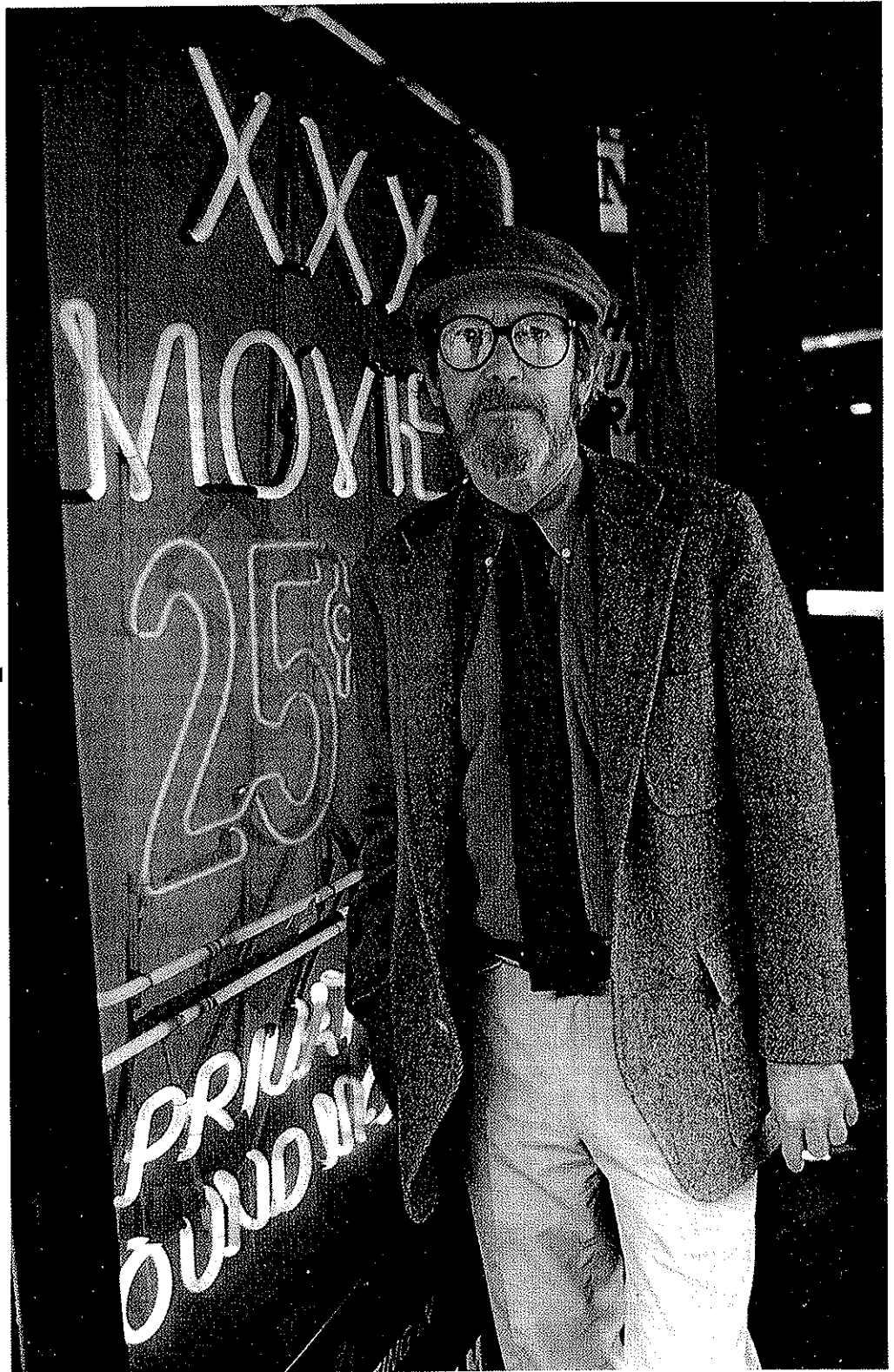


This Pen for Hire

Elmore Leonard
writes books.
Books that get
turned into
movies.
Movies like
Hombre, or
the new
Burt Reynolds
thriller, *Stick*.
He also writes
scripts.
Some work out.
Some don't.

