

Owen Wister Award Winner: Elmore Leonard

By Larry D. Sweazy

Born in New Orleans in 1925, Elmore “Dutch” Leonard learned to travel early on. His father was a site locator for General Motors, and the family moved about from Dallas, Oklahoma City, Memphis, and back and forth to Detroit, before settling permanently in Detroit in 1934. The times were ripe for a boy with an active imagination. Bonnie and Clyde were on the loose in Texas. Western serials, with William Boyd starring as Hopalong Cassidy, showed weekly at the local movie palace. And the Detroit Tigers won the World Series in the autumn of the same year the Leonard family arrived in Michigan.

The desire to write fiction came early on to Elmore Leonard. “I wrote a play in the 5th grade, and it was based on *All Quiet on the Western Front*. I just made up a scene that could take place in the classroom. I got to decide who were the Germans and who were the Americans.”

But the real work, the real desire to write, needed a spark...a spark that would have to wait until after he graduated from the University of

Detroit Jesuit High School in 1943. “I wrote just what I needed to in high school, compositions and things like that,” Leonard says of his high school days.

The nickname “Dutch” also came out of his high school years.

“I needed a nickname and for some reason out of the blue the guy sitting next to me said, ‘Let’s call you



Dutch Leonard,’ because there was this knuckle-baller named Dutch Leonard still pitching with the Washington Senators. He was in his 40s, and that was the name I got. Almost overnight I was Dutch throughout the school.”

After graduating high school, World War II was raging, and Leonard enlisted in the United States Navy. He served for three years with the Seabees, the construction battalion of the Navy, in the South Pacific. “I didn’t write at all in the Navy.”

The writing spark turned into a flame, then a full fledged fire, when Leonard enrolled at the University of Detroit, a member of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, after returning home from the Navy.

It was at the university that Leonard began to write short stories—mainly at the prompting of an English professor who said, “If you enter a writing contest, I’ll give you a B.” He submitted to the contest, sponsored by a local writers’ club at the university, but did not win.

“The commercial approach toward writing is something that has always

inspired me,” Leonard says about writing for compensation, grades or otherwise, that took hold in college. “Another break came when a professor told me if I wrote short stories and turned them in to him, I didn’t have to show up for class, just go into his office once a week and talk about what I wrote.”

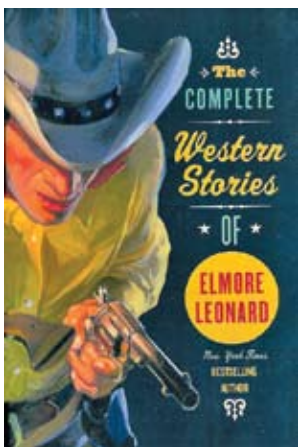
Before graduating from the University of Detroit, Leonard went to work for the Campbell-Ewald Advertising Agency as copywriter in 1949, and wrote fiction in his off time. He graduated from the University of Detroit in 1950 with a degree in English and philosophy.

Among his early influences, Leonard says “Mickey Spillane was starting to catch on in the late 40s. I liked him a lot, and thought he could really write. I read a lot of different writers, and Hemingway was one of my favorites. I copied him. Typed him right out of the book word for word, but I quit doing that once I figured out Hemingway didn’t have much of a sense of humor.”

Leonard’s inclusion of humor in his Westerns would be one of the ingredients that would make his writing stand out in the early 1950s. Leonard also discovered Richard Bissell, author of *The Pajama Game* and *Say, Darling*. “In his books nobody was trying to be funny,” Leonard says about Bissell, “but they were all funny because of the way they talked.”

Married and in the process of starting a family that would bring five children into the fold, Leonard began to submit short stories to magazines in earnest.

“There were a dozen different pulps for the Westerns, and the slick magazines ran serials, too, like *Collier’s* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. I decided



this was a good market, and I liked Westerns a lot, so I didn't see anything wrong with making as much money as I could."

The third story Leonard sent out sold to *Argosy* magazine. The story, "Trail of the Apache," appeared in the December, 1951 issue, and began Elmore Leonard's professional writing career.

Literary agent Marguerite Harper contacted him shortly after the publication of "Trail of the Apache," and he signed with her. Her immediate advice: "Don't write any stories set on the border." Leonard ignored her. "I wanted to write about the border because that's where all the action was. Once you figured out how to write the Mexican's speaking, hint at the language, it was a great setting."

He quickly followed up on his success with *Argosy*, and published six short stories in 1952 in *Dime Western Magazine*, *10 Story Western Magazine*, and *Zane Grey's Western Magazine*.

