

Elmore Leonard through the Eyes of a Polish-Born WWA Member

By Henryk Hoffman

As the “iron curtain” was partially raised in Poland in 1957, the Polish movie theaters were suddenly flooded with American movies. Especially Western fans had plenty of reasons to be pleased as within four years a number of remarkable Westerns found their way to the Polish screens: **The Indian Fighter, Apache, Shane, Winchester '73, Broken Arrow, 3:10 to Yuma, Stagecoach, The Man from Laramie, High Noon, Vera Cruz, The Big Country, Rio Bravo, The Magnificent Seven**, and more.

During the same period the Polish Television (having only one channel at that time) showed such classic Westerns as **My Darling Clementine, Yellow Sky, Western Union, Texas, Four Faces West** and **Colorado Territory**. Unlike other boys of my age (I was a teenager at that time) that limited their experience with the Western mythology to pure enjoyment, I decided to go further and make film, and the Western in particular, my hobby and the subject of personal study.

While analyzing the credits of my favorite movies, I came across names of several writers that I wanted badly to get acquainted with. In my research at the libraries and bookstores, I managed to find the translations of such works as *The Virginian* by Owen Wister (translated as *Wirnińczyk*), *Fighting Caravans* by Zane Grey (*Karawany walczące*), “Stage to Lordsburg” by Ernest Haycox (“Dylizans do Lordsburga”), *The Ox-Bow Incident* by Walter Van Tilburg Clark (*Dramat na Wolim Jarzmie*), *Shane* by Jack Schaefer (*Jeździec znikąd*) and *The Way West* by A.B. Guthrie, Jr. (*Droga na Zachód*).

Most of the Polish titles were literal translations of the originals. However, while *The Ox-Bow Incident* received a title that, in my opinion, was too literal because even the geographical name ‘Ox-Bow’ got translated into Polish, *Shane* got to be known both to the Polish movie goers and readers (the book was translated after the Polish release of the movie) as *Rider from Nowhere*, which—interestingly—coincides with the title of the serialized version of Schaefer’s novel published by *Argosy* in 1946.

As soon as my English was good enough (I took English—in addition to the required Russian—in high school and later majored in English Philology at the university), I expanded my search to original versions of the books, which I was able to find either at the Library of the American Consulate or in “antykwariats” (used book stores) in Poznań (my home city) or Warsaw (in those days the regular bookstores did not sell many foreign-language books). Thus, I managed to read Max Brand’s *Destry Rides Again*, Elliott Arnold’s *Blood Brother* (filmed



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as **Broken Arrow**), A.B. Guthrie, Jr.’s *The Big Sky*, James Warner Bellah’s short stories (collected as *Reveille*) that inspired John Ford’s Cavalry trilogy, and several books by Zane Grey and Luke Short.

The first time I took note of Elmore Leonard was after the viewing of **3:10 to Yuma** in one of the Poznań movie theaters. Hypnotized by the tale and the way it was staged by Delmer Daves, I rushed home to check (in my well-organized magazine clippings and notes) the name of the author of the original story. Since it did not sound familiar, I stored it at the back of my mind for several years until it emerged again during a TV presentation of **The Tall T**. Since both **3:10 to Yuma** and **The Tall T** were based on short stories rather than novels, I still did not start an Elmore Leonard book search even though I hoped to get better acquainted with the author. From then on, however, the name has maintained a much stronger resonance in my memory (it was not hard to remember as the writer’s last name happened to be my father’s first) and I immediately recognized it when I saw **Hombre** my first year of college and, a few years later, **Mr. Majestyk** and **Joe Kidd**—all three on the big screen. Absolutely convinced—by now—about the caliber of Leonard’s writing, I made a special trip from Poznań to Warsaw to see

Valdez Is Coming in a movie theater that specialized in showing films outside of the regular distribution. Although my checklist of Leonard's works had grown considerably, I still was not able to obtain any of his books.

I had never read a word by Leonard until my first visit to the United States in 1988. I was a bit disappointed because the first book I found was not a Western. It was *The Big Bounce* and I read it overnight, quite proud of myself for being able to decipher the author's allusion to his own work. All that Leonard says about the Western alluded to in an extensive passage of the novel, in addition to a part of its story line, is that it starred Randolph Scott and Richard Boone. Whatever he said was enough for me to know that the movie was **The Tall T** and that it was based on Leonard's own short story. Ironically, however, I was not able to read that story or any other Western work by Leonard until I settled down in America in 1992.

