

'Road Dogs' National Public Radio (NPR) June 11, 2009 Thursday

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'Road Dogs'

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NEAL CONAN, host:

This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Neal Conan in Washington.

Elmore Leonard's prose is famously economical. Crisp dialogue flashes along at the speed of thought. The author, however, is famously prolific. Now over 80, he's just published his 43rd novel, "Road Dogs." The book picks up the stories of three of Leonard's most beloved characters: Jack Foley from "Out of Sight," Cundo Rey from "La Brava" and Dawn Navarro from "Riding the Rap" and follows them through the beach and valleys of loyalty and betrayal. It's a crime novel, but it's also about something else: whether or not people can change, and who will stick it out while we try, who we can count on. Elmore Leonard is with us today to talk about his writing, his characters, that snappy dialogue.

And we will stipulate that many of you love and admire his books. We do, too. But let's try to keep the conversation to an exchange of ideas. If you would like to talk with Elmore Leonard about his work or about writing, our phone number is 800-989-8255. Email us: talk@npr.org And you can join the conversation at our Web site. That's at npr.org. Click on TALK OF THE NATION. Later in the hour, we'll talk with Indie Rocker Jason Lytle. But first, Elmore Leonard joins us from member station WDET in Detroit. And it's nice to have you on TALK OF THE NATION today.

Mr. ELMORE LEONARD (Author, "Road Dogs"): Neal, thank you.

CONAN: And I was wondering if I was supposed to know what a road dog was and was delighted to discover a conversation in the book that explained it.

Mr. LEONARD: Well, I felt I had to, because the explanation doesn't really - I mean, the words road dogs don't really describe what it means, and that is a couple of convicts, inmates who watch each others back, who, if one gets into a scrape, then the other one will get into it also to help him out. And I was - I liked the sound of the words. That's why I used it. And I was surprised that it means so much more than - because in some ways, it sounds like a motorcycle...

CONAN: Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

Mr. LEONARD: ...you know.

CONAN: If it was hogs, it would be...

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. LEONARD: Yeah, right. Exactly.

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CONAN: Did you ever go to prison to listen to people talk?

Mr. LEONARD: Yes, I have. I spent some time at - well, you know, as a guest.

CONAN: Oh, good.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. LEONARD: And I visited in Angola in Louisiana and spent few hours there. And I remember the first question I asked the inmate we were talking to, I said what you call the guards here? And he said, well, we call them sir.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. LEONARD: Well, I knew I was being put on. And we had to get in - onto a better basis that he would tell me things. Then I visited Broward Correctional, which was a women's prison in Florida. And we asked for volunteers who would come and sit in a room and talk to me. And there were 15 women who had killed their husbands or someone else. And they all volunteered. We had a good chat.

CONAN: And I wonder, because if don't you research like that, do you find that you - do you fear that you end up quoting Jimmy Cagney movies?

Mr. LEONARD: Well...

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. LEONARD: ...yeah. You could. But that - you know, there's enough written about any phase of life, or - whether it's convicts or even Wall Street people, you know, now...

CONAN: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Mr. LEONARD: ...we can find out a lot about, that you can get by, you can get by reading about them, or a phase of what they're going through - I mean, or talk about some particular phase of their life in the prison. And you hear actual dialogue, and you'll always pick up a new word or so that is strictly convicts way of expressing themselves.

CONAN: I also wanted to ask about place. The - it seems to me that your earlier crime novels were set in Detroit, where you're from, where you're talking to us from today.

Mr. LEONARD: Yeah.

CONAN: And then many more in Florida. And then, lately, more on the West Coast, too, where you spent time as a screenwriter in Hollywood. Do you write only about a place after you know it?

Mr. LEONARD: Well, no, because - no. And I've used New Orleans, where I was born...

CONAN: Mm-hmm.

