

The King of Pulp Fiction

By Dorinda Ohnstad

Elmore Leonard was born in 1925 in New Orleans, but lived in Dallas, Oklahoma City and Memphis before settling in Detroit in 1934. He graduated from high school in 1944, joined the Seabees and was stationed in the Admiralty Islands, but saw no combat. When the war ended, he went to college at the University of Detroit to become a writer. After college, he got married and took a job at an advertising agency, first as a copy boy and later as a copy writer. However, his real desire was to write fiction. At the time westerns interested him, and he saw a demand for them, so he began to write short stories for pulp fiction magazines. *Trail of the Apache*, his first published story, came out in December 1951, in the pages of *Argosy Magazine*. Over the next decade, he produced thirty pulp western stories and five complete western novels in addition to his advertising work.

After the success of Paul Newman's dramatization of Leonard's *Hombre*, he finally quit his day job. In 1966, Leonard published his first crime novel, *The Big Bounce*. He also started to work in Hollywood, adapting his own work for film, and used the proceeds to finance his writing career. In the early 70s, he had reached a state of financial security that allowed him to concentrate on writing. His works soon reached a cult status and received critical acclaim, but it wasn't until 1984 that he made his real breakthrough with *La Brava*, which won the coveted Edgar Allan Poe Best Novel Award. In 1992 his cumulative work was recognized when he was awarded the Edgar Allan Poe Grand Masters Award.

Since then, Leonard has continued to produce about a book a year, with no signs of slowing down at the age of 81. Many of his works have been filmed. Leonard's many novels adapted to the big screen include *Get Shorty* with John Travolta, *Tishomingo Blues* starring Matthew McConaughey and Don Cheadle, *The Big Bounce* with Ryan O'Neal and again 25 years later with Owen Wilson, *Jackie Brown* (originally titled *Rum Punch*) and *3:10 to Yuma*, a 1957 western with Glenn Ford and Van Heflin whose remake is set to be released September 7th starring Russell Crowe. Other Leonard novels have been optioned for film as well.

Leonard clearly enjoys the company of his characters. In his forty-first novel, *Up in Honey's Room*, he brings back Carl Webster, the handsome U.S. Marshal and Oklahoma cowboy famous for saying: "If I have to take my gun out of my holster, I'll shoot to kill." First introduced to readers in *The Hot Kid* (2005), and then in the *New York Times* serialized novella *Comfort to the Enemy*, Carl doesn't fail to live up to the reputation he has acquired as he continues his mission of becoming the most famous lawman of all time. *Up in Honey's Room* introduces Leonard's newest charming and vivacious character Honey Deal a snappy good-looking blond who likes to tell racy jokes and flirt. Carl enlists Honey to help track down two escaped Nazi POWs by baiting her ex-husband, Walter Schoen, who he thinks is giving shelter to the escapees. Walter is a German-born Detroit butcher who believes he's the twin of Heinrich Himmler. Honey loves the idea of going undercover and soon finds herself embroiled in all kinds of

dangerous activities mingling with interesting people and in over her head when she falls for married Carl.

Q. How did your writing career get launched?

A. . When I got out of the Navy in 1945 I knew I wanted to write. It had to be in an intelligent manner, so I enrolled at the University of Detroit, where I received a BA in English Literature and Philosophy. I started writing in 1950 right after I graduated. At the time there was a market for westerns. I had always liked western movies and wanted to sell stories to Hollywood, so I did research on the 1880s in Arizona. At the time, Calvary and Indian stories and movies were popular and I was able to sell thirty stories to the *Saturday Evening Post* as part of a series during the 1950s. During the 1950s I also wrote five books. My goal was to sell short stories on a regular basis to magazines such as *Colliers*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Argosy*. A number of these short stories were made into movies and one into a TV series titled *Karen Sisco*. In 1957 I sold a story to *Dime Western Magazine*, a pulp magazine of the time, for ninety dollars. The story was later made into a movie starring Glenn Ford and Van Heflin and is in the process of being remade with Russell Crowe. The name of the story is *3:10 to Yuma*. Although the budget for the remake is \$50 million my potential take is only \$6,000. That is if it does well. At the time I signed the contract for the rights to the story back in 1957 that seemed like a lot of money. Towards the end of the 50s, magazine fiction's, especially pulp magazine's, attraction ended.

