

Book Review: Elmore Leonard Takes His Crime-Writing Skills to 'Djibouti'

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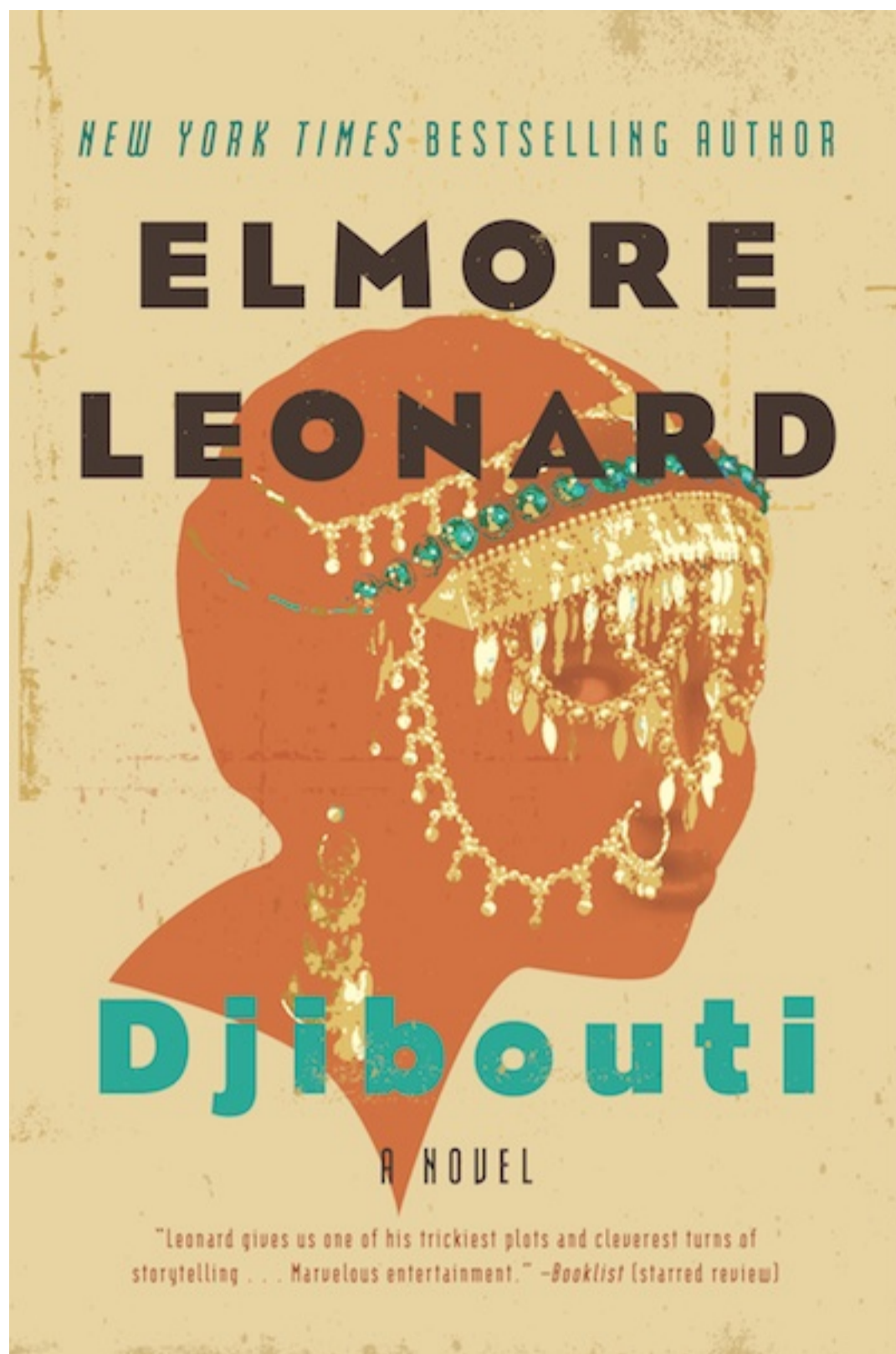
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CHICAGO – Well into his eighties, the great Elmore Leonard continues to churn out accomplished crime novels at a pace and skill level that shames men one-quarter his age. Time has not slowed one of the best crime writers of the last fifty years in any way and while his latest, "Djibouti," may not stand as one of his best, it certainly does nothing to sully his amazing reputation.

