GOOD TIME CRIME:
TALKING WITH ELMORE LEONARD
Anthony May

Back in 1991, I had the good fortune to sit down with Elmore Leonard in his Michigan home during the hot summer and lead up to the fourth of July celebrations that would be the first since Operation Desert Storm, quite a big thing around Detroit. I was there to talk to him about his books but he is an intelligent man and sees the connections in things so the conversation moved around. He had just finished the manuscript of Rum Punch and maybe he felt like a chat. In the end we spent quite a few hours together over three days trying to make some connections across the stories, books and films that comprise his long career. He was very generous with his time and opinions and I remain extremely grateful for the access and the insight. A couple of years later, when he was in Sydney, we sat down again and continued the conversation. The interviews that follow record those conversations and, hopefully, give another way into the books that have delighted so many.

The book that was about to come out that summer was Maximum Bob, the story that introduced characters like Judge Bob Gibbs’ wife, who channels a black slave girl who had died one hundred and thirty years before. In the books leading up to this, he had begun to foreground
characters who were free and loose in their own way and in ways that were not just due to their involvement in crime. And this was coming to mark a kind of maturity in his writing that began with the shift from the western to the contemporary crime novel and the necessity to deal with what he calls “contemporary scenery”, and, from there, the requirement to take on board contemporary character. He was doing it at a novel a year, a pace he took up in the seventies and kept working at through the nineties.

It had been a long road from his early days as an advertising copywriter in the 1950s when he was writing stories for Argosy, Dime Western and the other short story and western magazines in his spare time. Movies were based on his early stories ‘Three-Ten To Yuma’ (3:10 To Yuma, 1953, D: Delmer Daves) and ‘The Captives’ (The Tall T, 1957, D: Budd Boetticher). He eventually hit the slicks, like Saturday Evening Post, but he had entered the game too late and the time of that style of publishing was coming to an end. He published western novels along with the stories but without the movies to take up the property there was diminishing joy in this field. Fittingly, it was a western film, Hombre (1966, D: Martin Ritt) from Leonard’s 1961 novel, the only novel of his to feature a first person narrator, that allowed him to make a change. The film, starring Paul Newman, Richard Boone and Diane Cilento, was a success, because of Newman, of course, but also because, like a number of big screen westerns of the time, it was a revisionist history of the west. This was something that had been consistent in Leonard’s westerns—not so much rewriting the history of the period as readdressing the idea of character in the west. There were never good guys and bad guys, white hats and black hats, good baddies and bad goodies, nor the usual array of stock western characters. There were interesting characters, funny
characters, mean characters and ones that slid back and forth. It was his main concern back then and it continues to this day.

The change to the contemporary novel didn’t happen overnight. He published some novels through the sixties and early seventies but it was the movies again that really brought him back into the game. The original screenplay for *Joe Kidd* (1972, D: John Sturges) was Clint Eastwood’s first film after *Dirty Harry* (1971, D: Don Siegel). That led to Eastwood requesting another screenplay from Leonard, which turned out to be *Mr. Majestyk* (1974, D: Richard Fleischer). Eastwood passed on the project (he preferred the idea of an artichoke farmer to a melon grower) but with Charles Bronson in the lead, it was another moneymaker. By the mid-seventies, the novel projects were coming into line once more—*52 Pickup* (1974), *Swag* (1976), *The Hunted* and *Unknown Man #89* (1977)—and he was into that one-novel-a-year output cycle. But with rewards this time around. All these novels were being optioned as movies. Alfred Hitchcock picked up *Unknown Man #89* and the rights remained with him until he died. Sam Peckinpah had *City Primeval* (1980) but it never happened. Nonetheless, he had gone from an advertising copywriter who wrote western stories part-time to a novelist who sold every book that he wrote into hardback and into the movies. This was success. Perhaps just as important as the success, this was fun. It’s difficult to read an Elmore Leonard novel and not realize that we’re all having fun, reader and writer alike.

All readers come to the progression of Elmore Leonard’s books at a different point. Thanks to the loan of a paperback from a friend, I’d begun with *Glitz* (1985) and, like a lot of readers, I began filling in the time between new releases by reading the back catalogue. Publishers know this happens and that’s why there are so many different Elmore Leonard paperback editions of the same book. As he has shifted publication houses
over his career, there has been a tendency for publishers to buy the back catalogue and rerelease the older novels knowing that they will still sell. And there is value in picking up the back catalogue that doesn’t just accrue to the publisher and Mr. Leonard.

There is, in the progression of novels since the mid-seventies, a development of style that is particular to Elmore Leonard and intriguing for the reader. When he gets to the contemporary novel, he begins to experiment with ways of telling stories that suit his character-based concerns. As he says in the interviews, he had work to do in moving his storytelling into the present. When you write about the Arizona of one hundred years before, there are not a lot of people around to point out your mistakes, although he was pretty rigorous about using his reference books to keep those stories in line. But when you live and write in nineteen seventies Detroit, Detroit is just outside your door. And so is your reader. So if Temple Street doesn’t cross Woodward Avenue at the right place, people know. And they let you know. And if the young hipsters are using last year’s hipster talk, people know. And they let you know. And so the world of the book has a much more demanding relationship with the world of the reader than it ever had in the western. But it didn’t take him long before he was having fun with it.

The movies of the early seventies had signalled a shift for him. *Joe Kidd* was about an ex-bounty hunter who was dragged into a brawl between a wealthy landowner and a Mexican revolutionary leader. *Mr. Majestyk* was about a melon farmer who stood up alongside his Mexican field workers against the mob. Vince Majestyk was a Vietnam veteran but that wasn’t the big thing. He signalled a move for Leonard, to finding his lead characters in everyday roles, characters who might just get caught up in something criminal or generally bad. In *52 Pickup*, Harry Mitchell runs a
manufacturing plant; in *Swag*, Ernest Stickley, jr., is a down-on-his-luck cement truck driver before he gets eased into armed robbery; in *Unknown Man #89*, Jack Ryan is just looking for any old job when he gets taken on as a process server. Ordinary guys get caught up in the grey areas of ethical life and that is the type of thing that Leonard loves.

So piece by piece, the lead characters come into view, along with the modern world in which they live. The nice thing for Leonard is that his focus on the ordinary and the extraordinary cuts both ways. His ordinary folk become revealed as just as wild as the sociopaths and the sociopaths reveal their own concerns with the everyday. This became the Elmore Leonard playground in which we all had fun. At the same time he was shaking off those genre constraints that had shackled his westerns. Moving to the contemporary crime novel, it was inevitable that a certain amount of genre limitation was going to carry over. But the eighties put an end to all of that. In 1980, he published his first book with Arbor House, *City Primeval: High Noon in Detroit*. His publisher was Don Fine, who had made it clear that the first job of selling Elmore Leonard novels was to sell Elmore Leonard. The title of the book was a play on Leonard’s past as a western storywriter as much as it messed with the idea of the gunfight in the modern day. And the book is full of this type of play. In one scene, Raymond Cruz, the police detective at the centre of the story, manoeuvres a fellow officer into the home of Mr. Sweety, a local club owner, drug dealer and armed robber, to see a photograph of Jesus. The colleague thinks it might be Leon Russell but doesn’t give it much credence as Jesus. No-one but Raymond is surprised that it is a photograph of Jesus. No-one, especially Leonard, actually points out the incongruity of having a photograph of Jesus, as I just did. This is the modern world, Leonard-style—no-one is at that level and no-one tries to explain.
Modern world Detroit, when I was there in the early nineties, was trying to get on its feet. There weren’t many signs of renewal at that stage. There had been the Renaissance Centre that had been built at the end of the seventies and completed in the eighties but was starting to look a little shabby. That’s the site of the George Clooney-Jennifer Lopez bedroom scene in *Out Of Sight* (1998, D: Steven Soderbergh, screenplay Scott Frank, novel Elmore Leonard) although General Motors had renovated and rebadged the complex by then. There was the people mover, an elevated light rail project, that had opened just a few years before and was designed to get souls around the downtown safely and efficiently. Gregg Sutter, Leonard’s researcher, told me that it was commonly known as the people mugger but I was never clear whether that referred to the pricing or the unachieved ambition of passenger safety. It also had ‘The Fist’, officially known as the ‘Monument to Joe Louis’, I believe, but let’s call a fist a fist. Over seven metres of arm and fist, the arm and fist of Joe ‘Brown Bomber’ Louis, suspended in a pyramid like a battering ram at Hart Plaza. The sculptor, Robert Graham, got it right. Just like Joe Louis, not pretty but very powerful.

So a few things were happening in this tired, divided city, but downtown entertainment tended to be a couple of extremely well-lit streets in Greektown. The jewel in the crown of the renovations was the recently restored Fox Theatre on Woodward Avenue. As a movie buff, I was in awe of the Fox because it was one of the great movie picture palaces of the 1920s. It was the largest on the Fox chain. As a music buff, I was in awe of the Fox because by the 1960s, after the run down of the picture palaces, it became home to the great Motown and other music revues. Most everyone I listened to, growing up, had played here. Gregg Sutter took me to a benefit screening that was to support the renovations that had
taken place. I was going to see a brand new 70mm print of *Spartacus* (1960, D: Stanley Kubrick, starring Kirk Douglas, Laurence Olivier, Jean Simmons) but I was totally unprepared for the building. I knew it was big and seated around 5,000 but I didn’t know the lobby was six floors high. I didn’t know that a picture palace was a palace.

So the city, in its immediate pre-Eminem days, was working at change but there were few signs of that change taking hold. At least that’s how it felt when I stopped at a traffic light outside Hudson’s Department Store on Woodward, not yet out of downtown, about ten in the morning, listening to some country music on the radio, and looked to the side to see two police spreading two young black men over their car. The good feeling from the Fox melted into the clichés of an American cop show and I went on to sit down for another session with the man who had himself become one of Detroit’s renewal figures.

There’s a difference between being a writer who lives in Detroit and a Detroit writer. Detroit has well and truly claimed Mr. Leonard as its own, but, then again, so has South Beach, Florida. But this was where he really made his name. Unlike the westerns, where he started too late, Detroit was growing into a new skin just as he was trying to get it all down on paper. The renewal hadn’t started and he was prospecting in some very rough ground for a while there. One of the things that helped move it along was the chance to ride with the Detroit police in 1978. *The Detroit News Magazine* asked him to do a feature article on the police and he found such an abundance of material that Squad Seven of the Detroit Police Department Homicide Section became his posse for two and a half months. This was the accelerator that brought Detroit into perspective. Seeing Detroit from this angle was to allow him to get under the skin of this city and, very important to Leonard, keep his facts straight.
Riding with Squad Seven did more than give him access to the Detroit demi-monde. It gave him time to study the contemporary scenery that had become so important to him. If the cops made their coffee in a Norelco coffeemaker, he wanted to be sure that he had the right brand of coffeemaker, and if the interview room for the murder squad had gray paint on the walls and not light blue, he wanted to know. It was not about being obsessive. There was something about getting that contemporary scenery right that led to getting those contemporary characters right. He never really articulated it to me in detail but it was there in the books—pay attention to the characters, where they live and what they do. The clues to who they are are all around them but you might not pick it on the first pass. Squad Seven sharpened his eye.

The result of the serious attention he gave to Detroit was returned when he became a figure that the city claimed as its own. He started to crop up on the magazine lists of ‘Most Famous Detroit’ celebrities that all cities run about their homegrown. But, like the local press anywhere, they are always slightly insecure and so it all began after Newsweek (22 April, 1985) ran his picture on the cover when Glitz made the bestseller list. Don Fine was right—sell the man and then you can sell the books. The Newsweek article was very complimentary and passed on the ‘overnight success after twenty years’ rhetoric that had been running for a couple of years. But seeing your face on every newsstand in every place you go, if only for a week, has to play with your head. Leonard had the last laugh when, in the movie of Get Shorty (1995, D: Barry Sonnenfeld, starring John Travolta, Gene Hackman, Rene Russo and Danny DeVito), DeVito’s character is splashed all over the newsstands dressed as Napoleon as publicity for his latest film (another famous shorty). Leonard likes to use what he has and the sensations that come with major fame had to find a way into his work somehow.
Eventually you begin to wonder what doesn’t get into the work, or at least what the filter might be. It certainly isn’t about going out into the world, finding the biggest nut jobs to write about and getting the names of the cars right. There’s something going on in a Leonard novel that brings all this material together—contemporary character, contemporary scenery, contemporary nut job—and, when the story has had its play, we feel that we know more about something. Even if we don’t know what it is. Maybe he doesn’t know either. He is insistent about not having themes (“I don’t have themes”) but pretty tight-lipped about what he does have. He’s a very amiable man but much more attuned to listening to you than revealing things about himself.

It isn’t difficult to get down to one level. He doesn’t work with themes—he works with character. He writes stories that are based on the vagaries of character and the places where those little hiccups of personality take his characters when they get into situations that are not clearly defined in their everyday lives. It’s those grey areas that he likes so much (“Some things that my people do are illegal but not necessarily immoral”). To get at those characters, however, you have to know something about the world that they live in. To get a handle on the first, you have to know about the second. Back in the day, as they say, Leonard would have known a bit about the second. In the fifties, he was an advertising executive in a major city, keen on jazz (“In my car, I have the radio set on a jazz station”) and the jazz clubs that flourished in Detroit, lots of nightlife, lots of drinking, lots of everything. This was the social scene that eventually gave us Motown. All those musicians that they make documentaries about today would have been recruited from the clubs that Leonard would have frequented. It was probably quite a life for a while.
He certainly wasn’t living that life when I met him. He had been a non-
drinker for quite some time but, when we met, had recently given up
smoking. It took me a while to realise, as we talked across his writing desk
with an enormous ceramic ashtray between us, that as much as I was
encouraging him to fill my tape with stories, he was encouraging me to fill
the ashtray. He had a very nice large house with lovely grounds and a very
comfortable room in which to write. Access to the life came from research
these days. In part, that’s what riding with Squad Seven had done for him,
tuned him into how to research the modern day life. And that’s what
Gregg Sutter helped him with.

It would be wrong to overstate the usefulness of having a researcher
like Gregg Sutter, and he would be the last person to do that, but it is clear
that it helps. Sutter came into the picture around the time of the writing of
*Split Images* (1981). He had met Leonard and written about him earlier for
*Detroit Monthly* magazine. Leonard invited him to do some research on
material that went into *Split Images*. They clearly get along and Sutter’s
involvement has grown with each book. Today he runs Leonard’s official
website amongst other things. Sutter is an extremely enthusiastic and
energetic man. Like Leonard, he is very generous but unlike my time with
Leonard which was spent, for the most part, sitting on leather furniture
talking back and forth, my time with Sutter was spent in his car riding
around Detroit looking at the real locations of where the books were set
from Police Headquarters at 1300 Beaubien to Lily’s Bar in Hamtramck.
Hamtramck is just north of Poletown and stuck between the intersection of
the Chrysler Freeway and the Edsel Ford Freeway. (It’s impossible not to
love these Detroit names.) Sutter’s a man who’s always on the move. He
even managed to film the punk band playing at Lily’s (the singer was a
friend of his) whilst showing me around the place.
The research that Sutter provides is important but, as the interview shows, the sifting process that Leonard puts the material through is more important. He has boxes and boxes of material and, as we looked through them together, it became clear that what he found was triggering more than just memories. Everything is a potential springboard for an idea and that is probably a lot of what separates the researcher from the writer. It begs the question of why Leonard stays with crime but he was very clear on that: “It in itself is exciting so that you can do it low key, be calm and quiet about it.” Being calm and quiet is a lot of what Leonard does. The characters may well be outrageous and the situations that they find themselves in are generally extreme but their reactions normally come from the range of options that most of us experience. A good example is Elvin Crowe, brother to Roland and uncle to Dale, all Leonard familiares from different books. In *Maximum Bob*, Elvin tracks someone for shooting Roland. When he finds him sitting in a lavatory stall, he shoots him. And the police pick him up. When Elvin finds out that he has shot the wrong man he wants his charge diminished because, well, it was an accident, wasn’t it? No, we don’t go around shooting strangers, but we do feel miffed when we get taken to task for an accident. Leonard gets this and he does it low key.

