Have I told you about my Elmore Leonard audiobook collection?

by Richard Stin

I’m not saying I’m the world’s biggest expert on Elmore Leonard audiobooks, but I’m somewhere in the ballpark. Partly, that’s because there aren’t that many people competing for the title. And I’m not saying that I have the world’s most complete collection of Elmore Leonard audiobooks. But I’m probably in the ballpark there, as well. That’s also not truly that impressive because as far as I can tell—based on my holding at step—in the only one collecting Elmore Leonard audiobooks. I don’t know why that is.

Elmore Leonard audiobooks are supremely entertaining, they’re inspiring on a literary and performative level, and they’re rarely disappointing (and I mean that). Leonard is one of those rare novelists whose words seem custom made for the audiobook listener—he gives great story and provides a shifting narrative tone, snappy dialogue, and a narrator’s voice to score availability. The visual quality of his writing, combined with some truly dazzling reader performance, makes his audiobooks closer to a movie experience than a literary one. (Well, I don’t know why everyone doesn’t see that.

When I butterknife some unfortunates friend or acquaintance and I start talking about how great Elmore Leonard audiobooks are, I find them not overly easy. It’s like I’m trying to get them to go vegan or watch “Star Trek.” Okay, some of the people aren’t really that familiar with Leonard. They don’t know him. And then some of these people know of him, but only as the guy who wrote “Strumpet” and “Out of Sight.” This is doubly troubling. How can you not know him? He’s Elmore Leonard! He’s a signature American voice, a master craftsman who’s been meticulously labeled as a crime writer. If a book impresses you, he’s got a lot of them—if peer review impresses you, he’s been applauded by plenty of literary journalists. And if you’re impressed by quantity, he’s written 42 novels, which have been turned into 23 movies, two television shows, and 67 audiobooks. By the way, don’t pin me down on the number of audiobooks. I have a feeling that I’m the only one keeping track. According to my audiobook countryman’s books—Glitz, Thriller from Five Shadow, Consignment, Homicide, La Brea, and Lusier’s Almanac No. 1—never made it to audio. (Help me out here if you know where these can be found.)

Leonard is one of those rare novelists whose work seems crafted for the audiobook listener. If you’re looking for a narrator with a voice that suits the genre and the story, Leonard’s audiobook narrators are a great place to start. From the gravelly voice of narrator Frank Muller to the smooth tones of narrator George Guidall, each of whom has read an unabridged version of Red Cap. Or consider Alfred Molina, Tye Egel, Henry Strozier, and William Auffrere, each of whom has read the great Elmore Leonard short story, “The Sure Thing.”

The cool factor for narrative talent is off the charts. Consider some of the narrators: Liev Schreiber, Peter Capaldi, Neil Patrick Harris, James Naughton, David Strathairn, Tom Wopat (yes, from “The Dukes of Hazzard”), Henry Lee, Robert Lindsay, Armand Howard, Joe Morton, Brian Dennehy, Bruce Blockstein, Tom Selleck, Robert Forster, Dylan Baker, Steve Buscemi, Paul Rudd, Keith Carradine, and Richard Poe. Who, if I forget to mention Ed Asner? And Henry Rollins (yes, punk rocker Henry Rollins). And until all this testifies, let’s not overlook Barbara Rosenblat, the only female narrator of Elmore Leonard. (Check out her swinging performance of the story “When Two Women Come Out to Dance.”) Of course, dominating the world of Elmore Leonard audiobooks is master narrator Frank Muller. He’s read 13 of them (be sure to check out his version of “House of Cards” as the second-rate actor in Cat Chaser). Then, there’s the classically cool narration of George Guidall (he’s read seven) and masters like George Guidall (few), Mark Harmon (five), and the actor Joe Mantegna (five). Mantegna may be the best-known voice of Elmore Leonard, having narrated several unabridged versions of Get Shorty, Out of Sight, Pretty Monsters, The Bay, and Ron Rossich. Which leads us to audiobooks. Did you ever notice how rarely the books are approved by the “Approved” label on unabridged audiobooks? I posed a question at the Elmore Leonard Web site asking if the actually approved the audiobooks. Apparently the...
flashy, and he doesn't overwhelm you with his characterizations. But in "Mr.
Paradise," the one Leonard audiobook
that he narrated, Foster seemingly
found his innerBlaine, delivering an
even-handed, cool reading that distin-
guishes him from the rest of the pack.
If you've made it to the end of this arti-
cle, great! If we meet in person, I promise
not to harangue you about my favorite
Leonard audiobook collection. But please
feel free to tell me about yours!