

On writing

A PUBLICATION OF THE WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA, EAST

IN THIS ISSUE: PAUL AUSTER, MIKE FIGGIS, ELMORE LEONARD AND DONALD WESTLAKE



on writing

A PUBLICATION OF THE WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA, EAST

August 2008 | Volume #28

EDITOR

Arlene Hellerman

COPY EDITOR

Shelley Wolson

DESIGNER

Tom Beckham

CONSULTANT

Nicole Revere

ADVISOR

Marc Siegel



Michael Winship | PRESIDENT

Bob Schneider | VICE PRESIDENT

Gail Lee | SECRETARY-TREASURER

Lowell Peterson | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



All correspondence should be addressed to

on writing
The Writers Guild of America, East
555 West 57th Street
New York, New York 10019
Telephone: 212-767-7800
Fax: 212-582-1909
www.wgaeast.org



Copyright © 2008 by the Writers Guild
of America, East, Inc.

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Anton Chekhov once said, “Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.” Some writers might add: but do it sparingly.

In the conversations that follow, Elmore Leonard, Donald Westlake, Paul Auster and Mike Figgis talk about writing novels as well as films. One idea that runs through both interviews is that, while novels and screenplays are different forms, there is a similar challenge with each: the balance between evoking enough, without saying or showing too much. In this issue, these writers talk about that and more.

On *The Back Page*, as the baseball season is in full swing, we feature a one-act play called *The Shot* by Charlie Peters.

—Arlene Hellerman



Front cover illustration by Herb Gardner

Elmore Leonard AND Donald Westlake

NEW YORK CITY — MAY 8, 2007



ON WRITING: You both write screenplays and you both write books. So why haven't you done your own adaptations?

LEONARD: No one wanted me to. I mean, going way back when there were some easy Westerns I could have done and they said, "No, we've got a writer for that." I did a couple, but they were original—like *Mr. Majestyk* with Charles Bronson. It became a book after.

WESTLAKE: Yeah, I've worked in that direction, the *Love Story* direction. First you write the movie, and then you make a book out of it.

ON WRITING: Which one is that?

WESTLAKE: *Cops and Robbers*. The first screenplay I ever did.

LEONARD: Was that [Robert] Redford?

WESTLAKE: No, Redford was *The Hot Rock*. But I've always felt that it's so much harder to do the same story a second time in a completely different format. You know, "I told the story this way, and now I'm going to try and tell it that way." Why not go tell some other story?

LEONARD: Well, that's it. When you're writing a screenplay, you write it and rewrite it so many times, you get sick of it. So I think it's best not to adapt your own writing.

WESTLAKE: I'm doing it now for only the second time. The last time it didn't work out for all the reasons we just talked about. But I'm adapting *Kahawa*, though I'm doing it 26 years after I wrote it so I'm not close to it anymore. I can just change it completely.

LEONARD: That was a good book.

ON WRITING: What's it about?

WESTLAKE: It's based on a true story. A group of British and Australian mercenary soldiers stole a train full of coffee in Uganda—the Brazilian coffee crop had been struck by frost that year and the price of coffee went way up so their train was worth \$6 million. But the gimmick was that they made the train disappear, which can certainly also work in a movie. So I'm adapting my own story and hoping enough time has gone by to give me enough distance that it can work out.*

ON WRITING: I want to ask Elmore about his most recent book, *Up in Honey's Room*. It's a continuation of a story about a sheriff, Carl Webster, that started with—

LEONARD: —*The Hot Kid* was the first one. That book ended in '34.

ON WRITING: Then there was the 14-part serial in *The New York Times*.

LEONARD: That was really a tough one, to keep these people talking without using obscenities. It was impossible. Oh, my God. I used one, once. I think I used "getting laid." And they said, "We can't say that." Can't say "getting laid" in this family newspaper. So I changed it to something else. Then the new one—

ON WRITING: —*Up in Honey's Room*.

LEONARD: —Takes place in '45. And that's enough of it. I don't know how I got into writing about that particular character.

ON WRITING: You mean Carl Webster?

LEONARD: Yeah. It started with his dad. But I got tired of it. So I'm doing something contemporary now.

* Donald Westlake worked on the script for about a year and found that the producer's ideas and his ideas were completely divergent. They mutually agreed it was better for the project to move forward with another writer.

WESTLAKE: I have never done a historic novel.

LEONARD: Well, *Kahawa*—

WESTLAKE: —The story was set in '76 and I wrote the book in '80 and '81, so it really was contemporary. But since what I want to do is make it all up, I try to avoid things where facts can come in and trip me. So I stay away from the historical because I get that wrong.

ON WRITING: But your books are so detailed. Do you do a lot of research?

WESTLAKE: Only if I have to. Mostly I'll just make it up as I go along because if I say, "I've really got to find out about that," then I tend to overdo it. So in the Africa book, it's about removing a train from this track. And the history of the railroad is what makes it possible to do. There was a 1,600-page history of the railroad called *The Permanent Way* that I read; we went to Africa, we went to England—where I talked to people at the American Embassy—and I talked to people from the Bogotá Group, which is the OPEC of coffee. So I talked to all these people and then I'm reading this 1,600-page book. It's like quicksand. You can get drowned in research and never be heard from again.

ON WRITING: What about, for instance, Stan Murch in the Dortmund books who is so detailed about every driving route in the New York metropolitan area?

WESTLAKE: Well, from time to time I've been an outer-borough boy. I've never lived in the Bronx or Staten Island, but I've lived in Brooklyn and Queens. And New York, particularly the outer boroughs, will drive you crazy if you don't really know what you're doing.

ON WRITING: So Stan comes out of your experience?

WESTLAKE: Yeah.

ON WRITING: Elmore, I read in a *New Yorker* article that you hire somebody to do all your research.

LEONARD: I've had the same researcher since 1981. In fact, he's a full-time employee. He works harder than I do. He's always looking something up. He lives in Los Angeles, he moved out there when I wrote *Be Cool*, which was another bad movie. Terrible. And he keeps making me work. He keeps pushing me so that I'll pay him.

WESTLAKE: I used Elmore's researcher once in a funny way. ABC Television was considering doing a four-hour miniseries of *Maximum Bob*, Ulu Grosbard was directing and I did the teleplay. So Elmore gave me the footage that his researcher had done: here's the judge's house, here's the woman who runs the underwater dancers and she's scratching her forearms all the time because there's so many mosquitoes—

LEONARD: —Weeki Wachee mermaid. They wore mermaid tails and they danced and fooled around 16 feet underwater—

WESTLAKE: —With an air hose.

LEONARD: An air hose, yeah, and every once in a while they take a breath from the hose.

WESTLAKE: But it was fascinating to me to adapt Elmore's work, because there was something I would not otherwise have noticed. With most storyteller writers, there are two things going on: there's the characters, what they say and what they do, and then there's the scene, the appearance of it. You know, is it as grungy as *Blade Runner* or as overly cute as anything by Spielberg. But with Elmore I discovered there are three things going on: there's the characters and what they're doing and what they mean to do and all that stuff and there's the milieu that they're in, and then there's a sort of gentle little loping commentary on it.

LEONARD: Not by me, because I leave myself completely out.

WESTLAKE: I didn't say it was by you. But there's a commentary. There's an attitude about the story and the book and everything, which is not an attitude that belongs to any of the characters. Maybe it doesn't belong to you either, but it's the book's attitude.

LEONARD: Really?

WESTLAKE: And the hardest thing for me was, some of that was just lovely stuff. But it's not dialogue.

ON WRITING: Can you think of an example?

WESTLAKE: No, I can't because it was many years ago. Some of it I just converted to dialogue and gave to characters, some I just let go by. But it was very interesting.

LEONARD: But all of it is someone's point of view. When I write, it's always someone's point of view.

WESTLAKE: Yes, but there's a sort of loping commentary on the action that I became very, very aware of.

ON WRITING: And by "commentary," it sounds like what you mean is an attitude. A sort of point of view that doesn't belong to a character but belongs to a way of telling the story.

