

# Martin Amis Interviews Elmore Leonard

at the Writers Guild Theatre, Beverly Hills,  
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**MARTIN AMIS:** We're welcoming here Elmore Leonard, also known as "Dutch." And rather less formally, the "Dickens of Detroit." It is an apt description, I think, because he is as close as anything you have here in America to a national novelist, a concept that almost seemed to die with Charles Dickens but has here been revived. I was recently in Boston visiting Saul Bellow, and on the shelves of the Nobel laureate, I spied several Elmore Leonards. Saul Bellow has a high, even exalted view of what literature is and does. For him, it creates the "quiet zone" where certain essences can nourish what he calls "our fair souls." This kind of literature of the Prousto-Nabokovian variety has recently been assigned the label "minority interest." There is patently nothing "minority interest" about Elmore Leonard. He is a popular writer in several senses. But Saul Bellow and I agreed that for an absolutely reliable and unstinting infusion of narrative pleasure in a prose miraculously purged of all false qualities, there was no one quite like Elmore Leonard.

I thought we might begin at the beginning, and talk about your early years as a writer and how you got started. In my experience, everyone at the age of 14 or 15 (or a bit earlier) starts to commune with themselves and to keep notes and to keep a diary. It's only the writers who go on with that kind of adolescent communion. Was it like that for you? Did you get the glimmer quite early on?

**ELMORE LEONARD:** Let me ask first: Do you think if I lived in Buffalo, I'd be Dickens?

**AMIS:** The "Balzac of Buffalo" perhaps.

**LEONARD:** I had a desire to write very early on but I didn't. I wrote just what I had to write in school compositions and things like that. It wasn't until I was in college after World War II that I wrote a couple of short stories. The first one because the English instructor said, "If you enter

this contest "--it was a local writers' club within the University of Detroit-- "I'll give you a B. " I've always been inspired in this somewhat commercial approach toward writing. Which is why I chose westerns to begin with. In 1951, I decided to look at the field. I looked at the market, and I saw westerns in the Saturday Evening Post, Collier's, almost everything from the Ladies Home Journal down through men's magazines and pulps. There were then at least a dozen pulps still in business, the better ones paying two cents a word. So I decided this was a market. What with all of these magazines buying short stories, this was the place to start--and because I liked western movies a lot, and I wanted to sell to Hollywood right away and make some money. I approached this with a desire to write but also to make as much money as I could doing it. I didn't see anything wrong with that at all. I think the third one sold, and that was it. After that, they've all sold since then. But then the market dried up, and I had to switch to crime.

**AMIS:** You were also, as I understand, writing commentaries for educational films and industrial movies.

**LEONARD:** Yes: industrial movies about air pollution, building highways, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, geography and history movies. I did about a dozen of those: the settlement of the Mississippi Valley, the French and Indian War, the Danube, Puerto Rico. I think they were 27-minute movies. I did that right after I had left an ad agency where I was writing Chevrolet ads, which drove me crazy. Because you had to write real cute then. I had a lot of trouble with that. I could do truck ads, but I couldn't do convertibles at all. So I got out of that. But I still had to make a living. So I got into the industrial movies and a little freelance advertising.

**AMIS:** But the breakthrough was *Hombre*, was it not?

**LEONARD:** Yes: the sale to the movies. Because the book itself I wrote in '59, and by then the market was so weak. I was getting \$4,000 for a paperback, for example. And that one sold for \$1,250, and it took two years to sell it. I didn't get that much for the movie rights, either, four or five years later. That was when I got back into fiction writing.

**AMIS:** How do you feel when a book of yours goes through the treadmill of being turned into a movie? It's happened to me once, in my first novel ***The Rachel Papers***, and I thought, "Whatever they do to it, the book will still be there."

**LEONARD:** I believe that. There's no question about that. I'm not concerned with how closely it's adapted. I just hope it's a good movie. For example, "Rum Punch" to "Jackie Brown." Quentin Tarantino, just before he started to shoot, said, "I've been afraid to call you for the last year." I

said, "Why? Because you changed the title of my book? And you're casting a black woman in the lead?" And he said, "Yeah." And I said, "You're a filmmaker. You can do whatever you want." I said, "I think Pam Grier is a terrific idea. Go ahead." I was very pleased with the results, too.