Low key is very important because you never read a lot of Elmore Leonard in his books. In his now famous rules for writers, he always advocates avoiding those things that let you know that there is someone actually writing the book, like adverbs. It comes back to training. He hears the dialogue as it goes on the page and that is an inordinate strength for any novelist. That’s one of the things that he got from Richard Bissell, the only American novelist since Mark Twain to hold a pilot’s license for the Upper Mississippi. But there’s more to his novels than just dialogue. He
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has to deal with narrative and, in dealing with narrative, he developed an approach that marks him out amongst modern day writers. By the time of the mid-eighties, he had developed a narrative style that was his own and one that allowed him to experiment with, and sometimes improvise on, character.

By the time that Elmore Leonard had become a bestselling author, you just didn’t read him in his books. He wasn’t there. He’d put those comparisons with the old private eye novels well and truly behind him but they are good for helping us realize what is so special about him. In the old Raymond Chandler novels, the private dick is always in the action, taking you from clue to clue and from scene to scene. It had its benefits. It maintained an intensity and it gave the reader a strong character to lead him or her through the vagaries of the urban underworld. But it was very limiting. You couldn’t get away from that character. Leonard broke that grip without having to move to the overview of a narrator that could calmly direct you from scene to scene. Leonard began to experiment with narrating scenes from the point of view of individual characters but without making it explicit who was doing the narrating. The effect was dynamic. It allowed readers to fathom their own way through the story, intuiting who was colouring the scene as they went along.

There was nothing new about this. Flaubert had been doing it in France over a hundred years before, but Leonard was doing it here and now and with the nut jobs of Detroit and Miami. He doesn’t always use it just to colour scenes and hide his own presence. There is a section in Out Of Sight (1996) where Jack Foley is being driven around the empty Detroit car plants by his buddy, Buddy. Buddy is telling Jack about the time when he worked there. Jack is thinking about the sexy female cop that he had been locked in a car boot with down in Florida. The reveries intercut and,
technically as well as aesthetically, it is one of the most marvellous sequences in contemporary popular fiction. On top of that, Steven Soderbergh did a great job of filming the sequence in the movie with George Clooney and Ving Rhames.

When we got around to talking about writers that he admired, Leonard was quick to point out the other Miami master, Charles Willeford. But the interesting thing about Willeford was that he never really did make it and that was important for Leonard. As he says, “My contention is that once you’ve established yourself then you can do anything you want.” There have been some things that he has gone back on. I asked him about writing short fiction again and he said that he couldn’t do that anymore. But he did go back to that. By the mid-nineties, a few short pieces were coming out here and there but, to be fair, that was more along the lines of using fragments and bits and pieces of things that might well have come from other novels that he was writing or scenes with characters from past novels that he had to cut.

He stayed away from writing for the movies and that was a good thing. There’s a lot to be said for a volume of work and one of the nicer things about rereading Elmore Leonard is that development of craft, the way he works so hard to get out of the space between the reader and the story. You can forget, if you are not careful, that it is his imagination that you’re playing around in.

I can only repeat my gratitude for his generosity at the time. Detroit is an interesting city but it is made much more interesting with Elmore Leonard as a guide. I took in the fourth of July celebrations before I left town and as I prepared to drive to Toronto the next day I read the paper with a cup of coffee. There had been a number of incidents amongst the general exuberance of the celebrations. Amongst the arrested was a pair of
twins, Cassandra and Cassondra, two teenage girls who were going around causing a bit of mayhem. When they were arrested, they admitted that they only did this sort of thing because they liked to hang with the cops. Maybe I was wrong all along. Maybe in a town like that you just have to look out of the window and write down what you see. Or maybe not.

*I would like to acknowledge Noel King for his work on a preliminary edit of these interviews.*
‘DOING WHAT I DO’:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH ELMORE LEONARD  
Anthony May

Dates: 1st-3rd July, 1991

Location: Elmore Leonard’s home in Birmingham, Michigan. The interview took place in Leonard’s study across his writing desk. Immediately preceding the interview we had watched Mike Dibbs’s recent BBC video Elmore Leonard’s Criminal Records. The interview followed that screening.

MAY: One thing I found interesting in the video was this perennial problem that people seem to have with describing your work. They are mysteries but they are not, they’re not hard boiled, and so on. One phrase seems particularly appropriate, ‘Good Time Crime’.

LEONARD: I think most writers of crime come out of one tradition or another, either the Hammett/Chandler tradition or the traditional mystery tradition, the English mystery. There are some variations of that but I don’t think I came out of that Hammett/Chandler tradition. I wasn’t influenced by them at all, so I don’t think it shows. But, when you are first noticed, the reviewer, and the publisher too, feel they have to label you. And Hammett and Chandler are the handiest labels to put on anyone, so the publisher will do it or else a publisher who’s trying to think of something says,
'there’s just nothing to hang your hat on.’ This was said by the guy who bought *Touch* and sat on it for six or seven years before he bought it back. Nothing to hang your hat on. Of course that one was different. But really, he was talking about my work in general. What do you call it? And so I would go from publisher to publisher trying to find someone to sell my books. And finally Don Fine at Arbor House said, ‘I’ll sell ‘em’. And he did. Because he didn’t try to throw me into a school, he sold *me*. And it took some doing, it took five years. But he did it and I hit the bestseller list. And that’s the proof, you hit the bestseller list. And yet, you look at the bestseller list with mixed feelings because you don’t read most of the books that are on it and so you look at the company you’re in and you’re a little funny about it, for the most part. There are good writers who slip onto the list. But most of ‘em, they’re story writers, they’re quite capable as far as plot is concerned but not memorable because the prose isn’t particularly memorable, y’know. They like to use adverbs and exclamation marks.

So, in finally getting someone to sell my books I was with publishers who would throw me into that Hammett/Chandler school and I would say, well, let’s say that I was influenced, to some extent, by James M. Cain. But really, when I think of it now, I wasn’t, I was influenced by Hemingway and by Richard Bissell. And that’s it.

MAY: You once spoke of John O’Hara as an influence.

LEONARD: Yeah, his dialogue, although he very often used, ‘Said so and so’. I’ve never done that. It’s always ‘So and so said’. Here is some Richard Bissell from *High Water* [1954]:
The Grease Cup was right there in front of Katz’s drugstore, waiting for me like he said he would be.

“Hello, Grease Cup,” I said, “it looks like you got the worst of it.”

“What a night,” he said.

“Old lady not so good?”

“Just the same,” he said. “Where was you at?”

“Me and Lucille got a room at the hotel.”

“Who’s Lucille?”

“She’s the one with her picture stuck in my mirror.”

“Oh. Yeah. That brunette with all the hair.”

“Let’s get a cab,” I said.

“I ain’t got but two dollars. Let’s walk.” (pp. 3-4)

You can hear the influence of the fifties. Or this one:

I laid there but I couldn’t sleep, in spite of the fact that I had been up most of the night before with Lucille, loving and talking and acting the fool, and getting out of bed to stand in the window and look at St. Louis in the night.

“Ain’t you never coming to bed again?” she said. “What in the world are you looking at?”

“St. Louis, Missouri,” I said.

“Not much to it,” she said. “You better lay down and get some sleep. You have to go back to work tomorrow.”

“In a minute,” I said, looking out at the city, and I went to the bathroom... (p. 48)

Now he’s aboard the boat.
When I woke up I smelled cigar smoke and that meant Ironhat, and I knew that the watch had changed and it was some time after midnight. I was stiff from sleeping on that hard old couch. I took a cigarette from my shirt pocket and lit it.

"Where are we?" I said.

"Going up the goddam river," Ironhat said.

"What part of the goddam river are we in, Sunshine?" I said.

"Can you see that old Cap au Gris lock yet? Did we pass Grafton yet? How are we doing? Can you see the First National Bank of St. Paul?"

"I get a big kick out of your big buddy Grease Cup and his old lady," says the Iron Hat. "You see him on the boat down here with them two big engines of his you would figure he was quite a big sensible man, but anytime he gets home there in St. Louis the old lady why she has him running around pissing in a tomato can; it sure beats the hell out of me, a man like him with a heavy license like what he has got, leaving some ole two-bit girl from out on the edge of town lead him around by the nose. When you come right down to it old Grease Cup is not too bad a looking man except for the country clothes, and he has a real license on diesel; a man like Grease Cup could get a better woman than that ole faded-out blond movie fan.

(p. 50)

[Leonard laughs]

MAY: Is there anything but dialogue in there?

LEONARD: Dialogue. That’s it.

MAY: It just goes on and on, it’s great.

LEONARD: On and on and on. And referring to, y’know, the fact that the guy’s got a real heavy license on diesel, he should be able to get any woman he wants, that point of view, that whole little world of the river.
MAY: On dialogue, I came across a piece where crime writers were asked to name their ten favourite books and they had all these lists, and you put down just one book, George V. Higgins’s *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* [1970]. Dialogue is outstanding in that book, and there are a couple of things that I’ve wondered about in relation to that. What does dialogue do that other forms of description can’t? One of the things that I like in your work is the way you extend certain points of view by way of dialogue, you present a character through dialogue, and then you continue it in description, in a very productive way.

LEONARD: Exactly. I don’t know if I mentioned that in the documentary, but once I decide the point of view of a scene, then that character’s sound will permeate the narrative, will continue on through, because everything you see in that scene is from that character’s point of view and you won’t know what anybody else is thinking until you come to a place on the page where I’ve skipped down a few spaces and got into someone else’s head. And it could be in the middle of a dialogue situation, a scene, where I do it is beside the point but I won’t mix up points of view. I’m a stickler for that because I think I do so much more with it than most writers. With most writers it’s a case of, here’s the scene and the people are talkin’ and then you’re back into the viewpoint of this omniscient author again. I want to keep it down there. I want to keep it in the story.

I was at a Santa Barbara writers’ conference a couple of weekends ago, and I listened to the students, reading. And they all use adverbs, ‘She sat up abruptly.’ And I tried to explain that those words belong to the author, the writer, and when you hear that word there’s just that little moment where you’re pulled out of the seat. Especially by that sound, that soft L-Y sound. Lee. So often it doesn’t fit with what’s goin’ on, y’know. I mean, if a person sits up in bed, they sit up in bed. You don’t have to tell how they sit
up in bed. Especially with what’s goin’ on. In this instance, she sat up in bed ‘cause she hears a pickup truck rumbling by outside very slowly and she knows who it is. So you know how she sat up in bed, y’know. And in her mind she’s saying, ‘It’s that fuckin’ pickup truck’. She knows it is. And then there’s another, say, half a page or so of inside the character’s head and the phone rings. She gets out of bed and feels her way over and almost knocks a lamp down. And she passes this stack of self-help books, on the desk, and picks up the phone. And I suggested to the young woman who wrote this, ‘Save the fuckin’ pickup, drop the fuckin’ adverb, and put it with the self-help books and it’ll say a lot more about your character.’ See, it’s little things like that. The contrast works better.

MAY: I think that thing of not having a character working like that ‘I’ point of view all the time, by shifting to third person, the way you use that technique of point of view...

LEONARD: Gets a first person sound.

MAY: Yes, it gives a lot of license to that.

LEONARD: The trouble with first person is that you’re so limited.

MAY: Your mentioning self-help books in that young woman’s writing made me think of what seems a recurrent theme in your writing, the different things people use in order to make sense of their circumstances. Way back in 52 Pickup, the Harry Mitchell character is in this situation and all he has is a set of management techniques by which to understand a kidnap and a killing. He has these management seminars, that’s the only thing he knows to use to help organize himself to get through this.
LEONARD: Yeah well, I don’t remember that in detail, but I remember that there was a parallel between the situation in his plant, with the slowdown, and what was happening in his personal life.

MAY: On that idea of characters who do or don’t fall back on failsafe devices for helping themselves, I really liked that reference in the video to handwriting analysis where Carmen in Killshot (1989) sorts herself out by straightening up her l’s or something like that.

LEONARD: And I believe that could work. You can change your handwriting and improve your personality or your mental state, your attitude. Because you just tell yourself that this is what you’re doing, that’s half of it, y’know? So when she starts writing upright, she picks herself up. But she won’t [analyse] her mother’s [handwriting] because there’s nothing good to say.

MAY: On point of view and the practice of extending point of view from dialogue into those descriptive passages which follow, I’ve always thought that must be very difficult to translate into film. Have you thought how to get around that or is that just a filmmaker’s problem?

LEONARD: Yes, it’s a filmmaker’s problem and, no, because the thing which makes my stories, my books, the style, and the references that are made using this point of view, are not visual. You lose all that. By the time you take these 359 pages down to 110-120 page script, all of this stuff’s gone. Or, most of it.

One example of really using point of view in this way is in Rum Punch [1992]. Max Cherry, the bail bondsman, is on the phone when this black guy comes into his office and I start out with just this much as Max’s point of view:
Monday afternoon, Renee called Max at his office to say she needed twelve hundred and fifty dollars right away and wanted him to bring her a check. Renee was at her gallery in The Gardens Mall on PGA Boulevard. It would take Max a half-hour at least to drive up there.

He said, “Renee, even if I wanted to, I can’t. I’m waiting to hear from a guy. I just spoke to the judge about him.” He had to listen then while she told him she had been trying to get hold of him. “That’s where I was, at court. I got your message on the beeper... I just got back, I haven’t had time... Renee, I’m working for Christ sake.” Max paused, holding the phone to his ear. He looked up to see a black guy in a yellow sport coat standing in his office. A black guy with shiny hair holding a Miami Dolphins athletic bag. Max said, “Renee, listen a minute, okay? I got a kid’s gonna do ten fucking years if I don’t get hold of him and take him in and you want me to... Renee.”

Max replaced the phone.

The black guy said, “Hung up on you, huh? I bet that was your wife.”

The guy smiling at him.

Max came close to saying, yeah, and you know what she said to me? He wanted to. Except that it wouldn’t make sense to tell this guy he didn’t know, had never seen before...

The black guy saying, “There was nobody in the front office, so I walked in. I got some business.”

The phone rang. Max picked it up, pointing to a chair with his other hand and said, “Bail Bonds.” (pp. 11-12)

[There is a slight variation between the manuscript and the published text]
So I saved what his wife said to him until a little bit later when somebody else comes in. ’Cause he’s not gonna tell this guy. But now it’s this guy’s point of view.

Ordell heard him say, “It doesn’t matter where you were, Reggie, you missed your hearing. Now I have to... Reg, listen to me, okay?” This Max Cherry speaking in a quieter voice than he used on his wife.

This is now Ordell’s point of view, see.

Talking to her had sounded painful. Ordell placed his athletic bag on an empty desk that faced the one Max Cherry was at and got out a cigarette.