Mr. LEONARD: ...but haven't been there much. Just a few times. And I've used foreign settings in Italy and Cuba. No - but I started with Detroit, because Detroit is where I live, and it was just easier. And I was able to do a lot of research with the Detroit police, especially the homicide section. And they were very happy to talk to me. I spent about three weeks with them to do a piece for

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the Detroit News, which was called, "Impressions of Murder." And I learned all I could. I spent more time on it than a journalist would who might spend four days or so gathering information and then writing the piece. So, no, I was anxious to spend as much time as possible. And so then I would go back after that for Detroit-set books, go back to the homicide people and talk to them again.

CONAN: I've read many of your books. I won't say all of them by any stretch of the imagination, but I don't recall that you've set any of them in the world of advertising, where you worked.

Mr. LEONARD: No, I haven't.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. LEONARD: I left advertising as fast as I could in 1961. And I haven't ever thought about going back. No, I haven't. And I have thought: Could I set a story in an ad agency? And I thought: Why? What would you do? What will be the point? Now, of course, there is an ad - there was a series...

CONAN: "Mad Men," yeah.

Mr. LEONARD: ... "Mad Men," yeah. And I've never seen people smoke so much.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. LEONARD: And I was in an agency - I was writing Chevrolet ads in the '50s. I got out in 61. I was released. And all they - someone said, you know, they smoked a lot in the '50s. Well, we didn't smoke that much. I don't - it's - they're all chain smokers on that program.

CONAN: Well, they may exaggerate for dramatic effect. I'm sure you know nothing about that.

Mr. LEONARD: No.

CONAN: We're talking with Elmore Leonard today. If you'd like to join the conversation: 800-989-8255. Email us: talk@npr.org Let's begin with Christopher, Christopher with us from Oahu in Hawaii.

CHRISTOPHER (Caller): Good morning, sir.

CONAN: Good morning.

Mr. LEONARD: Good morning.

Mr. CHRISTOPHER: My question was - I'm an aspiring writer, and my inspiration comes from personal experience. But I'm just - sometimes I feel conflicted when I'm researching characters. Don't want to steal that person from real life. I don't want to just write that person. But at the same time, I want to draw experience from it. So I'm just wondering how your guest kind of overcomes that difficulty, or if he ever feels conflicted about drawing from reality too much.

Mr. LEONARD: The character that you're researching, maybe you already know what he's about - I mean, what he will be about in the story that you want - what do you want him to do? And you choose a character who will fit into that particular - into that slot for your book. I think the best advice I give is to try not to write. Try not to overwrite, try not to make it sound too good. Just use your own voice. Use your own style of putting it down. And one - because you

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have to establish your sound, what you - how you see things most clearly and able to describe them. And then once you know who you are as a writer, then it'll come easier for you.

CONAN: Good luck, Christopher.

CHRISTOPHER: Thank you for your advice, sir.

CONAN: Okay, I wanted to ask you about - obviously one of things you also - I've read this about you, that you really want to be careful not to repeat yourself, yet you bring back three characters, and this is not the first time you've brought back characters from other books. What attracted you to bringing back...

Mr. LEONARD: Well, these three - well, I felt Cundo Rey, who was in the, I think, the mid-'80s, he was in "La Brava," and I remember thinking, God, I hope he's still alive. And I looked - I saw his final scene. He was shot three times in the chest, and I thought, oh. But - and Joe La Brava did it, and Joe kept moving. He was on to something else, and Cundo Rey was never pronounced dead. So I have a couple of emergency fellows pick him up and say, hey, he's still breathing. And he's in a coma for a while, but then he gets - he revives, comes into the story.

Dawn Navarro, I used as a supporting character in another book, and I thought, I've got to use her again. She's good. I'm not - she has a lot more promise than I was able to bring out in "Riding the Rap," her book. So that - but that's done. I'm not going to overdo that because I remember John D. MacDonald. He was - he said I'm on my 28th Travis McGee, and he said, I don't know if I can do another one. I'm so tired of this guy.

CONAN: Yeah, he was running out of colors, too.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. LEONARD: Yes he was, and - and he did. He went up to the hospital for bypass and didn't come out.

