



STRAIGHT TIME: Portrait of the artist as a young cad (center) and today, at home in Highland Park

True Criminal

MEET EDWARD BUNKER: AUTHOR, ACTOR, SCREENWRITER, FELON

IN 1969, CAREER CRIMINAL EDWARD BUNKER SAT IN A CELL IN L.A.'S Central Jail thinking of ways to convince his captors that he was mentally unfit to stand trial. He had already told authorities that the Catholic Church had planted a radio in his brain, but Bunker felt he needed a real showstopper. Grasping the shards of a broken lightbulb, he chopped into the veins of his right arm, then spun in circles while the blood sprayed onto the walls and cell bars. "They always think you're faking," recalls the 66-year-old Bunker, "so you really have to do something to get their attention." • Bunker's attention-getting ploys have mellowed since. This month, he will publish *Education of a Felon* (St. Martin's Press), his memoirs of 18 years spent in some of the toughest prisons in California. The Hollywood native—Dad was a stagehand, Mom a Busby Berkeley chorus girl—was an early bloomer, smashing a neighbor's backyard incinerator with a claw hammer at 3, setting fire to a neighbor's garage at 4 and jamming a fork in a boy's eyeball at 15. By 17, Bunker had established himself as the Doogie Howser of the California penal system, parlaying a series of robberies, assaults and the stabbing of a prison guard into a stint in San Quentin (he was the youngest inmate there at the time). He once glimpsed his prison file, as thick as an L.A. phone book, and saw that it had a note attached to it: "See File 2."

While at San Quentin, a chance meeting with death-row inmate Caryl Chessman, L.A.'s infamous Red Light Bandit and a published author, sparked the writing bug in Bunker. At 40—four stabbings, five rejected manuscripts and several felony convictions later—Bunker published his first novel, 1973's *No Beast So Fierce*, which received critical raves from James Ellroy and William Styron. "When my first book was accepted, all those f—ers on the tier got pencils and papers and started writing," Bunker notes.

The gritty debut, written while Bunker was serving a stint in Folsom prison—he was released in 1976 and hasn't been in the big house since—proved to be his ticket into Hollywood. The novel was made into 1978's *Straight Time* with Dustin Hoffman, who hired Bunker as technical advisor. Acting gigs (Mr. Blue in *Reservoir Dogs*) and screenwriting assignments (1985's *Runaway Train*) followed. Now, hard-core fans of

Bunker's horrific novels about the L.A. underworld include Jeff Bridges, Quentin Tarantino and actor Steve Buscemi, who just finished directing the film adaptation of Bunker's second novel, *The Animal Factory*, and has been a fan since meeting Bunker on the *Reservoir Dogs* set. "Once you get to know him, he's a very nice guy," Buscemi says. "And he tells some great stories, obviously."

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Nevertheless, one gets the sense that Bunker could slip back into the San Quentin swing of things with relative ease. Despite the beautiful, well-appointed home in Highland Park he shares with his wife, Jennifer, and their six-year-old son, Bunker spends much of his time writing in a cramped, cell-like space behind the main house, where he is free to toss old manuscripts and cigarette butts on the floor and is never more than a few feet from a toilet. But Bunker insists that crime is a "young man's" game and considers himself rehabilitated.

"I'm not going to commit another crime, if that's what you mean," he insists. "Unless someone f—s with me, you know, and I lose my temper."

—ROBERT ITO

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