

A CONVERSATION with ROB LEININGER about GUMSHOE ON THE LOOSE

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. That was a bad career move if I wanted to remain employable as an engineer. Then I wrote a few novels that were published by “New York” publishers. *Killing Suki Flood* was optioned by Warner Bros. for a movie. I sold a screenplay to New Line Cinema, then life (mortgage, insurance, etc.) 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 novels since about the fifth grade. But the idea of having a “new” gumshoe 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. That was the basis for my novel, GUMSHOE. This latest novel, *Gumshoe on the Loose*, is the third in the *Gumshoe* series, and it was inspired by the first novel in the series, and by Mort's sense of humor.

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. I see life rather differently than most people, so my “hero,” Mort Angel, sees life in strange ways. But the *Gumshoe* series doesn't specifically use any of my previous professional skills. Very little math or engineering is involved, at least not so readers would notice.

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 investigated anything, or killed anyone (like Mort does in the novel), or received a severed hand in a FedEx package, which, all things considered, is a good thing. And I've never been buried alive, either.

ARE ANY CHARACTERS BASED ON PEOPLE YOU KNOW?

No one. I never do that. 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 useful. 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 high school sophomore. "English" as a subject can be boring if you take it too seriously. You can get an F if you write "gonna," but "gonna" works just fine in fiction.

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

Mort is my favorite, but this third novel introduces Lucy Landry, and she's right up there as a favorite because she's stone gorgeous, sexy, witty, tough, and can touch her toes.

WHO IS YOUR LEAST SYMPATHIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

Least sympathetic would be Arlene because she's evil, crazy, and murderous. But then, we can't all be perfect so I try to cut her some slack, especially since I created her.

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

SPOILER: Most challenging was having the most likely guilty person in the first fifth of the novel actually be the person who did it, without giving that away.

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

Like all the Gumshoe novels, *Gumshoe On the Loose* isn't a textbook, so I hope readers have a good time with it and think it's funny, interesting, offbeat, exciting, and want to know when the next book in the series will come out so they can run out and buy it for themselves and for everyone in their family and everyone else in their neighborhood.

WHAT WRITERS HAVE INSPIRED YOU?

John D. MacDonald (author of the Travis McGee series) was far and away the most inspirational. [This winter I read all 21 Travis McGee novels in order.] Next up would be Edgar Rice Burroughs. Then John Lescroart, John Sandford, , Robert Crais, Lawrence Sanders, Albert Terhune, and very early Stephen King.

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 put him or her in the computer's recycle bin.

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

Elmore Leonard: "If it sounds like writing, rewrite it." And "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, like DRK], who uses 39 words to say what can be said using 12 words. Write a 130,000-word novel—packed with literally thousands of extraneous words and phrases—that could be stripped down to 95,000 words without missing a thing. Write like *that* guy? All he's got is the big name and the \$3,000,000 advance, but if Joe Blow wrote the exact same novel, no agent would handle it, no publisher would publish it.

"Write about what you know" isn't the worst piece of advice, but if I followed it I would not be able to write the Gumshoe series.

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

The next book in the *Gumshoe* series, GUMSHOE "FOUR," is up next. That's not even a "working title." It's just the fourth book in the series.

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

- 1) Writing Gumshoe novels is fun because I get to be wacky.
- 2) The dogs like it (a lot) when they get their daily walk.
- 3) My wife likes to run the snowblower.