So then there’s all this from Ordell's point of view (a little description, then Ordell overhearing Max's conversation):

[Max] could be Eyetalian, except Ordell had never met a bail bondsman wasn’t Jewish. Max was telling the guy now the judge was ready to habitualize him. “That what you want, Reg? Look at ten years instead of six months and probation? I said, ‘Your Honor, Reggie has always been an outstanding client. I know I can find him right now...’”

Ordell, lighting the cigarette, paused as Max paused.

“...outstanding on the corner by his house.’’

Listen to him. Doing standup.

“I can have the capias set aside, Reg...” (pp. 12-13)
So you see this exchange, it’s hard to separate ‘outstanding’ and I’ve put it in the wrong place, that’s why you see that. So you’ve got two different things going on at the same time, in that use of point of view.

MAY: Do you try to develop that as a specific technical interest as you write or is it more an intuitive sense of how the writing is working?

LEONARD: It just happens. I come at it and use it. I like the idea of levels of things going on. To try and do that. Then you come to the end of the scene, he wants to bond a guy out. Costs ten thousand dollars, and he says:

[Ordell] stopped and looked back. “I got one other question. What if, I was just thinking, what if before the court date gets here Beaumont gets hit by a car or something and dies? I get the money back, don’t I?”

* 

What he was saying was, he knew he’d get it back. The kind of guy who worked at being cool, but was dying to tell you things about himself. He knew the system, knew the main county lockup was called the Gun Club jail, after the street it was on. He’d served time, knew Louis Gara and drove a Mercedes convertible. What else you want to know? (p. 17)

So now we’re back on Max’s point of view.

MAY: Thinking about your characters, you haven’t very often repeated figures. I mean repeated figures with the same names. Stick comes back.

LEONARD: Yeah, and Jack Ryan. These two guys, this black guy, Ordell Robbie, is from The Switch and Louis Gara. They were in on the kidnapping together. Louis Gara has just come out of prison for bank
robbing, did forty-six months, goes to work for the bail bondsman. Actually is put there by the insurance company that this bail bondsman represents. The insurance company wants him to write some big dope bonds and he says, I don’t write those kind of bonds because those people skip. And when I write a bond, the guy doesn’t skip or I go get him. So the insurance company has put Louis in there to try and find some big bond Colombian drug business. And he runs into Ordell Robbie who is now selling guns to Colombians by way of the Bahamas. And he’s being paid in the Bahamas. That is, the transaction that takes place in the Bahamas and the money comes back to him. An airline stewardess brings the money back. Jackie Burke. She was the female lead. She appears for the first time on page 41 and takes over the book. I didn’t expect that but she becomes the main character because the plot has to come out of what she is doing. I thought Max would be the main character. I thought I’d have more scenes with Max Cherry but it didn’t work out that way because he’s got to wait for something to happen. He’s not an instigator, a bails bondsman doesn’t instigate anything.

MAY: Before I left Australia to come here I was reading through your novels again, and another character who recurs, a minor character, is the Wendell Robinson figure who comes back in *Freaky Deaky* [1988].

LEONARD: Oh, that’s right. And the guy who was the lieutenant in *City Primeval*, is now the inspector. He’s in one brief little scene.

MAY: What sort of purpose does that serve?

LEONARD: It’s just because they’re there.

MAY: Does that keep a consistency for you?
LEONARD: Yeah. One of my favourite heavies was Roland Crowe from *Gold Coast* [1980]. I really liked Roland. I had a lot of fun with Roland. And readers had written to me about Roland and loved him, y’know. So for *Maximum Bob* I invent his brother, Elvin. And Elvin has just done about 10 years for murder. He went after the guy who was in *Gold Coast*, because he blamed it on the guy and not the woman who shot Roland, he blamed it on the guy and went after him and shot a guy. He shot the wrong guy and then he did 10 years. He didn’t think that was fair. But he comes out and he’s on 5 years probation and the probation officer, Kathy Diaz, she gets him. Of course he had been sentenced by Bob Gibbs.

MAY: Everybody seems to make links between the good guys, or at least the neutral people in your books, and relations to real life. What about the bad guys? Are there any connections in that way?

LEONARD: Well, it’s the relationship of trying to get the same kind of a guy. For example, in *LaBrava* [1983], Ritchie Nobles and the guy from *Gold Coast*, Roland Crowe, are pretty much the same type of guy, that redneck, heavy-handed, dumb guy. And then, any Mafia kind of guys. They’re the hardest to do in a fresh and different way. But what happens in writing is that things change. *Glitz* is a good example, where I thought Tommy Donovan was going to be the main antagonist in a way, not really the antagonist but at least a spokesman, the character for what was going on in the casino hotel in Atlantic City. And, I think it’s when they are still in Puerto Rico, he has a little scene with Donovan and Jackie Garbo. And Jackie Garbo takes over the scene. Jackie Garbo is much more interesting than Donovan, so Donovan’s pushed aside. What am I gonna do with him? I make him a drunk. His wife was going to be the female lead, Nancy Donovan. When she first meets Vincent Mora, boy, they make eye contact
and he thinks, something’s gonna happen here. Then, 20 or 30 pages later you meet Linda Moon and I like Linda better, so in her audition she comes out stronger to me. So now Linda takes over the female lead. So what do I do with Nancy? She becomes a ball buster. I do the scene in Jackie’s office, Nancy, Tommy and Jackie. It’s her scene, I thought, her scene, she’s got evidence that these guys are laundering money. She shows a picture of the Colombian, lays it on the desk, picture of the cop from Miami. I think, well, it’s her scene, it’s her point of view. So I write it from her point of view and I think, uh, no. Jackie Garbo has been in the business 20 years, Nancy’s been in the business, what, a few years. So I rewrite the scene from Jackie Garbo’s point of view and he begins to see what’s going on and he begins to think of her as the shark lady and the scene reads much better from this point of view. And then instinctively, when she shows him the second picture, he says, it’s a cop. And he guesses, and guesses right. So he has the last laugh.

There was a scene when Garbo was on the phone talking to a Mafia figure. And the first time I did it, it’s just the two guys talking. And then I do it over again, the phone rings, he looks at the black guy, DeLeon Johnson, to pick up the extension. Now I do it from DeLeon’s point of view, these two guys trying to act tough with each other, y’know. The use of different perspectives makes it a lot more interesting.

There’s one situation, in LaBrava, the way I saw it the first time where a guy, a photographer, uses a wheelchair to get around in just because it’s comfortable, just something to sit in that’s mobile. And he takes pictures of tourists on the beach. And he’ll give ‘em a card and for five bucks they can pick up the print the next day or something like that. And the hustler comes up to him and looks at him, at the camera, wants to look at his camera, takes a look at it and says, Yeah, I like it, I think I’ll keep it. And
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walks off with it and the guy in the chair doesn’t say a word. And it’s the guy in the chair’s point of view. He’s waiting. He knows the guy’s gonna have to stop. And he stops. And he says, ‘Can you walk?’ He says, ‘Yeah, I can walk.’ And it’s a different scene. He knows the guy in the chair can take him.

MAY: I think Glitz has, at least for me, one of your most horrible villains in Teddy Magyk.

LEONARD: Oh yes.

MAY: This is a really vile character you’ve got there. Yet, in a way there’s also a tremendous sympathy. I almost felt sorry for him when he’s at home with his mother and can’t borrow the car. You get tremendous range in a bad guy there. One of the things that I found interesting in that little scene, and this tactic crops up again and again, is that he gets the car from his mother by turning up the Van Halen tape. You have a huge range of musical references in what you write.

LEONARD: They’re all different. In Swag they listen to music in a bar that they’re going to hold up and the music is Country and Western. It depends on who the characters are and what they like. In Get Shorty [1990] it’s hard rock. It’s just a question of watching MTV when I need it. It’s all there at any given time. I mean, you don’t even need to plan ahead on it, oh, I think I’ll use Wicky Wachee sometime.

MAY: On the different types of music and the fact that it’s all there for you on MTV, which is a tremendous reference for that type of thing, you get what, in my own shorthand, I think of as the ‘list’ aspect of your books. Split Images is like a catalogue of handguns because the guy has the collection...
LEONARD: Wait till you read this one [Rum Punch].

MAY: Swag is really interesting that way with cars, because they steal cars, but also the references to cocktails. There’s an enormous range of things I’d never heard of, like Salty Dogs.

LEONARD: Also in Glitz. I finally got something for Donovan to do and that was to test out drinks. In the end, finally, they meet. They hadn’t even seen each other through the book and he says, ‘did you ever have a blue drink?’ And Mora says, ‘no, and I hope I never do. A blue drink.’

MAY: Does it serve any other function than the listing and the description?

LEONARD: No, I don’t have any themes. How are you gonna use this?

MAY: Well, I have three co-ordinates to the work I do. One is crime fiction—in particular your work—and I also have a more historical interest in crime writing and how character is presented. And the third thing is cities. And cities and character seem to me to be very important in your novels, they feed into one another.

LEONARD: Yeah.

MAY: And it’s interesting that you’ve located yourself around Detroit. Just yesterday, as we were driving around the downtown, I thought your novelistic descriptions of Detroit were almost like a guide book to the city. Streets connect, places are there. Do you find that’s more difficult to do when you are dealing with other cities, with Miami or the New Orleans of Bandits [1987]?

LEONARD: No. It’s not more difficult because I find out what neighborhoods I’m gonna use and I study maps. I was always referring to
this particular map when doing *Rum Punch* and *Maximum Bob*. West Palm, Palm Beach, Palm Beach Shores.

MAY: You say that you don’t think of yourself in that tradition of Chandler and Hammett but that writing is always located within a city.

LEONARD: But if we had lived in Buffalo, then there’s still crime in Buffalo. I didn’t pick Detroit in particular. Some people think I chose Detroit because it was, at the time, the murder capital of the US and it has a reputation. In the movies they were always sending away to Detroit to get a hit man.

I think you can use any place, any place. In *Killshot* I was gonna make the Blackbird pure French-Canadian. Then I decided it would be too hard to handle his accent all the way through. So instead of being from Montreal he’s from Toronto and he’s half Ojibway Indian. But the idea for his character came from a documentary I saw probably six or seven years ago. It was done in 1979 about the Mafia in Montreal. The filmmakers would run down the street with their mikes trying to interview Mafia figures, y’know, and in one segment you see these two tough guys coming along and they stop ‘em with their mikes and these are the Dubois brothers. And the Dubois brothers think all the Mafia guys are punks. And they’re really tough guys. No respect for, no fear of the Mafia at all. And I thought, I want one of those Dubois brothers. But I gotta change him in order to handle him for 90,000 words.

MAY: I think it works really well in *Killshot*. *Killshot* is one of my personal favourites because I think you hit the tone with the husband and wife humour that’s just terrific. But, before I want to talk about that, I want to ask you about the strategy of having two contrasting baddies, baddies that contrast so greatly as Armand and Ritchie do.
LEONARD: Wayne, the ironworker, was gonna be the main character in *Killshot* but it was so obvious that I had to change it.

MAY: There was a very good review by Michael Woods in the *Times Literary Supplement*. It was a review of a number of your books when a whole lot of your paperback books came out in Britain and yet he said that tenderness was a thing you couldn’t do. I thought that in *Killshot* you actually get round that very well. His review came out in 1985, and by the time you publish *Killshot*, that relationship between Wayne and Carmen has great tenderness in it.

LEONARD: That was ‘89.

MAY: I liked that stuff was where Wayne goes into his tales of the riverbank, when the ironworker, it’s almost the boy’s aspect. He finds a whole new set of toys on the river and almost a whole new terminology for him.

LEONARD: He likes that big stuff, thousands of tons. When I did his fantasy scenes up on the structure, when he does his fantasy, those are possible ways the story could have developed, directions that the reader might be thinking of. So, as soon as he has fantasized those things, they’re no longer possible. And then the reader might wonder, well what’s gonna happen with him?

MAY: You have been using Gregg Sutter as your researcher for some time. What references did you use before you started to use a researcher in that way?

LEONARD: I did it all myself. I didn’t do as much.
MAY: That period when you were doing the industrial films and educational films, was there any pay off to that in terms of experience? You’d spent a long time in advertising before that hadn’t you?

LEONARD: Yeah, ten years. There might have been a little bit as far as film writing goes. Maybe. I think I’ve always thought visually anyway so I don’t think it made that much difference.

MAY: Do you enjoy writing for cinema?

LEONARD: No, and that’s why I’m not gonna do it anymore. I had to do it. That is, it supported the book writing for about fifteen years. But I don’t have to do it now. And I always had the feeling, I’ve always been optimistic that good movies could be made from my stuff and I wanted to participate in that and work with a good director. But it didn’t happen. And I think it’s still possible but I don’t wanna waste all that time writing movies, unless I think of an original. But adapting is just too tedious. I mean, you’ve already done it, the enthusiasm has already gone into that blank page. And it’s done. You’re working for people who don’t necessarily have any story sense, who are throwing ideas from the top of their head at you and they expect you to adapt those ideas. Chandler said that you wear your second best suit, artistically speaking, when you write movies. Smile and say thank you when you leave because you may want to go back.

MAY: I always liked The Pat Hobby Stories, the F. Scott Fitzgerald material on screenwriting.

LEONARD: I’m not familiar with that.

MAY: It’s a series of F. Scott Fitzgerald short stories around, basically, a hack Hollywood writer who’s in and out of work and always looking for a
few days on a rewrite of something or trying to sell an idea or whatever, there’s about twenty stories.

LEONARD: Are they all published together?

MAY: Yeah, there’s a Penguin collection, I think.

LEONARD: No kidding. I’d like to read that. What is it?

MAY: *The Pat Hobby Stories*. They’re a little repetitive at times but it’s quite a nice character that comes through, that develops. Who would you thought would have been a good director for your work?

LEONARD: Scorsese. Jewison. A guy called Ulu Grosbard. I wanted to work with him. Ulu was gonna do *Stick* and the studio said no. He has trouble getting work because his pictures don’t make money. But actors love to work with him. He did two of my favourites, *True Confessions*, with De Niro, and *Straight Time*, with Hoffman. And I think he’s marvellous. I think there’s a very good chance that he’s gonna do this one, *Maximum Bob*, as a 4 part mini-series, with Donald Westlake, who’s nominated for *The Grifters*, doing the screenplay. He’s O.K. Laurel Entertainment is the production company, and they’ve made an offer and we’re gonna accept the offer, and they’re gonna give us director and writer approval. So if for some reason they can’t make a deal with Westlake and Grosbard, we still have the approval of whoever else they want to come up with, see? So that’s a good possibility. And then, who’s interested in *Get Shorty*? We’ve met with Jim McBride, who directed *The Big Easy*. He wants to do *Get Shorty*. He’s got backing from Shapiro Entertainment, Esther Shapiro who did *Dynasty* and quite a lot of TV stuff. In fact she was an executive at NBC. *Killshot*, Laura Ziskin has *Killshot*. Fox optioned it, put it in
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turnaround, gave it to Laura who did Pretty Woman, more recently What About Bob?

MAY: I haven’t seen that.

LEONARD: Bill Murray, just out. She also did No Way Out, Kevin Costner. So she has a good track record. But she’s been busy with other projects, she’s also doing The Doctor, directed by Randa Haines, who did Children of a Lesser God, with William Hurt. She’s in post-production with that. I think she’ll get Killshot out sooner or later. Looks like we’re gonna make a deal with Bruce Willis, who also has Bandits, to do Touch, which we feel is risky for anybody. But if he wants to bleed onscreen...