Bill Kelley



Stephen King has often said the best of all possible worlds for an author who sells his books to Hollywood is when "they buy the rights, pay you half a million dollars, for some reason never make the movie—but you get to keep the half million without the embarrassment of some awful film coming out."

For Elmore Leonard, things haven't worked out that way. The fifty-eight-year-old author, who began his career writing pulp Westerns in 1951, dwelt in relative obscurity for almost twenty years before critics began noticing him—and the big money started coming in. "I always depended on the movie sales, which were far more lucrative than my publisher's advances, to support my family," he says. "And the first few movies made from my Westerns—*3:10 to Yuma*, *The Tall T*, and *Hombre*—were quite good."

The son of a General Motors executive, Leonard was born in New Orleans but grew up in Detroit; he first worked as a copywriter for a Detroit advertising agency that handled the auto industry. During the fifties, Leonard rose at 5:00 A.M. each day to spend two hours writing fiction before leaving for his job at the agency. From 1950 to 1959, Leonard sold countless short stories to the two-cents-a-word pulp magazines like *Dime Western* and *Zane Grey's Western*; he also published five novels—one of which, *Hombre*, was selected as one of the twenty-five best western novels of all time by the Western Writers of America.

Leonard finally quit his agency job, and from 1961 to 1965 wrote history films for Bill Deneen, then an independent producer under contract to Encyclopedia Britannica Films. "They ran about twenty-four minutes, cost \$10,000 each, and I got \$1,000. They had titles like *Frontier Boy*—in which a kid would watch his mother make candles and soap and crap like that. That's how I learned the craft of writing a screenplay."

Leonard's literary reputation rests on the succession of taut, confident, unpretentious crime novels he began writing in 1974. Critics have called him a descendant of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. However, Leonard protests, "I'm not like Chandler or Hammett at all. If I resemble anyone from that period, it's James M. Cain, who also had a lean, terse style. Actually, my literary influences are authors like Hemingway and John O'Hara."

During the seventies, he worked fitfully as a screenwriter on such diverse projects as *The Moonshine War*, *Joe Kidd*, and *Mr. Majestyk*. But with Leonard's recent success has come renewed interest from Hollywood. Last year, he collaborated with producer Jennings Lang and director-star Burt Reynolds on a screen version of his 1983 novel, *Stick*, about an ex-con's involvement with the Florida drug scene. (Originally scheduled for release in the summer of 1984, the film is now due in theaters sometime in early 1985.) Walter Mirisch plans to produce a film of Leonard's *La Brava*, which won this year's Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America.

Leonard lives in Birmingham, Michigan, with his second wife, Joan; he says he does not shun Hollywood, but, rather, tries to remain "where my family, my friends, and my roots are. And I do have some close friends in Hollywood, notably Jennings Lang and Walter Mirisch." When this interview was conducted in August, Leonard was rewriting his *La Brava* script, a task he described as "laborious." He added, "Rewriting a script is about as exciting as laying tile, and trying to work in a little embroidery now and then."

Question: You've just seen the movie version of *Stick*. What do you think?

Elmore Leonard: I read somewhere that Bernard Malamud didn't leave his apartment for three weeks after *The Natural* opened—so I'm thinking maybe I should enter a Trappist monastery.

Question: It's that bad?

Leonard: It's just not what I wrote—not my book, not my screenplay. The tone is all wrong. The actors almost deliver their lines with a wink, then wait for a reaction, as if it's a comedy. Oddly enough, Burt Reynolds's performance may be the best thing in it, even though his casting as Stick was the first objection from people who read the novel. But I wrote him a four-page letter about his *direction* after I saw it.