When there was no more market for short stories I stopped writing them and focused on writing books. In the 1960s two of my books were made into screenplays—*Hombre* starring Paul Newman and *Valdez is Coming* starring Burt Lancaster. I was fortunate to sell my stories to Hollywood. I think the reason that my books were attractive to Hollywood is because I write in scenes, which is the way screenplays are put together. It makes for an easy adaptation from novel to screen. Hollywood was the ticket to launching my full-time writing career.

Q. Describe your writing process.

A. I have always written long-hand. I found that it was easier than using a portable typewriter and having to cross everything out during the editing process. It was easier to write it out, edit, and then type it out. I have to see what the words look like on paper. I try to complete three to five pages a day. I write until I run out of ideas or finish the scene then I type it up. Next day I read what I wrote the day before. Original scenes are much barer than they will end up being and need to have the details added in. I simply fill in the things that are needed. Writing is rewriting. Whenever I have to, I rewrite and retype a page. I don't mind because when I do, something good always happens. It never feels like extra work.

When I first started writing it would take me about four to five months to complete a manuscript, but now it takes me about eight months. I don't sit down and begin writing as early as I used to when I was younger. When I first worked at the ad agency I was up at

5:00 a.m. and would work two hours and produce at least one page per hour before I would leave for work. After work I would then type up what I had written in the morning.

Q. How would you characterize your writing genre?

A. My first eight novels were Westerns, but since the 1970s I've been writing Crime novels. After my eighth Western novel I felt that I was done writing what I wanted to in that genre and chose to switch to crime. At the time I didn't want to write popular crime, such as private eye or mysteries. Instead, I wanted to write what I like. At the time I was intrigued with the 1930s period of bank robbers and its colorful characters such as Pretty Boy Floyd and Bonnie & Clyde, so that's where I started. Fortunately, crime has become a popular genre, although it wasn't at the time I began writing in the genre. I have no dreams of doing anything else. I love what I'm doing and will continue to do it for the remainder of my writing career.

Q. Tell us about your research process.

A. For more than twenty years now I have hired a researcher to dig up the material I need for my books. He now knows what interests me. He uses the internet to find material, but also relies on old books and magazines from the period the book is set in to ensure that the book is true to the times.

Q. What input do you have in the Hollywood production of your screenplays?

A. None. I stopped doing screenplays in 1993 because there were too many people to have to please. You have to deal with studio executives and producers and all have a different opinion than you the writer has—or each other for that matter. If I write novels there is only me I have to please, and if the publisher likes me they'll like the book. With screen plays you are writing to order, not something you can feel good about.

Q. How do you continue to come with ideas for new novels?

A. I never have a problem coming up with ideas. For instance I am currently in the processing of writing a sequel to the book *Out of Sight*, which was made into a movie starring George Clooney. At the end of the movie Jack Foley, portrayed by George Clooney, is facing thirty years in prison. After seeing the character as portrayed by George Clooney, in what was a popular movie, I felt compelled to get Jack out of prison. I couldn't have him escape from prison again, as he did in *Out of Sight*, so I had to find a way to get him out free and clear. Then I thought about what female character would be interesting to pair him up with and I knew it had to be Dawn Novarro, a psychic fortune teller from my book *Riding the Rap*. I knew that if I got these two characters together that something interesting would happen. Then I had to come up with a bad guy to make their life difficult. Cundo Rey, a Cuban hit man from my book *La Brava* came to mind. I couldn't recall what happened to him at the end of the book so I went back to see if he was still alive. At the end of the book Joe La Brava assumes that Cundo is dead, since he

had shot him three times, but the reader never knows definitively whether he was alive or dead so I revived him for my new story *Foley's Back*.

Q. How do you sustain a long-term career in writing?

A. I will be eighty-two years old in October. I'm still writing because I get pleasure out of writing books not the selling of them.