MAY: I liked Touch. I’d never understood about the delay in publication but you had that little preface in there, explaining the history of it. And I never really understood what so hard to categorize about it. I thought that there was enough...

LEONARD: Contemporary scenery?

MAY: Yeah.

LEONARD: But they don’t know how to label it, y’know, in a few words. Another Elmer Gantry?

MAY: Of course the big change for you came with Glitz didn’t it?

LEONARD: ’85.

MAY: From then on you start really to sell on your name?

LEONARD: Yeah. So for what, seven years, they’re not gonna do anything with Touch until Glitz came out. Then it was sold to Bantam as an original paperback. So finally Glitz hits the list and now they understand the book and now they wanna bring it out hardcover, Bantam does. I said,
'No, I don’t want that to be my next book, all my new readers to think that’s his next book.’ I said, ‘It’s gotta be brought out in such a way that it’s labelled and explained what it is, somehow.’ I thought a foreword by someone else, not me. And then my agent said, ‘Wait a minute.’ He looked up the contract and he said if they didn’t bring it out in two years all we had to do is return the advance and it was ours. So the next day he called them up and he said, ‘You got 24 hours or 48 hours to make an offer.’ They said, ‘Whadya mean, make an offer? We own it.’ And we said, ‘No, you don’t own it any more. We’re gonna auction it off and the floor is $600,000.’ They’d paid thirty for it. We knew six was going a little high but a lot of that is just picking numbers out of the air. So then he called up Arbor House, and Eden Collingsworth was the publisher then, Don Fine who had bought it originally had been fired. And he tells Eden, ‘You got 48 hours to come up with $600,000 if you want it.’ She said, ‘You know, I have to go to Hearst and get their approval.’ He said, ‘Well, you better hurry.’ So the next day they came back with an offer of 3. We said sold. That was that.

MAY: Are there any plans afoot for re-releasing any of the western material?

LEONARD: You mean the books?

MAY: I was thinking more of the stories. Bantam re-released a lot of those books, didn’t they?

LEONARD: Oh, they’re all available.

MAY: I was thinking more of the short stories.

LEONARD: There’s someone that’s always bringing that up. There aren’t many of them though that I’d like to re-issue.
MAY: Do you never consider returning to the short story format?

LEONARD: No, because first of all there is no market for them. I would have to do 15 and then have them published that way. Every once in a while I think of a situation that could be a short story but I don’t have the desire, I never get the urge to sit down and write it. And then the next thing I think of is, could it be a scene in the book or could it be part of someone’s backstory in a book, describing some character. There’s always that.

I would have to learn how to write a short story all over again. And I don’t think most of the short stories I read are that satisfying. I’d probably end up writing a story with a beginning, a middle and an ending. And they would say, what’s this? You can understand this story, can’t be any good. Throw it out.

MAY: When you made that move from westerns to crime fiction, there’s a series of books that you do, *Big Bounce* [1969], *Moonshine War* [1969], before you move into that *City Primeval* world. *Mr. Majestyk* is also around that period isn’t it?

LEONARD: Yeah, early ’70’s, original screenplay.

MAY: I was just reading the other day about that, actually. I was reading the Barry Gifford collection, *The Devil Thumbs A Ride*. He describes *Mr. Majestyk* as a ‘melon western’, as opposed to a spaghetti western, but does so quite affectionately, I think.

LEONARD: I took *Mr. Majestyk* from *The Big Bounce* and named the character, it’s a different guy completely, y’know. But I figured, I need a title, and I know *Mr. Majestyk* is a good title, and I figured, well, nobody’s read *The Big Bounce*. I’ll just use that name. Originally, this story was meant
for Clint Eastwood. He had called up and said he wanted something new. I had written *Joe Kidd*, an original, for him. It was shot but not yet released. And he called up and said, *Dirty Harry* is making a lot of money everywhere but he only had a few points in it, I gathered. Now he wanted to own his next property. What he wanted really was another *Dirty Harry* but different. And so I thought of *Mr. Majestyk* and I called him the next day and told him about a melon grower, just basically the situation, I’d just thought of it that minute. And he called back that night or rather just a little later that night and said he wasn’t seeing him as a melon grower, rather an artichoke farmer because artichokes were grown not far from where he lived.

MAY: We were talking earlier about the time before you started working with Gregg Sutter, and the research that you used to do for yourself. Were there any sorts of reference books that were useful or was that done from more contingent sources, like you said about picking up material off MTV? Did you have any books that you would go to like crime reports or things like that? Did they help?

LEONARD: No, just the paper. The first time I did the piece for *The Detroit News*, ‘Impressions of Murder’, I had not done any research directly with the police. I had with newspapermen, like the crime reporter who took me to the morgue, a crime reporter who dealt with the cops. But I didn’t get into the details of procedures. I think the only research for the most part that I did outside of using settings around Detroit that I knew of or would visit was going to the library. If you look at my research boxes, you’ll see they are envelopes from the early books up to a box or two boxes for *Killshot*. I’ll show you what I have.

MAY: You’ve got notebooks and rolls of film...
LEONARD: I would never go to all this trouble myself. This one is all full of *Bail Bondsman News*. These are all newspaper pieces about bail bondsmen. This one, I think this one is a tape of ‘Demonstrations of Machine Guns’ and the voice-over tells what the guy’s firing, its rate of fire, the kind of cartridge it uses and all that. So I went through that one and I picked out maybe six or eight machine guns with a few facts and I described a movie that the character in the book had bought at a gun show. And he shows this to his customers who come from Columbia, Detroit and New York. He shows them this movie, you want an Uzi, you wanna TEC-9 and all that. And he sells them on it, see. He tells them how much. [Skipping through research box] Here’s some material on bounty hunters. Bounty hunters sometimes are hired by bail bondsmen.

MAY: And you get to read books like *Gunrunning For Fun And Profit*? So Gregg Sutter goes down and gathers all this material for you?

LEONARD: Yeah. These are parts of manuscripts. These are interviews with bail bondsmen. Mike Sandy, he’s the guy in the movie. This is the ATF file. This is the eating area [*Looking at floorplan of a mall – a location in Rum Punch*]. The food service area in the mall. I have about one, two, three scenes which take place in there. I would have never gone to this trouble before, before I had a researcher.

MAY: Presumably different aspects of this research feed into different things. I mean, some of it’s for detail and some of it’s for visualisation.

LEONARD: Yeah. [Still searching boxes] A letter from Medellín, drug capital of the world. So I took a few facts out of that and I have Ordell, the gun dealer, telling the jack boys—he has some young black guys working for him, in Florida, and they are called jack boys—who knock over street dealers and dope houses that love to go into the salt waters and shoot the
place up and steal everything. So he’s got these young 18, 19 year old jack boys working for him and he tells them about the boys down in Medellín who are called pisto-locos, who are that version of the Columbian jack boys, and how many of them get killed each year and how they should be so happy that they were born in America.

MAY: A much healthier business to be in here.

LEONARD: Yeah. So I already know how I’m gonna use that material. This is where I break down the paragraphs once I get into the book just to help me find things when I look back.

MAY: This notebook? Does Chili Palmer come back in Rum Punch?

LEONARD: No, but I was considering that.

MAY: Has this complicated things at all, having this amount of material to draw on, or does it make life so much easier?

LEONARD: Oh, much easier. But I don’t have it all at once. All these things didn’t come until the very end. In fact, I thought all my research was finished then I decided I was gonna have more scenes in this big mall than I had originally. And Gregg Sutter was down there, he had gone down there for some reason, so I said, ‘take me some pictures’ and he called the Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms agent, who’s part of the Treasury, and asked him a question, some technical thing that had to do with where I was up to in the book.

MAY: And that produces more stuff?

LEONARD: Yeah, right.

MAY: It seems to be such a different job researching this material from researching the westerns.
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LEONARD: Oh, Yeah. The westerns, what did I use? I did them with this, *The Look of the Old West* by Foster Harris. I would use just an old catalogue of westerns. And I used my *Arizona Highways*. I relied on *Arizona Highways* for my descriptions. I’d find a canyon or something, the kind I want, and then the caption would tell you what kind of rock it was and so on. It’s better than being there. Because when you’re out there you wouldn’t know if that was one kind of rock or another, you know. So using *Arizona Highways*, that worked.

MAY: Did you find in terms of audience that there was more of a cult thing with westerns?

LEONARD: I never heard from anybody. Now I hear from a lot of people. I can’t remember hearing from anybody. I must have done but not much.

MAY: I was going to ask you about audiences and how you thought about them. I don’t mean in terms of adapting your writing but a sense of an audience must come into play sometime.

LEONARD: I don’t think so, no, I don’t know who they are. I mean, they’re everybody. They could be convicts. In the video you heard what they wrote, and there’ll be a judge, there’ll be some lawyers, there’ll be some doctors, there’ll be cops and convicts.

MAY: Are there ever any things in the mail that you get, like the convict saying that the heroin dealers seem to like you but the cocaine dealers haven’t picked up on you yet. Are there any amusing things in there that are worth using?

LEONARD: I don’t know if I’ve gotten anything from letters yet. Maybe, I can’t think of anything off hand. *Finding a book in research box*
This is part of the research for *Maximum Bob* because his wife gets into channeling and she channels this little black girl, a slave who had died one hundred and thirty-five years ago. And so this voice comes out of his wife, this little black girl’s voice. And the judge never knows who he’s talking to and it’s driving him nuts. This is it, the *Psychic Energy Workbook*. I needed something that would have to do with this for my final scene, when everybody’s assembled. And I was looking through this and I came to that phrase, ‘psychic cleaning’, ‘psychic dirt’, and I thought, that’s it, I don’t care what it’s about, that’s what I want. And it worked, it was just perfect in my last scene. Alligators. [Reading from folder covers] Sugar. Probation. Revised from first draft. Part of a draft, but I don’t write a draft and then work it over. I revise as I go along.

MAY: When you have a situation like you were describing before, where a character takes over the running, does that involve a lot of extra work going back and readjusting that original character?

LEONARD: Usually not. Because it’s usually early on that it happens, early enough. [Still digging in research boxes] This is a sex crimes file from the sheriff’s department where they have plants and lamps. They have kind of a homey atmosphere in sex crimes in West Palm Beach. They have the same thing in Detroit, they have lamps on the table.

MAY: So these notebooks have the names and little bits of plot fleshing out characters. When you were talking about Roland Crowe and his brother coming back in *Maximum Bob*, you described a little history for him. Does that appear in the novel or do you do that to more clearly imagine the character?

LEONARD: Elvin Crowe describes to the probation officer what happened to his brother. This dink shot him and when he found out where
the guy was, he went after him. And he chased him up the Florida Turnpike and the guy goes into one of the rest stops. And he sees the guy running into the men’s room and he went in after him. And he stood right in front of the door where the guy was in the stall. And he called his name and as the door started to open he fired five shots into him and the wrong guy falls out. ‘And I got ten years for that.’ In here I’ve got a lot of manuscripts and stuff.

MAY: In developing a character like that how far you feel you need to go in providing them with a personal history?

LEONARD: Well it comes along. I don’t sit down and write too much. I might just write a page or so about a character, but it really comes when I’m into the book and describing their little habits. And then sometimes I will go back and fill in a little bit more, maybe some kind of little scene, something that happened in a backstory. But I don’t worry too much about the background. In the new one for example [Rum Punch] I say, in Chapter 2, that Ordell has three women that he’s talking of that live in different places. One is Sheronda, a young black woman he picked up on the road as he was driving through Georgia. She’s a country girl standing there at the side of the road, he picks her up and she’s very, very grateful to him for taking her out of the peanut farm. Another one is Simone, who he brought down from Detroit, 63 years old, but every time he let her take him to bed she was ten times better than he thought she was gonna be. She likes to do Motown numbers and sing to the Motown numbers with all the gestures. And his third one is this white girl, Melanie, who is from The Switch. So now she’s 34 years old and she’s bigger than ever. She’s his fine big girl, see. And she has her own ideas. Everybody in the book has got a scheme of how to get the money for themselves. There’s a lot of money
involved that Ordell has banked in the Bahamas. All his gun money’s there and he’s gotta bring it in. He’s been bringing it in gradually but now that he sees the cops about to descend on him, he wants to bring it all in. And so the lead character, Jackie Burke, an airline flight attendant, she’s setting him up. She’s already been arrested for bringing his money in, so she tells the cops, ‘Get me my job back, let me fly, I’ll bring all his money in and you guys can grab it.’ Well, they like that idea. But she has a scheme devised were they think they’re grabbing it and he thinks he’s getting it. She’s gonna sneak off with it. But she needs the bail bondsman to help her. So everybody’s scheming and scamming everybody else. And that’s just something that came along later.

Here’s something [photographs of skinhead parade in West Palm Beach] where Gregg just happened to be there and he got this. It wasn’t planned for the book but he had it. So he said, ‘I got it if you wanna use it.’ And I said, ‘Maybe I will’.

MAY: A few things like that crop up in your work. In Cat Chaser [1982], the Americans in the Dominican Republic, it’s almost like a forgotten piece of recent history. Is there any rationale behind that?

LEONARD: That particular one started when I was looking either at a 1965 Look or Life magazine, researching something for Split Images. I asked Gregg to get me some information on Porfirio Rubirosa, who was a famous playboy of the ‘50s, married to two very wealthy American women, Doris Duke and someone else. His first wife was in the Dominican Republic, Trujillo, the dictator’s daughter. He was married to her. He was killed driving his sports car in Paris in ‘57. So Gregg found this piece that Trujillo’s daughter had written, a three part thing in Life or Look about Trujillo but it mentions Porfirio Rubirosa so he got it for me. So I’m
reading the magazine and I turn the page of this ‘65 issue, and here are the marines in Santo Domingo walking down the main street, looking up at the buildings. And I thought, ‘God, that might be a book’. Going back there, 15-16 years later, maybe to find a girl. So that’s how that started.

MAY: The people you work with and come into contact with, like Squad Seven and the judge down in West Palm Beach, has anyone ever objected to things that you’ve developed around them?

LEONARD: There was one fellow who was in *City Primeval*, or he said he was in *City Primeval*, an Albanian who brought a suit against me, the publisher and Hearst. He wanted about $35,000. He said that the lives of his family were in danger and his business had gone to hell because I had portrayed him in the book as someone who had shot at the Albanians. But they’re always shooting each other, that’s what they do, they have these feuds going all the time. The references to the feuding, I got out of the paper, I didn’t have to get them from him. And I didn’t have that many Albanian names to use. So his lawyer called up my lawyer and said he wants satisfaction. He wants about $35,000 and my lawyer said, ‘Or what?’ He said, ‘Or we’ll take you to court’. And my lawyer said, ‘You’re gonna put your guy up against my guy in a Wayne County Court room probably with an all black jury and you expect to win?’ Because the Albanians have these little hot-dog Coney Island places all over Detroit and party stores, beer and wine stores, too and they are always being held up by black stick-up guys. And they’re always shooting them. So he wouldn’t have much of a chance so I just said, ‘No, I’m not gonna pay him.’ The publisher retains a very, very high-priced law firm downtown and then they send him a questionnaire and it took about six months for him to fill out all the answers and send it back. And it’s costing the publishing company money
all this time. So finally they said to me, ‘Do you think he’ll settle?’ and my lawyer said, ‘Sure, he’ll settle in a minute for about seventy five hundred bucks.’ So they said, ‘O.K. let’s settle with him’. So they settled and then they wanted me to pay half of it. I said, ‘No’, I wouldn’t have settled with him, I’d have gone to court. You’re the ones that retained the high-priced law firm and so I refused and they said, ‘O.K. Forget it.’

