

Elmore Leonard

BY JESSICA TEISCH

“THE QUESTION HERE IS, WHY IS ELMORE LEONARD SO GOOD?” wrote Walker Percy in a 1987 review of Leonard’s 1987 novel *Bandits*. “He is as good as the blurbs say: “The greatest crime writer of our time, perhaps ever.””

With his hard-edged, rapid-fire prose, gritty realism, audacious storytelling, dark humor, and true-to-life characters living outside the normal standards of humanity—from lowlife gangsters to demented millionaires, miracle workers, and men who dive 80 feet from a platform into a small tank, all of whom seem perfectly ordinary at first glance—Leonard just may be one of the era’s greatest crime writers. Unlike others of his ilk, the cool, clever writer does not judge: It’s often hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys, except for the ones who carry out the crime with the most panache.

But even in Leonard’s psychopathic world, where most people know the differences between right and wrong but don’t often care, his bad guys are not bad guys all the time. George Stade, reviewing *Stick* (1983) in the *New York Times Book Review*, called Leonard’s villains “treacherous and tricky, smart enough to outsmart themselves, driven, audacious and outrageous, capable of anything, paranoid, cunning and casually vicious, and rousing fun.” It is these contradictions that make Leonard’s characters and their capers so appealing. Not surprisingly, 26 of his novels and short stories have been adapted for film and television, from the movies *Hombre* (1967) and *Get Shorty* (1995) to the 2010 FX series *Justified*. “My material looks like a movie,” Leonard told *Esquire*. “Then when the studio gets into it, they find out it’s not quite as simple as it looks.” Therein lies the talent.

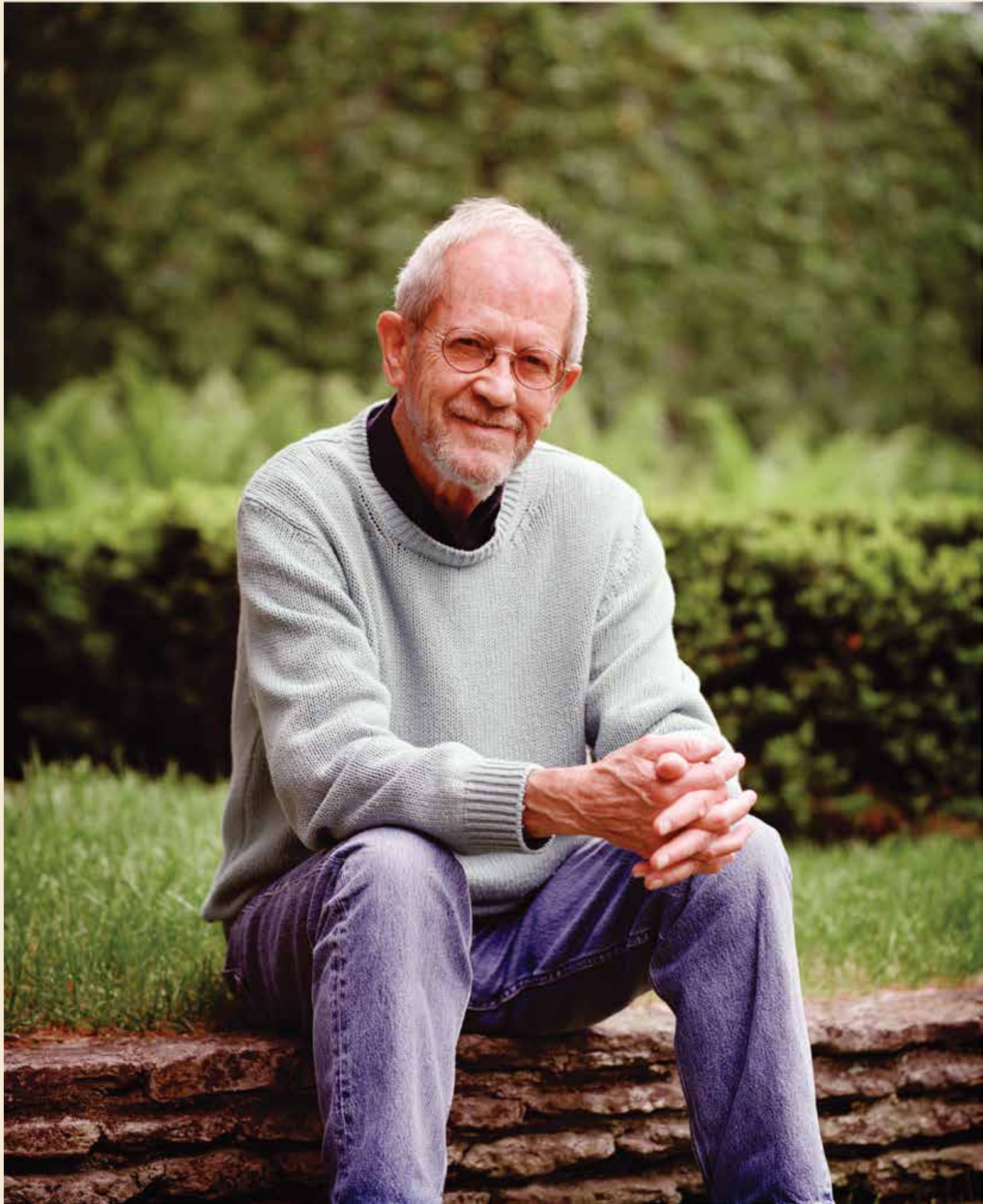
Leonard often draws comparisons to Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, though he cites as his main influence Ernest Hemingway (“I used to read a lot of him till I learned he had no sense of humor,” Leonard told the *Los Angeles Times*). But without doubt, his best work—nearly 50 novels and dozens of short stories in all—combines the intensity of noir crime fiction with the best of literary fiction. “Leonard has long been seen as the greatest of crime writers, walking all over even Raymond Chandler,” writes

