

2004/August ELMORE LEONARD - Publishing News

Elmore Leonard is no overnight success. He had his first short story, a western, published in *Argosy* magazine in 1951. Two years after that came his debut novel, *The Bounty Hunters*, but it was another eight years (30 short stories, five novels and two movie adaptations later) before he felt confident enough to leave the ad agency where he worked to become a full-time writer.

In the mid 60s Leonard switched from westerns to crime with the publication of *The Big Bounce* and slowly became known to a growing band of aficionados as the coolest, hippest writer around. Now, at the age of 80, with almost 40 books under his belt and a new one, *Mr Paradise*, just out, he still is. And just in case you thought he was taking things easy, he's also written his first children's book.

"My agent in Hollywood said I should write a children's book featuring an animal and I said why? He said because anytime you have an animal in one of your books there's something of this animal's point of view and why didn't I try it, do a dog something. So I did. I wrote a few pages about a dog who was a movie star, but I was bored, I thought 'I can't write any more of this, I'm not interested in it, from the dog's point of view alone'. Then I decided to bring in the coyote, because he's the kind of guy I've had in every one of my books and I knew I could run with him."

The coyote in question is Antwan, a straight-outta-Compton type, a streetwise, canny and total chancer of an individual who decides to try living the life of Riley as a pet dog in the upscale home of a fading movie star mutt called Buddy. Shades of *Sunset Boulevard* it ain't, there's no real mystery, or much of a plot, but the snappy, crackling dialogue's all there, if a tad Leonard-lite because of the age range. *A Coyote's in the House*, which comes complete with a cover and interior line illustrations by Lauren Child, probably works best when viewed as a primer, building an audience for the real thing. With classics like *Stick*, and *Maximum Bob* and *Tishomongo Blues* waiting for them, new fans certainly have a lot to look forward to.

A Coyote's in the House, begun a couple of years ago, was actually intended to be the basis for an animated movie project which is still going through the long, long production process. Leonard, who now has virtually his own reading group of 12 grandchildren and one great grandchild, says he did use them to test drive the story and that the ones who are 10-12 years old read the book and liked it, "...although they had a little trouble with the language; even though it's written for their level, they still had trouble with the sound of it. This is the way people talk, but Harry Potter doesn't talk like that, that's the difference."

Is this a one-off project, or are more children's books a likelihood? Leonard says he enjoyed writing *Antwan* enough for that to be a distinct possibility, but isn't sure whether there would ever be any books with actual children as the main characters. He would, he says, have to think about that, see if he could get them to talk in an interesting way. This concern, about how people talk, is central to everything Leonard does. "I want the reader to have the feeling that [what I write] isn't made up, that these are real people and this happened; the plot just doesn't really interest me that much because whatever you think of has been used before, invariably. So unless I can think of a knock-out situation that no one's done before I just start with a situation and go from there. I begin to people it with the characters and get them to talk - they have to be able to talk."

Which brings us neatly to *Mr Paradise*, a prime slice of Leonard storytelling, which finds him back on home territory in Detroit for the first time in a long while with a tale of murder, various types of mayhem and plenty of intrigue. "I hadn't done what I would think of as a police procedural in more than 20 years," says Leonard, in his easy, measured drawl. "There had been other books with Detroit cops, but their purpose was not investigating a homicide, so this time I focussed on the homicide section of the Detroit police and I thought [the book] would be a real quicky."

"But then, when my researcher and I went downtown to talk to the cops, we find out that they're all different, a completely new crew to the ones I'd dealt with in the early 80s, so my researcher had to come to Detroit about

once a month to collect investigative information - what they were working on at the time - that I would use behind the plot.” What you get out front in *Mr Paradise* are questions, like were elderly lawyer Tony Paradiso and his \$5,000-a-week call-girl friend shot dead in a home invasion gone wrong - or was it murder - and why is factotum Montez Taylor lying to the police?

Remaining true to his literary signature, the plot here is driven by the motor of character more than anything else, dialogue tumbling across the pages in that way Leonard has of mimicking how it really is that we speak, with all the inherent lack of structure, grammar and, often, clarity. Reader, he seems to be saying, you’ve got to listen, got to pay attention, else you are going to miss something important.

He writes this way, he says, because he decided he liked dialogue and wanted to use as much as possible. “I wasn’t writing in the usual style of crime writing, which is, for the most part, first person - writing as a private eye, and it’s his story. You either do that or you’re the omniscient author, you know everything, you have the vocabulary and you tell the story in your words, every once in a while letting the characters talk. I don’t have that language - I’m not Martin Amis, for example.

“What I do is tell my books in scenes, always from the point of view of the character - this is it, now you’re going to see the story from someone else’s point of view and you’re going to hear that character’s sound, even, somewhat, in the narrative. Characters kick-start my stories, and there are peripheral ones who end up insisting on being in the story more - having started with a very minor part they work their way into the story. In [*Mr Paradise*] it would be the houseman, Lloyd. Lloyd is the one I found a use for.”

Still working to a strict early start, late finish work schedule, Leonard likes to begin a project and work through till it’s done. Right now he’s just about half way through his next book, which takes place in eastern Oklahoma in the 1930s, a time and a place he knows as it’s when and where he grew up reading about Bonnie and Clyde in the newspapers. “I have scenes in my head, of things I saw, and I want to write it,” he says. And how

good it must feel to know that there are so many people waiting to read the outcome.