MAY: On the critical reception of your novels, how have you felt about the way that people have written about your work?

LEONARD: For the most part, it’s been excellent, very good. I mean, 95%. Every once in a while there’s a problem. In Time magazine there’s a review of Maximum Bob and it said that I shouldn’t try whimsy. And I thought, when did I do that? It said that whimsy wasn’t my forte at all. But I think the reviewer was writing that just so that he could end his review with ‘police farce’. One of those moments. Because I don’t use whimsy, I write straight.

MAY: You said that you weren’t going to write for films anymore. Do you think it’s enough to have the approval on director and writer?

LEONARD: In this case only. I think for it to come out the way I see it, I would have to do the whole thing. It’s way too late for me to learn how to direct and do all that. And even if it holds true to the book and it’s a good movie, I don’t think it would still make any money. It’s not the kind of material that makes a lot of money.

MAY: Although we were talking earlier about the treatment of Miami Blues.

LEONARD: Didn’t make any money.
MAY: Didn’t make any money but don’t you think it’s probably a growing market?

LEONARD: I don’t think so. I don’t think since Spielberg there’s been much hope of returning back to a mass of good movies. Once in a while maybe. When something like Home Alone knocks everything out of the running, makes $250 million, they’re gonna make Home Alone more and more. They’ll make a sequel to that. Why didn’t Die Hard II make a lot of money, I don’t know?

MAY: It did make money.

LEONARD: It did make money but it cost, what, $60 million to make so it would have gross $150 million or something like that.

MAY: Also the film wasn’t as sharp.

LEONARD: They think of TV and movies as two different audiences but I don’t make a distinction. I don’t understand writing something and then showing it to a test market to find out if they like it or not. Who cares? I really don’t understand that, at all. And I know that they probably think I’m crazy but you do what you do. This is it. You like it or you don’t like it. I couldn’t imagine changing my ending. I mean I show it to the neighbours, say, ‘Which ending do you like better?’

MAY: It doesn’t make sense, does it.

LEONARD: I did it with a title, but titles are different. At one point I changed Rum Punch. I was considering using ‘Stingers’ and I went as far as asking six people at a dinner party and they all said, ‘Rum Punch’. I asked two people in the film business, Walter Mirisch and Nancy Hardin, who optioned Touch. Walter Mirisch is the only one who said ‘Stingers’, Nancy
Hardin said ‘Rum Punch’. She said, ‘It sounds like more fun.’ I think it’s a good title.

MAY: Do you get a lot of pressure from the publishing company to think of audience?

LEONARD: It’s strange, I’ll be talking to someone and they’ll say, ‘you and Ken Follett are my two favourite writers.’ How’d they get me with him? ‘You and Robert Ludlum are my two favourite writers.’ I don’t think you read me for story. It’s not a big story I do, it’s just little situations and they end up. There’s always a way to end them up.

MAY: I think the humour that goes through the books is one of the reasons that people talk about your work, and Willeford’s work. From the late Willeford books, say Sideswipe, there’s no crime committed until about fifty pages from the end and that’s almost by accident.

LEONARD: When they hold up the supermarket? I think that character is a wonderful guy. He’s always explaining things to people.

MAY: Earlier when he’s in prison and we’re introduced to him and he explains what a criminal psychopath is, he says there’s a difference between right and wrong but I don’t give a shit.

LEONARD: Sociopath.

MAY: OK, sociopath. You were saying that you don’t read much crime fiction. What do you read?

LEONARD: I read these two [picking books off desk]. I read a little bit of Julia Philips’ You’ll Never Eat Lunch In This Town Again. She produced Close Encounters. Steelyard Blues was her first film. Then she became a coke head and lost her standing and then I don’t know what happened to her for
years. I guess it was just the drugs and she finally wrote this book, *You’ll Never Eat Lunch In This Town Again*. It’s OK but it’s just a little too hip. It’s just trying too hard. I don’t know what else I’m reading. I like Bobby Ann Mason. I like Raymond Carver short stories. There was an Australian guy I used to read back thirty years ago, his detective was Napoleon Bonaparte, was that his name, Napoleon? In Adelaide, right?

MAY: The author’s name was Arthur Upfield. They did a TV series of it. He was an Aboriginal detective and they had a white guy with make up on. That was Australian TV at that time.

LEONARD: What, he was in blackface, you mean like Amos ‘n’ Andy?

MAY: Yeah, he looked like a white guy with make up on. It was a guy called Laurenson. I think he was a British actor and had done a lot of TV. It wasn’t as though he was some unknown that they’d brought in.

LEONARD: I mentioned Nancy Hardin to you. Well, her partner in obtaining *Touch*, Francis O’Brien, was one of the producers of *Gallipoli*, which was shot for like two-and-a-half-million. Must have made money at just two-and-a-half-million. It was a good movie.

MAY: We were talking about the things that you like reading. You said that you like Willeford’s stuff. James Crumley, have you read any of that?

LEONARD: Yeah, I read one of his and reviewed it for the *Washington Post*. I liked that. But, again, I don’t really look for private eye stories. I read those forty years ago. I read a lot of them. I don’t remember who wrote them. Frederic Brown. I remember, who wrote Perry Mason? Earle?

MAY: Earle Stanley Gardner.
LEONARD: He wrote under another name. I couldn’t read [Perry Mason] but the other name, A. A. Fair, I could read.

MAY: What about other types of novelists, we were talking about DeLillo before and say Running Dog. It’s not necessarily a crime novel...

LEONARD: Yeah. I like Running Dog.

MAY: I was admiring the photographs on your wall. Do you have an interest in photography?

LEONARD: No. [This guy] shot me for Rolling Stone five years ago and then he sent me those last year.

MAY: Again, in the style of what I’ve called your lists, in the opening to LaBrava where Maurice shows Joe LaBrava’s photographs to someone and she replies, ‘You want me to say this, this, this.’ There’s a list of names of American art photographers. I was wondering if that was research or if that was just personal interest.

LEONARD: It was both. I started with Danny Lyon [pulling book by Danny Lyon from shelf]. I looked at this and I thought, I’m gonna write a book about photographers. So then I started collecting them. He did some stuff on bikers. And then I got things like this, Street Cops, A Kind of Life, Conversations in the Combat Zone, Walker Evans. So I had a guy who just wants to shoot pictures. He overhears people talking about his work and they say something that was once said about mine, that the subtext of his work is the systematic exposure of artistic pretensions. And he hears that and then he hears someone say to that person, ‘And I thought he was just trying to make a buck.’

MAY: I’d read that in George Will’s introduction to Elmore Leonard’s Double Dutch Treat and it made me a little nervous in meeting you. I’m
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aware that academics have a tendency towards statements like, aesthetic subtext and so on.

LEONARD: A woman once wrote and said, ‘I hope no-one does a doctoral dissertation on you and screws the whole thing up because I thought George Will writing about you was the kiss of death.’

MAY: The good thing is that nobody ever reads doctoral dissertations anyway, so it doesn’t matter.

LEONARD: Is that what you are doing?

MAY: Yes, but this is more of a case study within a study of crime, popular fictions and the circulation of urban knowledges. I’m looking forward to reading about the channeling in Rum Punch. You take a phrase like ‘psychic dirt’ and it means something to someone.

LEONARD: Yes, I know. You have to scrape it off. You scrape it off with your hand, you go like that [wipes hands]. It’s like Epsom salts. This is serious. You don’t have to set it up in the book. Nobody winks or nudges, you just do it straight. That’s the beauty of it. The trouble with the screenplay—Bruce Willis’s screenplay that he gave me of Bandits—I read it and I spoke to him and I said, ‘This guy doesn’t understand, if you want to play yourself that’s one thing, with all this smart aleck stuff. If you wanna do that then it’s quite a different character.’ He said, ‘Yes, yes, I understand.’ I said, ‘Well, look at this line for example, when Delaney’s in the bar and he’s talking to this woman who’s got bruises on her, a go-go dancer. She walks away and he says to his friend, the ex-cop, “y’know every sixteen seconds in the United States a woman is physically abused?” And the bartender says, “you wouldn’t think so many women would get outta line.”’ Now, in the script he delivers the line and then, direction,
grins and winks. I said, ‘No, he doesn’t grin, this is the guy’s mentality. Don’t tell the audience anything. If the audience thinks that’s fine, let ‘em laugh. Don’t tell ‘em anything.’ It’s like television, holding up applause cards.

MAY: So Willis is actually going to do the screenplay himself?

LEONARD: Oh, no. He had it done by the guy who rewrote Stick.

MAY: Oh, no!

LEONARD: Well I haven’t seen it apart from those couple of scenes. It’s also the same guy who did Sudden Impact and City Heat, Joseph Stinson.

MAY: If I remember right, with Stick, they change the dialogue around. They take some lines from Barry Stamm, the millionaire character [George Segal], and give them to Burt Reynolds [as Stick] so the lead gets all the good lines. Reynolds gets to say the funny lines.

You’re on record as saying that Richard Boone was the actor who best delivered your lines. What was it about him?

LEONARD: I don’t know but in The Tall T he spoke the lines exactly the way I heard them when I was writing the book, the novelette. Exactly, and then when he appeared in Hombre he played the part that I wrote with him in mind. That never happens. I don’t see how that could possibly have happened, that they actually cast one right. Right on the nose. But they did change his name in the movie because they added a character. They added the sheriff, who was that guy?

MAY: Martin Balsam?

LEONARD: No, Martin Balsam was managing the stage company. They added... the sheriff, who left town, who joins the outlaws, who had
been the boyfriend of Diane Cilento at one time in the past. What’s his name?

MAY: He was on the TV series *The High Chaparral*. Cameron Mitchell.

LEONARD: What that guy, the sheriff? Maybe, but they gave that name to the sheriff, the name that he had originally in the book and gave him another name, Cicero Grimes, a guy whose name was Frank Braden, a real name, just a regular name.

MAY: Am I right in thinking that your sales, the career, everything, starts to take off when that problem of marketing your work is fixed, when Don Fine makes it a thing of marketing you? How did they do that, what do they do in marketing you rather than marketing the books?

LEONARD: Well, he was marketing the books, sure, but he was getting the books into the hands of reviewers at *Time* magazine, *Newsweek*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, the ones that had some influence. That, more than anything else. I was always reviewed well, almost always. But not by people that were recognized as top notch reviewers. I was reviewed in the *New York Times* book review section back in the ’70s by Newgate Callendar, which was the name they use for reviewing crime. I don’t know how many Newgate Callendars there were, whoever reviewed crime was Newgate Callendar. But he reviewed *Unknown Man #89* up toward the front of the paper and not back in the ‘Criminals At Large’ or whatever his column was called. And it was a good review. I was at Delacorte then. He said, this guy can write rings around practically anybody in his field. So what did Delacorte do? They don’t use that. They advertise, ‘move over Philip Marlowe, here comes Jack Ryan’, y’know. Completely missing the point, as though this is just another private eye story. I thought, My God, didn’t the sales department read the book? And I remember saying to my
editor at the time, ‘Why wouldn’t they use the *New York Times* quote?’ She said, ‘We can’t say that you can write rings around practically anybody. We have other people writing crime stories, too.’ I said, ‘No, you don’t, not when you’re advertising a book you don’t. It’s the only one there is. That’s how you sell books.’ She’s fiction editor at *Cosmopolitan* now.

MAY: What do you see as the distinction between the hardback and the paperback? What is the work of the hardback? As it has always been just the hardback that got reviewed, was it a way of getting to reviewers and then making the running for the paperback?

LEONARD: Yeah, respectability, that’s all. I have always been in hardback up until I chose, twice, the more recent time in 1978 when I went to Bantam, to be in paperback simply to make more money.

MAY: Earlier you were talking about different material getting worked into back stories. This seems to be a thing you pay a lot of attention to, the development of back stories.

LEONARD: Once I’m doing it, once I’m into the book, yes. I don’t save things, but I might start doing it though because I do forget ideas. But usually it’s an idea that comes along while I’m writing the book, just something that could be a book in itself that I use as part of the back story. In *Bandits*, talking to the cops, the *Newsweek* writer who did the cover story on me pointed out the fact that the cop told us a story that he thought any other writer might have used as the plot for a novel. But I used it as the back story for the police officer in the book who had gone bad and ends up in this caper that they’ve planned. I’m not always looking for something. Like I didn’t feel that I was wasting it, that I should have saved it for a book plot. There are always ideas. I don’t worry about ideas. Ideas come along. Ideas are the least of my worries.
MAY: You were quite firm in saying that you didn’t want Touch coming out as your next novel after Glitz. Can you expand on that?

LEONARD: Well, because it was so different. It isn’t what I usually do. The fact that I did do it in ’78 or whenever, it occurred to me then, I thought it was a good idea. But I thought, If I’m gonna build a following, and now I have with Glitz 150,000 or 160,000 people who read the book, considerably more, ten times more than I had before, I’ve gotta follow up with what I usually do. That’s what they’ll be looking for. So I felt that Touch had to be labeled in some way, with an introduction or something. I felt that it would work best as a trade paperback, one of those eight or nine dollar paperbacks.

MAY: But it did come out in hardback.

LEONARD: Yes.

MAY: We touched briefly on television the other day. I was wondering if you could expand upon your experiences writing things like Desperado.

LEONARD: When my agent, Swannie, died the Los Angeles Times asked me if I would write some kind of a tribute, which I did, and I described phoning his office in the early sixties and at this time he had sold two of my books to the movies. I phoned his office in ’62, ’63, something like that, thinking about writing for television because of all the westerns that were on television at that time. And the point of the story is that I asked for him and his receptionist, the operator said, just a minute, came back and said, what is it that you want to speak to him about? And he didn’t know who I was even though he had sold a couple of movies. I go on to say that I thought I wanted to write for television, before I had really watched any of the episodic westerns that were on to see that they had not learned one
thing from *My Darling Clementine*. And I saw no point then in writing for television. And with few exceptions, certainly in the western field, it’s the same way today. *Desperado* looked like 1950’s westerns. Sam Eliot looks like a cowboy, on the other night. There was no hope for it as I could see. It got very good ratings but there was nothing on opposite it. They had hired Nicol Williamson to play in the first episode as the British manager of the mine and he took one look at Tucson and disappeared. I don’t know what happened to him. He got out of there fast.

MAY: What was *Wilder*?

LEONARD: *Wilder* was a pilot for a cop show. It was bought but never produced. But there wasn’t any gimmick. It was straight.

MAY: We were talking about your books making the bestseller lists and you said that it was double-edged. It’s very satisfying but it’s a little confusing to find yourself in that company. A phrase you used was ‘storywriters’. How do you see your work in relation to that?