WESTLAKE: Yeah. You get a sense of a writer in a different way when you're doing a screenplay of something that he did. I've done a number of adaptations—

ON WRITING: —Jim Thompson's book, *The Grifters*.

WESTLAKE: What Thompson was like to adapt, you feel his desperation and sweatiness as if you're in it with him writing the thing. I did other things that didn't get done, for instance, working with Volker Schlöndorff I did three drafts of a script of *Red Harvest*.

ON WRITING: Dashiell Hammett.

WESTLAKE: Yeah. Hammett was interesting because he's aloof. The whole thing is written by a guy who's very cool and keeps you out there a little bit. And then the other one was an Eric Ambler novel, a great one called *Passage of Arms*. That also involved Volker Schlöndorff. Ambler's like the best big brother you've ever had. He knows more than you, but he's willing to teach you how to play basketball and he's just terrific. The Ambler novel was set in Southeast Asia just before the Vietnam War and the production company, Orion, wanted to update it. To update *The Grifters*, all I had to do was take the hats off the men. But Eric Ambler was so alert to everything that was taking place contemporaneously everywhere in the world, and you try to wrench it out and move it—boy, that was hard.

LEONARD: Why'd they want to do that?

WESTLAKE: They didn't want to pay for yesterday.

ON WRITING: I want to go back to something Elmore said earlier when Don was talking about point of view. I have this article that you wrote for the series *The New York Times* does called *Writers on Writing*—

LEONARD: —My rules. You violate my rules all the time, Don. You use exclamation points where I can't believe.

WESTLAKE: No, I don't.

LEONARD: Yes, you do. But you use so many that it's okay. It's like Tom Wolfe. He just throws it in.

WESTLAKE: I would add an 11th rule which is, never describe one of your characters' dreams.

ON WRITING: Why?

WESTLAKE: I think somebody said once, "Describe a dream, lose a reader." It just stops everything.

LEONARD: It really does.

WESTLAKE: We want to know what the characters are doing.

LEONARD: Yeah, definitely.

ON WRITING: I wanted to go through the rules and we're a little bit out of order, but that's okay. One of the things that struck me when Don was saying that Elmore's stories have an attitude was Elmore's response that he leaves himself out of the narrative. And that's what he says in this piece: "These rules I picked up along the way to help me remain invisible when I'm writing a book." So that's really important to you, to be invisible.

LEONARD: Yes, because I'm not a classic novelist in the sense of the omniscient author like, say, Martin Amis, for example. He and I are so far apart in our styles, but he likes my style for some reason and says nice things. I can't write like those people who are important novelists. I don't have the words. The idea of remaining invisible is important to me so that I can let the characters react to the story. It's always from their point of view, not mine. And when I'm starting a scene I decide from whose point of view it's seen in the most interesting way. Then I'll write the scene and I'll say, "No, that's not right." I'll rewrite the scene from another character's point of view, and it works better.

ON WRITING: Actually, to sort of elaborate on that, there's one point in *Up in Honey's Room* towards the end of the book where each chapter describes what's happening with a different character during the same period of time. And it shifts point of view three times in a row. Can you just constantly be shifting characters' points of view?

LEONARD: Yes, you can shift points of view.

WESTLAKE: Well, not without some sort of indication of a break in the action, I think.

LEONARD: Oh, of course. You've got to set it up.

WESTLAKE: I've seen writing where a line of dialogue is told, it's clear, from one person's point

of view and in the very next line of dialogue we're inside another person's head.

LEONARD: I would never shift point of view from one person to another within a scene. I would set it up as another person's point of view in another scene.

ON WRITING: So back to Elmore's rules.

LEONARD: "Avoid prologues."

ON WRITING: Rule number three—

LEONARD: —"Never use the verb other than 'said' to carry dialogue," which is another thing that Westlake—

ON WRITING: —He violates that?

LEONARD: Yeah.

WESTLAKE: Well, I occasionally break it up a little bit and say, "he told him."

LEONARD: No, no. You also use other verbs.

WESTLAKE: "Tom expostulated?"

LEONARD: No....

ON WRITING: The fourth rule....

LEONARD: —"Never use an adverb to modify the verb 'said.'"

WESTLAKE: I know, never.

LEONARD: "Keep your exclamation points under control. You're allowed two or three per 100,000 words."

WESTLAKE: I thought I was within that range. I'll have to go back.

LEONARD: "Never use the word 'suddenly' or 'all hell broke loose.'"

ON WRITING: Have you done that, Don?

LEONARD: No, you haven't.

WESTLAKE: No.

LEONARD: He wouldn't have done that.

ON WRITING: The next rule.

LEONARD: "Avoid detailed descriptions of characters."

WESTLAKE: That's right.

LEONARD: Just enough, unless you're good at it.

WESTLAKE: What you're saying is, it's like radio. If on the radio somebody jumps into a car and you hear "rrrr" and the car drives off, each of us has, in his head, a different car. And we're all right. So you do the minimum description and whatever I as a reader see in my head is right.

ON WRITING: What about Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett? Raymond Chandler describes not only what people look like, but what they're wearing. He's like a fashion designer.

WESTLAKE: I know.

LEONARD: Well, who called him a very good writer?

ON WRITING: You don't think he's a very good writer?

WESTLAKE: No.

LEONARD: No.

WESTLAKE: Every one of his sentences is two or three words too long.

LEONARD: Yeah.

ON WRITING: Really?

LEONARD: No, he's not a good writer. He uses all those similes.

ON WRITING: But I thought that's what makes him good.

LEONARD: They're distracting.

WESTLAKE: I like Hammett even when he's being goofy. He just uses the language in another way. In one of the Continental Op stories, the Op knocks on the door and he says, "A lathy youth with salient ears led me down the hallway." "A lathy youth with salient ears...."

ON WRITING: Does that violate anything?

LEONARD: I'll tell you, I have not read him that much. I'd say that I was certainly not influenced by him at all and I never thought he was that good.

ON WRITING: Hammett?

LEONARD: Yeah. He had a good name, Dashiell Hammett. God, that'll sell books.



WESTLAKE: But the thing that I saw in doing *Red Harvest*, which was his first real novel—he sort of screwed around before that—was that he didn't really trust the form yet so he kept putting short stories into it. Some of the short stories were really exciting. And this project, this script, has been going on with writers and directors attached to it for years and years and years and I can see where everybody would get completely screwed up. Because, for instance, there's a sequence in it at the boxing matches. And all of a sudden, with all the bright lights on the ring and the bout going on, the boxer is shot from the darkness. Now, that has virtually nothing to do with anything else in the book. But there isn't a director alive that doesn't want to fit it into the movie. So that means you're bending the script completely out of the way so that you can get this goddamn boxer being shot, which has nothing to do with it. And it's only in there because Hammett wasn't sure he could go the distance. He was just putting these things in.

ON WRITING: Let's keep going through the rules.

LEONARD: "Try to leave out parts that readers tend to skip." I do that. I don't feel a need to overwrite.

ON WRITING: Do you go back and edit out?

LEONARD: Oh yeah, sure. But I go back and add the next day. And as the pages build up, I'll go back all the way. But most of my revisions, I'm adding cigarettes or a drink—a little business. That's all. It's to keep my characters going. And then: "My most important rule is one that sums up the 10. If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it.

Or, if proper usage gets in the way, it may have to go. I can't allow what we learned in English composition to disrupt the sound and rhythm of the narrative. It's my attempt to remain invisible, not distract the reader from the story with obvious writing."

ON WRITING: But you have a distinct writing style, right?

LEONARD: Yeah.

ON WRITING: I guess I want to define this, maybe there's not a lot to be mined here, but this idea of point of view versus invisibility. To me, the most invisible writer would be Hammett. Would you agree?

WESTLAKE: Yeah. When you're saying "invisibility," I hope I'm reading you right here, you're saying that the characters' opinions are not necessarily mine. So what you're getting in the book is what the characters think about the world they're in and not what I think about the world the reader is in.

LEONARD: Yes, exactly. Exactly. Why would anybody be interested in what I think? I said one time in a book that this guy got hold of a Jewish lawyer. I got a letter from a Jewish lawyer saying, "What's a Jewish lawyer?" I said, "I don't know. But I didn't say it. This guy in the book said it."