Question: I read your script, and it was pretty close to the novel.

Leonard: Oh, I recognized my lines throughout the movie. Of course, they were elaborated on. I guess Burt thought his actors were so *funny* he just let 'em go, as in *Stroker Ace* or *The Cannonball Run*. But *Stick* is not a comedy.

He also missed what *Stick* himself is all

about. There's an early scene at a waterway bar in Fort Lauderdale, and in the *book*, its whole purpose is to show that Stick is out of step with what's going on now, after seven years in prison. He's not up on anything, even the fact that women are so much more forward now. So [in the book] when this tourist comes on to the barmaid, she doesn't give a damn; she says, "Don't touch what you can't afford," and leaves it at that. But *Stick* sees this, he doesn't understand, plus the book makes the point there's all this *noise* everywhere, from the drawbridge ringing up the intercoastal waterway, from the crowd and music in the bar, so *Stick* overreacts and almost decks the guy. His buddy Rainy has to pull him aside and stop him. But in the *movie*, you've got this virginal, blonde barmaid who's like a timid little fawn cowering from this raucous backslapper coming on to her, and *Stick* is like her savior. It doesn't make the point at all that he's out of step with the world.



Opposite, Elmore Leonard does some fieldwork for one of his novels; above, Burt Reynolds as an ex-con looking for a score in Leonard's *Stick*.

Question: Do you think the audience expects a certain personality when it pays to see Burt Reynolds—or any big star—in a movie?

Leonard: Sure. I don't mean to put down stars. I like stars. But character actors are more likely to deliver my lines with their original sound and interpretation than are stars. The character actor plays the part, and if he's any good he *is* the part, and

you're not aware of him acting. The star is apt to change the part to suit his personality. He may deliver the lines in a way that brings cheers from the audience, but he'll never deliver them the way my guy does—because my guy is not a superstar. He's not even sure how he got into the mess he finds himself in.

Question: Surely there's a lot more to working with stars than how they deliver dialogue.

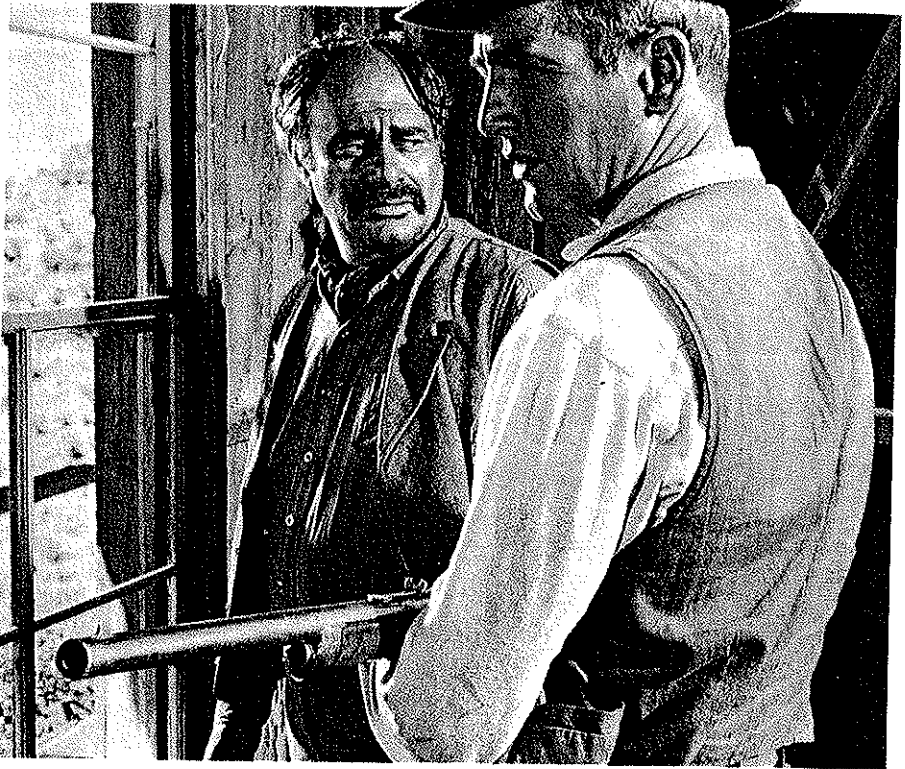
Leonard: When I was working on *Joe Kidd*, there was a point when I was doing rewrites at Universal while they were shooting. About five in the evening, John Sturges, the director, would come in and look at the pages, then Clint Eastwood would come in, and we'd pass the pages to him, and he'd read them. Eastwood came to the part where he's facing John Saxon, who has several armed men standing behind him, and Eastwood's character says, "You're going back with me—either straight up or wrapped in canvas, you're going back." Eastwood looked at me and said, "Shouldn't I have my gun out when I say that?" and I told him, "No, I don't think that's necessary." And he said, "Yeah, but I'm not established yet as a gunfighter—I'm just a guide." And I said, "Well, no, I don't think you need to hold a gun on him." So then Eastwood turned to Sturges and asked him, "John, don't you think I should have my gun out in this scene?" and Sturges said, "No, I don't think so." Eastwood said, "Why not?" and Sturges said, "Because the audience has seen all your other pictures!" When I finally saw the movie, he held a gun on John Saxon. I thought *Joe Kidd* was an OK movie, no more than that, but my problem was not Clint at all, but Sturges's insistence on doing cute riffs from his *Magnificent Seven*, none of which I had written into *Joe Kidd*.