LEONARD: My work is based on character, the characters and the interplay of the characters and there is story that comes out of that. There is certainly more story in mine than in, say, what you would consider a serious novel. I mean, I know I gotta have a plot to sell it because it’s commercial fiction. I know that. But it’s not simply story as reviews of some of the bestselling authors would indicate. A favourable review will say that it’s a good story, that it moves right along but the characters are kind of wooden, the characters are one dimensional, and that’s it. So I think what I’ve done, over the years, knowing what I wanted to do from the beginning and developing it, but at the same time finding out what I do best and developing that, and that is telling the story through dialogue. That appealed to me the most and in developing that style it did turn out
to be what I do best. I don’t have to struggle with it. I’m not a narrative writer. I don’t write long, long narrative passages. I’m not afraid of them. I don’t mind starting a story with a narrative passage. I have done it. I’ve started stories with narrative passages. Unknown Man #89. But I’m careful. It’s gotta be one that I know I can handle and make interesting. It used to be I would know there are places, there would be passages in this book that would be difficult and I knew that I didn’t want to write them but I knew they would have to be there. This is what I used to think. There are certain parts of the book that have to be there in order to tell the story but you don’t look forward to writing them. And then finally it dawned on me, Why? Why do you have to think you have to have such passages like that? You don’t. You write it some other way. How can you make something like that interesting if you think that it’s a chore? So then I realised that I’d just think of other ways to write it. Or leave it out. So that was one thing I learned.

MAY: In giving such attention to character, what do you look for in your characters? Do you have certain coordinates that you know would bounce off one another?

LEONARD: Well, there are people who are for the most part street people. People with a sense of irony. I don’t know if they would realise that or not. The line is ironic but maybe the character doesn’t realise that. Although he might know and think it’s comic. I don’t know. It’s just a certain sound. But I have a feeling for the people, no matter who they are, and I try to bring out the human side of it. And that’s another thing that you have to realise, the fact that I like them.

MAY: Is that why building personal histories for the characters is important?
LEONARD: Yes, it’s important. It’s not always necessary. I’ll build more of a background for some than others. Or I’ll just start writing, not with a real clear idea of the character’s background but just start writing and see what comes out of it. One thing leads to another, one idea prompts another and goes that way.

MAY: In working that way, how difficult is it to maintain consistency of character throughout a book?

LEONARD: I suppose sometimes I might have a character who doesn’t stay in character and begins to sound different but, for the most part, no, that isn’t a problem. You see I do enough rewriting as I go along. By the time I get to page fifty I’ve rewritten those pages over and over and over.

MAY: I’ve been reading the typescript for *Rum Punch* and I was interested to see that it is a computer font but it looks like a typewriter typeface. Gregg [Sutter] was telling me about the search to find this font.

LEONARD: Quite a search to get this and this to me is perfect. It’s exactly what I want.

MAY: Did you know what you were looking for?

LEONARD: I knew that that’s what it looked like. I didn’t know what it was. I thought it would be a lot easier. I didn’t know that all the computer typefaces were so condensed, so pushed together. I wanted something that looked like this [taps typewriter].

MAY: So the appearance as you are producing the book is important to you?

LEONARD: Yes. I want it to look easy to read. That to me would be kind of a perfect page, just enough dialogue in it.
MAY: A thing that interests me is the balance between crime and everyday life.

LEONARD: I don’t think about that. It’s not planned out. I don’t look at the whole thing at once. I used to. I’d even put it on 3 x 5 cards and draw a line to see where the highs and lows were and you’ve gotta have lows to have highs. And if it’s all high, it’s all low, it’s all the same. It’s too linear and static. But it just comes now. I know how to intercut between scenes. But I don’t think about a certain proportion of everyday life to the crime, so much planning to finally allow the crime to come or a love scene. I don’t think about that at all. This book has more shootings in it, more people killed, than any of my books have allowed.

MAY: Why do you think that is?

LEONARD: It just happened. And it’s about guns.

MAY: Moving away from your novels for a moment, I’d like to talk about the non-fiction that you’ve written. Can you tell me a little about writing the preface to the book on Detroit? [Balthazar Korab, Detroit: The Renaissance City, 1989].

LEONARD: It took me about three weeks to write two thousand words. Because it’s not something that I had an urge to write. I had no desire to write it. The only reason I did it was because the photographer’s a friend of mine. Then I had to decide, What do I think about Detroit? I had to do some research on its history, and to realise when I think of this city fondly at all it goes back to a time in the 30s and 40s, riding a street car downtown. By the late 50s that was all gone. It had changed completely. It was difficult. I get asked to write non-fiction a lot by magazines and newspapers and I have to explain to them, It’s not what I do. I’m not going
to get my sound when I do that. My sound is a non-sound. My sound is the sound of the characters, not me. I don’t want to hear me. I don’t want to see me in there. I don’t know why they don’t understand that in the books I’m not there. I would have to have one of my characters write the piece on Miami or whatever.

MAY: In the case of the book on Detroit, you’re a local celebrity. You’re in a list of things that represent Detroit in this weekend’s Free Press along with the Ford factory. You’re a local identity. You say that Detroit all changed in the 50s. What sort of changes occurred?

LEONARD: The fact that 700,000 people left town and moved out to the suburbs. I think at first because assembly plants moved out. Automotive assembly plants were located all around the country rather than just here. It just became easier to assemble and move around the finished product. I suppose it comes down to foreign competition, especially the Japanese, that the automotive companies here misjudged it. And finally it’s too late. It’s the same thing that’s been happening in large industrial centers all over the United States where worldwide competition beats us in making steel and producing automobiles. We’re not the leaders anymore. Oh, we still produce more cars than anybody but not to the point where we can be cocky about it. I don’t know, everybody doesn’t work in the auto plants but there are the related industries, of course. In Hamtramck, though, there were 40,000 people worked in Dodge-Main in three shifts. That’s a lot. That was probably half the working people in the town. So then they tear that down. Dodge-Main is razed and replaced with a little Cadillac assembly plant that’s full of robotics and it employs maybe 3,000. I don’t know what happened. Best restaurant in downtown Detroit closed last week. London Chop House. It was good. We were there a
couple of weeks before it closed. I’d always thought that it was the best restaurant in town. No question about it. I think it just didn’t have the business. People are afraid to go downtown. And I’m sure that you can go there safely. You drive up to the place, somebody takes your car, you walk in, y’know? But they don’t have the lunch trade they used to have because there aren’t as many people in the office buildings downtown. Doubleday bookstore closed on Saturday. There’s nobody downtown. Hudson’s department store and that was it. That was the reason to go downtown. Get on a street car and go down. If you wanted to go to Windsor, just for something to do, you’d ride on the ferry.

MAY: It’s closing down now but what was it like before this? It’s obvious to anyone what downtown Detroit is like now. It’s so easy to experience. You just go down there and there’s no one about. What was it like before the change, back in the 50s?

LEONARD: It was alive. It was a vibrant, big city downtown with a lot of cars and streetcars and buses. In the blocks around Hudson’s department store, it was always crowded. You came up Woodward about three miles from downtown, you came to Grand Boulevard, Fisher Building off to your left a couple of blocks, and five more blocks north of there is where I lived through most of the 30s. And then another ten blocks north of there, in Highland Park, I lived in an apartment building. And then a couple of more miles out to Six Mile Road, when I was going to University of Detroit I lived in an apartment building there by the park. Then two more miles to Eight Mile Road was the next place that I moved when I was married the first time. Followed by Twelve Mile Road. Then we came out to Birmingham in ‘61. That’s from Twelve Mile to Fifteen Mile. Then Joan and I got married in ‘79. I like the city. I used to go to black
clubs a lot. That was in the late 40s when I was going to school. I’d go to black dance clubs all the time and some nights I might be the only white guy in there but usually there were a few others. And there was no problem.

MAY: What sort of people used to play there?

LEONARD: Let’s see. There would be small jazz groups up on bandstands behind the bar. In the 40s, when I was in high school, I used to go to Perry Lanes Theatre in the afternoon sometime after school or in the evening to hear the big bands. And they were all black bands in the Paradise. They’d go from the Paradise to the Apollo in New York.

MAY: Do you still listen to jazz?

LEONARD: In my car, I have the radio set on a jazz station.

MAY: Did Detroit have much of a cultural life beyond the jazz clubs?

LEONARD: There was a cultural life as far as there was a symphony and that stuff, but that didn’t interest me.

MAY: In terms of the translations of your books, how many languages are you in now?

LEONARD: Sixteen. You get the Viking Penguin edition, is that right?

MAY: We get various editions. First we get the American hardback as an import and then we get whatever might be the British edition. Australia has a book trade agreement with Britain.

LEONARD: You get the U.S. paperback?

MAY: Individual bookstores will import copies before Penguin releases it.
LEONARD: Here’s a newsletter from Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola. Wilbert Rideau, he’s the guy that I interviewed in 1985. A Newsweek writer was with me, and a photographer came along and then a guy from the publishing company and then the two assistant wardens were all parading around the prison while they’re showing me around and we sit down with Wilbert Rideau and talk about life in the prison. One of guards told him that he had to call me ‘sir’. I’m not going to get anything here. In the end I got him to open up a little bit. He had been in since he was eighteen years old. He’d been in for twenty-two years. He’d taken two women hostage when he’d robbed a bank and he got them out in the woods and he cut the throat of one and thought he’d cut the throat of the other. She survives and every time the governor would want to pardon the guy, she would come forward and say, ‘Stop.’ And so he’s still there. He’ll be there forever.¹

MAY: Where does this circulate? Just in the prison?

LEONARD: I don’t know how much in the prison. I suppose it does to some extent. Outside circulation, maybe relatives and friends of inmates.

MAY: What conscious ways have you been trying to change your material over time?

LEONARD: Lately, I’d say the last five years, I’ve just been a little freer and easier in the construction of the books and they haven’t been as tight. I think this one, Rum Punch, is maybe a little tighter. I’m getting back into more of a direct storyline. You get into Swag, for example, you know what it’s about. These two guys, as soon as they get together, they’re going to

¹ Editor’s note: Wilbert Rideau was freed in 2005.
get into armed robbery. That’s OK, let’s see what happens. That’s what it’s about.

MAY: What are the techniques for advancing something like that? You have two guys, they get into armed robbery. How do you direct the story?

LEONARD: Well, first of all, who are they? There’s got to be some contrast to make it interesting. One of them gets the idea and has to talk the other one into it. Do a little research on robbery, bank robbery, different kinds of robbery, find the most successful. Most bank robberies are successful. How are they going to get their guns, how are they going to approach that first one? How many robberies am I going to need? How many am I going to need to be seen? Perhaps some will be in the minds of the robbers. What happens? I can’t see them being successful. And, of course, as soon as they make up these rules then they’ve got to break the most important rule. And that’s the way to do it. Now who do they associate with? They’re show-off types of guys and they pose in front of the ladies at the swimming pool, ‘Excuse us, ladies, we’ve got a business appointment, we’ll see you a little later.’ Take off and rob a supermarket, come back smiling.

MAY: One of the nice things is how so much of that is carried by character. It doesn’t need to be spelled out. They just do it and you read it. To do that character through the dialogue, the vocabulary is so very important. Are there ever any phrases that you don’t want to lose? You don’t want to let them go but you know that they’ve gone out of date, they’re not going to work anymore.

LEONARD: There are things like black guys saying, ‘you dig?’ or ‘cool’, but they’re still good, they’re still said. In the last couple of years I’ve used ‘dis’ a couple of times. It’s a black expression meaning ‘he dissed
me’, ‘he disrespected me’. A black guy doesn’t say ‘Hello, how are you?’
I’m not sure what the current expression is. ‘What’s happening?’

MAY: So how do you keep up, how do you keep on top of all that?

LEONARD: Well, I hear them talking and I hear the rhythm of their
speech for one thing. And I hear the words that they say. ‘Y’understand
what I’m saying, what I’m saying, y’understand what I’m saying’ which
they always repeat over and over. It’s their construction, using the wrong
tense. With Hispanics, one who’s been here from Cuba only a couple of
years, he’ll be using present tense English just as I would use present tense
Spanish. The little bit that I know is all present tense. I would leave out
certain letters if there are certain letters that aren’t in the Spanish
dictionary.

MAY: We were talking about Charles Willeford the other day and you
mentioned his refusing to change the title of Kiss Your Ass Goodbye. Where
do you see the limits on that type of thing?

LEONARD: I think it was a problem he was having from the beginning
when he started out. He hadn’t established himself at all. My contention is
that once you’ve established yourself then you can do anything you want.
But you’ve gotta give in on the way. It’s not that important. These are not
life and death principles we’re defending here. Even some sequence in the
book that they want changed, change it. The overall approach to the way
you write it, that everyone criticized in The Big Bounce when they said,
‘This is a downer, there’s nobody to sympathize with, we don’t like any of
the characters’—it’s one thing to change all that if these are people you
believe in. These are honest, not honest, these are real people. If that’s the
kind of people that you’re going to portray then you gotta stay with it. You
gotta stick to that. The anti-hero, you gotta stay with it. And pretty soon
they see the positive side. They see that it does work, that it can be interesting, that every book doesn’t have to be the same. That’s why I can’t read most of the crime fiction because they’re the same people, the same guys who are by now boring. I like the guy who’s on the fence, you don’t know which way he’s gonna go. I’ll probably do Chili Palmer again because he can go any which way.

MAY: With what I’ve read so far and what you’ve described, *Rum Punch* seems to be back to crime in a serious fashion. I thought *Killshot* had shown a change of direction. Or, if it didn’t, maybe I just got interested in the back stories.

LEONARD: Well that’s it. And it interests me when he goes off on the river. And I probably lost some readers when he did that. But it’s the kind of thing that I think would have hooked him. He would have loved the idea of pushing several hundred thousand tons of stuff down the river like that. And it fascinated me, talking to a pilot who showed me his notes, not the Corps of Engineer notes on how to negotiate this bridge in Memphis, the second bridge in Memphis. But how you aim at that motel to swing your tow boat around and this line of barges through the bridge.

MAY: Is there any chance that crime will become more and more simply a McGuffin and these back stories are going to take your interest more?

LEONARD: It’s not a case of me moving over into the mainstream, as one reviewer suggested. A guy in Fort Lauderdale, reviewing *Bandits*, said that I’m trying to move over into the mainstream. He opens the review with, ‘Elmore Leonard, the most overrated writer in America, who is trying to move from crime to mainstream fiction but doesn’t have the nerve to leave behind the conditions of...’, y’know. I thought, My God, this
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guy’s gonna call me tomorrow and I’m gonna talk to him? So I ask him the
next day. I say, ‘Why would you pretend to say something like that? You
don’t know what my intentions are. I’m writing what I wanna write, that’s
all. It’s not that cut and dried, this is what you do. It might look like that to
a reviewer but it isn’t, not when you’re doing it. I’m doing what I do and
so far no-one has even been able to name it so that’s what it is and that’s
where I am.’ He was taking exception to Newsweek saying that I’m the
finest thriller writer that we have or perhaps have ever had. And, my God,
there are all kinds of reviewers taking shots at that. I didn’t say it but I’m
getting the brunt of it. They’re all aiming it at me. I don’t see anything
competitive about writing a book.

MAY: It wasn’t so much a notion of moving from crime to the
mainstream or from crime to a different genre but a sense of your interest.
Is your interest still tied up so strongly in this stuff that you don’t feel that
you’d want to move into writing about other things?

LEONARD: I don’t know. I like crime as an area in which to write. It’s
just more exciting. It in itself is exciting so that you can do it low key, be
calm and quiet about it. I think one reviewer one time said that all I really
need is just a suitcase of money. Well, that’s about it and that’s enough. It
really doesn’t matter how much.

MAY: One of the nice tensions in the books is how the people with the
straight occupations are drawn to the suitcase of money, drawn to seeing
this way of getting rich quick. In the case of Max Cherry, he’s been doing
his job for a long time. And vice versa, the ones who are criminals but
realise that they haven’t been making a living from it.

