

Raylan by Elmore Leonard

Few people get a NY Times obit on the front page. Elmore Leonard did, after a long and distinguished career as a writer. He died on August 20. Some sixty years ago, Leonard began writing Westerns, five of which became movies. *Hombre*, named by the Western Writers of America one of the best 25 Westerns ever written, became a movie starring Paul Newman.

Then Leonard turned to writing crime novels. Many became movies, notably *Get Shorty*, with John Travolta as the unforgettable Chili Palmer, a Florida loan shark who goes to Hollywood to collect a debt and ends up making a movie. Leonard's last novel, *Raylan*, features Raylan Givens, a fascinating figure from two previous novels and from the current FX television series *Raylan*. Givens, a laconic US marshal operating in Harlan County, Kentucky, is fully equal to the body part snatchers, hillfolk drug dealers, grifters who populate the novel. For me, the addicting qualities of Leonard's work are his dialogue, his characters, and his imaginative, fully realized settings. The settings are the grittier parts of large cities like Detroit and Miami, Florida, Djibouti, Harlan County. Leonard's characters are mobsters, low lifers, cops, people on the make. The dialogue is colorful, evocative, memorable, spare.

In 1995 British writer Martin Ames described Leonard's traits as a writer as "gifts—of ear and eye, of timing and phrasing—that even the most indolent and snobbish masters of the mainstream must vigorously covet." *Raylan* the novel is among his best and is a fitting close to a wonderful writing career. Leonard wrote it when he was 85. If you try him, you just might like him.