Question: Why haven't you worked with Eastwood since?

Leonard: *Mr. Majestyk* was originally written for him. He called me at home before *Joe Kidd* was released and said, "Can you work something up for me?" I said, "How about a melon grower in Colorado who saves a gangster's life in a shoot-out on a bus, in return for getting his crop in on time without interference from the local mob?" He liked that. I flew out to Carmel to meet with him, and we talked some more about it. Then my agent got into the act and told Eastwood he had one week to make up his mind. Eastwood balked at that and didn't pursue it. I guess *Mr. Majestyk* turned out fair, and I still get residual checks from it, but I wonder if I'd have been even a little excited by it if I saw it just as a moviegoer. There's not much to it. The Dell paperback, written *after* the screenplay, is better, because I worked up the characters more.

Question: *Joe Kidd* and *High Noon, Part II: The Return of Will Kane* were depar-

The star will never deliver lines the way my guy does—because my guy is not a superstar.



Photorevue

Leonard's acclaimed novel *Hombre* was made into a hit film with Martin Balsam and Paul Newman; below, Clint Eastwood starred in the Leonard-scripted *Joe Kidd*.

tures for you—Westerns written after you had left the genre behind for suspense.

Leonard: *High Noon, Part II* was done as a television movie for CBS. I needed the money—\$50,000—and at first it seemed like a good idea. Eventually I realized you can *never* do a belated sequel to a classic, because it's bound to suffer alongside the original. What got me was when Lee Majors, in Gary Cooper's role, has a bead on Pernell Roberts two hundred yards down a slope, while Pernell's shaving and lecturing his men on how you track somebody. In the script, Majors fires, misses, hits the mirror, and they all scatter. The way they filmed it, Majors can't shoot him, sort of in the back like that. So David Carradine takes the rifle, and then *he* can't shoot him either. So they just ride off. Well, it was a television Western—in a real movie, he would have just shot at him.