Philip Hensher of the *Guardian* (UK), “but perhaps the time has come to drop the qualification of genre. In his analysis through laughter of money, crime, spectacle and the play-acting of the powerful, he has created something entirely his own.” The awards committees think so, too: Leonard has received the Mystery Writers of America’s grand master award, the National Book Foundation’s outstanding achievement in fiction writing, and similar lifetime achievement prizes from PEN USA, the Crime Writers’ Association, and the Western Writers of America.

Success didn’t come overnight to the 87-year-old novelist and screenwriter. Born in New Orleans and raised in the Detroit area, where he still lives, Leonard served in the navy during World War II. After college, he decided to write fiction. Although his fame rests on later novels such as *Get Shorty* (1990), Leonard first delved into genre Westerns after he sold his first short story; in 1953, he published *The Bounty Hunters*. To support his family of five children, he worked in an advertising agency and wrote when he could. In the early 1970s, when the market for Westerns dried up, he turned to crime fiction with *The Big Bounce* (1969). Best sellers, including *Mr. Majestyk* (1974), *Get Shorty*, *Rum Punch* (1992), *Out of Sight* (1996), and dozens of others followed.

With more than five decades of work under his belt, Leonard has crystallized his distinctive style. “I would definitely say my style has changed,” he told *Goodreads*. “I think it started with one of the last westerns—I was trying to get a little more humor in it, but also to be more spare in the writing.” And spare it is. In his *10 Rules of Writing*, Leonard writes, “If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it.” Another rule: “Leave out the parts that readers skip.”

Readers will agree that there isn’t much to skip in Leonard’s oeuvre, though some may prefer his 1970s stories set in Detroit (he’s often called “the Dickens of Detroit”), those set in 1980s Miami, the 1950s and 1960s Westerns, or the diverse settings Leonard has populated from the beginning of the 21st century on. As hard as it is, we’ve tried to put together a representative sample of his works. Please excuse us if we’ve left off some favorites.



Hombre (1961)

A precursor to Leonard's hardboiled crime dramas, this Western classic exhibits the pure, hard-hitting prose and grit to come. The movie version, starring Paul Newman, came six years later. In many ways, *Hombre*, which the Western Writers of America called "one of the 25 best Western novels of all time," reacted against the clichéd westerns of the 1950s; indeed, most of Leonard's Westerns remain in print decades after they were first published.

THE STORY: John Russell, a man of mixed white, Indian, and Mexican heritage, was raised as an Apache. He even served as a member of the tribal police. But then the time comes for him to leave the San Carlos reservation and embark on life as a white man. His fellow stagecoach passengers want nothing to do with him—until bandits hold them up and they must rely on Russell's leadership to guide them through the desert to safety.

"Displaying his trademark ability to turn pulp into art, Leonard elevates the classic Western through the story of John Russell, a white man raised partly by Apache Indians, who taught him how to fight and survive. ... Leonard answers that question [of whether Russell will protect the passengers] in this action-filled tale while probing Western myths, issues of race and our responsibilities to our unlikable fellow man."