WESTLAKE: Right.

ON WRITING: I want to ask a question about style. I'm an avid Dortmunder reader, and then prepping to do this interview was the first time I read one of the Parker books. And the first couple of pages seemed to be the same tone as a Dortmunder novel. But then, because completely different characters are thinking and completely different things are happening, it's a completely different tone.

WESTLAKE: See, I don't think the writing is that much the same.

LEONARD: No.

WESTLAKE: Because it's all vocabulary. The Dortmunder vocabulary is completely different from the Parker vocabulary. I sometimes think that if a Dortmunder novel were to be read aloud, it should be read aloud by a W.C. Fields impersonator. Whereas a Parker novel is delivered almost reportage. The name Richard Stark—

ON WRITING: —Which is your pen name for the Parker books.

WESTLAKE: —“Richard” was Richard Widmark.

LEONARD: Tommy Udo.

WESTLAKE: Exactly. Tommy Udo, *Kiss of Death*.

ON WRITING: I just want to explain that Richard Widmark played a character named Tommy Udo in the film *Kiss of Death*.

WESTLAKE: Yeah. And the “Stark” was to remind myself what I was trying to do here. To be lean.

LEONARD: I would think it would be easier to write Dortmunder. You think about more in a scene.

WESTLAKE: Yeah, it is, because Parker's so stripped down. You have to leave out more.

LEONARD: Yeah, right.

ON WRITING: This works into the question I wanted to ask. Elmore, other than Carl Webster, have you written a lot of serial characters?

WESTLAKE: Well, you've had repeats.

LEONARD: Yeah.

WESTLAKE: You had Chili Palmer and what's-his-name from *Glitz*.

LEONARD: Raylan Givens—he was another marshal. I like those marshals. I keep leaning back toward the Westerns.

WESTLAKE: Didn't you do a story in a *New Yorker* about him?

LEONARD: Was it Raylan?

WESTLAKE: Yeah, I think so.

LEONARD: I was at some kind of a book thing, and I gave a talk. And the guy who was the host said, “Hi, I'm Raylan Givens.” I said, “Oh, wait. I've got to write that down. That's a name.” So I used Raylan a few times.

ON WRITING: One of the things I noticed in *The New York Times* serial and then *Up in Honey's Room* is you had to repeat the same information. Do you do that with Dortmunder novels, Don?

WESTLAKE: That's some of the hardest stuff with a series, you have to assume that whoever's reading the book now just got here and doesn't know anything. So you have to tell what you've told. And to try to figure out a way to do it slightly differently and slightly more quickly is not easy. I've always said, and it's perfectly true, that if I had known that Parker was going to be a series—which I didn't, I thought it was just one book—I would have given him a first name. And I would not have called him Parker because for 35 years I have not been able to write “Parker parked the car.”

LEONARD: How long have you been writing?

WESTLAKE: Forty-five years. I quit my last job in April of 1959. My last honest job.

LEONARD: Did you write while you had the job?

WESTLAKE: Oh, yeah. I've been writing since I was 11. Nobody cared, but...

LEONARD: How many books?

WESTLAKE: I think we're up to 104.

LEONARD: Wow.

WESTLAKE: It's around that.

ON WRITING: And how many for you, Elmore?

LEONARD: I think I'm on 42. When I was working at an ad agency during the '50s and writing Chevrolet ads, I couldn't wait to get out. Because in writing the ads, you had to be kind of cute. You couldn't say "kids" in a station wagon ad, you could say "young 'uns." So I'd get up at five in the morning and write for two hours. I did that for about eight years, I wrote five books and about 30 short stories. I could write a page an hour then, at least, a longhand page because I didn't know any better. Now I can't write a page an hour. But that got me going. If I hadn't done that, I don't know where I'd be.

ON WRITING: Was writing screenplays an easy transition for you? Because your books are very dialogue-driven, and even your rules could be applied to screenplays as well.

LEONARD: I thought it would be easy, but not with all these people involved, no, good God, with their own ideas.

WESTLAKE: It is an insanely collaborative form. But if you have the right people, it's a huge help. It's very, very rarely that the screenwriter gets something to be pleased about in the process after the first draft. With *The Grifters*, about two months before filming started the phone rang

one Sunday afternoon and the guy said, "This is Dennis Gassner. I'm the production designer on the picture. And I wondered if you had a minute to discuss the three main characters' automobiles from a philosophical point of view." I said, "Okay." And we talked for 50 minutes. Because a movie is only what you see and only what you hear. That's it. So a lot of stuff that creates character in a novel doesn't exist in the movie. This is a California story and we're going to see these characters in their cars a lot. So what do the cars tell about them? The character that Anjelica Huston was playing, what did she really care about most in all this world? She cared about safety and money. So her car is a great big, golden tank. The character played by Annette Bening is like a world-class bimbo, so her car is a swimming pool. It's a big, blue convertible. And the John Cusack character is a con man who doesn't want to be noticed. And so his car is no color, no brand, no nothing, it's a hopeless-looking thing. You forget it while you're looking at it. You'd never contemplate any of that if you were writing a novel.

ON WRITING: Really?

WESTLAKE: No, you'd just say, "He was driving a Buick," and you'd get on with it. You might think for a minute, what would this character drive? But I wouldn't have a 50-minute conversation with anybody about it.

ON WRITING: You create character more with action and what they say?

WESTLAKE: Yeah. And intent. But you don't have those icons in a book. In the movie, the automobile is an icon, it stands in for character description. You don't have to do that in a book.

ON WRITING: If the development process wasn't there, would the screenplay writing be enjoyable?

LEONARD: Not when you have to write it that many times. It's not enjoyable.

ON WRITING: So it's the process that sucks.

LEONARD: Yeah.

ON WRITING: But what about the genre?

LEONARD: Well, I love movies. And I always thought I'd be able to write one. But I haven't really written a good movie. *Mr. Majestyk* made a lot of money, but I don't think it was a good movie because Bronson kept hitting the wrong word, as he tends to do.

ON WRITING: But then you've had some really great movies made from your books.

LEONARD: Yeah, I was happy with *Get Shorty*, although I don't think it looked like my story. My story's real to me. It happened. And I see it. I see everything. But I don't see my characters that closely. Someone might say, "God, doesn't he look like Harry Dean Stanton?" That's about as close as I'll ever get. Three times in *Maximum Bob* people say, "God, he looks just like Harry Dean Stanton." Because I wanted Harry Dean Stanton in the movie.

WESTLAKE: You wanted Harry Dean Stanton to play Maximum Bob and Ulu Grosbard and I both wanted Robert Duvall.

ON WRITING: So did you take out all the Harry Dean Stanton references?

WESTLAKE: Yeah.

LEONARD: In my new book, I want to bring back three characters from other books. One is Jack Foley, bank robber. George Clooney played him. He loved that character. So we'll see if we can get him interested in it again. And the other character, the woman, is Dawn Navarro from *Riding the Rap*. She's a psychic. I wasn't sure if she was really a psychic or not, but I suppose she is to some degree. And then I picked the bad guy, I'm going to bring him from *LaBrava* which I wrote, what, 27 years ago. He's Cuban, his name's Cundo Rey. I like him a lot. He was good. And I thought, "God, I hope he's still alive." So I looked in the back of *LaBrava* and Joe LaBrava shoots him three times in the chest. But in the new book, the emergency guys get there very quickly and find out he's still breathing. They take him to the hospital and he's in a coma for 62 days. He pretends to still be in a coma until he sees a way to get out of the hospital. And then he goes out to Hollywood and starts selling crack cocaine to people in the business. He becomes rich and buys houses in Venice Beach. So he's got a lot of money when he meets Jack Foley in prison. Cundo is doing 10 years for second-degree homicide. Foley's looking at 30 years for a bank he robbed. He's robbed 100 banks, but for this one Maximum Bob was the judge and he nailed him with 30 years. So he appeals that and he gets out before Cundo Rey does.

ON WRITING: How far into this book are you?

LEONARD: Sixty pages.

ON WRITING: Do you know where it's going to go?

LEONARD: No.