That's why I wrote *Hombre*, because of that "white flag" TV situation I'd seen a hundred times, while thinking, All he has to do is shoot that guy and his troubles are over. The first scene I wrote in the novel *Hombre*, which is also in the movie, is where Richard Boone walks up the hill and

says to Paul Newman and Martin Balsam, "OK—you got the gold, we got the water and the woman. You give us the gold, we'll give you the woman and some water, and we can all go home. Whaddaya say?" And Newman says to him, "I got a question." Boone looks over his shoulder as he's walking away and says, "Ask it." And Newman puts this big 50 Sharps rifle on him and says, "How you gonna get down the hill?" Boone says, "Now, *wait* a minute," and he starts to run, and Newman shoots him—twice. That's what it's all about: realism. Boone, incidentally, is the only actor who has delivered my lines exactly as I wrote them, accent and all, and he did it twice—in *Hombre* and *The Tall T*.

Question: You didn't write the screenplay for *Hombre*. Do you like the film?

Leonard: Yes, with minor reservations. I wrote it in 1959 and it took two years to sell; the market for Westerns had dried up, and publishers didn't like the idea that the hero got killed. My advance from the American publisher was \$1,250. Irving Ravetch and Martin Ritt saw an English hardcover of it—a real cheap edition; I was selling foreign rights then for, like, \$200—

and bought the screen rights for \$10,000, with Ravetch and Harriet Frank scripting it. Afterward, Ravetch said, "What else you got? Maybe lightning could strike twice." I thought, Some lightning—\$10,000.

Question: You didn't adapt *3:10 to Yuma* and *The Tall T*, your first two films, into screenplays either.

Leonard: I wasn't in that position, as a pulp Western novelist. The movies are considered classics thanks to their directors, Delmer Daves and Budd Boetticher. My only objection to *3:10 to Yuma* was the ending, in which Glenn Ford willingly goes with Van Heflin to make Ford less of a cold villain.

Question: It's a shame you and Sam Peckinpah never collaborated on a Western.

Leonard: He was set to direct one of my crime novels—*City Primeval*. It was going to be called "Hang Tough." Peckinpah and I met, and he scouted Detroit locations. The meeting wasn't good—he was sober, but he talked about his father, other movies, everything but the book—and when he asked a secretary to take notes, I thought, What is there to write down? The project fell apart after the 1981 Writers Guild strike, when United Artists was sold to MGM.

Question: *Hombre's* success was followed by *The Big Bounce*, a total disaster as a film.

Leonard: In every way. I wrote a crime novel because of the lousy advance I got for *Hombre*. It became the first property handled exclusively for me by H.N. Swanson—"Swanie," who's eighty-five years old now, has been an agent for, like, fifty years, and is kind of a legend for bringing Raymond Chandler up from \$150 a week to \$750 during his Hollywood period. He told Chandler, "I don't handle \$150 writers," and got him a \$600 a week raise. My New York literary agent went into the hospital, and Swanie, who had always handled the movie sales, took over completely. He read *The Big Bounce* and



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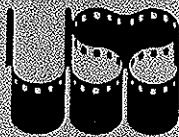
7th Annual National Short Film/Video Competition

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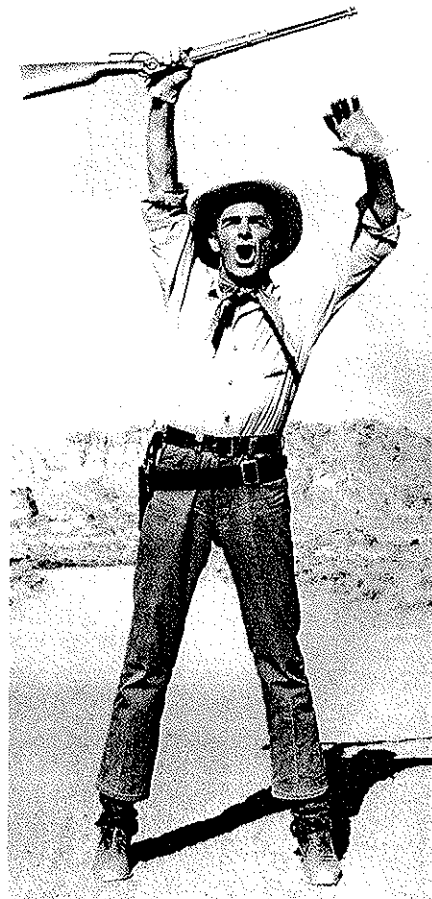
Discovery Premiere Competition For Independent Feature Films

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USA Film Festival



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Randolph Scott in *The Tall T*, made from an early Leonard pulp novel.

