



Strange Peaches
by Edwin Shrake
Harper's Magazine Press;
\$7.95, 375 pp.

Edwin Shrake's third novel begins with its narrator-hero, John Lee Wallace, quitting his job as star of *Six Guns Across Texas*, a television weekly, and going back to his home state to make a documentary film about Dallas. John Lee has really gotten around in his 30-odd years—as journalist, acid-head, prodigious consumer of bennies and dope, sufferer of an unhappy marriage to an anal-retentive wife, star of a couple of Tarzan films and friend of billionaires and mil-

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8/17/72

lionaires and poor Mexican-Americans and producers and actors and one erotic dancer (whose act consists of doing it with a fake lion). The year is 1963, the dancer works for Jack Ruby, and you can guess what the prize footage of John Lee's documentary turns out to be. Because he is a star, John Lee has social mobility and can aim his Bolex at high and low: oil-rich Texans, their lobbyists, whores and sycophants; his inane mother, who is certain that Oswald was a Communist spy because "he did the shooting with a foreign-made rifle"; and Erwin, a childhood rival with whom he used to bump peckers (a primitive Texan version of jousting) and who, now turned from hood to genuine outlaw, leads John Lee into a world beyond the "movie."

The movie concept is central to *Strange Peaches*. Before the final adventure with Erwin in Mexico (a hair-raising gun-smuggling episode), John Lee is cynical enough, or at least detached enough, to get along with virtually anybody, including the outrageously naive, good-time-charlie Dallas millionaires, whose assumption that the world revolves around Dallas and their own political views become finally sinister in the implication, captured in John Lee's documentary, that Kennedy's assassination was an F.B.I.-millionaire plot.

John Lee hopes that by making the documentary he will counteract some of the bullshit perpetuated by *Six Guns Across Texas* and also pull himself out of the despair that he has fallen into as a two-bit actor. The final adventure, however, catapults him out of the honest movie—the documentary—into a situation more perilous than even his stoned script writers back in Hollywood could have conjured, presenting him with a rite of passage that he has no choice

but to hazard—a passage from his detached, cynical "movie"-consciousness to a necessary involvement.

So the movie concept is an index to John Lee's character and development and to the overall direction of the novel. The novel is like John Lee's movie—expansive, unselective, sprawling from one end of the social and emotional spectrum to another. Its genius is that of an uncut documentary, with full reportorial detail that is seldom insignificant or boring; yet also at work is Edwin Shrake's extravagant and energetic imagination and slapstick prodigality of humor. *Strange Peaches* is not a neat book, but it is damn fun to read, and it reaches for some unpleasant truths about Dallas and America. It's worth buying.

—SPEER MORGAN