ON WRITING: Do you know where your books are going?

WESTLAKE: You don't want to know. Best not to know. Though I remember, some years ago, I finally figured out when a book ends. And I think this rule works. A book ends when the reader could write the next chapter.

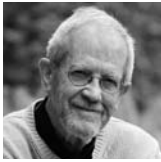
LEONARD: Jackie Farber, who was my editor at Delacorte, would say, "This book ends awfully abruptly." I'd say, "Yeah, but it's over." And she'd say, "Why don't you just—not add anything, but just let it coast a little bit?" So I'd add three pages and cut two that were there, and it would have a different feel at the end, but it wouldn't be jumping off a cliff.

WESTLAKE: I like to jump off a cliff.

LEONARD: My favorite ending was in *Get Shorty*. It's a [John] Travolta line, that character is trying to rewrite the screenplay. And he's gotten to the end of it, and the last line is, "Fuckin' endings are harder than they look." ❦❦



BIOGRAPHIES



ELMORE LEONARD published his first novel, *The Bounty Hunters*, in 1953. Over the next eight years he published 30 short stories and four more novels. When his novel *Hombre* (1961) was chosen as one of the best westerns of all time by the Western Writers of America in 1961, Leonard finally felt confident enough to quit his job in advertising and devote all of his time to writing. During the next two decades Leonard continued writing in the genre with such novels as *Fifty-Two Pickup*, *The Switch*, *City Primeval: High Noon in Detroit*, *Split Images*, *Stick* and *LaBrava*. It was not until 1985 that he had his commercial breakthrough with the publication of his best-selling novel *Glitz*.

Leonard's subsequent novels include: *Bandits*, *Touch*, *Freaky Deaky*, *Killshot*, *Get Shorty*, *Maximum Bob*, *Rum Punch*, *Pronto*, *Riding the Rap*, *Out of Sight*, *Cuba Libre*, *Be Cool*, *Pagan Babies*, *Tishomingo Blues*, *Mr. Paradise*, *The Hot Kid* and most recently *Up In Honey's Room*.

Three of Leonard's books have been nominated for the Edgar Allan Poe Award by the Mystery Writers of America: *The Switch*, nominated for Best Original Paperback Novel of 1978, *Split Images*, for Best Novel of 1981 and *LaBrava*, which won for Best Novel in 1983. *Maximum Bob* was also awarded the first annual International Association of Crime Writers North American Hammett Prize in 1991. In 1992 the Mystery Writers gave Leonard the Grand Master Award.



DONALD E. WESTLAKE began his writing career in 1960 with *The Mercenaries*, which was nominated for an Edgar Award as the best first novel of the year. He has written over 80 novels under his own name and pseudonyms, including Richard Stark. His novels include: *The Hot Rock* featuring the recurring character John Dortmunder, *Kahawa*, *The Ax* and *Smoke*. His most recent novels are *What's So Funny?* and *Dirty Money* (a Richard Stark novel). His screenplays include *The Grifters*, *Cops and Robbers* and *The Stepfather*.

Westlake is a Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America, a three-time Edgar winner and an Academy Award nominee for his screenplay of *The Grifters*. His numerous other honors include the 2002 Ian McLellan Hunter Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Writers Guild of America, East and the 2004 Private Eye Writers of America Award for Lifetime Achievement. He has just been given the Gumshoe Awards' 2008 Lifetime Achievement Award bestowed by Mystery Ink. *Photograph by Abby Adams.*

Paul Auster
AND Mike Figgis

NEW YORK CITY – MAY 26, 2007

ON WRITING: One of the things I think is interesting about both of your work is your use of imagery.

FIGGIS: I think that changes as you go through your life. I came from, first of all, a musical background and then a performance art background which was very anti-theater, and very anti-British theater. So there was a time when I would have said that an image was far more valuable than text. I've radically come around from that point of view.

AUSTER: I've always had the feeling that, as a novelist, I'm the least cinematic of fiction writers. My books are not constructed in the way films are, they don't break down into scenes, there's usually not a lot of dialogue and not a lot of imagery—just suggestions, hints. I've always been interested in suggesting things so that the reader can fill in the blanks for himself. But then working in film, I've seen a bit of an evolution. I haven't done that much, just four films in all. The first two were collaborations with Wayne Wang, and the script for *Smoke*—which was our first film—is a film almost without images. But in the two films I've made on my own—

ON WRITING: —*Lulu on the Bridge* and *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*—

AUSTER: —I've found myself more and more drawn to trying to convey feelings and ideas through images. And particularly in this last film, *Martin Frost*, even though it's a very simple film with only four actors and limited locations, I was thinking of painters as I was setting up shots. There's a little close-up of a tabletop when Claire is sick, for example, and you see that glass of water. I consciously tried to make it look like a glass of water painted by Chardin. I find that, if presented correctly, simple, everyday objects can be terribly moving.

ON WRITING: As you were talking, I realized I want to make a distinction between visual versus imagery. It's interesting what you said, Mike, because I think your digital movies, *Timecode*

and *Hotel*, are still incredibly visual but they're not as image-driven.

FIGGIS: True.

ON WRITING: Whereas your earlier movies, for instance, *Leaving Las Vegas* or *Liebestraum*, the visuals are much more front and center.

FIGGIS: You don't abandon a sensibility. I know how film works and how video works; I know how the color blue will read and things like that. So that's an ingrained technique. What I've always been aware of is, what's unique about film—and what makes it so interesting for so many different people—is that you have upped the ante by having multi-options. In other words, how you combine text, music, camera movements, acting style and color of costume is all going to mean something really big, because somebody is going to watch it big. And the visual is the crudest of all senses, it will overwhelm the literary part of the brain if you allow it.

ON WRITING: The literary part of the brain?

FIGGIS: The part of the brain that deals with words is very different from the part of the brain that deals with visual images.

AUSTER: He's right.

FIGGIS: One is like crude sex. The other one is more like an intellectual interplay that has many more subtle levels. So your choice of how to bring one down and the other up is going to be the challenge. As I become less and less happy with the cruder use of visual imagery, to me, it's almost become an obsolete form. It's almost a redundancy because the visual saturation is inescapable.

AUSTER: You're talking about the culture.

FIGGIS: Within our culture.

ON WRITING: But you're using it.

FIGGIS: I'm using it but I'm trying to temper that with all the other levels; I haven't lost my love for it, I'm just saying the redundancy that has been created has made it really, really hard to work in that medium.

AUSTER: Mike and I were talking around a year or two ago about collaborating on a film in which there would be no visual information at all except people's faces talking, and the entire story would be told rather than shown. I'm still very attracted to this idea.

FIGGIS: I was more and more reminded of scenes in certain films that contained an interesting actor speaking and describing something graphic. And if you bring in literature by using either text on the screen or the spoken word, it still transports the viewer in an amplified way to a domain that has enough abstraction or enough choice of imagery within your own head space. And yet it's still cinema.

ON WRITING: Would it be a story?

AUSTER: Yes, definitely a story.

ON WRITING: Paul, you sort of do that in *The Book of Illusions*. The novel is about a man who writes a book about a forgotten silent movie comic named Hector Mann. And you describe Hector's films in detail.

AUSTER: Yes, I made up Hector's films. The challenge in writing those imaginary films was to convey enough visual information so that the reader could see what was going on, but then at the same time not put in too much. If it's too verbose everything slows down and it doesn't have the feeling of a film. I had to walk a fine line between the too little and the too much.

ON WRITING: And then *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*, the film you wrote and directed, is described in *The Book of Illusions* as one of Hector's later films.

AUSTER: Yes, but I wrote the film before I wrote the book.

ON WRITING: Oh, really?

AUSTER: I wrote a short version of *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* for a series being put together by a German producer that never happened. So the script was sitting around and when I was writing *The Book of Illusions*—I started it later that year—I thought *Martin Frost* would resonate with the rest of the novel. But in the meantime I thought that it shouldn't be a short film, it should be feature length. I was actually planning to do the whole film in the novel, but it would have taken up far too many pages and the novel would have been thrown out of balance. So I stuck to the short version with the idea in the back of my mind that one day I'd try to make the full-length version, which I have finally done now.

