

# Pronto Short Guide

## Pronto by Elmore Leonard

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# Characters

Harry Arno, the main character of Pronto, is a vain sixty-six-year-old South Miami Beach local celebrity (there's a "Harry Arno" sandwich at a local eatery) who grosses \$6,000-\$7,000 a week running a sports book from three locations. He is supposed to split fifty-fifty with the local mob boss, but for over twenty years has been skimming a thousand a week off the top before paying his tribute. With over a million dollars stashed in a Swiss bank account and two passports in different names, Harry thinks about, but postpones, retirement. Meanwhile, he lives at a seedy hotel and has a girlfriend, fortyish Joyce Patton, formerly a topless dancer (distinguished by the fact that she wore her glasses while performing) and more recently an occasional model for clothing catalogs.

Set up by the FBI as fall guy in an anti-rackets push and therefore pursued by the mob, Harry kills a man who came at him with a "sawed-off pump-action shotgun . . . he says from Jimmy Cap."

His nominal adversary is Jimmy Capotorto (also known as Jimmy Cap and Jumbo), a 350-pound mobster who eats, sleeps, suns himself, and gives orders to a pair of henchmen: Tommy Bucks (nee Bitonti), who came from Sicily "ten twelve years ago" (according to Arno) as a "Zip" or assassin, and his competitor for primacy with their boss, Nicky Testa, a muscle-bound young thug who never has killed a man, muffs several chances to do so, but finally proves his mettle in spectacular fashion. Despite his indolence, Cap has a piece of everything that is illegal in Dade County, and his reach extends across the Atlantic to his native Italy.

When released on bond provided (indirectly) by Capotorto, Harry takes off for his retirement outside an Italian hill town. Years earlier, as a World War II U. S. Army man, Harry was in Rapallo, where he shot a deserter and met the poet Ezra Pound. He never has forgotten either experience. Even if the mobsters did not follow him to his retreat and force him to flee once more, Harry would have returned to South Miami Beach, for he quickly tired of the slow pace and bucolic scenery. His problems resolved, Harry speculates about retirement and says he "may give Italy another chance," but he is not especially convincing.

Most important of the several law enforcement figures in Pronto is Raylan Givens of the U. S. Marshals Service.

About forty, he always wears "a businessman's cowboy hat," looks like a farmer even in a dark blue suit, and has two young boys who live with his former wife in Brunswick, Georgia. A gentleman with no affectation, he is also a fearless marksman. Face to face across a table from Nicky Testa, he says that even before entering the Service, he had "learned to be ready in case I saw a bad situation coming toward me. . . . In other words . . . if I see you've come to do me harm, I'll shoot you through the heart before you can clear your weapon. Do we have an understanding here?"



When he is assigned to watch Arno after the bookmaker is released on bail, it is the second such experience Givens has had with the older man. Seven years earlier, Arno gave him the slip while Givens was transporting him to Chicago: "We're in the Atlanta airport?"

I'm eating an ice cream cone, he says he's going to the men's and will be right back. The next time I saw him was yesterday, six years later." Harry grins at the lawman's recollection, but Raylan does not. "If you'd kept your word I'd be up in grade by now with the Marshals to a GS-Twelve stead of where I am presently and have been the past seven years. Nothing happened to you, though, did it?" When Harry eludes him once more, Givens understandably is anxious to apprehend him, takes vacation time, and goes to Italy at his own expense, where he tracks down Arno, keeps the mobsters at bay until the fugitive returns to the U. S., and then takes charge of matters back in Florida. He accomplishes quite a bit for a self-effacing country boy.

## Social Concerns

The action of this novel focuses upon organized crime, which Leonard presents in all its sleazy criminality; however, in addition to dramatizing the corruption of the mob, he implicitly criticizes aspects of U. S. law enforcement. The initiating event of the action, which moves between Florida and Italy, is a government plan to make a bookmaker, Harry Arno, the fall guy in an assault on the mob, specifically Miami Beach gangster Jimmy (Jumbo) Capotorto. One of the least appealing characters in Leonard's motley cast is the FBI agent in charge, who sees no ethical problem about making someone a scapegoat, even at the risk of the man's life. For agent McCormick, the end justifies the means: "Listen to me.

McCormick says, 'Or work it so Arno does get whacked and you bring Jumbo up on homicide.' He says, 'What would be wrong with that?' "

His colleagues indeed do have problems with the reasoning, and because Leonard develops them more positively, the reader identifies with these men and shares their doubts about McCormick's plan. Through this ambivalence, Leonard raises questions about the nature of law enforcement and the point at which it steps over the bounds of propriety and even morality.

Capotorto and Arno are engaged in illegalities, but whereas most people would label the mobster a criminal, few would describe Arno as such. The bookmaker is a likable old gent who for decades has been facilitating his clients' desire to gamble, and they, from what we learn, are upstanding, even leading, citizens of the community. By the end of the novel, therefore, Leonard has introduced a broader range of social issues than just the appropriateness of some FBI procedures.



## Techniques

Reverting to his background as a writer of westerns, Leonard utilizes for this novel a standard plot technique of that other genre. From start to finish, *Pronto* is a chase. The FBI goes after Arno, so the mob follows. When he flees, Givens and the mob go after him, and that part of the novel set in Italy is wholly devoted to people running after and from each other. Such is also the case when the action returns to Florida.

