

CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF, HOW AND WHEN YOU STARTED WRITING.

I wrote my first novel (about 87 pages, handwritten) in the fifth/sixth grade. Since then I've always wanted to be a writer. However, life interfered for years: the Navy, college, working as a mechanical engineer—but I quit my job as an engineer to write full-time in 1985. Bad career move if I wanted to remain employable as an engineer. Then I wrote a few novels, one of which was optioned by Warner Bros. for a movie, sold a screenplay to New Line Cinema, then life (mortgage) interfered again and I taught high school math for 12 years. Now that I'm retired from all that "life," I am able to write full time.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE YOUR NOVEL?

I've been inspired to write stories for most of my life. But the idea of having a gumshoe-in-training find the decapitated head of Reno's missing mayor in the trunk of his ex-wife's car was certainly inspiring. I couldn't pass up an opportunity like that.

HOW DID YOU USE YOUR LIFE EXPERIENCE OR PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND TO ENRICH YOUR STORY?

Like all novelists, my life experience is part and parcel of every novel I've ever written. The "escape" in the final chapters of *Gumshoe* used some basic engineering. I just hope my old friends at Northrop appreciate it. My professional background (electronics, engineering, and math) was critical in writing several of my other novels, in particular: *Richter Ten*, *Sunspot*, and *Maxwell's Demon*.

ANYTHING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IN YOUR NOVEL?

Nothing at all. I've never been a private investigator. And I never once found a head in the trunk of a car, or an unknown naked blonde in my bed, one of which is a good thing, the other of which is a bad thing—but both are true.

ARE ANY CHARACTERS BASED ON PEOPLE YOU KNOW?

No one. I never do that. All of my characters are composites and amalgams of people I've met, people I've heard about, people I've seen on the street, people I've invented, and people I hope

don't actually exist anywhere since they're so evil (but probably do). It's all done via imagination. Maybe staying home from school "sick" in order to read two novels a day instead of *Silas Marner* in English class was a good thing. Not sayin' that *Silas* isn't a good book, but it's hard to beat the Edgar Rice Burroughs "Mars" books when you're a sophomore. "English" can be boring if you take it too seriously. You can get an F if you write "gonna."

WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE OR MOST SYMPATHETIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

Mortimer (Mort) Angel. He's funny, he makes wacky, off-the-wall references, and his sense of humor is exactly like mine. Of course he ended up with the unknown naked blonde in his bed and I didn't, so I hate him.

WHO IS YOUR LEAST SYMPATHIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

Least sympathetic would be Victoria, because she knows she's evil and she corrupted her daughter. I should also mention that this doesn't mean I don't like her. I like all my characters, good and bad. If I didn't like them, I wouldn't put them in the story. I also like killing them off.

WHAT PART OF WRITING YOUR BOOK DID YOU FIND THE MOST CHALLENGING?

Getting that first chapter down right. That's usually the hardest part, except when I wrote *Killing Suki Flood*; I wrote 5,500 words the first day on that one.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE READERS WILL TAKE AWAY FROM YOUR BOOK?

Gumshoe isn't a textbook, so I hope readers had a good time with it and thought it was funny, interesting, offbeat, and "When's the next book in the series going to come out because I've got a wad of red-hot cash in my fist?"

WHAT WRITERS HAVE INSPIRED YOU?

John D. MacDonald (author of the Travis McGee series) was far and away the most inspirational. Also, John Sandford, Jonathan Kellerman, and John Grisham. [Hmmm, I think I'm going to change my first name to John.]

WHAT IS THE WRITING PROCESS LIKE FOR YOU?

Put the characters in interesting situations, then watch the movie. Record what the actors (characters) do and say, pay attention to the surroundings (sounds, smells, the buildings, clothing, etc.). If an actor does something that doesn't seem right, rewind the movie back to the point at which the actor went off the rails, then put them on a track that feels right, that's fun, interesting, has future potential, and keeps the plot moving forward. If an actor gets boring, shoot him—or stuff him (or her) in the recycle bin.

WHAT IS THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?

Elmore Leonard: "If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it." And "I try to leave out the parts that readers tend to skip."

WHAT IS THE WORST PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?

Write like (insert any of several best-selling authors here), who uses 39 words to say something when 12 will do the same thing. Write a 130,000-word novel—packed with thousands of extraneous words and phrases—that could easily be stripped down to 95,000 words. Write like *that* guy? What's the point? Yeah, okay . . . money, which translates to freedom. It's still bad advice.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU? ANY NEW BOOKS IN THE PIPELINE?

The next book in the *Gumshoe* series is up next. Also, marketing my other novels: *Richter Ten*, *January Cold Kill*, *The Tenderfoot*, *Maxwell's Demon*, *Sunspot*, *Killing Suki Flood*, *Olongapo Liberty*, *Liar-in-Chief*.

ANY FINAL WORDS YOU WOULD LIKE TO SAY ABOUT YOURSELF, YOUR NOVEL, OR LIFE IN GENERAL?

Myself: I can stand on my hands, ride a unicycle, and juggle—just not all at the same time so none of that pays the rent. **My novel:** *Gumshoe*, still makes me laugh. Might make you laugh, too. **In general:** life is good, except when water pipes break.

WHAT IS THE BEST THING ABOUT THE PUBLISHING PROCESS?

Editors who “get” the novel, whose advice and changes make the novel better. Editors who get the subtlety of a character’s dialogue and appreciate it. Editors with a sense of humor. Editors who like what they’re doing and do it well. As a result, having the entire process glide along effortlessly.

WHAT IS THE MOST ANNOYING THING ABOUT THE PUBLISHING PROCESS?

Editors who don’t “get” the novel, who partially destroy it in the process of “improving” it. Editors whose language or “novel” skills aren’t as good as mine and who request changes that don’t work. Editors who don’t get the subtlety of a character’s comment and therefore want it altered or deleted. Editors without a sense of humor. As a result, having to explain and defend that which shouldn’t have to be explained or defended.