Leonard's first short story was published a truly remarkable 59 years ago and the years since then have seen the kind of literary success that allows a writer's pop culture influence to spread to film and television as well. Novels or short stories adapted for the big screen include "Get Shorty," "Out of Sight," "Stick," "Killshot," "Rum Punch" (which became "Jackie Brown"), and more. Recently, beloved Leonard character U.S. Marshal Raylan Givens went from fiction in the books "Pronto" and "Riding the Rap" to the excellent FX series "Justified."

The strength of Leonard's best material is obvious to anyone who's read a number of his books or even merely seen a number of the film's mentioned above — he has an amazing way with character. There are hundreds of crime writers who can weave an entertaining whodunit, but very few writers have ever had the skill at creating memorable characters as the man sometimes known as Dutch. From Givens to Karen Sisco to Chili Palmer, Leonard has a way with dialogue that makes his cool characters feel completely three-dimensional and yet bigger than life at the same time. We believe Chili Palmer exists and we totally want to hang out with him.

Leonard's fiction also often works itself around a group of people with one major thing in common: They're looking out for number one. Most of his crime stories are about people grabbing for whatever they can and stepping on whomever they need to in their way up the criminal ladder (although rarely in an overly-violent or dark manner). Even people who had only seen the films or shows based on Leonard's work would recognize the characters in "Djibouti" as those of the legendary writer. The setting may be notably different for a man typically associated with the Midwest that he calls home, but the common human trait remains the same: Nothing matters as much as getting what I want.



Djibouti

Photo credit: William Morrow

The title refers to the nation and its capital city, which happens to be located in one of the most contentious areas in the world. On the Northeast coast of Africa, the area around Djibouti is a hotbed for pirate activity and that's what draws documentarian Dara Starr to it for her latest film. Having just made an Oscar-winning documentary about Katrina, she longs for an equally-interesting subject and finds herself in an area of the world where morality isn't black or white. Heck, it's not even gray; it's some other color. The pirates who steal and often kill are seen as celebrities in the area, often even taking the moral high ground. As Idris, one of Dara's interview subjects says, *"I think of us as the Coast Guard giving fines to ships that contaminate our seas, thousands of them leaving their waste in the waters we once fished."*

Leonard subtly makes clear that Dara and her filmmaking partner Xavier aren't significantly different from their subjects in that they, as filmmakers, often create their own narratives. A large portion of the book features Dara and Xavier recapping what many writers would have detailed through action by looking at playback. Of course, their editing of the material tells the story as much as the story itself. The book folds in on itself in multiple "meta" ways in just the fact that the title refers to the country, capital, and Dara's documentary title simultaneously. And isn't Leonard himself not unlike Dara in how he edits together "what really happened"?

While the "meta" approach to such a straightforward writer might not work, the fact is that Leonard's overall approach is not too dissimilar from his previous work. Leonard may have changed his setting but his characters and their motives aren't significantly different from his crime novels or westerns — everybody wants to do what's best for them, whether they be pirates or filmmakers.

The fact that "Djibouti" feels so clearly like an Elmore Leonard novel could be considered a strength or a weakness. After a few interesting moments in the first part of the book, the setting starts to fade into the background and one wonders if there isn't a stronger version of the book with a little more actual local flavor. We never really feel like we're "there," as the Leonard rat-a-tat dialogue, while entertaining enough to be the book's main draw, doesn't exactly create a sense of realism on the African coast in the same way that it does in the American crime world.

Despite that, "Djibouti" is a quick, breezy, enjoyable read that may not be as memorable or influential as some of Leonard's best works but shouldn't be written off nonetheless. Just because Leonard makes this kind of material feel so strikingly easy for him to do doesn't mean that the accomplishment is any less. Basically, subpar Leonard still makes for enjoyable reading. He's been doing it for almost six decades now and shows no serious signs of slowing down. He's a gift to the form of American crime fiction, even if his latest does take place halfway around the world.

"Djibouti" was written by Elmore Leonard and published by William Morrow. It runs 279 pages and was released on October 12th, 2010.



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