

Elmore Leonard, 1925-2013

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier



August 20, 2013. American crime writing lost one of its giants today with the passing of Elmore Leonard, who had been recovering after suffering a stroke on July 29th.

He began his literary career with a string of western short stories. His first novel, 1953's *The Bounty Hunters*, and four subsequent novels also had strong western themes, and two were made into films: "Three-Ten to Yuma" and "Hombre", which starred Paul Newman. But it is for his novels of contemporary urban life that Leonard will be best known. Beginning with 1969's *The Big Bounce*, and continu-

ing through such classics as *Killshot* (1989), *Get Shorty* (1990), and *Maximum Bob* (1991), Leonard carved out a distinctive niche in the hard-hitting school of crime fiction, showing the way for generations of subsequent writers. By the time of his death Leonard had penned an impressive forty-eight series or stand-alone novels, eight screenplays, and two non-fiction works.

Drawing on the strong visual element in his tales, twenty-six of his novels have been filmed for television or the big screen. *The New York Times* dubbed Leonard as "the greatest crime writer of our time," and the *Times* described him as "a literary genius." For his work Leonard received a Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America in 1992, the 2006 Cartier Diamond Dagger Award, the F. Scott Fitzgerald Literary Award for outstanding achievement in American literature in 2008, a Peabody Award in 2011, and in 2012 a National Book Medal for Distinguished Contribution to literature.

Elmore Leonard was a wonderfully complex man and a quintessentially American writer, both in subject and style. His famous "Ten Rules of Writing" cut right to the bone in

Leonard's characteristic no-nonsense way. They include "Never open a book with the weather", "Use regional dialect sparingly", and "Don't go into great detail describing places and things." The list of first-rate authors who have violated these rules – which includes Tony Hillerman and James Lee Burke among others – would cause a more tractable man to blush, but not Leonard. His rules worked for him: he managed to combine suspense, dark humour, and hard-hitting dialogue in a spare, gritty prose that perfectly fits the twisted world he

described. Probably his best piece of advice for aspiring writers was to "skip the boring parts." His influence can be found in some of America's most original writers, including Joe Lansdale and James Sallis. Among Leonard's best works are the stand-alone *Maximum Bob*, and the Chili Palmer classic *Get Shorty*, and its sequel, *Be Cool*.

Born in New Orleans, Leonard spent most of his life in Detroit. He is survived by his third wife, Christine Kent, and his son, Peter, also a novelist.

Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing the Evidence*, *January Magazine*, and *Type M for Murder*, as well as on his own award-winning website, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

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