**AMIS:** And how about "Get Shorty"? That must have felt like another breakthrough.

**LEONARD:** It was. It was the first contemporary story of mine that I really liked on the screen. And I said to Barry Sonnenfeld, the director, "But you're advertising this as a comedy." And he said, "Well, it's a funny book." And I think it did have my sound, and it had Barry's look. Because I could hear my characters on the screen, and I think the reason it worked was because they all took each other seriously and didn't laugh. There weren't any nods to the audience, any signals to the audience with grins or winks that that was a funny line. It was up to the audience to decide. This was the first question I asked Barry. I said, "When you shoot, I hope you don't cut to reactions to lines." He understood that, of course.

**AMIS:** I was on the set of "Get Shorty." As a journalist, I was writing a profile of John Travolta. And usually when a journalist goes to the set of a film, he stays for six hours and sees one person cross a road and then goes home again. But on this occasion, I got to see the fight between Chili and the Bear at LAX in the car park. And John Travolta, who is sweetness incarnate, gave me an insight into the star system. We were all going off to lunch, and a limousine appeared. I was going to have lunch with John in his trailer. I thought there was obviously some way to John's trailer. In we got and drove a few feet, and John said to the driver, "Pull over," and then asked the Bear if he wanted a ride. And the Bear said, no, he was fine, he was going to do it on foot. And then we started off again and pulled up at the elevator. And that's as far as we went. The Bear joined us in the car and down we rode. Travolta explained that it was as important to seem like a star as it is to be a star.

Movies deal with externals, largely, and books with internals. Is that what strikes you as the main difference between the forms?

**LEONARD:** I would say definitely that. The first day I was on the set of "Get Shorty," John Travolta called me "Mr. Leonard." And I let him. He got over that.

**AMIS:** Did you call him "Mr. Travolta"?

**LEONARD:** No, I didn't. I'm using my age now.

I don't think there's any question that it's difficult for movies to internalize. The reason I've been able to sell all my books is because they look like they're easy to shoot. They're written in scenes, and the stories move through dialogue. I think the problem has been, in the past, that they've been taken too seriously. They haven't been looked at as if there is humor in them. And also the fact that when you bring a 350-page manuscript down to 120 pages, in my books a lot of the good stuff is gone. It disappears. Because then you're more interested in plot than you are in, say, character development.

**AMIS:** People say that movies will be the nemesis of the novel. But I think that's a crisis that's already been survived. I think the novel is more threatened from the Internet than from movies. I feel the movies are still an immature form, a young form, that they're still in the adolescent stage. It will take a while before they can challenge the internal nature of the book. Do you ever worry about the death of the book?

**LEONARD:** No, I can't imagine such a thing. Ed McBain and I were on one of the morning shows, and we were asked, "To what do you attribute the resurgence in popularity in crime fiction?" And we looked at each other, and we thought it was always very popular. We didn't know that it had dipped at all. We have to always have novels. My God, what would you read?

**AMIS:** Well, they say you won't be reading; you'll be having some kind of cybernetic experience. I think that the future of the book perhaps will be that the book will coexist with some kind of cybernetic experience, where the punter, the depositor (or whatever you want to call him), may read your book and then take you out to dinner in cyberspace-- looking ahead about a hundred years.

Now, I'm going to ask you this question because I'm always tortured by it. This is the sort of invariable question of the tour. Do you set yourself a time to write every day? How hard do you press on the paper when you write? I'm asked this so unerringly that I think people suspect that I'm going to reveal that what you do is you go into your study and you plug your ear into the light socket and then some inner voice tells you what to write. But what is your routine and how do you go about it?

**LEONARD:** I write every day when I'm writing, some Saturdays and Sundays, a few hours each day. Because I want to stay with it. If a day goes by and you haven't done anything, or a couple of days, it's difficult to get back into the rhythm of it. I usually start working around 9:30 and I work until 6. I'm lucky to get what I consider four clean pages. They're clean until the next day, the next morning. The time flies by. I can't believe it. When I look at the clock and it's 3 o'clock and I think, "Good,

I've got three more hours." And then I think, "I must have the best job in the world." I don't look at this as work. I don't look at it as any kind of test, any kind of proof of what I can do. I have a good time.

**AMIS:** And it just seems to flow? There are no days when whole hours are spent gazing out of the window, picking your nose, making coffee?

**LEONARD:** Oh yeah, there are whole hours' work to make one short paragraph work.

**AMIS:** I want to ask about your prose. Your prose makes Raymond Chandler look clumsy. Now the way I do it is: I say the sentence in my head until nothing sticks out, there are no "elbows," there are no stubbings of toe; it just seems to chime with some tuning fork inside my head. And then I know the sentence is ready. In your work, pages and pages go by without me spotting any "elbows." Even with the great stylists of modern fiction, you know you're always going to come across phrases like "Standing on the landing" or "the cook took a look at the book. " There's always some "elbow" sticking out, there's some rhyme causing the reader to pause and wonder and think, "That's not quite right. " With you, it's all planed flat. How do you plane your prose into this wonderful instrument?

