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Leonard's 'Rum Punch' hits home



VICTORIA DIAZ

"Rum Punch," by Elmore Leonard (297 pp., Delacorte, \$21).

"I think I'm having trouble mid-living." So speaks Dutch Leonard's spunky heroine in his latest tale, "Rum Punch," the 30th novel

written by Detroit's resident master of crime fiction.

If you've been looking for a reading treat this summer, this colorful story of greed and gun-dealing, set among the sheltering palms of South Florida, should hit the spot.

Pushing 60, Max Cherry has grown disillusioned with his job as a bail bondsman and with his life as the estranged husband of a ditzy art dealer in one of South Florida's countless shopping malls.

Enter Jackie Burke, a flight attendant who's caught at Palm Beach International one day with a stash of coke and \$50,000 on her.

Max, meeting her for the first time when he springs her from jail, promptly falls for the 44-year-old, quick-witted blonde (who surely

has the worst cigarette-smoking habit of any heroine in the history of American fiction). Jackie likes Max a bit, too. But at the moment, she has more pressing matters on her mind.

The trouble is, in order to pack away some extra cash, she's been working for the bad guys, conveying payoffs from the Bahamas for illegal gun dealing. (She doesn't know it's for illegal gun dealing; she never asks what it's for.)

The other trouble is, the main bad guy, Ordell Robbie, is really bad. Once she's arrested, if she points a finger at him, Ordell will make sure she's history — and soon. But if she doesn't name him, the middle-aged atow will have to spend the next five years behind bars.

And so with her back to the wall, Jackie comes up with a plan that just might work to solve her problems. And you can bet the crafty scheme will involve the smitten Max Cherry.

Even though Max Cherry, in his own middle-aged way, is plenty appealing, the monstrous Ordell turns out to be more memorable here than the story's hero (although he's not quite so impressive as, for example, the razor-edged Elwin Crowe

in Leonard's last novel, "Maximum Bob").

Decked out in comic book colors and aggliter with gold jewelry in the Florida sunshine, the imposing, stylishly pigtailed Ordell would seem at first almost like a character who's wandered out of an episode of something like "Batman." But the key word here is "almost." At heart, there is nothing funny about the "light-skinned black guy" (original from Detroit), who, if you get in his way, would just as soon murder you as glance in your direction.

Members of the supporting cast in this highly cinematic tale include Louis, an ex-con (also from Detroit) whose time in three prisons has scarred him for life, plus the blue-janned officers, Tyler and Nicolet, who like "guns, beer, cowboy boots, air boats, hunting in the Everglades, and chasing bad guys," and aren't above noticing that, even at the doddering old age of 44, Jackie Burke still has a rather healthy amount of sex appeal.

Also sparking the action are Ordell's three girlfriends: bored Melanie, who's spent most of the past 17 years working on her tan; grateful Sheronda, who knows how to cook up some of the best collard greens and salt pork in town, and

63-year-old Simone, who thinks she resembles Diana Ross and "could write a book on the different ways to please a man."

Leonard's scenes of South Florida in the '90s make his backdrop seem very much like another player in the drama.

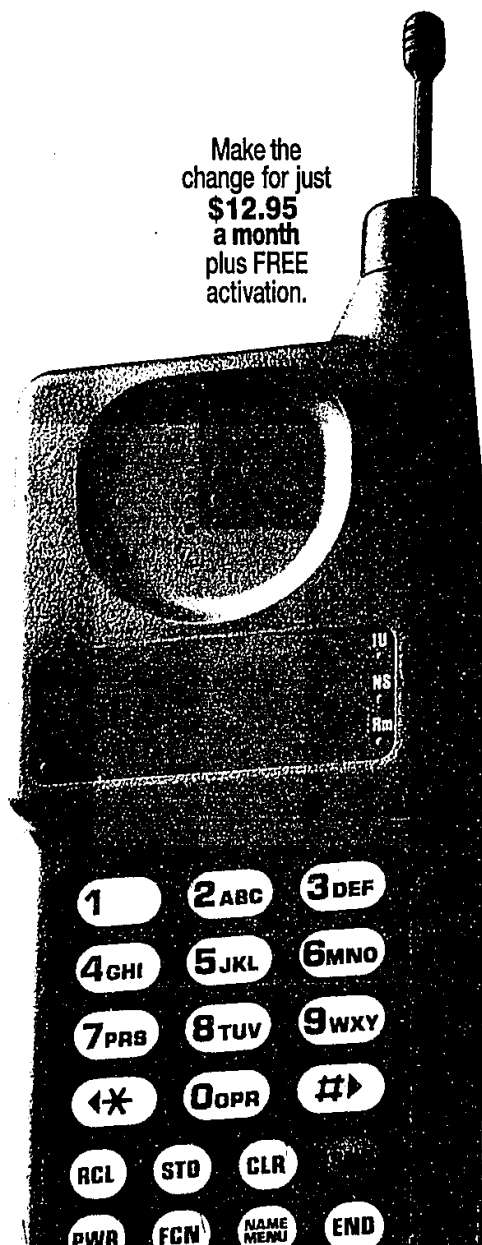
Gleamy skyscrapers, glitzy malls and expensive condos exist alongside the dilapidated housing of the poorer neighborhoods, where armies of roaches skitter underfoot in the dark rooms and West Indian reggae fills the night. Among the mangroves, you can just about taste the asopao di pollo, just about smell the mildew and all that sustan lotion.

With all of this, count on Leonard's usual, unflinching way with dialogue. Tell me, does this guy wire himself for sound each time he goes out into the world? Or stand on street corners and take notes? Or eavesdrop on other people's conversations all over the place? Or maybe just remember every syllable of every conversation he's ever heard or heard about?

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Victoria Diaz of Livonia tracks the books and literary industry.

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