"I loved writing Westerns. Writing them was a great way to learn to write. They had a beginning, a middle, and an end. And with short stories, you're putting your words down on paper, you're making pictures. You have to

develop a style."

Leonard often refers to his style as his "sound," a skill he built upon in the early days of his writing Westerns. He would



two run into all sorts of trouble at the border and across it, and Leonard obviously chose not to heed his agent's advice with his first novel concerning the border setting.

later come to be called "The Dickens of Detroit," and considered a master of writing dialogue.

Houghton Mifflin in 1953 published *The Bounty Hunters*, Leonard's first novel. In it the Arizona Department Adjutant sends two men to find an Apache renegade, Soldado Viejo, who is hiding out in Mexico. Dave Flynn is experienced and wise to the ways of his prey, while Lieutenant R. D. Bowers is green behind the ears. The

One of the sources of Leonard's early research was the magazine *Arizona Highways*. Each issue was devoted to specific topics such as winter birds, horses, or the seasons of wildflowers. Scenic photography graced the pages of the slick magazine, bringing a clear picture of the West to a young Leonard who was now living in the Detroit suburbs.

He quickly followed his sale of *The Bounty Hunters* with more Western novels: *The Law at Randado*, *Escape from Five Shadows*, *Last Stand at Sabre River*, and *Hombre*.

Leonard also continued to write short stories as well, and Hollywood soon came calling. The short story, "Moment of Vengeance," originally published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, was turned into a screenplay and aired on the CBS television show, *Schlitz Playhouse of the Stars*, on September 28, 1956. The episode starred Ward Bond and Gene Nelson.

In the March 1953 issue, *Dime Western Magazine* published "Three Ten to Yuma," a short story about a down-on-his-luck rancher who escorts an



outlaw to the prison train. “Three Ten to Yuma” was made into the movie, *3:30 To Yuma*, in 1957 starring Glenn Ford as the outlaw Ben Wade, and Van Heflin as Dan Evans, the rancher. The movie was directed by Delmer Daves. Halsted Welles, who wrote the screenplay, had also been a screen writer for *Schlitz Playhouse of the Stars*, a few years before.

In 1957 another movie came from one of Leonard’s short stories. “The Captives” appeared in the 1955 February issue of *Argosy*, and was renamed for the silver screen as *The Tall T*, which was released by Columbia Pictures. Burt Kennedy adapted the story into the screenplay for the film directed by Budd Boetticher, which starred Randolph Scott, Richard Boone, and Maureen O’Sullivan. The plot featured another down-on-his-luck cowboy. This time, a cowhand falls for a married woman while they are being held hostage.

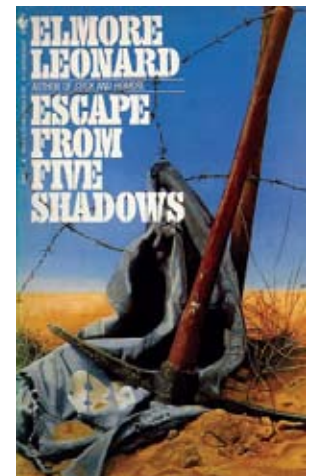
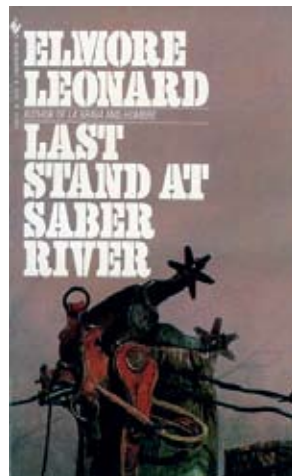
For both *3:30 To Yuma* and *The Tall T*, Leonard was excited to see his stories on the movie screen, but “saw how easily Hollywood could screw up a simple story.”

3:30 To Yuma was re-made in 2007 with Russell Crowe as Ben Wade and Christian Bale as Dan Evans. Halsted Welles, Michael Brandt, and Derek Hass are credited as screen writers, and the re-make was directed by James Mangold.

David Denby, a film critic for *The New Yorker*, wrote that the remake “is faster, more cynical, and more brutal” than the original starring Glenn Ford and Van Heflin.

The *Christian Science Monitor* also reviewed the 2007 film. Peter Rainer wrote, “what Alfred Hitchcock once said about thrillers also applies to Westerns: The stronger the bad guy, the better the film. By that measure, *3:10 to Yuma* is excellent.”

Roger Ebert said of the remake, “James Mangold’s *3:10 to Yuma* restores the wounded heart of the Western and rescues it from the morass of pointless violence. The Western in its



glory days was often a morality play, a story about humanist values penetrating the lawless anarchy of the frontier.”