ON WRITING: So you'd already written this movie in the book in a way that's much fuller and richer than a screenplay would be. What was it like making the transition to three dimensions?

AUSTER: Well, I had made films before, I knew what I was getting myself into. And I know that things change, it's inevitable—sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. You need a good crew, you need people who are thinking with you. And that applies to the actors, the director of photography, the production designer, the wardrobe person, the composer—everybody has to be in harmony.

ON WRITING: And you do something you also do in your books, which is a story within a story.

AUSTER: The way I describe this film to myself and to others is, it's a story about a man who writes a story about a man who writes a story about a man who writes a story. But it's ambiguous because Martin, who's the author of the story, makes himself the hero of the story as well. So you think it's all really happening.

FIGGIS: But the thing that's actually refreshing about that—and it's apropos of what you said earlier about use of images and text and all of that—they're forms of language. I quite like the idea of theatrical staging, whether it's a literary device or a visual device. You see the set, you know it's not real. The fact is, if you do it halfway decently you still transport the people that you're asking to come and be an audience or reader or whatever. And I think for a period, for me, it will be satisfying to go back to that basic idea.

AUSTER: I've never had any problem, as a novelist in particular, or as a filmmaker, with the idea of using the medium itself as part of the thing you're trying to express. I mean, who's kidding whom? You're holding a novel in your hand and you know it's a book. You know it's not real.

FIGGIS: You open it and it says page one.

AUSTER: Yeah, so you can turn the stuff inside out and make it very compelling by exposing the pipes and the plumbing and the wiring, and that can be just as big an adventure as a traditional narrative, I think.

FIGGIS: In *Hotel*, the use of, let's say *The Duchess of Malfi*—

ON WRITING: —*Hotel* is a digital film that you did in 2000.

AUSTER: I think this is the one film of yours I have not seen.

FIGGIS: It's largely improvised. But its core is that a film company is doing a punk version of *The Duchess of Malfi* in contemporary Venice with no control of the traffic or the people or the noise or anything. And then the film company starts to fall apart because the producer tries to kill the director so he can seduce his girlfriend who's the main actress and so on. Interestingly enough, the one thing I think is useful in our culture is that people have gotten fascinated with the process of filmmaking. They know how a special effect is done, they know how every trick works. And now people are doing it themselves in cheap cameras and computers. So their interest in device and process is a useful thing because now it's part of the language.

ON WRITING: *Timecode* also deals with film.



FIGGIS: In a different way. That was much more, I think, Auster-ish—

ON WRITING: *Paul Auster-ish?*

FIGGIS: Yeah. It's the idea of real parallel narrative, and getting away from montage, because montage is one of the things that's also strangling film.

ON WRITING: What do you mean by montage?

AUSTER: It's the Eisenstein word. He was the one who wrote at great length about all this. It's the juxtaposition of images.

ON WRITING: I see.

AUSTER: It's cutting, it's editing.

FIGGIS: When it first happened it was a vanguard movement. Now it's been taken by the mainstream and used as a stifling device. And also the visual image is so addictive that the faster you cut, the more addicted to fast cutting you become.

AUSTER: Exactly.

FIGGIS: So you now try to make a film—like a '60s film—with very long takes and the audience will keel over and fall asleep, because you can't go back to something once you've created an addiction for something else. *Timecode* was an attempt to deal with the audience's hunger for multi-imagery but in a parallel narrative way rather than a linear montage way—which is what draws me to Paul's books because he, over the last 20-whatever, 30 years, has created his own genre of parallel narrative.

AUSTER: Or stories within stories within stories.

FIGGIS: But also in a way that's effortless to read in the sense that when you read a Russian novel and suddenly it'll go from Moscow to somewhere else and you say, "Oh, I was really into that, I want to know what happened to the Count." And then you get into the next one and say, "Okay, this is interesting." And then, almost with a sense of a familiarity and joy, you go back to the first one.

AUSTER: The problem is, as you say, people have been trained to look at things in a certain way. Our mutual friend, John Boorman, once said to me, "People are so in the habit now of watching big budget Hollywood films that when they're confronted with something different, something that uses a different language, so to speak, they can't comprehend what they're seeing." And I think that's why independent filmmakers have such a hard time finding an audience, because we're going against the grain.

ON WRITING: But linear storytelling is something people have always been used to. And nonlinear, more experimental stories have tended to be outside the mainstream.



AUSTER: But I have to say, I think what determines good storytelling from bad storytelling, whether it's linear or not, is almost secondary. It's clarity. Clarity is what's important. There's no writer more disturbing than Kafka. He still upsets us when we read him. And yet every sentence is clear as a bell. There's nothing murky about it at all. And I think that's why he's such a great writer. Then there are other, what you might call, experimental writers who deliberately try to be obscure. And it's very difficult to connect to that. There are poems by Ezra Pound which are so saturated with allusions to other literature, they're so oblique that you really don't have what I would call a sensuous or visceral experience with the work. And I'm looking for the visceral experience, no matter what.

FIGGIS: Even when you have no clue what something is on first experience, sometimes you just know something interesting is going on. And if it's really the avant-garde, you won't understand it at first but you will also get the buzz that something's happening. And as Paul says, that is a visceral response to it. To me it's such an important test of something you're experiencing, it really is. And oftentimes you do find yourself nodding and gritting your jaw and kind of saying—

AUSTER: —This is good for you.

FIGGIS: Yes.

AUSTER: It's really good for you. Open your mouth and swallow.

ON WRITING: How important is it that the audience gets all the nuances in a film?

FIGGIS: I recently had a film conversation with David Lynch, who I think is a very interesting filmmaker.

AUSTER: I do, too.

FIGGIS: His latest film is very long and very personal. And one of the things that's quite clear when you talk to him—and I think the same thing

would apply to us—is that when you've lived with an idea for a long time, the logic is absolutely clear to you and it seems obvious. And we forget it's not so obvious to other people.

AUSTER: Perhaps not.

FIGGIS: What's left is, let's say, our choice of the bones we will lay out. But a lot of the other flesh, which was maybe much more explanatory, has gone.

AUSTER: I think with *Lulu on the Bridge* I made some mistakes as a screenwriter. I used my novelist's brain on small, small things, but I thought about them at great length. For example, I'd seen someone walking down the street with a T-shirt that said, "Beware of God." I thought this was very funny. We have the phrase, "Beware of Dog," right? Thus, "Beware of God...." You see Harvey Keitel's character walking down the street and someone has written on the window "Beware of God." The very next thing that happens is he gets tangled up in the leash of a dog. I thought, all right, we have God and dog here, we're establishing something. So that later on when he discovers the dead body in the alley—I don't know if you remember this moment. He's walking down a dark, dark alley and suddenly we hear a dog barking behind him. He turns around to look, and for me this was actually God, or the gods, beginning to intervene in the story. But nobody—nobody, not a single human being on the earth understood what I was doing. It doesn't matter, it was there for me, but I don't think it translated.

FIGGIS: When I did *Liebstraum*, the whole point of that film is you think you're inside the head of the son who's come to visit his dying mother. And then the truth is you're in the head of the mother. The proof of that is, she's in the hospital dying of cancer and she's on morphine. And the nurses are like Catholic nurses, they're all sort of nuns. There's a scene later on where the son, Nick, goes to a whorehouse with a very drunk sheriff and the whores in the whorehouse are played by the same actresses who were playing the nuns in the hospital.

AUSTER: People didn't notice that they were the same?

FIGGIS: No, what happened was that after the preview, which was such a disaster in New York, the studio insisted that I take the whorehouse scene out. And I tried to explain to them, if you don't have the piece of information that the whores and the nun-nurses are the same characters, you would never be able to work out that it was all taking place in the mother's mind. And despite that, they took it out because they could care less about it. To me it was a tragedy. I'd worked so hard on the complexity of this script. I was very influenced by Alain Resnais' film with John Gielgud—

AUSTER: —*Providence*.

FIGGIS: Yeah, the whole thing is in his head and he's dying. And it was such a profound film, amazing. So sometimes you have no choice, the Powers That Be step in and say, "I don't give a fuck about your script, mate, that's a filthy scene and it's coming out of the film."