**LEONARD:** First of all, I'm always writing from a point of view. I decide what the purpose of the scene is, and at least begin with some purpose. But, even more important, from whose point of view is this scene seen? Because then the narrative will take on somewhat the sound of the person who is seeing the scene. And from his dialogue, that's what goes, somewhat, into the narrative. I start to write and I think, "Upon entering the room, "and I know I don't want to say "Upon entering the room." I don't want my writing to sound like the way we were taught to write. Because I don't want you to be aware of my writing. I don't have the language. I have to rely upon my characters.

**AMIS:** So, when you say it's character-driven, do you mean you're thinking: How would this character see this scene? Because you're usually third person. You don't directly speak through your characters, but there is a kind of third person that is a first person in disguise. Is that the way you go at it?

**LEONARD:** It takes on somewhat of a first-person sound, but not really. Because I like third 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. What they do is more fun. A few years ago, a friend of mine in the publishing business called up and said, "Has your good guy decided to do anything yet?"

Or, I think I should start this book with the main character. Or I start a book with who I think is the main character, but a hundred pages into the book, I say "This guy's not the main character, he's running out of gas; I don't even like him anymore, his attitude; he's changed." But he's changed and there's nothing I could do about it. It's just the kind of person he is. So then I have to bring somebody along fast. Do you run into that?

**AMIS:** What I do find, and my father Kingsley Amis used to find, is that when you come up against some difficulty, some mechanism in the novel that isn't working, it fills you with despair and you think, "I'm not going to be able to get around this." Then you look back at what you've done, and you find you already have a mechanism in place to get you through this. A minor character, say, who's well placed to get the information across that you need to put across. I always used to think (and he agreed) that: Thank God, writing is much more of an unconscious process than many people think.

I think the guy in the street thinks that the novelist, first of all, decides on his subject (what should be addressed), then he thinks of his theme and his plot and then jots down the various characters that will illustrate these various themes. That sounds like a description of writer's block to me. I think you're in a very bad way when that happens. Vladimir Nabokov, when he spoke about *Lolita*, refers to the "first throb" of *Lolita* going through him, and I recognize that feeling. All it is is your next book. It's the next thing that's there for you to write. Now, do you settle down and map out your plots? I suspect you don't.

**LEONARD:** No, I don't. I start with a character. Let's say I want to write a book about a bail bondsman or a process server or a bank robber and a woman federal marshal. And they meet and something happens. That's as much of an idea as I begin with. And then I see him in a situation, and I begin writing it and one thing leads to another. By Page 100, roughly, I should have my characters assembled. I should know my characters because they're sort of auditioned in the opening scenes, and I can find out if they can talk or not. And if they can't talk, they're out. Or they get a minor role.

But in every book there's a minor character who comes along and pushes his way into the plot. He's just needed to give some information, but all of a sudden he comes to life for me. Maybe it's the way he says it. He might not even have a name the first time he appears. The second time he has a name. The third time he has a few more lines, and away he goes, and he becomes a plot turn in the book.

When I was writing "Cuba Libre," I was about 250 pages into it and George Will called up and said, "I want to send out 40 of your books--this was the previous book--at Christmastime; may I send them to you and a list of names to inscribe?" I said, "Of course." He said, "What are you doing now?" I said, "I'm doing Cuba a hundred years ago." And he said, "Oh, crime in Cuba. " And he hung up the phone. And I thought, "I don't have a crime in this book." And I'm 250 pages into it. It was a crime that this guy was running guns to Cuba, but that's not what I really write about. Where's the bag of money that everybody wants? I didn't have it. So, then I started weaving it into the narrative. I didn't have to go back far, but just to begin--and I was on my way.

**AMIS:** I admire the fluidity of your process because it's meant to be a rule in the highbrow novel that the characters have no free will at all. E.M. Forster said he used to line up his characters before beginning a novel, and he would say, "Right, no larks." And Nabokov, when this was quoted to him, he looked aghast, and he said, "My characters cringe when I come near them." He said, "I've seen whole avenues of imagined trees lose their leaves with terror at my approach."

Let's talk about "Cuba Libre," which is an amazing departure in my view. When I was reading it, I had to keep turning to the front cover to check that it was a book by you. How did it get started? I gather that you've been wanting to write this book for 30 years. It has a kind of charge of long-suppressed desire.