CONAN: There's the third character, Jack Foley, and there's just a piece of dialogue. I hope you won't mind if I read it. This is - his ex-wife, Adele, is talking to an FBI agent, who's trying to hunt him down after he gets out of prison, and Adele says:

It's too bad. You get to know Jack, he's really a good guy. Girls love him. Lou(ph) allowed Adele to take him by the arm to the door, still open, Adele saying, girls find out he robs banks, they get turned on. And he is good looking, you have to admit. But say the girls find out he holds up liquor stores? It'd turn them off, or they'd be scared to death of him. That's true, Lou said. There's something about bank robbers, the way the general public imagines them as cool guys. Why is that? Nine out of 10 are bums, deadbeats, owe car payments or need a fix, guys who will never get their life ahead of the game.

That's A, really nice. But it's also helped by the fact that we see Jack Foley as Mr. Clooney.

Mr. LEONARD: Yes, we do. Yeah, sure. Yeah, that's why I want him in "Road Dogs."

(Soundbite of laughter)

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CONAN: And maybe you're already casting the movie. We're talking with Elmore Leonard. If you'd like to talk with him about his book, about writing, the phone number 800-989-8255. Email us, talk@npr.org Stay with us. I'm Neal Conan. It's the TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

(Soundbite of music)

CONAN: This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Neal Conan in Washington. Elmore Leonard is with us today. His latest book is titled "Road Dogs." It's one of the recommended books in the summer book section of our Web site, npr.org. And you can go there and read an excerpt from the book, at npr.org. Just click on TALK OF THE NATION.

If you'd like to talk with Elmore Leonard about his book or about writing, our phone number, 800-989-8255. Email us, talk@npr.org You can also join the conversation at our Web site, npr.org. Click on TALK OF THE NATION. Let's get Charlie(ph) on the line, Charlie with us from Wichita.

CHARLIE (Caller): Hi. I was interested to find out that you are a screen-writer. I was curious to know: Do you adapt your own books, and have you been happy with other people's adaptations of your books?

Mr. LEONARD: Well, I've been very happy with the ones that turned into good movies, sure.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. LEONARD: I haven't been happy with my own writing for the screen, and I don't like screenwriting. I finally, when I quit, I'd had enough. But I couldn't - I felt as though I couldn't use my style of writing for the screen. I was never sure of points of view. I couldn't change points of view.

CHARLIE: (Unintelligible) tongue in cheek, I think.

Mr. LEONARD: Yeah, and there were too many people telling me what to do, you know, who really don't know that much about story. That's the trouble. You're just a hand. You're there to put - they would love to be able to write the story, I'm talking about studio executives, but they can't. They can't, so they'll use you and then they'll use you for a while, and then they'll say, well, we'd better get somebody else because there are a lot of writers. There are 8,000 writers in Hollywood. So we'll just get somebody else.

CHARLIE: So you write (unintelligible)...?

Mr. LEONARD: Yeah, they're not sure what they want.

CHARLIE: Okay. Thank you.

CONAN: Thanks for the call, Charlie. And let's see if we can go next to Jenna(ph), Jenna with us from Portland, Oregon.

JENNA (Caller): Hi.

CONAN: Go ahead, Jenna.

Mr. LEONARD: Hi, Jenna.

JENNA: Hi. I just recently discovered you. I just read "The Hot Kid," and it's a great book. I really enjoyed it. I was surprised at the ending, though,

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how abruptly it ended. And having not read any of your other books, I'm curious if that's a style of yours or just something that you did in particular in the book. And I'll take my answer off the air.

CONAN: Thanks, Jenna.

Mr. LEONARD: I have - I had an editor who told me, she said - she would say, this book ends awfully abruptly. I said, I know, but it's over. And she'd say, well, could you let it just kind of slide along for a while, you know, add a few pages and see if you can just keep things going just for a bit? And so I would add three pages and then cut two of the pages that were already in the book. And it would still be somewhat abrupt, but when it's over, it's over. You know, why, you're not going to see everybody grinning and then Lassie barks.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. LEONARD: And it's over.

CONAN: Let's go to another caller. This is David, David with us from Schertz in Texas.

DAVID: Yes, hello. How are you doing?