Of both renditions of *3:10 to Yuma*, Leonard says, “In the first version they added about twenty minutes to the front end, to show the robbery and all. Otherwise, it was the story right up to the ending. Glenn Ford was the star, and he had to renounce being an outlaw in the end—so the audience would like him. The endings to both versions made no sense at all to me. I just had the good guy throw the bad guy on the train.”

In the early 1960s, Westerns on television were gaining in popularity, and the fiction market was drying up, so in 1961 Leonard quit working for Campbell-Ewald Advertising to write full time, admitting that he did a little freelance advertising copywriting, but stayed as far away from car ads as possible. He says writing the Chevrolet ads for Campbell-Ewald, “Drove me crazy, because you had to write real cute then. I could write truck ads, but I couldn’t write convertible ads at all, so I got out of that.”

He also began writing scripts for industrial movies during this period in order to make a living and care for his family. He made movies about air pollution, geography, and history, mostly for *Encyclopedia Britannica*. “I made about a dozen or so of those movies. They were about twenty-seven minutes long, about the Danube, settling the Mississippi Valley, the French and

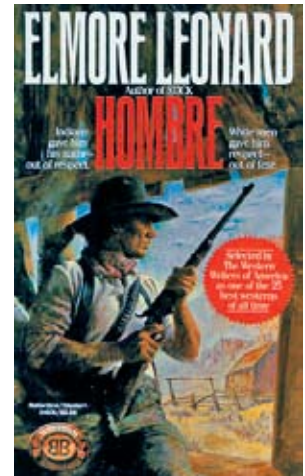
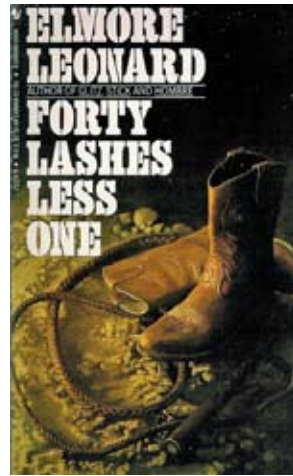
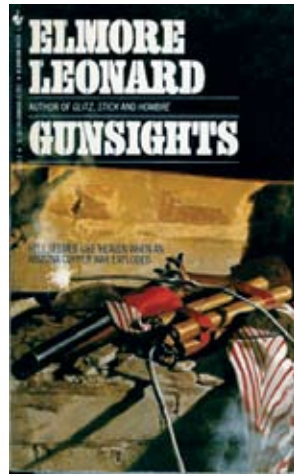
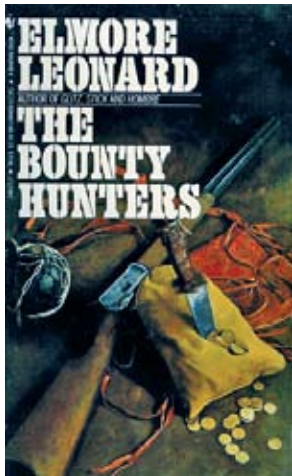
Indian War, Puerto Rico, and others. The experience with the industrial movies helped when I went to Hollywood and did some screen writing, but I didn’t like that much. There were too many meetings, and not enough writing. You could spend all day talking about back story, and I didn’t think the back story needed to be in the movie. Stick to the story.”

He published *Hombre* in 1961, which would prove to be a breakthrough for Leonard once the movie was made in 1967 with Paul Newman in the lead. *Hombre* was written in 1959 and took two years to sell. His advance was about a quarter of what he was previously being paid, due to the tightening in the market. Ballantine Books published *Hombre* as a paperback original. The cover price was thirty-five cents.

In *Hombre*, Leonard once again tells the story of the Apaches. In it John Russell has been raised by the Apaches, but is on his way to try and live his life as a white man. He is on a stagecoach, and once the other riders learn that Russell was raised by Apaches, they want nothing to do with him—until outlaws rob them and leave them to walk out of, or die, in the desert. Then Russell becomes the passengers’ only hope.

The movie, directed by Martin Ritt, starred Frederic March, Richard Boone, Diane Cilento, Cameron Mitchell, Barbara Rush, and Martin

LEONARD (continued on page 22)



Writers on Leonard

I met Elmore Leonard at one of the early WWA conventions and was impressed because I had read some of his superior Westerns. I became even more impressed over the years as he shifted gears and became one of the most popular writers of crime fiction. Few have handled both genres as successfully. His Westerns remain among the best of their time.