The effect of this simple plot technique is immediate tension at the start, with the momentum and suspense increasing without let-up as the story progresses to Givens' climactic shots two pages before the close.

Crisply realistic dialogue is a standard Leonard technique, which he uses here, as elsewhere, to advance the action rapidly and also to reveal character concisely and quickly. He utilizes another simple but effective device to influence reader attitude toward a character. Because FBI agent McCormick is the only person known just by a last name, he is hard to know, and most people don't like him. As the narrator says, "McCormick would sound like he was a nice guy, but underneath it was a snot-nose attitude he couldn't hide. He liked to make fun of people, especially with another agent to show off in front of. One on one, when you had business with him, he wasn't so bad. Then, he hardly paid any attention to you."



# Themes

Interdependence is the primary thematic motif of *Pronto*. Whether FBI agent McCormick, Raylan Givens of the U. S. Marshals Service, or Buck Torres of the Miami Beach police department succeeds depends upon the cooperation of others, and all of them grit their teeth and enlist the aid of people they consider undesirables. Mobster Jimmy Capotorto relies totally upon the assistance and loyalty of his underlings, such as Tommy Bucks and Nicky Testa, and the lackeys themselves look to others for help in carrying out their assigned tasks.

The theme is present in personal as well as in professional and business relationships. Harry Arno, worldly wise and very much an independent man, still wants the companionship of a woman and welcomes the friendship of such strangers as Givens (albeit he is a sometime adversary) and Robert Gee, both of whom become indispensable helpmates in his life-threatening dilemma. At the end of the novel, on his own again, Harry already is planning to get in touch with Joyce again as he thinks of still another try at retirement in Italy.

Raylan Givens is the focus of a secondary theme, that of fundamental decency. Despite being buffeted by career and marital failure, he remains a thoroughly decent man, still very much the boy from rural Georgia. Unimpressed by wealth earned from criminality and corruption, he has a refreshing naivete that is tempered only by his determination to redeem a career damaging error. He is a good lawman despite that lapse, perceptive, fast thinking, and ready to kill when necessary. Givens stands apart from everyone else in the novel as the untainted person. That he ultimately prevails — and wins the woman, too — is an unmistakable thematic message.



# Key Questions

Much crime fiction is formula writing, and since most practitioners of the genre are prolific, producing at least one full-length work a year, they often recycle plots and characters. Many of Leonard's novels have echoes of earlier novels, yet each manages to be different. A discussion of *Pronto*, his twenty-sixth crime novel, could begin with why, among readers of crime fiction, familiarity breeds content, whereas at the same time they want something new.

1. Is Raylan Givens in the 1994 *New Yorker* story pretty much the same person as that of the novel, or have his experiences in *Pronto* changed him?
2. The fugitive Givens escorts in "Riding the Rap" is Dale Crowe Junior, from the Everglades. The hired gun Arno kills in *Pronto* is Earl Crowe, from the same area. Does this similarity in names, and the likelihood that they are related matter in terms of the novel or story?
3. Leonard often laces his crime novels with humor. How much is in *Pronto*? For what purpose does the author use it? A critic has said that in Leonard's novels the bad guys get most of the funny lines. Is this the case in *Pronto*?
4. According to the same critic, "the chief function of a Leonard hero seems to be to try and bring a little reality into people's lives." Is this statement valid for *Pronto*?
5. How honest is Buck Torres, the first law officer Leonard introduces in the novel?
6. Harry Arno's killing of an Army deserter in World War II was a landmark event in his life and frequently is recalled in the novel. How does it affect reader attitude toward him?

Does it function as a motivating element in the plot (aside from making Rapallo his choice of retreat)?

7. What does Arno's ambivalence toward Robert Gee suggest about the older man? There's no real pause in the narrative to mourn over Gee's murder.

Indeed, the reaction to his death is little different from the reaction to gangsters' killings? Why?

8. Leonard's novels are peopled with survivors. Harry Arno is one such.

How has he managed to be one? Are there any constants that link Arno, Zola, and other Leonard survivors?

9. "Evil appears in Leonard's crime novels as that mysterious force which makes criminals out of petty men with hopelessly wrong ideas about who they are and how the world really works."





This statement appeared in an article several years before Pronto was published. Does it apply to this 1993 novel?

10. In what ways does Leonard vary his repeated chase motifs in so many of his novels?

## Literary Precedents

Leonard's close reading of Ernest Hemingway (particularly *For Whom the Bell Tolls*) focused his attention on dialogue and point of view, but he claims to differ significantly from Hemingway: "I see more absurdity. I like people more. I'm more tolerant."

An acknowledged influence is the novel *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (1972) by George V. Higgins, which utilizes dialogue and monologues as means of increasing realism. His portrayal of ordinary people (including law enforcers) in trouble follows Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett.

## Related Titles

The setting, characters, and situations recall LaBrava and other Leonard novels in which lawmen are at risk.

The plot, built around a chase, also is similar to that of earlier books, as far back as *The Hunted*; however, although the basic pattern is the same, Leonard has come up with still another variation for this novel. In the June 27/July 4, 1994, issue of *The New Yorker*, there is a Leonard short story, "Riding the Rap," whose main character is Raylan Givens, "the one the Mafia guy drew on last winter in Miami Beach — the two of them sitting at the same table, this marshal shot him dead." Finally, a Crowe from the Everglades is the first dead man in this novel, and he is part of the lawless family that figures prominently in *Maximum Bob*.



# Copyright Information

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