**LEONARD:** In 1957, I borrowed a book from a friend called "The Splendid Little War." It was a picture book, a coffee-table book of photographs of the Spanish-American War: photographs of the Maine, before and after; photographs of the troops on San Juan Hill; newspaper headlines leading up to the war; a lot of shots of Havana. I was writing westerns at the time, and I thought, "I could drop a cowboy into this place and get away with it." But I didn't. A couple of years ago, I was trying to think of a sequel to "Get Shorty." And I was trying to work Chili Palmer into the dress business. I don't know why except that I love runway shows. I gave up on that. And I saw that book again, "The Splendid Little War," because I hadn't returned it to my friend in '57. And I thought, "I'm going to do that." Yeah, the time has come. So, I did.

**AMIS:** In a famous essay, Tom Wolfe said that the writers were missing all the real stories that were out there. And that they spent too much time searching for inspiration and should spend 95% of their time sweating over research. The result was a tremendously readable book, "The Bonfire of the Vanities." Now you, sir, have a full-time researcher.

**LEONARD:** Yes, Greg Sutter. He can answer any of your questions that I don't know.

**AMIS:** Were you inspired by the research you put into this book?

**LEONARD:** He got me everything I needed to know. I asked him to see if he could find out how much it cost to transport horses from Arizona to east Texas and then to Havana. And he did. He found a cattle company that had been in business over 100 years ago and was shipping cattle then. He found an old ledger book and copied it and faxed it to me.

**AMIS:** Among the differences from your earlier books, this book is more discursive, less dialogue-driven and, till the end, less action-driven. Toward the end, you get a familiar Leonard scenario where there's a chunk of money sitting around, and various people are after it and you're pretty confident that it's going to go to the least-undeserving people present. And it's not hard-bitten; it's a much more romantic book than we're used to from you. Could your westerns have had such romance?

**LEONARD:** No. In my westerns there was little romance except in "Valdez Is Coming," which is my favorite of the westerns. No, I just wanted to make this a romantic adventure story.

**AMIS:** And there's a kind of political romanticism, too. You've always sided with the underdog, imaginatively; one can sense that. And who could be more of an underdog than a criminal? And your criminals have always been rather implausibly likable and gentle creatures. What is your view about crime in America?

**LEONARD:** I don't have a view about crime in America. There isn't anything I can say that would be interesting at all. When I'm fashioning my bad guys, though (and sometimes a good guy has had a criminal past and then he can go either way; to me, he's the best kind of character to have), I don't think of them as bad guys. I just think of them as, for the most part, normal people who get up in the morning and they wonder what they're going to have for breakfast, and they sneeze, and they wonder if they should call their mother, and then they rob a bank. Because that's the way they are. Except for real hard-core guys.

**AMIS:** The really bad guys.

**LEONARD:** Yeah, the really bad guys.

**AMIS:** I certainly feel that. I never really judge my characters. I always feel I've made them the product of their origins, and there was really no choice for them anywhere along the line.

**LEONARD:** I wanted to ask you: I noticed in your new book, "Night Train," which is first person, there are several third-person lines in it.

**AMIS:** Oh? You better point them out to me.

**LEONARD:** There's one in one of the first paragraphs.

**AMIS:** A third-person line?

**LEONARD:** Uh-huh. She da-da-da-duh.

**AMIS:** (pause) Not that I recall. I'm sure I would have caught that. Anyway, we'll sort this out afterward.

**LEONARD:** I'm surprised. I thought you did it on purpose and it was OK.

**AMIS:** I better take another look at that and change it for the paperback perhaps.

Before we end, I'd just like to ask you about why you keep writing. I just read my father's collected letters, which are going to be published in a year or two. It was with some dread that I realized that the writer's life never pauses. You can never sit back and rest on what you've done. You are driven on remorselessly by something, whether it's dedication or desire to defeat time. What is it that drives you? Is it just pure enjoyment that makes you settle down every morning to carry out this other life that you live?

**LEONARD:** It's the most satisfying thing I can imagine doing. To write that scene and then read it and it works. I love the sound of it. There's nothing better than that. The notoriety that comes later doesn't compare to the doing of it. I've been doing it for almost 47 years, and I'm still trying to make it better. Even though I know my limitations; I know what I can't do. I know that if I tried to write, say, as an omniscient author, it would be so mediocre. You can do more forms of writing than I can, including essays. My essay would sound, at best, like a college paper.

**AMIS:** Well: why isn't there a MARTIN AMIS Day? Because Jan. 16, 1998, was Elmore Leonard Day in the state of Michigan, and it seems that here, in Los Angeles, it's been Elmore Leonard Day for the last decade.