—*Elmer Kelton, seven-time Spur Award winner*

What I admire most about Elmore Leonard is how much his spartan prose reveals. No foo-foo writing, no excess, nothing outrageous or over the top. His dialogue never sounds staged, yet just by reading what his characters are saying, you know exactly what's going through their minds. That's tough to do. Whenever I get in a bind writing fiction, I'll read one of his short stories or novels – crime or Western, doesn't matter – and try to figure out how he does it. The catch is: Nobody can do it except Elmore Leonard. He's a master, an inspiration, and a national treasure.

—*Johnny D. Boggs, current WWA President, and three-time Spur Award winner*

Dutch is among the finest writers because he's always understood that any story – Western or otherwise – is about the people, not the trappings.

—*Brian Garfield, author of Death Wish*

Elmore Leonard's Westerns are like a good steak: all meat and no fat. Dialogue is crisp, characters are well-defined, and he holds the reader's attention to the end. I only wish he'd write more of them.

—*Michael F. Blake, author of Code of Honor and Hollywood and the OK Corral*

No one writing in the 1950s and 1960s produced traditional Western fiction of a more consistently high quality than Elmore Leonard. His novels *Hombre* and *Valdez is Coming* are indisputable classics, as is his now famous short story, "Three-Ten to Yuma." He's an excellent choice for the 2009 Owen Wister Award.

—*Bill Pronzini, Spur Award winning author of "Crucifixion River"*

Whether he's describing a deal gone bad on the mean streets of Detroit, or a stand off in the unforgiving West, Elmore Leonard is the most cinematic of American writers. With his remarkable choice of words, he creates visions in the mind's eye that are as vivid as any on a movie screen.

—*C. Courtney Joyner, screen writer and author*

From **The Tall T** to **Hombre** and **Valdez Is Coming**, Elmore Leonard has stripped the Western to its existential essentials. Like all his writing, his Western stories are tight, compact, and primal, with a narrative force that has not lost its power to surprise and entertain.

—*Kirk Ellis, Emmy and Spur Award winning screen writer*

Dutch Leonard is America. He has taken every development in our culture, old and new, and used it to turn his books into Technicolor. He reinvented the West, and having accomplished that, he turned his attention to the American Century and reinvented that. At the moment the 21st is under renovation, and guess who's the contractor?

—*Loren D. Estleman, five-time Spur Award winner, and author of The Branch and the Scaffold*

Balsam. Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank, Jr. wrote the screenplay.

The success of *Hombre* allowed Leonard to write full-time. Before switching almost exclusively to writing contemporary crime novels, he wrote *Valdez is Coming* in 1970 and *Forty Lashes Less One* in 1972.

Leonard considers *Valdez is Coming* as his favorite Western. He says, “I felt a difference in how I should write. I’d turned a corner. There were parts of the book that had nothing to do with the plot, but was all about the character.”

The movie **Valdez is Coming** was made in 1971, and starred Burt Lancaster, Susan Clark, and Jon Cypher. It was considered one of the best contemporary Westerns of the time.

Today at age eighty-four, Elmore Leonard is still writing, still striving at being a better writer. When asked what advice he would give to writers just starting out, he said, “Find somebody you like, and copy them, like I did with Hemingway. After a while

you have to quit that, and find your own sound.” His greatest advice may be found in *Elmore Leonard’s 10 Rules for Writing* (see sidebar), an eighty-nine page guide, published by William Morrow & Company in 2007. In this short writing manual, Leonard touches on everything from starting a story with the weather, to how he feels about prologues, and the use of regional dialects. It is a practical guide that is applicable to Westerns, mysteries, or any form of good storytelling.

Of his writing habits, Leonard says, “I write every day when I’m writing a novel. Some weekends, a few hours every day. I want to stay with the story. If I miss a day or two, it’s difficult to get the rhythm of it. I’m lucky to get four clean pages a day. They’re clean until the next day. I don’t look at this as work. It’s not a test of any kind, any kind of proof of what I can do. I have a good time.”

He prefers to write in third person as opposed to first person. “I don’t want to be stuck with one character’s

viewpoint because there are too many viewpoints. And, of course, the bad guys’ viewpoints are a lot more fun.”

In 1982 Leonard published “The Tonto Woman,” a Western short story in *Roundup—An anthology of Great Stories by the Western Writers of America*, edited by Stephen Overholser.

The story revolves around a white woman who was kidnapped from her home by Apaches, then traded to Mojave Indians. She is found by her husband after eleven years, but he decides she is not fit to mix with society, so he keeps her in a shack in the desert. She is befriended by a Mexican, and ultimately learns she has control over her own life.

“The Tonto Woman” was made into a short film in 2008. It was directed by Daniel Barber, and the screenplay was written by Joe Shrapnel. The film was nominated for an Oscar in the short film category, and is Elmore Leonard’s most recent Western to grace the movie screen.