CONAN: Very well, thanks.

DAVID: Good. I had a question for Elmore Leonard about his Western novels. I'm a big fan of the Westerns, and there were rumors several years ago about a possible adaptation of "40 Lashes Less One" by Quentin Tarantino. I didn't know if there was any validity to those rumors, or - it's one of my favorite novels, and I was just wondering if that was eventually going to see the light of day. And I'll take my answer off the air.

CONAN: Thanks, David.

Mr. LEONARD: Yeah, well Quentin just - he didn't talk to me about it, but he liked the idea of doing a Western and chose that one. But he never did it. That - Charles Bronson, it was given to Charles Bronson in the '70s, mid-'70s, and he thought about it for a while and then turned it down. And I think it would still be a good movie, a very good Western. It's a prison Western.

CONAN: And I have to ask you, in that regard, which version of your book, the "Three-Ten to Yuma," filmed twice, quite a number of years apart, which do you prefer?

Mr. LEONARD: Well, the first one in '53 I think it was, or '57, was closest to the story, which was a 4,500-word short story I sold to Dime Western for \$90, and then sold the movie rights. And the first one, with Glenn Ford, was very, very close to the story. They added, they had to add about 20 minutes on to the front end to make it feature length.

Then the second one I thought was quite good all the way, but it missed - it misses the point of the "Three-Ten to Yuma." Will this guy, who has nothing, who has to bring this outlaw in, will he give in? Will he give in for money? Because the guy, he tries to bribe him. And then ending made no sense at all, but I thought the picture was good until the ending, and then it made no sense.

CONAN: Do you go see the pictures of all of your books?

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Mr. LEONARD: Sure. Well, I don't necessarily go, but I do in time see it. There's only one - let's see, what is it? It was the first, "Big Bounce." I'd never - I've never seen the whole thing, and I said this is the worst - this has to be the second-worst movie ever made.

CONAN: What's the worst?

Mr. LEONARD: And then they remade "The Big Bounce," and I said ah, now I know what the first-worst movie...

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. LEONARD: They were terrible.

CONAN: Let's get Don on the air, Don with us from Ann Arbor, Michigan.

DON (Caller): Yeah hi, Neal, you always have a great show.

CONAN: Oh, thank you.

DON: Mr. Leonard, we lost Donald Westlake recently.

Mr. LEONARD: Yes.

DON: And I just got done reading like the first four or five Richard Stark books of his, with (unintelligible) in them. And I was wondering if you could comment on Westlake a little bit and maybe if he influenced you or you thought you influenced him at all.

Mr. LEONARD: Well, I don't know. I think we had pretty much the same - I won't say - well, the attitude. Our attitude has to be - they were similar.

DON: Very unique voices, each of you.

Mr. LEONARD: Yeah, we saw humor. We saw more humor in situations than I think most crime writers. And he was great. He was a wonderful stylist. So it's just unfortunately now that he's gone.

DON: I never knew he wrote so many books. He, like, put out six or seven a year and had to have different names so he could get them all published.

Mr. LEONARD: He's probably written 100.

CONAN: Wow.

Mr. LEONARD: Really.

DON: Yeah.

Mr. LEONARD: Like Ed McBain. I think McBain had written 100, also.

DON: Well, when I read your books, I thought of him, and when I read his, I think of you, so...

Mr. LEONARD: Yeah, yeah.

CONAN: Don, thanks very much.

DON: Thanks, you bet.

CONAN: Bye-bye. Let's go next to - this is Jim, Jim with us from Spencer, Iowa.

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JIM (Caller): Hi, Mr. Leonard. My question involves characters of other ethnicities or gender types or certain sensitivities that we may have today. It may be characters that might not be, you know, glowing examples of humanity. Are you concerned that certain types of ethnicities and characters are something that you have to steer clear of, or is that perfectly fine with you?

Mr. LEONARD: I don't steer clear of any kind. I always have - most often I have black actors and Hispanic and - and now, right now, I'm using Arabs.