Q. Do you outline your novels?

A. I haven't outlined a book for thirty or forty years. My books are character driven and they dictate what happens in my books not me. I always create characters that I have affection for, even the bad guys. I don't have to know how the plot will move forward until I'm into it. For instance, in my current book, *Foley's Back*, both of the main characters know about each other and they both have larceny in their hearts. You add to that the fact that they have eyes for each other, and you know something will happen.

All of my books are about three hundred pages in length. The first hundred focus on introducing the characters and start to develop the story line. The second hundred put the plot into motion and introduces secondary characters, which all have to have a purpose. The last hundred wrap it all up.

I write scene by scene. I first determine whose point of view the scene would best be told from. I have as many points of views in a book as I have characters, but I primarily rely on my main characters to tell the story.

Q. Out of the many novels and screenplays that you have written over your illustrious career which were your favorites?

A. My favorite western was *Valdez is Coming*, although the most popular commercially was *Hombre*. *Mr. Majestic* was my favorite screenplay, which starred Charles Bronson. It was so successful that thirty-four years later I still receive residuals from its airing. My favorite crime novel was *Freaky Deaky*, which dealt with the 60s counter culture of radical hippies. It is set in the 1990s after two ex-hippies are released from being jailed for their radical political activities. They started their lives over as professional stockbrokers until they realized they could put their 60's experiences blowing things up to work for even more money.

Q. How has the publishing industry changed during the tenure of your career?

A. I don't know that it has changed. For instance my son just recently sold his first book. He was in the advertising business and wanted to follow in my footsteps writing crime fiction. He was still able to do it on his own. The only difference that I see is that his book had to be more print ready. It couldn't have any glaring changes needed when it was submitted through his agent. There is less editing provided at the publishing level.

Editing is primarily the author's responsibility now. What hasn't changed is the fact that an agent is still the hardest thing in the world to get.

Q. How about marketing to Hollywood? Has that changed over the years?

A. I have been lucky to sell a lot of my work to Hollywood. However, the market keeps changing. A few years ago I could have easily marketed work to Hollywood, but now the types of movies that sell are like *Spiderman III*. Not what I'm interested in writing. I like writing about interesting people who live today.

Q. What advice would you give to those just starting their writing careers?

A. If you are going to write a book it should be fun or why do it? If you look at writing as a chore, or as something difficult to do, then you are only trying to write or trying to impress the reader. You won't be successful that way. It is the character's story and their attitude and how they want to tell the story has to drive the writing process.

The best thing to do is read. Read all the time. Figure out which successful authors you enjoy reading and feel a kinship to, then figure out how he or she does it. Study their style. I started with Hemingway. I noticed that he always had a lot of white space on each page and lots of dialog. He used little character description, allowing readers to fill in the rest. John O'Hara and George V. Higgins were other authors that I tried to learn my writing craft from.

You have to find out how you write most naturally and effectively and find your own voice. It can take a million words, but then you will have the confidence in telling your story.

Q. Tell us a little about your latest book *Up in Honey's Room*.

A. In 2005 I did a fourteen installment series for the *New York Times* titled *Comfort to the Enemy*, which created the setting for this book. The main character is Carl Webster, from my book *The Hot Kid*, whose goal is to be the most famous lawman of all times. The story opens in 1939, but most of the book is set in Detroit in 1945 during World War II when prisoners of war were incarcerated in farm labor camps in the United States. Most of the prisoners never "escaped" because they loved it in the camps. I had to do more research for this book than any other book. The style of the writing has to reflect the times it is set in. It is much easier to write a contemporary story, as the expressions and feel of the time are something you know.

It is the story of Honey Deal who was married to Walter, Nazi sympathizer. Walter is a German-born Detroit butcher who believes he's the twin of Heinrich Himmler. She thought that she could change him, but then discovered she couldn't so she divorced him. She didn't give him another thought until Carl enlists her to help track down two escaped Nazi POWs by baiting her ex-husband who Carl thinks is giving shelter to the escapees.

Honey loves the idea of going undercover and soon finds herself among all kinds of dangerous and interesting people and in over her head.

For more information about Elmore Leonard and *Up in Honey's Room* visit the author's website at www.elmoreleonard.com.