My relationship with my wife Betsy (an American) opened a new chapter in my life that also led to my first attempt at writing.

The comprehensive research of Western literature and film begun in my native country was energetically continued in the United States where an overwhelming abundance of resources resulted in a nonfiction book proposal submitted to McFarland in 1996. This was the book 'A' *Western Filmmakers: A Biographical Dictionary of Writers, Directors, Cinematographers, Composers, Actors and Actresses* published in January of 2000. In the first of nine parts of the book, sixty-nine writers (original authors) are discussed with the focus on their contribution to Western film. Elmore Leonard received one of the most extensive entries in that section and one of only four furnished with an illustration (the cover of the Ballantine edition of *Hombre*).

As a prerequisite of writing his entry, I had read several of his crime books and most of his Westerns, including all five works that have been made into

Western movies: the novels *The Law at Randado* (1954), *Hombre* (1961) and *Valdez Is Coming* (1970), purchased at Barnes & Noble as a special order, and the short stories "Three-Ten to Yuma" (1953) and "The Captives" (1956, the basis for the movie **The Tall T**), found in a series of Western anthologies edited by Bill Pronzini and Martin H. Greenberg. Needless to say, the experience was pure delight and, consequently, the conclusive paragraph in Leonard's entry is full of superlatives about both his writing and his contribution to the Western genre.

Another opportunity to laud Elmore Leonard's work came in my second book, *Western Film Highlights: The Best of the West, 1914-2001* (McFarland, 2003). In this chronological, year-by-year, account of the Western genre's best achievements, I was able, more than in my first book, to reveal my opinions and preferences referring to the Western writers, movies and filmmakers. Thus, in Appendix F, listing the "Top 20 Authors" (the major criterion being the qualitative and quantitative contribution to the Western film), Leonard ranks No. 11, above such distinguished writers as Louis L'Amour, Alan LeMay, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Dorothy M. Johnson, and Glendon Swarthout.

The new version of **3:10 to Yuma** (released in 2007), with Michael Brandt and Derek Hass's screenplay considerably expanding Halsted Welles' script based on Leonard's story, may appear controversial to many aficionados of the original version, especially in its abundance of unjustified violence, but the complex and engaging tale confirms, once again, the inexhaustible potential of Leonard's writing. Similar merits can be found in the author's crime books, which reveal unequalled imagination, authenticity, sense of humor, and originality of structure.

They are also unique in the way they include numerous cinematic references for more than just decorative purposes. This tendency of Leonard's—most

obvious in such novels as *Freaky Deaky*, *Killshot*, *Get Shorty*, *Out of Sight* and *Be Cool*—became instrumental in my idea to write a book on movie references and allusions in American literature. I have researched a great deal of other writers and found some two hundred with similar inclinations, but Leonard is definitely unsurpassed in this respect and his entry in the project is by far the largest one.

Thus, humming nostalgically the tune from **3:10 to Yuma** (which, in the unforgettable rendition by Frankie Laine, enhances the atmosphere of the original movie), I pay homage to the great writer of Western and crime fiction and congratulate him on the well-deserved Owen Wister Award. My selfish wish, on this occasion, is that some more of his brilliant Western works would find recognition by the current decision makers in Hollywood.

Henryk Hoffmann was born in Poznań, Poland, where he worked as an English teacher, translator and interpreter, and served as Vice-President of the Film Society "Kinematograf '75." He emigrated to the USA in 1992, and subsequently authored three reference books—"A" Western Filmmakers: A Biographical Dictionary of Writers, Directors, Cinematographers, Composers, Actors and Actresses (McFarland, 2000 and 2008); Western Film Highlights: The Best of the West, 1914-2001 (McFarland, 2003 and 2009); and Leksykon gwiazd kina amerykańskiego (A Comprehensive Dictionary of American Movie Stars, Agencja Producentów Filmowych, Warsaw, 2006)—the last one written in Polish in collaboration with his daughters, Beata and Katarzyna. An active member of the Western Writers of America, he now lives in Pennsylvania, where, as the World Languages Department Chair in a boarding prep school, he teaches Latin and German, but also runs a film club and coaches soccer. He is referenced in Contemporary Authors (Thomson Gale, 2005).