

What evil lurks? This man knows

By NANCY MAZZARA

Amid the bustle and bustle of the 17th annual Craftsmanship of Creative Writing conference Oct. 21, co-sponsored by Detroit Women Writers and Oakland University, there was one place where evil and murder lurked.

That was during Elmore Leonard's talk on writing crime and suspense novels.

"I like to write from the bad guy's point of view," Leonard said. "They have a human side. Most characters are nice people even if they're bad."

Reading from a review of one of his books, Leonard said his books focus on an individual involved in a "gritty" situation and his or her reactions to the situation.

"My books are about a decent man in trouble," Leonard said. "The antagonist misjudges the hero until it's too late."

Leonard advised his audience to write what gives them the most pleasure, but also to consider the market. Leonard has written 15 mystery and crime novels and has sold 15 stories to television and movies.

"Alfred Hitchcock bought one of my books last year," he said.

Leonard has been writing for 27 years. It has taken him 10 years to develop his style. He started his

career in the 1950s by writing short stories. He also wrote advertisements for a while.

"I KNOW what I can and can't write," Leonard said. "If I'm having trouble with a scene or character, then I don't know them well enough."

"I let my characters do the talking. But whether a character talks sometimes depends just on the name I give him."

Leonard said he asks himself what the character's problem is and how he will get involved.

"I write so that the reader knows something the main character doesn't," he said. "Characters become so real that when they're finished, I hate to see them go."

How does he discipline himself? Leonard writes every day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. He said,

"In 60 working days I have a book," he said.

His books are usually 80,000 words, slightly more than 300 pages.

Leonard said he used a detailed outline at one time but now finds it's more fun to take the plot as it comes.

"The best way to begin is just to start," he said. "It's too easy to over-research a novel. Just start writing!"

Leonard admitted that a certain

atmosphere is needed to begin writing.

"FOR ABOUT FIVE YEARS I had to have my lucky orange pen to write," he said. "I like to write in airplanes, but hotel rooms are my least favorite place to write, although I have done it."

Leonard usually travels to the location of a novel to research it, but said he picks up much of his background "just from being around and seeing things."

"For a newspaper article I did, I spent some time with a squad of the Detroit Police Department," he said.

He gets his ideas from old newspaper stories and current events.

"When Elvis Presley died I put that

right into the book I was writing."

Leonard said that his readers write or call from all over the world to comment on or correct his novels.

"One guy wrote me and said that I had made a mistake on the guns in one book," he said.

One member of the conference audience was Anita Kopley, a teacher at Ulica Eisenhower High School.

"I came to the conference every year for inspiration," she said. "My creative writing students want to write and need ideas."

"I hope to get back into writing after a long absence," said Rosemarie Barrow of Dearborn. "I enjoy the organization of mystery and suspense novels."

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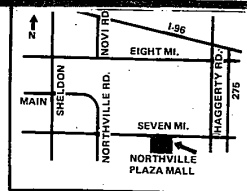


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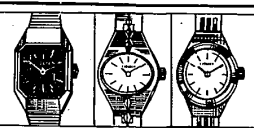
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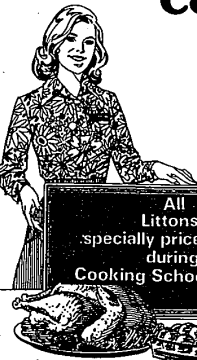
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Elmore Leonard of Birmingham shared some hints of how he writes crime and suspense stories. (Photo by Randy Bors)



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