LEONARD: Max says to Jackie at one point, when she’s trying to
justify taking the money, ‘You’re rationalizing.’ And she says, ‘That’s what
you do so you won’t change your mind once you’re in it.’ It’s the grey area that I treat, that I deal with. Especially from the cop’s point of view, the grey area, whether he can do something or not. Did we discuss the scene in *Freaky Deaky* when the cop, Chris Mankowski, gets the bomb out of the indoor swimming pool after he’s made a deal for $25,000? Then, in his mind, he talks it over with the experienced bomb squad veteran, I have to hand over the dynamite, the bomb, because it’s evidence. Of course, it’s evidence that a crime was committed. What about the $25,000? Now that’s a grey area. And that’s exactly what the cop said when I called him up and described the scene to him. I said, now the guy takes the dynamite out of the pool, it’s evidence, right? He said, sure, it’s evidence of a crime. I said, what about the money, can he keep the twenty five grand? And the cop said, now that’s a grey area. That’s exactly what I wanted him to say, the grey area. Some things that my people do are illegal but not necessarily immoral.

MAY: Sometimes you use abbreviations or acronyms, an example would be STRESS from *Split Images*. People in Detroit would remember STRESS but not many others would know what it was. Do you ever worry about audiences not understanding these references?

LEONARD: No, I don’t worry about it, but I did explain STRESS, I think. No, I don’t worry about that. I’m not going to stop my book if it would require an awkward explanation. I’m not going to do it. Two guys are talking on an issue that has to do with prison, there’s just the two guys, who’s going to tell the reader what it means? I’m not. I’m not going to get into their scene. Maybe later on in the book someone will use it. I use ‘dis’ in here and I don’t explain it but I think half the readers at least will know what it means.
MAY: And I suppose that there will always be a character who will be sufficiently distanced to ask about it.

LEONARD: Yes.

MAY: You moved back to Delacorte with Get Shorty, what was the reason for that?

LEONARD: I had wanted to go back to Arbor House. I was there for about nine years. Well, they published nine books anyway. Once Don Fine was gone Arbor House gradually became an imprint of William Morrow. And by the time I was writing Get Shorty, or even before that, at the time of Killshot, it was an imprint of William Morrow. My editor then was the publisher of the imprint, Alan Williams. He’s been in the business for probably forty years. Alan was going to publish about fifteen, seventeen titles, of his choosing, for this Arbor House imprint. Then, just about the time I had started Get Shorty, he found out that that it wasn’t going to develop that way at all. That he didn’t have the autonomy that he thought he did, he still had to get approval from the people who ran Morrow and so he handed in his resignation in the spring, saying that he would leave in June. He was my connection. Everybody else had left. My friend and editor [Michael Carter], who was the Marketing Director at Arbor House, and the only reason he was my editor was because I really don’t need editing, but he knows my work, he’d gone to Doubleday. Everybody was gone, all my old friends. So I decided that I wanted to go to Doubleday.

Arbor House/William Morrow had first look, first right of refusal on Get Shorty. So we show it to them first and they make an offer. Also Nancy Evans, who is the president of Doubleday, is a friend of ours. Then a guy who worked for my agent—this is when he [Swannie] was not doing so well and wasn’t really in control—so a guy who worked there called up
Carol Berren at Delacorte and said, ‘Do you want to make an offer on his new book?’ and she said, ‘Absolutely’, without even having read it. Carol Berren had visited me for the two previous summers, her mum and dad live here. So she would come and see me and talk about coming back to Delacorte. She wasn’t at Delacorte when I was there earlier but now she’s the president at Dell. So she said, ‘Yes’, she would make an offer. And then had a meeting with Alberto Vitale, who then was over Doubleday Dell and she got back to my agent, made the offer and they tell me. And I say, ‘I don’t wanna go to Delacorte, I wanna go to Doubleday where my friend, Michael Carter, is.’ They said, ‘You can go there if you want, it’s the same deal, they’re not going to compete with each other. It’s the same money, go to either place.’ So Carol Berren calls and she gives me a pitch—why I should come to Delacorte. And then Alberto Vitale calls, tells me why I should be more interested in going to Delacorte. He said, ‘I shouldn’t be saying this, I shouldn’t open my mouth, I shouldn’t say a word,’ and since he’s over both of them, he says, ‘That’s what I advise.’ So I decided, OK. So I went to Delacorte. Six months later my friend Michael Carter died, another two months and Nancy Evans was gone. So, as it turns out, Jackie Farber, who was my editor back in ‘74, ‘75, and Larry Hughes, who was the promotion guy at Arbor House, are handling it here. And so I’m happy.

MAY: What are the requirements of the upcoming promotional tour for *Rum Punch*, is it a big tour?

LEONARD: I start in New York, go to Florida, go to Miami and Palm Beach, probably Fort Lauderdale. That’ll take care of more than one week, that’ll take care of Friday to Sunday of the following week. Then I’ll do Washington and Boston and Chicago and then San Francisco and Los
Angeles, Denver, Nashville and Huston. I usually do Seattle and Portland but this time I’m going to skip those and do Huston and Nashville this time. I do readings in Denver. I do readings in San Francisco, in Berkeley. Did a reading in Portland, last year.
IN AUSTRALIA:
AN INTERVIEW WITH ELMORE LEONARD

Anthony May

Date: 21st February, 1994

Location: 3rd floor lobby, Ritz-Carlton Hotel, 93 Macquarie Street, Sydney. Leonard had been doing press interviews all day. This was his eighth and final interview of the day.

MAY: Am I correct in thinking that you got the idea for the title of Pronto from an Italian telephone operator?

LEONARD: No, we’d gotten home from Italy and I called up my publisher in Milan for some reason, I forget, and she answered the phone and said, ‘Pronto?’ And right away I said, ‘That’s it, that’s the title.’ She said, ‘What?’ I said, ‘That’s the title of the book.’ At Delacorte-Dell they loved it. They could see it on the cover.

MAY: And you generally go with one or two word titles anyway.

LEONARD: One or two, outside of Unknown Man #89.

MAY: What about the early title for The Big Bounce—Mother, This is Jack Ryan?

LEONARD: You’re right, I forgot about that one. That one didn’t last long.
MAY: Why did you pick Rapallo?

LEONARD: Because of a friend of mine, Richard Guindon, who’s a cartoonist with the Detroit Free Press. He does a funny, little, off-beat kinda cartoon that most people in town don’t understand. When he found out we were going to Italy, he said, ‘Listen, you should go to Rapallo, I think you’ll like it, it’s different, it’s an Italian resort town.’ And I remembered that Ezra Pound had spent a lot of time there. And just the fact that Richard Guindon said, ‘pick Rapallo,’ that was enough for me because I had no reason to set any scenes, if indeed I was going to set these scenes, anywhere else. So I decided, OK, Rapallo. Well, if Ezra Pound was arrested there back in ‘45, and of course as soon as I thought about Ezra Pound I immediately began to research him. I found out that it was ‘45 that he was arrested and held for a while under disciplinary guard at a training centre near Pisa before being brought back to the United States to be tried for treason. His literary friends talked the government out of that. Rapallo sounded right. Now, I thought my character, if he met him in ‘45, would have had to have been young then, 20 years old if he’s in his sixties now. In the army, what was he doing in the army, what outfit was he with? I had to research all of that. Then the idea of the character in the book, Harry Arno, having returned to Rapallo several times with the idea of retiring there, that developed. Then I knew that once I got everybody over there, and I could see that would happen, that all the cast of characters would simply move to Rapallo. And then Harry would tell about Ezra Pound in more detail there. In fact I don’t think there’s any detail about Ezra Pound in the end. There are some reviewers, one or two anyway, who thought it was a little unbelievable that when they’re under the gun there in Rapallo he would be talking about Ezra Pound. Who knows?
MAY: Coincidentally, since I read *Pronto*, I read in Barry Gifford’s *Landscape with Traveler* about a character that, during the time that he was in the navy, comes across Pound, and Pound was in St. Elizabeth’s in Washington. I’ve probably read more about Pound through the two of you than I did when I was a literature student.

LEONARD: I quoted from one of Barry Gifford’s poems in *Rum Punch*, a poem about Terry Moore.

MAY: Do you like Gifford?

LEONARD: Yeah, he’s a good writer and I like his poems very much, and the fact that he would think about writing a poem about Terry Moore.

MAY: In a recent discussion with a friend we listed as three of the best writers in contemporary U.S. fiction you, Gifford and DeLillo. I remembered that you’ve said to me before that you like DeLillo.

LEONARD: Don DeLillo, Yeah. I think *Libra* is a marvelous book.

MAY: You have said occasionally that you sometimes have trouble with reviewers of your books.

LEONARD: You know the place I really have trouble with reviewers is in South Florida, I don’t know why. When Willeford was reviewing for the *Miami Herald*, I had no problem. Willeford loved my work. He and I were corresponding. Then, once I got on the bestseller list, the book reviewer had to review me. He looked down his nose at my work. And then the same thing’s happening in the *Palm Beach Post*. There’s a guy there who thinks that he’s a literary mind and he thinks my books are deteriorating and I don’t know what that means. He had someone else review *Pronto* who found fault with the fact that you don’t learn anything new about the Italian Mafia. And then he said St. Elizabeth’s was not referred to as St. Liz
but St. El’s. Well I didn’t make up St. Liz, I got it out of a *Time* magazine story.

MAY: In *Pronto* and in *Get Shorty*, which also has Jimmy Cap, you treat the Mafia as schoolboys.

LEONARD: They are. I think they are. I think they are guys that never grew up. They’re very childish and dumb. They all sound the same. I kind of reluctantly use them but I had to there. The fact that Harry Arno runs a sports book, you know that they’re gonna be involved, that they’re gonna want their cut.

MAY: Although you start the novel with Harry, it’s actually Raylan’s novel as much as anyone’s. Who was the original hero?

LEONARD: Harry. I thought that Harry would take it all the way. Then Harry got to Italy and he changed. I mean, I didn’t change him. He changed. This is the way it works out. He gets there in December and it’s cold. When I was there it was towards the end of November and places were starting to close up. I could imagine what it would be like in the summer or even in the fall and everything’s going, everyone’s on the beach. And that’s the way it would have been on his previous trips. Now he gets there and it’s like a different place. He’s got this building that’s got this probably 300 year old leak in the ceiling and it’s just not the same. He can’t be Harry in this place. He meets this woman and he’s talking to the woman and he doesn’t get along with her. He picks her up and he just wants to get rid of her. And she doesn’t see anything in him. He doesn’t entertain her at all. It just doesn’t seem to work. And I thought what am I going to do here? He needs help. I thought, in this frame of mind he’s going to start drinking again and he’s going to get deeper into trouble, more disenchanted with the place.
Now the idea of course was that Raylan was going to get there. I went back a little bit and changed Raylan’s original home from Western Kentucky to Eastern Kentucky to the coal mines. I had to give him a background of having been familiar with violence beyond what he might have seen as a marshal. And Harlan County, I’d been wanting to use Harlan County anyway and got hold of that documentary that won an Oscar about twenty years ago called, *Harlan County USA*. Bloody Harlan, that’s what it’s known as. That helped me enormously. I got to know him then. I had my researcher look up all kinds of things, not only that movie but he also got me news magazine and newspaper stories about the strike and that time, the early seventies. There was a picture in one of the newspaper stories of a marching band, a high school marching band practising, they didn’t have their uniforms on. Where do they go to school, because Raylan went to that school. The caption said that they’re in Everetts, Kentucky, a coal mining camp. So then I call my researcher and find out what they’re known as, the warriors or whatever, and what the school colours are, and what the Harlan high school colours are, what they’re called and so on. Just little things like that, I think add to it.

MAY: You put a lot of backstory in for Robert Gee and then you go and kill him.

LEONARD: Well, I had to give him some. What’s he doing there? He’s an individual, he does have his own ideas. And I didn’t think that if it came down to it, if the Zip asked him where Harry was, I think, Tough. He has no allegiance really, the five hundred bucks a week wouldn’t pay for that. But I wanted to give him a little bit of a different background and I happened to be talking to a friend of mine that I see about three times a year. He was in the Wehrmacht, the German army during World War II.
He’s a psychiatrist in our area, speaks with an accent. I was talking to him about his experiences and he said that when he was in France when the German army was defeated, he joined the French Foreign Legion. I said, my God, you did? Where? And he told me where you joined, near Marseilles, and then he deserted and came to the U.S. I thought, Uhm, Foreign Legion, that’s good. So then Gregg, my researcher, met a guy in Miami. There was a bounty hunter in Miami, a guy named Bob Burton, put him in touch with a guy who had been in the Legion. So Gregg Sutter talked to him for a bit. He just questioned this guy and then recorded it and then sent me a transcript.

MAY: How much time did you put into the Italian research?

LEONARD: Actually I was in Rapallo one day, a day and a half. That’s really all I needed. Took some pictures. Well, as far as being there because it’s just the facade of it I would be interested in but I needed this sidewalk cafe and that one. Then looking up into the hills and seeing the villas. It was interesting to see early photos in books about Ezra Pound, early photos of Rapallo, going back to the twenties that looked exactly as it does now.

MAY: It’s not changed much?

LEONARD: No. There are some more modern looking high-rises just as you start to go up the hill, which Harry and the woman from Genoa talk about.

MAY: Rum Punch would have been your third book with Delacorte, Dell-Delacorte, or is it Dell-Delacorte-Doubleday?

LEONARD: It’s Bantam-Delacorte-Dell, Bantam-Doubleday-Dell. Let’s see, the first contract was three books, beginning with Get Shorty, Maximum
Bob and Rum Punch. Then a new contract with this one, Pronto, the one I’m doing and then one more. That will satisfy that second contract. The one I’m doing now, I’m bringing back Raylan. Pronto was optioned but I have it in the contract that I can use Raylan again, that they’re not going to own Raylan. There was a little fight there. I said, well, do you want Pronto or not, because I’m not going to sell it to you unless I can keep Raylan for myself. I want to use him again. And Harry’s in it, and Joyce to some extent. I begin with Raylan wishing that Harry would disappear because he’s as childish as he was at the end of the book and he’s drinking again, heavily. He’s lost his license, drunk driving, and he relies on Joyce to drive him around, although he does drive himself too. And he’s feeling sorry for himself and Raylan wishes he’d disappear. And he does. They don’t know where he went. They’re sure he didn’t go back to Italy because he would have made a big to-do about it. He wouldn’t have just slipped away in the night.

It was funny on this book tour, the one I’ve just done in the States, people asked me, ‘Whatever happened to Dale Crowe, jnr.? He took off in that Cadillac and what happened to him?’ Because he didn’t come back into the book (Maximum Bob) and a lot of people thought he was going to be important to the story seeing as it opens with him. I said, ‘I don’t know, he’s probably driving around in the Cadillac, he’ll get caught. Why not, he’s a dumb kid.’ But just the fact that people asked me about him, I had opened the new one with Raylan talking to a psychic. He knew Harry had talked with this psychic and the psychic was possibly the last person who saw him, at least that anyone knows about. So he goes to see the psychic, not to know anything about himself but to find out about Harry. But the psychic tells him things about himself. I thought, This is a good opening. I like this opening. But there was certainly a scene with Harry and the
psychic and if I open with Raylan then I’m going to have to just tell about Harry and the psychic or else flashback. I don’t want to flashback. So somebody has to talk about it, the psychic and somebody else. Why did Harry go to see the psychic? I finally realise that I’m not going to be able to open with Raylan and the psychic. I have to open with something else. And something else and something else until finally Raylan and the psychic is chapter seven.

