids, kids who wear glasses, talk funny, show off, patrol boys and wise guys and kids who pass pencils and water the plants – and cripples, *especially* cripples. I love nobody loved."

Oh, the outlandish zigs and zags that energized his works. Lit up by his contrary spirit, his stories and novels were lessons in shooting from the hip. They made you question every safe assumption you had about writing, and its reflection of reality, and about your own strengths and weaknesses at the keyboard. I can only wonder where Stanley was when I felt compelled to defend one of my jazz reviews (of Sonny Rollins' 1987 *Dancing in the Dark*) a mere week after it appeared. I was thrilled with and enriched by the album's crossover pop melodies; why did I give a hoot that some critics thought they compromised the tenor giant's bebop-rooted genius?



All of my favorite authors boasted unshakable sensibilities: Robert Penn Warren, whose [*All the King's Men*](#) asserted itself as a great American opera decades before they attempted to turn it into one; Ross Macdonald, whose intrusions of past on present in mysteries such as *The Chill* addressed the very meaning of time; Don DeLillo, whose [*Great Jones Street*](#) staked a claim as the Great American Rock Novel; Scott Spencer, whose soaring, suffering [*Endless Love*](#) is *Layla* in lyrical prose form; Anglo-Irish minor-key master William Trevor, whose stories turn on what isn't said, and his sad American equivalent Richard Yates, whose characters are haunted by things they wished they had said.

And then, in a category of his own, there was John Leonard, whose literary criticism – and TV criticism and cultural and social commentary – touched me in ways I can't really describe

because his influence had as much to do with his surpassing reach as the words themselves. While there's no way I could ever come within a mountain range of his erudition – his reviews of such authors as Toni Morrison and Richard Powers had the effect of shaming you for not having read, or at least tried to read, everything the author at hand had ever published – that didn't stop me from stepping out with what I thought was Leonard-esque brio in my reviews.

Leonard's book collections, including [*The Last Innocent White Man in America*](#) and *Lonesome Rangers: Homeless Minds, Promised Lands, Fugitive Cultures* are as inviting now, for quick hits or extended stays, as they were when they came out. If many of the topics in them should by all rights be dated, the intellectual energy and sheer sense of joy he poured into them refuse to wear out their welcome.