

BOOK BRIEFS

preacher, and Ray himself pulls the plug on one of his good-for-nothing patients. Violence is part of his imagination; sometimes he thinks he has been a captain in the Confederate cavalry, and often he remembers seeing a buddy in Vietnam turned by an enemy missile into "a big white flower spraying into the night." "I am infected with every disease I ever tried to cure," Ray complains, for he shares the contrarities of "gentleness and rage together" that he sees in the hearts of Americans. He knows that some people are just plain not worth saving.

Barry Hannah, who wrote the extravagantly praised *Airships*, is a master of the short form. Yet this new book often reads like a collection of sketches. It is diffuse—characters are introduced once and forgotten, incidents go nowhere—and this failure of continuity deprives the book of the cumulative power it should have. Ray is laconic, mean, raunchy, and very funny, but not as moving as it means to be.

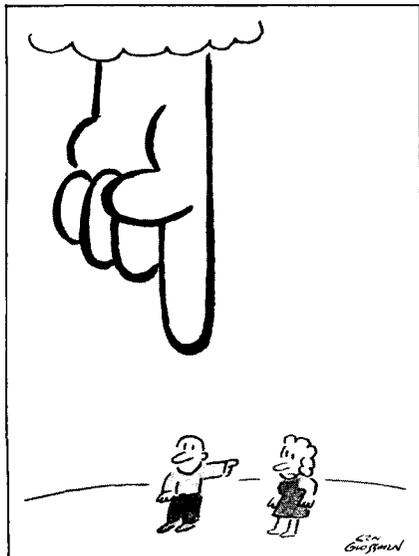
—RONALD NEVANS

Stanley Elkin's Greatest Hits

by Stanley Elkin

E.P. Dutton, 288 pp., \$9.95

EXCERPTS FROM novels can leave a reader feeling slightly cheated, sus-



pecting that something essential has been left out. But these selections from seven of Stanley Elkin's novels are self-contained and highly provocative short stories—wholly original inquests into our uneasy American lives.

The hitherto unheralded ragsellers, wrestlers, and merchants, Elkin's characters are refreshingly intelligent men grappling with a riotously out-of-joint world. In "Mr. Softee," a stalwart ice cream merchant stricken with M.S. is pitted not only against a roommate who persists in calling him Mr. Softee, but also against a power failure that creates a "high tide of vanilla" in his stores. In "The Transient," a young, mortality-conscious wrestler builds his body "to ward off death," only to meet the next time out a fighter named the Grim Reaper in the ring.

These situations are heightened by the indefatigable eloquence of Mr. Elkin's prose, which may also be the collection's only problem. One wonders how an untutored body-builder can say: "For four years I sat naked and wet on the low peeling bench by my locker, making with others the rude, brutal shoptalk of athletes or drying myself with the intense absorption of a soldier cleaning his weapon." And yet, it is precisely this eloquence that makes these selections so rewarding, whether the reader is relishing familiar passages or delighting in Mr. Elkin for the first time.

—ROBIN BROMLEY

Congo

by Michael Crichton

Alfred A. Knopf, 352 pp., \$10.95

"THE WONDROUS ADVENTURES of the Supercomputer Gang in Darkest Africa" would nicely subtitle this marvelous update on H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* as revealed by a solemnly academic anonymous researcher. Our heroes' entrance into the Lost City of Zinj, he tells us, "... was accomplished with none of the mystery and romance of the 19th-century accounts of similar journeys. These

20th-century explorers sweated and grunted under a burdensome load of technical equipment—optical range finders, data-lock compasses, RF directionals with attached transmitters, and microwave transponders—all deemed essential to the modern, high-speed evaluation of a ruined archaeological site."

Michael Crichton is always a gripping hard-science storyteller and here he overflows with energy. True, *The Terminal Man* and *The Andromeda Strain*, among his earlier novels, gave thrills at the cost of character and ended with little more than a slap on Faust's wrist for his obsession with improving human life through futuristic hardware. In *Congo* he outdoes himself with hardware, especially a portable computer terminal that allows scientists access to Niagaras of information as they hack their way through the dripping "enormous hot, dark womb" of the rain forest in search of the diamond mines of Zinj. His pedantry about a half dozen sciences is inspired padding, but he has created in Amy, a "talking gorilla" of enough charm to enshrine her in pop culture as firmly as R2D2 and C-3PO. She steals the book with her 92 IQ and by speaking in signs like a mute. When she runs off to join a newly discovered species of gray gorilla, and later returns to her trainer Peter, it is "a crucial moment in modern primate history. A language-skilled ape had joined a wild troop, and had then come back again." Crichton's climax is colossal—volcanic eruption, earthquake, an electric storm dropping 200 bolts per minute. What entertainment!

—DONALD NEWLOVE

Aztec

by Gary Jennings

Atheneum, 768 pp., \$15.95

UNLIKE MOST books about the Aztecs, Gary Jennings's is not as dead as its subject matter. His *Aztec*, a Shogun-esque novel about pre-conquest Mexico, is a gripping piece of historical fiction. Many modern Mexicans would prob-

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