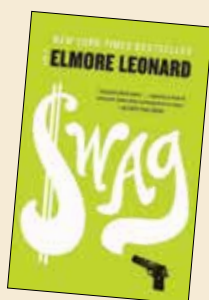
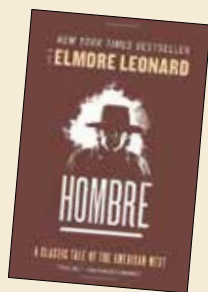
PEDER ZANE, THE RALEIGH NEWS AND OBSERVER

Swag (1976)

Leonard's 12th novel contains his trademark wry humor and nonstop action. Critics compared the tough, hard-edged writing to that of Raymond Chandler and George V. Higgins, and the *New York Times* called it one of the best books of the year.

THE STORY: In mid-1970s Detroit, two smalltime criminals—car thief Ernest Stickle, Jr. and mildly honest used-car salesman Frank Ryan, whom Ernest has the gall to rob in the car lot—form a simple armed-robbery team. On the basis of "Ryan's Rules"—always be polite on the job, never talk more than necessary, never look suspicious, and never flash money, among other rules—they hope to get rich quick from liquor-store and supermarket holdups. Their partnership at first succeeds; in one instance, they go into a bar and when someone else robs it, they rob the robber. But when one of them gets some big ideas and throws the rules out the window, they become victims of their own greed.

"About the worst thing I can think of to say about Swag is that it might be said to make armed robbery look like an enticing career move. ... We like it when the bad prosper, up



to a point, and Leonard judges perfectly how to modulate our sympathies for the two men. Interestingly, they do not screw up quite so royally or regularly as almost all the other criminals in his oeuvre." NICHOLAS LEZARD, GUARDIAN (UK), 12/10/2004

LaBrava (1983)

♦ EDGAR AWARD

Leonard's 22nd novel is vintage Leonard: fast-moving, pitch-perfect, quirky, and above all, despite its haywire plot, completely authentic in tone.

THE STORY: When amateur photographer and ex-Secret Service agent Joe LaBrava first fell in love with one-time Hollywood starlet Jean Shaw, he was 12 years old. Years later, Joe meets her in person when he is asked to escort the former but still attractive Hollywood movie queen to a crisis center in seedy South Beach, Miami, to clean up her act. While Jean is being terrorized by her abusive, redneck ex-lover and a Cuban male exotic dancer who doubles as a hit man, Joe finally has the opportunity to serve as Jean's hero—or die in the process—when he becomes involved in a triple-cross caper.

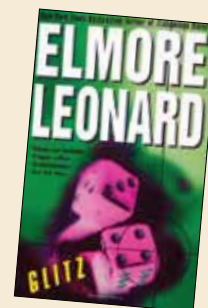
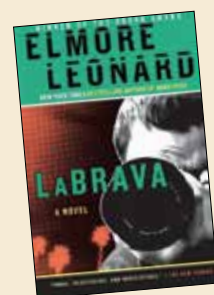
"As usual, his dialogue is so authentic that it dances off the page, whether it's Joe LaBrava talking, or his friend, old Maurie Zola, who owns beachfront real estate and remembers Miami when the right kind of people came down for the season. ... What's unusual about LaBrava is that no matter how complicated its implications grow, it remains firmly rooted in its realistic milieu."

CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT, NEW YORK TIMES, 10/7/1983

Glitz (1985)

As Stephen King noted in a *New York Times* book review of the novel, the first of Leonard's works to hit that newspaper's best seller list: "You can put *Glitz* on the same shelf with your John D. MacDonalds, your Raymond Chandlers, your Dashiell Hammetts. ... This is the kind of book that if you get up to see if there are any chocolate chip cookies left, you take it with you so you won't miss anything." In 1988, it was made into a TV movie starring Jimmy Smits.

THE STORY: Miami cop Vincent Marra, after putting away Teddy Magyk (one of Leonard's best-drawn "crazies") for raping a senior citizen, is on medical leave in Puerto Rico. There, he's stalked by the sex offender who, it appears, has not forgotten Vincent, and he half falls in love with a prostitute. When Iris leaves him to work as a hostess in an Atlantic City casino and turns up dead, Vincent gets involved with gangsters, casino men, and the seedy side of Atlantic City.



"After finishing *Glitz*, I went out to the bookstore at my local mall and bought everything by Elmore Leonard I could find. ... Mr. Leonard moves from low comedy to high action to a couple of surprisingly tender love scenes with a pro's unobtrusive ease and the impeccable rhythms of a born entertainer." STEPHEN KING, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 2/10/1985

Killshot (1989)

Leonard's 27th novel boasts the off-beat heroes, the psychotic bad guys, the ironic social commentary, and the formulaic but nonetheless compelling plot of the best of his work. The 2008 movie starred Diane Lane, Thomas Jane, and Mickey Rourke.

