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Los Angeles Mysteries I



If You Get Shorty, You'll Get Me...

Hollywood and Satire

by Michael P. Naughton (Los Angeles, California)

I was at the Writers Guild Theatre in Beverly Hills in 1998 when Martin Amis inter-

viewed Elmore Leonard. What a night! The Dickens of Detroit. Dutch. *Mr. Majestyk* him-

self. I had seen all of his movies and read all of his books, but that night I attended as a screenwriter and was interested in E.L.'s take on Hollywood.

It was also at this pivotal time that I was ruminating on the idea of novelizing my scripts. I had just gotten a request for one of my spec scripts from Oliver Stone's office, Illusion Entertainment, and completed another spec which was ahead of the smash HBO series *Six Feet Under*; that spec was called *Deathryde* and it was making its way around Hollywood.

That night inspired me because I realized that I could have the best of both worlds: the novel and the screenplay... just like Dutch.

I am originally from Detroit and grew up in Norman Lear sort of environment... uncensored, controversial and no dearth of hilarious material. My father was a great storyteller and could never get his facts straight to save his life. He loved to debate with my mother; for example if they were arguing about Watergate and Deep Throat my father would misconstrue the facts and belabor the point that Nixon was involved in a sex scandal. My mother on the other hand would correct him and explain that Deep Throat was an FBI informant... It was like my dad was reporting from *The Onion* and my mother was *The Washington Post*. The result: I wound up with a unique bent on facts; embellished observations. Satirical fiction based on some facts. It was also this environment that engendered a life-long fascination and escapism with Hollywood, detective shows and writing. I would read the books and see the movies. It was my world and still is.

In my mind, I always wanted to be in Los Angeles. Los Angeles represents a place where you can blur the line between fact and fiction. Where celebrities are larger than life and then walk off the screen and do the same mundane things most of us do, like popping in at Starbucks for a coffee, walking their dogs, taking care of their kids, hanging out in bookstores or even getting stuck in gridlock like the rest of us.

Hollywood is TMZ as much as it is *L.A Confidential*, but it is also cool and blissful like Clint Eastwood driving up the Carmel coast in the opening scene of *Play Misty for Me*. Keep your ear to the ground and you'll get the inside scoop. The stories are so good that if it isn't true, it should be. "Good fiction," as George V. Higgins once said, "is unverified, uncensored gossip." Again, there is no dearth of material and, of course, crime. Just tune in and let the film roll.

Being a screenwriter first, I think and write in scenes. I let the projector roll in my mind when I write. People that have read my work usually see the movie in it. As a screenwriter I learned about the economy of space and cutting to the chase, and the value of entering into a scene late and getting out early. So chapters are short, like scenes, and keep fast paced.

My first novel, **Deathryde: Rebel Without a Corpse**, tells the story of James DeRossa who uses the alias James Dean. He turns his back on the family funeral business after being released from Jackson County Jail. DeRossa heads out to Tinsel Town and hires a group of unscrupulous undertakers who help him settle an old score, that of his murdered

father, mafia racketeer “Big Frank” DeRossa. Only this time these undertakers aren’t burying anybody, they’re out to disinter \$25 million in missing cash and ice from an old Detroit case called Operation Grim Reaper. But when Los Angeles Detective Hank Gladwin brings his shovel to the party, he is soon onto DeRossa when his list of suspects starts pushing up more than daisies.

The James Dean theme and classic Hollywood are played out throughout the novel and the book is loaded with celebrity and movie references. The story harks back to Dutch’s predecessor, Donald E. Westlake, and his 1966 classic comic crime caper **The Busy Body**. *Deathryde* could also be an extension of Billy Wilder’s classic flick *Some Like It Hot* and those gangsters posing as undertakers in that opening scene.

I like to write in the third person narrative, because I, like Leonard, don’t want to get stuck with one person’s viewpoint, and as he has said, “the bad guys’ viewpoints are a lot more fun.” So I have multiple points of view—which is why I added a Cast of Characters in the opening pages of *Deathryde*, like the clas-

sic pulps of the Forties and Fifties used to do.

Where I differ from Elmore Leonard is that a reader is not sure from the beginning who the bad guys are. Everyone seems to be playing each other, and I tend to make use of corrupt detectives and public officials. So then it becomes a whodunit. If nothing else, my books are meant to entertain. No subject is sacrosanct, as in Carl Hiaasen’s writing. He is another satirical crime writer I am influenced by—I am working on several novels, and now refining the script to *Deathryde* looking to get the film produced. Michael Madsen has agreed to play the main character, James DeRossa.

Leonard nailed the absurdity of Hollywood. If you *Get Shorty*, you’ll get me and not only where I’m coming from, but also where I’ve been and where I’m going....

Michael P. Naughton is the author of **Deathryde: Rebel Without a Corpse** (Gilded Hearse Press, 2008) which is currently in preparation for the film starring Michael Madsen as James DeRossa. He is also currently working on his next crime satire novel, **The Deadbeat Alchemist**, due out later this year. He lives in Los Angeles. See www.GildedHearse.com.