CONAN: And I would say that few of them are glowing examples of humanity.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. LEONARD: Well, I'm having a little trouble with Arabs right now, but you know, getting them to talk. I don't have trouble with African-Americans or - there are just ways, Hispanics. I just think of the Hispanics, for example, speaking pretty much in the present tense with just a little bit of an accent. I don't overdo the accents.

CONAN: I wonder. So many other writers say that once they've created a character, sometimes it takes them to places they were not expecting to go, that the character takes on a life of his or her own. Do you find that, or do you stick to the plot that you've set out ahead of time?

Mr. LEONARD: Well, I always have little set pieces that I like, you know, that entertain me. A little - a piece about a person who - I don't know necessarily what I could say it's about now, but maybe the way a guy performs a robbery or something. But it's just thrown in to describe, to help you understand this character better, you know. It's not for any plot point.

CONAN: There's a - we mentioned - you mentioned earlier you got \$90 for the story "Three-Ten to Yuma" that was published in a Dime publication. Dennis in Tempe, Arizona, asks: The term pulp fiction is tossed about so loosely. Could we hear your definition of the genre?

Mr. LEONARD: Well, the pulp fiction, when I was writing for the pulps, it was on that rough, heavy paper, you know?

CONAN: Mm-hmm.

Mr. LEONARD: And that was it. It's - it described the paper, the stock more than anything else. But it was a wonderful way to learn how to write because when I got into it in the early '50s, there were at least a dozen or - more than that. There were more pulp magazines. And - just in the Westerns. I didn't get into the crime yet.

And so, you can - the better ones were selling - were paying \$.02 a word. And so I must have sold at least, you know, 20 stories at \$.02 a word. I sold one to the Saturday Evening Post. At that time, they paid 8.50 for the first - you, know, first story.

CONAN: Mm-hmm.

Mr. LEONARD: And Argosy, I wrote an - my first sale was a novelette to Argosy, and they paid a thousand. And I thought, wow.

CONAN: Wow.

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Mr. LEONARD: This - I couldn't believe it, because I was only making about \$3,000 a year. So that came in handy, I'll tell you.

CONAN: You've written - you started out writing like that, and I think your first books came out in paperback, as well. Now your books are - the recent - the most recent book, it was reviewed in the New York Times by Robert Pinsky, the former poet laureate, and Martin Amis, who's really thought of as a literally writer. Does that surprise you?

Mr. LEONARD: Yes, of course. When I saw Robert Pinsky's name, I thought, oh, my God. Then - and I thought, right from his first sentence, he liked it. And he liked my writing. And so - and then it's funny that he said this is about loyalty. This is about friendship and about whether it's going to work or not. And I thought, wow. It is, isn't it? Because I hadn't even thought of that. I never think of what it's about as far as theme is concerned. Hollywood writers always know what the theme is. And I would wait for - the same writer has written a couple of mine, and I would wait for him to tell me what the theme is of my books. And I would say, yeah, wow. Wow, I didn't know that.

And - because I don't know that it matters what the theme is. You're not going to think of that first and then write the book. The theme, to me, is just something that comes along.

CONAN: We're talking with Elmore Leonard. His new book: "Road Dogs." You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

And let's get Helen on the line, Helen with us from South Hampton, on Long Island.

Ms. HELEN MENDES (Caller): Yes. Hello. Hello, Mr. Leonard.

Mr. LEONARD: Hi, Helen.

Ms. MENDES: Thank you. I wanted to thank you for putting me in one of your books about - I don't know how many years ago it is now in the '70s. I don't count the years. And also, I want to thank you for the TALK OF THE NATION show. I love your show. I always listen to it.

CONAN: Well, thank you. Helen, how are you in one of Elmore Leonard's books?

Ms. MENDES: Well, I was driving along, I was on a cross country trip and I saw a protest going on in front of this business. I stopped to see what it was, and these people were out in front protesting. They'd been locked out of their place of employment. I think it was some sort of a factory. And so my grandpa used to call me a rabble rouser, so I got the crowd roused. And there was this man that came up to me and asked me who I was and what I was doing, and I said, I'm Helen Mendes and I'm an actress.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. LEONARD: Wow. Helen Mendes.