AUSTER: Or you over-think it the way I did.

ON WRITING: But you said you don't care if the audience makes those connections.

AUSTER: Well, it's not crucial to the film.

FIGGIS: But the thing is, the information is there if you choose to find it. Like in any good piece of work. You have a choice, you can either hit them over the head with a mallet or you can lay the things out and say, "It's there."

AUSTER: Which means that good films, or difficult films, or challenging films—however you want to define it—need to be seen more than once. And most people see a film just one time. But a dense film needs to be seen two or three times, I think, before you can fully absorb it.

FIGGIS: The joy being that it's the kind of film that you can. The first time is to try and understand the plot, the second time is to then start understanding the subtext and the third one is to enjoy it, maybe, where you're kind of like, "Okay, I've absorbed quite a lot of information and now I can really watch the acting."

ON WRITING: In a previous issue of *On Writing*, Tom Stoppard talked about—I can't articulate it the way he did but—

FIGGIS: —Nobody can, it's an impossibility.

ON WRITING: He said there's a line where the audience comes to meet you. And if you don't bring it to them enough then they're baffled. If you bring it to them too much—

AUSTER: —It's boring. It's funny that writing novels and making films are very different activities. When I write a novel, I don't show it to anyone except Siri, my wife, she's my only reader. And that's all I need, one intelligent person who's sympathetic to what I do but is very rigorous and will tell me if something's not working. Whereas with a film, when you're editing, it's very helpful to have people come in and say, "Ah, you know, it's really dragging there. It's not interesting. I don't understand it."



FIGGIS: Or when somebody is bored.

AUSTER: Film is like music. It is all about timing and pacing and rhythm. That's why editing is so crucial.

FIGGIS: It's so different, you can enjoy a really slow book because you can put it down and say, I'll come back to this tomorrow. That's why I like episodic filmmaking; I quite like the idea of half-hour episodes and having a bit of a break. Because you're not forced into this awful three-act, mini-structure where you have to end with some kind of literary orgasm each time. Episodic storytelling is terrific.

ON WRITING: Television.

FIGGIS: Well, yeah, it is the domain of telly. And there is also a lot better writing in the mainstream going on in certain aspects of television right now, without a doubt, than in mainstream filmmaking.

AUSTER: True, true. I made one episodic film with Wayne [Wang], but we co-directed that one, *Blue in the Face*. I don't know if you've seen that.

FIGGIS: No, I haven't, I would love to.

AUSTER: It's the craziest film project I've ever been involved with because it was improvised. I gave all the actors notes and suggestions but they were free to use or not to use them. Our method was to establish goals for each scene. Originally, we thought the finished film would be a series of about nine 10-minute episodes. In the editing room, however, we realized that it didn't work and we started cutting them up and intermingling

them, so you see a little bit of one and then we'd cut to another, then we'd go back to number one and then we'd jump to number four. It took six days to shoot and 10 months to edit.

ON WRITING: Do you think some of the conventions of storytelling in filmmaking are the same in episodic? Even in an episodic, you still have a beginning, a middle and an end.

FIGGIS: Yeah, but you don't need to have the same kind of payoff at the end. One of the problems in film is this awful thing of a payoff. Cinema, as I said earlier, because it is the most popular form of communal storytelling, has this franchise problem. And films are so expensive now. Mainstream film budgets have gone through the roof. Low budget still is exactly the same. There's been no inflation in the consideration at all. But still a million dollars of somebody else's money—

AUSTER: —It's a lot of money.

FIGGIS: It's not going to be Paul's and it's not going to be mine, that's for sure. But I love the fact that economics are a factor and I don't in any way dismiss them, I think they're interesting. You're constantly looking for ways to do digital this, digital that, just shoot it in your own place, actors working for scale, cut it on your laptop and all this kind of stuff. I just brought out a book called *Digital Filmmaking* and it is a guide to how you can do that. And that's exciting.

AUSTER: But there are certain costs you have to absorb. The technical business of post-production, making the film, doing the sound mix. This is time-consuming and expensive, even for a cheap film it's the same as for a big budget film.



ON WRITING: What Mike is saying is now you can just do the digital—

FIGGIS: —I’m cutting in my hotel room. I just started a feature-length film in Istanbul two weeks ago based around a real event, the Gumball Rally, that then went horribly wrong.

ON WRITING: What’s the Gumball Rally?

FIGGIS: It’s where dot.com millionaires drive their Ferraris across Europe and break speed limits and things like that. I’m making the film with my son and I threw in two actors, one of them pretending to be a driver and one pretending to be a very depressed woman in Istanbul. We waited for the rally to come and shot all these scenes. Then the rally had a disaster that killed two people in Romania so it got cancelled. So I had to completely restructure the improvised scene that we thought we were about to do. And I’ll cut the film on the computer because there isn’t really any money.

ON WRITING: Are you going to distribute it?

FIGGIS: I can’t even think about that any more. At the end of the day you want to make films just because you want to keep moving. You want to keep developing; the ideas are interesting. If you stop and think about distribution all the time you might just stop because it might seem too hopeless or something. And economically, of course, you are forced to find other ways of making a living by doing commercials—

AUSTER: —So many directors do that, don’t they?

FIGGIS: They have no choice.

ON WRITING: I want to go back to a question about something Paul said earlier. When we were talking about how you described Hector’s movies in *Book of Illusions*, you were saying it’s a balancing act of not describing too much but just enough. Isn’t that also the challenge in a novel as well, that you don’t want to slow it down?

AUSTER: Yes, I agree. In fact, I have a little motto for myself when I’m writing novels because I sometimes have a tendency to go on too much. I say to myself, “Swift and lean. Swift and lean.”

ON WRITING: For your novels?

AUSTER: Yes, and it helps. I want to write books in which every word is essential, that if one word were removed the book would be different. And I think, too, with film you want every scene to count, every moment in every scene to count as well.

ON WRITING: I always thought that in a book you can take digressions more than in a film.

AUSTER: You can do that, sure. For example, long, exhaustive descriptions of places or rooms, some novelists revel in this. And sometimes the writing can be extraordinarily beautiful. But if it’s not serving the story in any essential way, I tend to get bored by it. I want works in which everything is pertinent.

ON WRITING: So, I guess, it’s the same use of craft in a novel as in a screenplay?


AUSTER: I suppose, although writing a novel is very different from writing a screenplay. Because, oddly enough, it’s more real than a screenplay. I write novels in three dimensions. It’s an ongoing, pulsing narrative. I smell things, I taste things, I touch things. Whereas writing a screenplay is an artificial act of composing a story for a rectangle. A two-dimensional rectangle. It’s more like putting together a jigsaw puzzle than an ongoing organic process.

FIGGIS: It’s different rules.

AUSTER: Yes, different rules.

ON WRITING: Was it a difficult transition? Are you still figuring it out?

AUSTER: I’m still figuring it out. The two screenplays I wrote before this were *Smoke* and *Blue*



in the Face, but there was no screenplay per se for *Blue in the Face*. And then *Lulu on the Bridge*. Both of them were too long and, in the editing room, large amounts of material had to be cut.

FIGGIS: It's damaging.

AUSTER: Yeah, and it's very hard. The first cut of *Smoke* was three hours. So we had to cut out things that I really liked very much, but I understood the necessity.

FIGGIS: David Lynch's recent film is three hours and something long, and it's often out of focus and very dark. They screened the film at the Polish film festival after another film and after two concerts. It started at 10 o'clock and it went on till after one in the morning. And by midnight, I'd been sitting on that same seat for about seven hours and listening to speeches from the president and blah, blah, blah, in Polish with translations. And I was actually bored during the film. However, the next morning I woke up so cheerfully and my head was so full of the images and I said to David, "I love this idea of latent cinema." Which is, the kind of cinema that doesn't work till the next day. But on a commercial level that's a gamble.

AUSTER: It sneaks up and hits you from behind. There's no question, there are certain long, drawn-out movies—I'm thinking about a film like Wim Wenders' *Kings of the Road* which, while

you're watching it, seems dragged out and then you remember the images for the rest of your life. So there is that aftereffect.