So I’ve got these other chapters going, I thought, I gotta open with Raylan, he’s my main character and I’m gonna be true to him this time. And then I remembered the people asking me about Dale Crowe. So I opened with Ocala police. Ocala’s a city in Florida state, Ocala police picked up Dale Crowe for weaving and having a broken tail light. They bring him in. They give him a breathalyzer test and then look him up on the crime computer and find out that he’s a wanted fugitive. So then in the next paragraph, Raylan comes to pick him up. Raylan then lets Dale Crowe drive back to Palm Beach County and in their dialogue, you find out some of the things that have happened since Pronto. I thought, That’s the way to get this exposition out of the way. Dale Crowe, jnr. really doesn’t know what he’s talking about, nor does it matter. Nor does he understand why he’s being told this, and yet there is a point in Raylan telling him. He thinks Dale Crowe is a punk kid and there is something in his story about Harry and Joyce that could apply to Dale in a way. Then Dale tries to get away. He tries to hit him but Raylan knows that Dale’s going to try this. As Dale Crowe swings at him, he pops him right in the face with his cowboy boot and then handcuffs him to the steering wheel. Then when they get into town, they get to West Palm, they get off the turnpike and they’re into West Palm, a car hits them from behind. It pops the trunk a little bit so Raylan gets out and goes back and he sees this pickup truck. Two black
guys get out of the pickup truck and one of them’s got a gun and it’s a car jacking. The guy says, We’re gonna trade you our truck for your Cadillac. The Cadillac that he was using was a confiscated drug car. So the one black guy goes up to get in the car and get Dale out. Then he calls to his friend and says, Hey, come here. As the guy walks up there, Raylan opens the trunk and gets his shotgun out. He steps over into the road and then he racks the pump, which every lawman knows will get more attention and respect than anything else. And they turn around and there it is, they’re looking at a shotgun. He says, I’ll give you guys some advice, don’t try and jack a car that’s being used to transport a federal prisoner.

MAY: The psychic isn’t Maximum Bob Gibbs wife, is it?

LEONARD: No, but originally I thought that she could be in it. There’s a town north of Orlando called Cassadaga where nearly everyone who lives in the town is a psychic or a clairvoyant or in the spiritualist church. It’s just a county road, and on one side of the road are all the legitimate psychics who are in the spiritualist church. On the other side are the ones who come along because these people had made this area so popular. People come from all over to get readings. So on the other side are a lot of fortune tellers, pseudo-clairvoyants, tarot card readers and so on. And that’s the whole town, that’s it. It’s an unusual town. I was going to use Cassadaga. I was going to set most of the book there but there wasn’t enough to it. I need more bright lights, big city. So I moved my psychic out of there down further into South Florida. Her name is Reverend Dawn Navarro. She’s about 28 years old, she’s good looking and you’re not sure if she really is psychic or not. Except that she tells things to Raylan that he relates later to Joyce that make him wonder if he might have said something. ‘The fact is she knew I was a coalminer from Kentucky, I might
have said something.’ Then she calls somebody else. She says, ‘There’s a
guy here looking for Harry Arno and he’s a federal officer.’ And the guy
she’s talking to says, ‘What kind of a federal officer?’ She says, ‘I don’t
know.’ He says, ‘What do you mean, didn’t he show you his I.D., his
credentials? Why do you say he’s a federal officer?’ She says, ‘He is, that’s
why.’ And at the end of their conversation, she says, ‘He shot someone.’
He says, ‘well, what, he told you about that?’ She says, ‘No.’ She was
reading him using psychometry where she holds his hand. She says, ‘No, I
felt the hand that held the gun.’

MAY: Have you got a title for this yet?

LEONARD: Out of Sight [The book was eventually published as Riding The
Rap; Leonard used the alternative title for a later novel]. I want her to predict
something half way through the book that either comes true or it doesn’t.

MAY: What films do you have in production at the moment? The last
time we spoke you said that Jim McBride was possibly doing Get Shorty.
Did that happen?

LEONARD: No. Danny DeVito optioned Get Shorty. So Danny DeVito
has hired Barry Sonnenfeld (Addams Family) to direct it. He hired Scott
Frank to write the screenplay. He wrote Dead Again, the Kenneth Branagh
film, and Little Man Tate. Anyway, they got the script and Danny DeVito
wanted to play Chili Palmer. I thought, my God, everybody’s gonna have
to be pretty short if he’s the normal sized guy in the film. And then he’s
got so much to do he said, ‘No, let’s just get somebody else.’ He’ll produce
it and they want to get Gene Hackman for Harry. It moved from Tri-Star to
MGM. MGM want to shoot the picture this summer and their first choice
for Chili Palmer was Dustin Hoffman. It doesn’t make sense and yet, in a
way, it does. In the book, Chili Palmer is telling this short actor about this
role, which is himself. And the short actor is trying to imitate Chili Palmer, y’know, look at me, type of thing. So in that sense, it makes sense. Anyway Dustin Hoffman wants an awful lot of money and MGM doesn’t want to pay him that much. They’re not basing the production on whether or not they go with him. They’ll get somebody else. I don’t know if they’re still dealing with him or not. That’s fairly likely to get started.

McBride was originally involved in *Pronto*. A producer, Dick Byrne, and Viacom and somebody else got together and optioned *Pronto* and Jim McBride was involved for a while but I don’t think he is now. *Killshot* is at Fox and there’s still a possibility there, I don’t know. The guy who directed *Reservoir Dogs*, Quentin Tarantino, and also who wrote *True Romance*. Have you seen it? It’s something. It’s got a lot of stuff in it. It’s got Quentin’s mark on it. He’s got a line in it, one guy says to another, “Who you think you are? Charlie Bronson? Mr. Majestyk?” And it’s set in Detroit even though I don’t think it was shot there. It doesn’t look like Detroit. But Tarantino told my agent that he did that as a tribute to me. Tarantino was arrested for shoplifting when he was a teenager and he was trying to steal a book of mine, *The Switch*. They didn’t do anything to him. They just grounded him. They wouldn’t let him out of the house for a while and as soon as he got out he bought the book. And then he had this success with *Reservoir Dogs* which he directed when he was 28 years old. Now he’s out in Hollywood and he’s a star and everybody wants him to do something and he reads *Rum Punch* and it has three of the same characters who were in *The Switch*.

MAY: Ordell, Louis and Melanie.

LEONARD: Yeah. So he goes to see my agent and he wants to make a deal. He wants to do it. But they couldn’t get together. He didn’t have
enough backing. We were willing to go along with him. But he’s young and talking to a lot of people and he finally decided that he better not commit to it because it would be a couple of years before he could come to it. Now he’s got his own production company. He’s already directed another picture that he’s cutting. He and my agent are about the same age. My agent just turned 33. He went to him, said, ‘Look, you like Elmore Leonard books. I’ve got two that are available now and I’ve got four more that will be available in the next few months, how about this? You option all of them. You do one or two, hire a director but you supervise all of them. You write one or two, let somebody else write it and do it. Low budget pictures, four, or five million bucks.’ And he jumped at the idea. Well, he jumped but I don’t know what’s going to happen. And I’d be willing to do it because there are books of mine that have stalled, you’re sure they’re going to be made but nothing happens. With Laura Ziskin who optioned Killshot, had it at Fox, then Tri-Star, then they’re looking for a director, they think they have a director, then they ask me what I think of that director, a woman, and I don’t think that much of her, but they didn’t either so now we don’t want her and now we want a woman to rewrite. They had a good script by a guy named Chris Gerolmo, who did Mississippi Burning, they want a woman to rewrite the script to get more of the Carmen, the female lead in it. But that individual option is up soon. It may be up already. Killshot, that’s been optioned ever since it was released. Touch has been optioned ever since I wrote the thing. Unbelievable. Finally Warner Brothers bought it for Bruce Willis but he let it go.

MAY: Willis decided not to bleed on screen?

LEONARD: I can’t believe that he ever wanted to, that he ever had the nerve.
MAY: What about Maximum Bob? Wasn’t that due to come out as a mini-series?

LEONARD: Yeah, that was going to be four hours with Westlake writing, which he did. Finally they got approval from ABC who was gonna do it and then ABC backed out. But here’s Ulu Grosbard and Donald Westlake going to see this little girl, who was one of the production heads at ABC. She’s telling them what she wants changed, y’know. And they have to turn around and go and make the changes if they wanna do it. Well, they make some of them. I don’t believe they really followed out her instructions. But finally ABC said, no. They’d rather do true crime. True crime or the disease of the week. So the option was picked up and renewed, I can’t think of the name of the production company. It’s still in development. But y’know when you read about a movie and you find out that this thing’s been kicking around for eight years or so. It’s taken that long with all the drafts and the rewrites and so on. I knew a guy who was first hired to do Schindler’s List, Kurt Luedtke, he wrote Out of Africa, and he’s a good screenwriter and he spent a year on Schindler’s List. Every time I’d see him, I say, ‘Are you still on Schindler’s List, why don’t you just write it?’ So finally he gave it up. He didn’t care for the character and I was surprised because from what I’ve known about the character it’s the perfect kind to have, you don’t know if the guy’s good or bad. You don’t know the guy’s motives.

MAY: And it would seem to be the right sort of material for some of the work he’s done with Sydney Pollack.

LEONARD: Yes, so then Spielberg hired Steve Zaillian to write it, who’s also a director, and he got the script he wanted. I saw Luedtke right after the picture came out. It wasn’t out yet but he’d seen it and I said,
what do you think of it? This was before it exploded and we see how big it is. He said, oh, it’s not about Schindler, it’s about the holocaust. I said, but he’s in the middle of it, you gotta see what his motivation is. And he said, I think you should see it, it’s a good picture. He was very reluctant to show any enthusiasm.

I did a script, did I tell you, last year with Billy Friedkin. Paramount had asked me to rewrite a script they had that was not unlike Basic Instinct, which had, that week, made $155 million gross. They had one kinda like it where a cop falls in love with a woman who’s involved in crime. And I said, no I don’t want to do it. But Friedkin was involved and he called and said, why don’t we do our own? So we talked it out over the phone and I wrote one set in Florida. He liked the idea, but he said, ‘I don’t like all these Cubans. Get rid of the Cubans. And the money laundering, and cocaine.’ Well, there was no cocaine in it but the money came from cocaine. There’s a guy who was laundering money for the Cubans and he has money sitting in his house at a particular time and by morning it won’t be there. There’s two and a half million dollars or something that he will send somewhere and by the time it comes back and gets into some land development it’s been cleaned and pressed. So he didn’t like that. He said, ‘Get rid of the Cubans and the money laundering.’ So I got rid of that. No, I didn’t get rid of the Cubans. Oh, and he said, ‘Play down the cop.’ Even though the cop was supposed to be falling in love with the woman. So I added a burglar. A burglar was in the house the night when these guys were with the woman, it’s an inside job, she opens the door for the guys to come in and pick up the money. But there happens to be a burglar in the house that night who we have met just before, posed as a carpet cleaner going through the house to see what he wanted and to unlock a window or something, a French door. So that he’s in the house when all this happens.
Friedkin likes the burglar, he likes the girl, he likes the bad guy that comes in to get the money, but he doesn’t like the Cubans. ‘Get rid of the Cubans and the money laundering.’

So I went up to see him but in the meantime he’s married Sherry Lansing. Right in the middle of this deal Tartikoff leaves as Head of Production and Friedkin’s wife comes in as Head of Production. I said, ‘What happens to our deal now?’ They said, ‘Are you kidding, his wife’s running the studio!’ So I said, ‘Here’s the problem, here’s this guy, who’s kind of a wealthy guy, but if he’s not laundering money, what’s he doing with two or three million bucks sitting there in his house, cash?’ And Friedkin said, ‘Let’s think about it.’ I said, ‘My least favourite thing to do is to sit with someone and plot, why don’t I call you.’ So I left and my agent, Michael Siegel said, ‘Why don’t you just forget about it? You’ve gotten paid up to date, you’ve made enough money on this thing. Go write your book.’ I said, ‘I’m gonna give it three hours and see if I could think of why the money would be sitting there.’ So, back to the hotel. The next morning I woke up at five o’clock and I was gonna give it three hours. I was gonna read but I decided to just think instead. And it came in five minutes. Then I had to wait three hours to call Friedkin. So I called him up and I said, ‘There’s a televangelist who uses ESP powers. Open with him. He’s healing this little girl who stutters and he’s trying to get this little girl to say, “Praise Jesus”. And she can’t say it. So he lays his hands on her and does all this stuff. And she says, Praise Jesus. And there’s a collection. And the camera watches where the money goes. Some of it goes out to his limo. And the limo goes home and then you see the bag of money go in. There’s the money.’ He says, ‘I love it! Write it!’ It took about three weeks and I sent it to him. In the meantime he has started production on Blue Chips, a basketball picture. So I haven’t heard from him since then.
MAY: And what was that going to be called?

LEONARD: I had a good title for it too, Stinger. The guy who engineers this scam, the heist, is a fishing guy out on Lake Okeechobee and he designs fishing lures. And one of his lures is a stinger. And there’s some reference to the girl as a stinger. She’s the lure. He’s finished with Blue Chips which opened last week in the States but now I hear that he’s doing something with Peter Blatty, the Exorcist guy. So it’s OK with me. There’s so much of that done. They pay a lot of money for a script that just never gets off the shelf. But this is different. I used to write scripts like that for fifty thousand, a hundred thousand. This is six hundred thousand bucks and it’s just sitting there. They don’t care.

Brandon Tartikoff moved. He went to New Orleans because he was in an automobile wreck with his daughter. She was severely injured with head injuries. He took her to New Orleans where there was some specialist. The story was that he quit at Paramount because he wanted to spend time with his daughter. He was being eased out anyway. So he calls me up from New Orleans, says, ‘I got an idea for a series. It’s called House of the Rising Sun and I have the rights to the song. A prostitute is murdered in New Orleans. She works in The House of the Rising Sun, and da-da-da-da-da-da-da. Do you wanna write it?’ I said, ‘No.’ I’ll bet he was surprised. Y’know, it’s funny. When he called, I was out. I had gone to the grocery store. My stepdaughter who was there, this is right after my wife, Joan, had died, and she was still there. My step daughter answered the phone. I got back from the store and she said, ‘Brandon Tartikoff called. Here’s the number.’ So I called him. He said, ‘You went to the grocery store, huh?’ He said, ‘God, isn’t that nice, in the middle of the day you can just go to the grocery store.’ I said, ‘Well, I do that all the time.’ He’s probably never been to a grocery store. He thought that would be a real
hoot to be able to do that. He said, ‘Who do you think would write this?’ I said, ‘I dunno, how about James Lee Burke? He lives down there.’

MAY: Does he? I thought he lived up in Missoula.

LEONARD: He does now but he’s South-West Louisiana. He knows that Cajun stuff.

MAY: It used to be that South Florida, Miami, South Beach, that was your territory, yours and Willeford’s. But these days they’re even setting TV series down there. Have you seen the one called South Beach?

LEONARD: No.

MAY: It’s not very good.

LEONARD: I was watching a little bit of the beach thing with all the life guards, Baywatch. I thought this guy’s a little old to be making four dollars an hour.

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