Photo: Ken

said, "Did you write this? Kiddo, I'm gonna make you rich"—and proceeded to get eighty-five rejections on both coasts. It was finally made by Warner Bros., but in Robert Dozier's screenplay, my misfits and antihero became characters out of *Peyton Place*. I saw it when it opened in New York; I came in fifteen minutes late. A half-hour later, a woman in front of me said to her husband, "This is the worst movie I ever saw in my life," and the three of us got up and walked out.

Question: Are you bitter about the books that were sold but not filmed—*Forty Lashes Less One*, which Richard Brooks was going to do, *City Primeval*, *The Switch*?

Leonard: No. One of the things I learned in Alcoholics Anonymous years ago was don't look back. Take life one day at a time.

Question: The first book you wrote after starting AA was the last property bought by Alfred Hitchcock—*Unknown Man No. 89*.

Leonard: The title refers to a vicious black guy who's a corpse on a slab in a morgue as the story begins. The hero's a process server, a recovering alcoholic, who meets the black guy's ex-wife, a blonde who's drunk, and then he falls off the wagon. I didn't meet Hitchcock, so I don't know what he saw in the novel when he bought it in '78—it's not a Hitchcock-type story.

Obviously, there was one scene he liked, because it's mentioned in his biography. A guy comes on to the woman while she's drunk, and she says, "Do you like sex? Do you like to travel?" and he says, "Yes!" and she tells him, "Then go take a flying fuck!" And I suspect he liked the title.

Question: You missed out with Hitchcock, Peckinpah, and Brooks. Are there any major directors you'd like to work with?

Leonard: Sure. Martin Scorsese, Sidney Lumet, any of those directors to whom the script is a major contribution. I'm always hoping the "sound" of my material will make it to the screen.

I'm not sure a really good movie can be made from my material without some very noticeable changes. I think it's too flat, as is for a film—though that works in the books 'cause you're interested in the characters and how they relate, talk, interact. I hate to say it should be more theatrical, but in my books, you're never biting your nails waiting to see what happens next. In a movie of this genre, you *are* waiting—it's suspense—and something's gotta be held back from the audience.

Question: How do you find the so-called realistic television cop shows, like "Hill Street Blues"?

Leonard: What bothers me about "Hill Street Blues" is it's too emotional, and there's too much going on. *No* precinct house, not even in downtown Detroit, has that much activity and is that busy. And cops don't cry or choke back tears or hug the victim when a street contact gets blown away—they're stoic, they hold it in, or they'd be crying every day. The most realistic recent cop show I've seen is "Barney Miller," because of the gritty routine and the characters—a black cop, who's dressed pretty nice, looking at a white cop wearing a purple jacket, a green shirt, and a yellow tie, and wondering where the hell he's at.

Question: On location for *Stick*, you had a fistful of rewrite instructions from Reynolds, and you told me, "See? If I lived in L.A., I'd be getting these all the time." Is that why you stay in Michigan?

Leonard: It gives me a detached perspective. In seventeen years of commuting between Detroit and Los Angeles, switching trades from novelist to screenwriter, often in mid-flight, I've learned two things—maybe three. Never allow anyone to pick you up at the airport, especially in a gray stretch limo—limos are seductive, they make you feel important, and the next thing you know you're taking yourself too seriously—and I've learned to love my agent, God bless him. Also, Raymond Chandler said when you go to Hollywood, wear your second-best suit, artistically speaking, but say thank you when you leave, because you may want to go back sometime. **E**

Bill Kelley is the television reporter for the *Fort Lauderdale News/Sun-Sentinel*.