FIGGIS: Godard does it all the time. He did it in [*l'Éloge de*] *L'amour*. I watched that film and I fell asleep a couple of times, woke up and I watched it again. The film is incredible. But it's working on a different level. It's important to absorb things slowly sometimes in order to understand them. You can't always go to the crash language of our contemporary cinema. But that is the prevailing climate in cinema. So that's the rub.

ON WRITING: One more question. At the beginning, Paul, you said that your books weren't good for film, they didn't have a lot of dialogue.

AUSTER: I don't think I've written a novel longer than 350 pages, but they're very dense. I think they function like 700-page novels. And it would be impossible to do a two-hour adaptation of any of these novels that would make any sense. You'd have to start cutting things from the original story and I think you'd lose the structure and they wouldn't be very interesting.

ON WRITING: Do you agree, Mike?

FIGGIS: Well, I once made the point, which I still believe, that if you wanted to do *The Idiot*, the only really interesting way to do it would be to put a blindfold on, open the book, count off 100 pages,

tear them out and say, don't worry about it, it'll work. It'll be confusing for about the first 10 pages and then people will absorb the characters through the writing anyway.

AUSTER: Movies are short stories or novellas.

FIGGIS: They're just expanded short stories. Or not even particularly expanded.

AUSTER: Unless you do a mini-series. That can work, the 12-hour version of a book.

FIGGIS: People read a book and they just assume it's going to be a good film because they had a good experience with it. It's not the case.

AUSTER: No, no.

ON WRITING: Mike, you've done a number of adaptations, is there a lot of stuff that you need in a book that you don't need in a movie?

FIGGIS: It's a time issue. Stories take time to absorb and tell and if you try to force the pace on them—it's like what Paul was saying about having to edit *Lulu* and lose stuff because of time and the pacing of the film. And ultimately, okay, you win the one battle, which is you get it down to 95 minutes, whatever it is. But you lose the second battle which is all the detail that you put your love into and your talent and your skill, you cut out like a bad surgeon because it's too long.

AUSTER: One novel of mine was turned into a film in the early '90s, *The Music of Chance*. I thought of all the books I had written up to that point, that was the one that lent itself most easily to film because it was a linear story with more dialogue than is usual for me. And still they had to cut out huge chunks of the book. The film isn't bad, but it's not the book. It's something else.

ON WRITING: Mike, what about *Leaving Las Vegas*?

FIGGIS: Let's say *Leaving Las Vegas* as a novel is a series of internal thoughts, his-hers. In the

process of converting that, I xeroxed the entire novel into single sheets and went through and did cut ups. I had three piles: this would work in a film, there's no way this could be filmed, and I don't know about this. I cut the first pile together into a very short scenario, which I then converted into a form of a script, very short, and then started to write some connective tissue because I'd cut out the other connective tissue which I thought wouldn't work. Then I went through the third pile which was "maybe" and I found stuff. And I thought, oh, that actually would work really well as a connective tissue right there. By now I was no longer in sequence. I didn't go back to the novel's sequence till much later on. And that process of cutting and pasting until it organically seemed to make sense got me to the first draft.

AUSTER: That's really very interesting to hear. I think that's probably the best way to approach a novel if you're going to turn it into a film.

ON WRITING: Would it be hard for somebody to do that to one of your novels, Paul? Because a film might be a good film but just different.

AUSTER: To tell you the truth, I'm just not interested in having my novels adapted. There's one project that might happen and I've let this happen. A young Argentinean director wants to do *In The Country of Last Things*, the book that came after *The New York Trilogy*. But it's so visual, I think it could work. I guess. I helped him write the screenplay. He's trying to get the money together. We'll see if it happens or not. But that's the only one.

FIGGIS: Obviously, I'm a huge fan so I would like to work with Paul and that's why I think the only way for us to work together would be to start from scratch on something.

AUSTER: I think I might have an idea, by the way.

FIGGIS: Good.

AUSTER: I'll talk to you about it later. +++

BIOGRAPHIES



PAUL AUSTER'S novels include: *Travels in the Scriptorium*, *The Brooklyn Follies*, *Oracle Night*, *The Book of Illusions*, *Timbuktu*, *Mr. Vertigo*, *Leviathan*, *The Music of Chance*, *Moon Palace*, *In the Country of Last Things*, and the three novels known as *The New York Trilogy*: *City of Glass*, *Ghosts*, and *The Locked Room*. *City of Glass* has also been adapted by Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli into a graphic novel.

His latest novel, *Man in the Dark*, will be published in August 2008. His nonfiction works including *The Invention of Solitude* and *Hand to Mouth* have been published in the volume *Collected Prose*. He edited and introduced *I Thought My Father Was God: And Other True Tales from NPR's National Story Project* and edited *The Random House Book of Twentieth-Century French Poetry*. He also edited *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition*.

Auster has written the screenplays for *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face*. His screenplay for *Smoke* won the Independent Spirit Award for best screenplay and the Silver Bear from the Berlin Film Festival. He wrote and directed *Lulu on the Bridge*, which was an official selection of the Cannes Film Festival and, most recently, *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*.

In 2006, Auster was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters and won Spain's Premio Principe de Asturias de las Letras. Among his other awards are the Commandur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, the Prix Médicis for the best foreign novel published in France (1992), the Morton Dauwen Zabel award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1990), the Borders Original Voices Award (2002), and The Brooklyn Book Festival Best of Brooklyn Literary Award.
Photo by Lotte Hansen.



MIKE FIGGIS has roots in experimental theater and music. In the early 1970's, he joined an avant-garde theater group called The People Show as a musician, but was soon drafted into performing. He toured with the group for 10 years until he left to concentrate on writing and directing theater and working in film. Figgis wrote, directed and scored his first feature film, *Stormy Monday*. He then directed and co-scored *Internal Affairs*. His subsequent films include: *Liebestraum* which he wrote, directed and scored, *Mr. Jones*, *The Browning Version*, the HBO film *Mara*, *Leaving Las Vegas* which was nominated for four Academy Awards, *One Night Stand*, *The Loss of Sexual Innocence*, *Miss Julie*, *Timecode*, *Hotel* and *Cold Creek Manor*.

He has made a number of documentaries, including: *On Liberty*, *Just Dancing Around*, *Flamenco Women*, *The Battle of Orgreave*, an episode of the PBS series *The Blues* produced by Martin Scorsese called *Red White and Blues*, *Hollywood Conversations* and *Coma*. He has also done film, video, photography and art installations around the world: *The Museum of the Imperfect Past* for the Valencia, *In Space* for Designer Ron Arad, *Spanish Steps* in collaboration with photographer Massimo Vitale; *Soho Composites*, *London*, *Soho Composites*, *NYC* and *5 Senses*.

Figgis created a camera rig called the FigRig in collaboration with Ben Willson designed to stabilize the wobble often associated with smaller digital cameras which is available through Italian tripod manufacturer Manfrotto.

His recent film work includes a series of online films called *The Four Dreams of Miss X: Shadows*, *Scale*, *Exhibitionist* and *Narcissus* and a low-budget, digital film called *Long Live Love* built around the events of the Gumball Rally. His book, *Digital Filmmaking*, was published in 2007 by Farber and Farber.

The Back Page

THE SHOT BY CHARLIE PETERS



The Shot was first performed as part of The Seventh Inning Stretch series
at The Mile Square Theater, Hoboken, NJ, in 2005.



SCENE ONE:

LIGHTS COME UP ON DANNY.

DANNY

I used to go to my grandparents' house every Sunday for chicken supper. After supper, my mother would tell me to tell my grandparents what my plans were, my dreams. I'd tell them my plan was to become a big-league baseball player, a pitcher for the Cubs, and I wanted to throw the fastest fastball, the meanest curve and a changeup that would stop half way to the plate before starting up and going again. I told them I'd win more games and strike out more batters than Cy Young and I would be loved by the fans. Not just admired, I'd be loved. I would be adored. Every Sunday, as soon as I finished outlining my dreams, my mother would say "Isn't it wonderful that Danny has a dream?" And my grandfather would smile and agree, and then my grandmother would say the same thing.