Asked what keeps him going after over fifty years of writing professionally, Leonard says, “It’s [writing] the most satisfying thing I can imagine doing, and I’m still trying to make it better.”

His crime novels have defined an era. Works in crime fiction, such as *Get Shorty*, *Jackie Brown*, and *Out of Sight*, have made Elmore Leonard a household name. But his Westerns are the foundation of an amazing career. They have helped shape a generation and preserve a genre. That is a legacy of which any writer could be proud.

Larry D. Sweazy’s first novel, The Rattlesnake Season, will be published by Berkley in October, 2009. He won the 2005 Spur award for Best Short Fiction.

Elmore Leonard’s Ten Rules for Writing

Never open a book with weather.

Avoid prologues.

Never use a verb other than “said” to carry dialogue.

Never use an adverb to modify the verb “said.”

Keep your exclamation points under control.

Never use the words “suddenly” or “all hell broke loose.”

Use regional dialects, patois, sparingly.

Avoid detailed descriptions of characters.

Don’t go into great detail describing places and things.

Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip.

Elmore Leonard's West

"Under the thatched roof ramada that ran the length of the agency office, Travisin slouched in a canvas-back chair, his boots propped against one of the support posts. His gaze took in the sunbeaten, gray adobe buildings, all one-story structures, that rimmed the vacant quadrangle. It was a glaring, depressing scene of sun on rock, without a single shade tree or graceful feature to redeem the squat ugliness. There was not a living soul in sight."

—*Trail of the Apache*, 1951

For a few minutes he moved the scissors deftly over the brown hair, saying nothing, until he finished trimming. Then he placed the implements on the shelf and studied a row of bottles there.

"Wet it down?"

"I suppose."

"You can use it," Willet said, shaking a green liquid into his hand. "That sun makes the flowers grow...but your hair isn't flowers."

"What about Apaches?" Flynn said.

"What about them?"

"They don't wear hats. They have better hair than anybody."

"Sun don't affect a man that was born in hell," Willet said, and began rubbing the tonic into Flynn's scalp.

—*The Bounty Hunters*, 1953

Charlie Prince stood at the corner of the station house with a pistol in each hand. Then he moved around carefully between the two men and the train. "Throw it far away, and unhitch your belt," he said.

"Do what he says," Kidd said. "They've got you."

The others, six of them, were strung out in the dimness of the platform shed. Grim faced, stubbles of beard, hat brims low. The man nearest Prince spat tobacco lazily.

—*Three-Ten to Yuma*, 1953

When Mr. Mendez spoke to him you believed it all the more. He stepped closer to John Russell's roan horse, and I remember the first thing he said.

He said, "Hombre."

Russell didn't say anything. He just looked at Mr. Mendez, though you couldn't see his eyes in the shadow of his hat brim.

"Which name today?" Mr. Mendez said.

"Which do you want?"

—*Hombre*, 1961

Bob Valdez arrived at the Maricopa pasture about noon. He was riding shotgun on the Hatch and Hodges run from St. David. He swung down from the boot, holding his sawed-off shotgun in the air, as the stage edged past the whiskey wagon.

—*Valdez Is Coming*, 1970

If the ticket agent brought up the subject that would be different. He could be noncommittal. "You heard the old prison's closing, huh? Well after thirty-three years I imagine you won't be too sorry to see it happen." But the ticket agent didn't bring up the subject.

—*Forty Lashes Less One*, 1972

PANELS (from page 15)

werks has also launched a new line of illustrated children's action books under the Actionopolis imprint. Shannon is currently writing and producing on the animated series "World of Quest" for Warner Bros.



Thom Ross has illustrated many book covers including *Wild Women of the Old West*, edited by Glenda Riley and Richard Etulain, and the recent edition of Robert Utley's *Custer: Cavalier in Buckskin*. Ross has written and illustrated his own book, *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*. Among his unique pieces are cutouts that become landscape art. They include "Willie Mays: The Catch," "154 Nevermore," a piece that consisted of 154 plywood raven cutouts, which were nailed to fence posts along Highway 22, which runs from Teton Pass to the town of Jackson, Wyoming. He often deals with Western history subject matter including a plywood cutout version of "Custer's Last Stand," and most recently "Buffalo Bill and Indians on the Beach," installed in September of 2008 on Ocean Beach in San Francisco, and that attracted 40,000 viewers. The piece was Ross's interpretation of a photograph taken by the Buffalo Bill Wild West at the same location in 1908.

6 p.m. Buses loading for events at National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum

6:30-7 p.m. ... Spur Awards Reception at Museum

7 p.m. Spur Awards Banquet at Museum