Ms. MENDES: Oh, (unintelligible) me?

Mr. LEONARD: She was - what was she in? Was she in "Hombre"?

Ms. MENDES: Was she in "Hombre?" Was who in "Hombre"?

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CONAN: Helen Mendes.

Mr. LEONARD: Helen Mendes.

Ms. MENDES: I'm Helen Mendes.

Mr. LEONARD: I know. But the name that I used, Helen Mendes.

CONAN: Which book was she in?

Ms. MENDES: She - I was in "The Switch."

Mr. LEONARD: Oh, "The Switch."

Ms. MENDES: I was in "The Switch." And I forgive you. You spelled my name wrong. Everybody does is. It's like Mendes - it's Mendes with an S, like Sam.

CONAN: I see.

Mr. LEONARD: Oh, really? Yeah. Uh-huh.

Ms. MENDES: But I was astounded, because my friends said, did you meet Elmore Leonard? And I said, no. No, I don't know who that is. And they said, well, I think you're in one of his books. And they gave me the book and sure enough, that incident was in your book. Huh.

Mr. LEONARD: Well, I'll be darned.

Ms. MENDES: Me, too.

CONAN: Has your agent been in touch with Mr. Leonard?

Ms. MENDES: No. But I'm going have to call my agent, because as a matter of fact, I am in the theater and film business. I'm an actor and director, and I guess I want to put that in my bio. You made me famous.

CONAN: Well, it's interesting...

(Soundbite of laughter)

CONAN: ...Helen should mention that. There are auctions, as I understand it, Elmore Leonard, where people can put in bids and win the chance to be a character in one of your books.

Mr. LEONARD: Every one of my recent books. I would say for the last 10 years, I will have - at least three or four real people in my books.

Ms. MENDES: Oh, (unintelligible)...

Mr. LEONARD: They never know what they're going to become, what they will - what parts they will play, of course. And...

Ms. MENDES: No. No. I don't know what part it was. This was, I think, 1977.

Mr. LEONARD: Oh.

Ms. MENDES: ...76, 77 when it happened.

Mr. LEONARD: What was the book?

Ms. MENDES: It was "The Switch."

Mr. LEONARD: "The Switch."

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Ms. MENDES: "The Switch." Yeah.

Mr. LEONARD: Uh-huh.

CONAN: Well, Helen, congratulations. You've been immortalized.

Ms. MENDES: I certainly have. And I'm so thrilled to be able to get to call in and get to talk to you guys. You're both wonderful and...

CONAN: Well, you're very kind.

Ms. MENDES: ...exceptional work. Thank you so much.

CONAN: Thank you, Helen.

Ms. MENDES: Thank, Mr. Leonard.

Mr. LEONARD: Thank you.

CONAN: We just have a minute or so left, Elmore Leonard. Can you tell us, are you working on your next book?

Mr. LEONARD: Yes, I am. In fact, I finished - I must have finished "Road Dogs" last fall - early fall, because in November, I started reading about pirates in the Gulf of Aden...

CONAN: Oh, in Somalia.

Mr. LEONARD: ...off of West Africa - right, Somali pirates. And I'm 153 pages into my pirate book.

CONAN: Ah!

Mr. LEONARD: I have a woman who is doing a - she's making - she's writing her - I mean, she's shooting her film about pirates. She's - she makes documentary films.

And she's in a little boat out in the gulf, and she's meeting pirates and shooting them and getting along pretty well. So, by page 152 or 153, where I am right now, it's about to switch over into something else. We're about to bring al-Qaida into the story.

CONAN: Well, we can't wait to read it. Elmore Leonard, thank you so much for your time today.

Mr. LEONARD: Thanks, Neal.

CONAN: Elmore Leonard's latest book, "Road Dogs." You can find an excerpt with Jack Foley and Cundo Rey getting to know each in the joint on our Web site at npr.org/talk.

Coming up: We'll be talking with Jason Lytle about his new album, "Yours Truly, the Commuter."

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