GRANDMOTHER (O.S.)

Every dream has an asshole. Don't you end up being the asshole in no other man's dream.

DANNY

(after a pause)

It was not the support a young boy yearns to hear. But she had a point and it was her way of looking out for me.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE TWO:

DANNY WEARS A BASEBALL GLOVE AND MIMES PITCHING A BALL.

DANNY

I got my dream. Eleven years later I was pitching for the Chicago Cubs, and we were having a great year. The fans loved us as only Chicago fans can. New York fans, they think they love their teams, but they win all the time, so how hard is that? That's like loving a beautiful woman. But in my second year up with the Cubs we made it to the World Series.

We were playing the Yankees, the greatest team ever to play the game of baseball. It was like a dream inside of my dream.

(stops pitching)

One afternoon, my manager told me to go to the hospital to see a sick kid.

SCENE THREE:

A HOSPITAL ROOM. A MOTHER STANDS NEXT TO A TABLE ON WHICH LIES HER SON. THE SON IS REPRESENTED BY A DOLL, LIFELESS OF COURSE. IF IT BORDERS ON THE RIDICULOUS, SO WHAT?

Mrs. Sullivan? DANNY

Are you the pitcher? MOTHER

That's me. DANNY

I thought you'd be bigger. MOTHER

Is this your boy? DANNY
(points to DOLL)

That's my boy. MOTHER

What's his name? DANNY

Taylor. MOTHER

Nice looking kid. DANNY
(beat)
Quiet.

He's dying. MOTHER

Yes, ma'am. DANNY

MOTHER
Doctor says he's not gonna make it.

DANNY
I'm sorry to hear that, ma'am.

MOTHER
I think he's wrong.

DANNY
He could be.

MOTHER
Last thing my boy asked me was to get you to come here.

DANNY
Is that right?

MOTHER
You was one of his favorite ball players.

DANNY
I'm happy to hear that.

MOTHER
It don't mean nothing to me.

DANNY
What can I do for you?

MOTHER
Other than give my boy a new heart?

DANNY
Other than that.

MOTHER
He wants something from you.

DANNY
A picture?

MOTHER
No.

DANNY
A ball?

MOTHER
No.

DANNY
A glove?

MOTHER
No.

DANNY
A bat?

MOTHER
No.

DANNY
What does he want?

MOTHER
He wants you to strike out Babe Ruth.

DANNY
Are you joking with me, ma'am?

MOTHER
I don't joke, sir.

DANNY
Babe Ruth is the greatest hitter in the history of the game, ma'am.

MOTHER
I know that, everybody knows that, what do you think I am? That's why Taylor wants you to strike him out. It wouldn't do no good if you were to strike out some nobody, would it?

DANNY
It might.

MOTHER
It wouldn't.

DANNY
You can't be sure.

MOTHER
That's not how these things work. You strike out Babe Ruth and you'll save my boy's life. That's how it works.

DANNY
Did the doctor tell you that?

MOTHER
Of course not. I just know it. I'm a mother. It came to me. Will you do it?

DANNY
I can't promise you that, ma'am.

DANNY

Game three. A beautiful day, the home crowd was feeling good. I was doing okay, too. I gave up a couple of runs early, but I settled down. I had little Taylor's name written on the inside of my glove. I couldn't see her, but his mother was sitting in stands behind third base. Then Babe Ruth came up to the plate.

ANNOUNCER

Just listen to this crowd giving it to the Babe. Oh my, oh my, this is something else.

DANNY

Here was my chance to do something great, something memorable. I took the sign from the catcher, threw a fastball over the inside corner, and he took it.

ANNOUNCER

Strike one. And, folks, for some reason it looked like the Babe wasn't even ready for that pitch.

DANNY

One strike down, two to go, a little boy would live another day, and I would be immortal.

DANNY SHAKES OFF SEVERAL PITCHES. HE READIES TO THROW.

ANNOUNCER

Hold on, folks, we just got a message up here in the press box.

DANNY

What?

ANNOUNCER

I don't believe this.

DANNY

What? WHAT?

ANNOUNCER

It says right here that Babe Ruth has promised to save the life of a little boy in the hospital by hitting a home run for him this afternoon.

DANNY

WHAT?!?

ANNOUNCER

A little boy who's mortally ill.

DANNY

What little boy? What's his name?

ANNOUNCER

That's right, folks, little Tommy Jones is laying in his hospital bed right now listening to what could be the last baseball game of his life.

DANNY

Who the hell is Tommy Jones? How many dying kids are there out there for Chrissake?

ANNOUNCER

It says here that the Babe was at Tommy's bedside this morning before the game and promised to hit a home run for the little boy.

DANNY

What is this? A joke? Is it? He can't do that. I promised to save the life of a kid by striking him out.

ANNOUNCER

This is the stuff of legends, folks.

DANNY

The hell with this, you fat-bellied, stick-legged a-hole. I got a kid, too. All right, we're on. Let's see whose kid lives.

DANNY PITCHES.

DANNY

What the hell was that?

ANNOUNCER

In an amazing turn of events, folks, the Bambino didn't even bother to swing at that pitch.

DANNY

Why the hell not?

ANNOUNCER

He just let that strike sail by him. And now he's got two strikes on him. Why in the world would he do that?

DANNY

'Cause he's an arrogant a-hole, that's why. Let's see him hit this.

DANNY GOES INTO THE MOTION.

ANNOUNCER

Wait a minute, folks.

DANNY STOPS PITCHING.

DANNY
What?

ANNOUNCER
What's the Babe doing now?

DANNY
What's he doing?

ANNOUNCER
He asked for time and stepped out of the batter's box and now he's pointing to the right field bleachers.

DANNY
What for?

ANNOUNCER
He's calling his shot.

DANNY
He can't do that.

ANNOUNCER
Oh my, oh my, ladies and gentlemen, this has the makings of an immortal baseball moment.

DANNY
It already was an immortal baseball moment, my damn immortal baseball moment!

ANNOUNCER
The Babe is standing at home plate calling his shot to save the life of little Tommy Jones.

DANNY
Screw Tommy Jones.

TAYLOR'S MOTHER CALLS FROM BEHIND THIRD BASE.

MOTHER
What about my Taylor?

DANNY
I'm taking care of it.

MOTHER
You gotta strike him out to save Taylor's life.

DANNY
I'm aware of that, ma'am!

MOTHER

Can you do it?

DANNY

Shut up!

ANNOUNCER

The Babe is going to hit a home run into the right field bleachers to save little Tommy Jones's life.

DANNY

No, he's not.

ANNOUNCER

It doesn't get any better than this.

DANNY

Yes it does, it gets better than this when I strike out that fat, hot dog-swilling glutton and save my kid's life. What about that? Huh? Doesn't my dying kid count for anything?

MOTHER

I don't understand this.

DANNY

Don't worry, ma'am, I'm striking him out.

MOTHER

What if you don't?

DANNY

SHUT UP!

ANNOUNCER

The Chicago pitcher gets his catcher's sign and goes into his motion. Something tells me we're watching a mythic moment here.

DANNY

This is for you, Taylor, you're gonna live!

DANNY GOES INTO THE MOTION AND PITCHES. BEAT. THEN THE UNMISTAKABLE SOUND OF A CRACKING BAT IS HEARD. DANNY FOLLOWS THE ARC OF THE BALL INTO THE RIGHT FIELD BLEACHERS AS THE ANNOUNCER CALLS THIS.

ANNOUNCER

And the Bambino connects, sending a long fly ball, high as the eye can see, with little Tommy Jones's hopes riding it into the blue Chicago sky where it's ... GOING! ... GOING! ... GONE!!! You're gonna live, Tommy Jones, because Babe Ruth hit a called shot home run that will go down in baseball history.

MOTHER

TAYLOR!!!

DANNY STANDS CENTER STAGE. THE HUGE CHEERING FROM THE FANS
FINALLY DIES.

BLACKOUT. SILENCE. WE HEAR DANNY'S MOTHER.

DANNY'S MOTHER

Go on, Danny, tell your grandma what your dreams are.

THE END