THE STORY: When cool, collected hit man Armand "Blackbird" Degas signs on with hot-blooded killer Richie Nix to extort \$10,000 from a Michigan real estate agent, he thinks it's a sure thing. What they don't count on is middle-aged realtor Carmen Colson and her ironworker husband Wayne, who happen to be in the real estate office when it's time to collect the cash. After Wayne forces them away, the seasoned criminals decide to obey Armand's dictum of "killshot." Simply, Carmen and Wayne know too much, and they've got to go.

"It's another powerful, unpredictable story about people who probably look almost as ordinary as Leonard but do creatively violent things you just can't stop reading about." DAVE MATHENY,

MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE, 5/1/1989



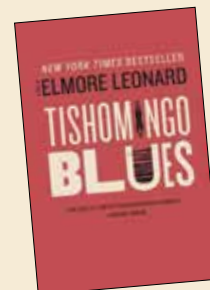
"Mr. Leonard doesn't know Los Angeles physically in the way he knows Miami and Detroit, but he understands it perfectly. He understands that in Hollywood nothing is wasted: every love affair, every divorce, every criminal act has a shot at being, at the very least, a pitch and, at the very most, a major motion picture." NORA EPHRON, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 7/29/1990

Tishomingo Blues (2002)

Leonard describes his 38th novel as one of his own favorites. With its black humor, thriller elements, sprawling plot, and large cast of characters, the book contains plenty of Leonard's trademarks. "If you haven't read Leonard before," notes *January* magazine, "*Tishomingo Blues* will provide you with a great initiation into the brotherhood."

THE STORY: One evening, shortly before his debut at the Tishomingo Lodge & Casino in Tunica, Mississippi, professional daredevil high diver Dennis Lenahan witnesses two rednecks committing a murder right beneath him as he stands on the 80-foot diving platform. The problem is, the killers see him watching. As Dennis worries whether to tell the police what he knows, Robert Taylor, a cool, conniving, Jaguar-driving black man from Detroit, offers him protection—as well as an business opportunity too good to turn down. This premise is just the start of a story involving murder, drug running, the Dixie Mafia, minor league baseball, and, not least, a high-stakes Civil War reenactment.

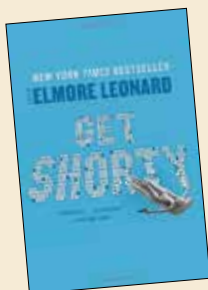
"Mr. Leonard, sharp as ever, has concocted another deft, funny book about dueling miscreants, and this time he has staged the duel in costume-party style. ... But what's best about this book is a setting and situation so well drawn that they almost upstage the mystery, especially after the battlefield action begins." JANET MASLIN, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 1/28/2002



Get Shorty (1990)

Martin Amis described *Get Shorty* as "a masterpiece." A psychological portrait of Hollywood and its superficiality, the plot revolves around three film scripts and a reflection on narrative structure. *Be Cool* (1999) is a follow-up. The 1995 movie version starred John Travolta, Gene Hackman, Rene Russo, and Danny DeVito.

THE STORY: When Ray Bones walks off with Chili Palmer's leather jacket in Miami, Chili, a small-time loan shark, breaks his nose. They meet again 12 years later, when Ray (who has never forgiven him and who is now Chili's boss) forces Chili to Las Vegas to collect a mob debt from Leo Devoe, a dry cleaner who has faked his own death. A casino boss then enlists Chili to find Harry Zimm, a Hollywood player and producer of grade-B horror films, and Chili ends up simultaneously trying to track down Leo and working for ZigZag Production on two movies—one in need of a male star and a new ending and the other about a guy just like Chili.



FOR YOUNGER READERS

A Coyote's in the House (2004)

Designed for middle school readers, Leonard's first novel for this age group features the same strong, zany characters and situations that populate his adult novels. Antwan, a hip, jive-talking, coyote who fends for himself, meets up with two canine residents of ritzy Hollywood Hills: Buddy, an aging German shepherd who once starred in films, and Miss Betty, a pampered show poodle. Then the bored Buddy makes a daring proposal and convinces Antwan into changing places with him, for better or for worse. *Horn Book* called *A Coyote's House* a "blue-ribbon, canine version" of Mark Twain's classic novel about trading places, *The Prince and the Pauper*. ■