

# The Bret King Series

by David Baumann

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6,000 words precisely

The Bret King series (1960-1964) by Dan Scott first came to my attention in the fall of 2003 when I found an advertisement for it on the back flap of a Biff Brewster book. Western stories would not normally be my first choice of series genre, but a few years ago I collected and enjoyed the X Bar X Boys series, and, since there were only nine Brets in the set, I decided to give them a try. I found the ninth and last volume first in a local bookstore. The first seven in dust jacket came my way in one fell swoop through ebay, and a short time later the eighth followed suit. The entire series was on my bookshelf before I cracked any of the volumes. It was a considered risk to make such a commitment since the Bret King series was a Stratemeyer Syndicate product being published in the very years that the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew books were being rewritten for the first television generation.

The titles are

1. The Mystery of Ghost Canyon (1960)
2. The Secret of Hermit's Peak (1960)
3. The Range Rodeo Mystery (1960)
4. The Mystery of Rawhide Gap (1960)
5. The Mystery at Blizzard Mesa (1960)
6. The Secret of Fort Pioneer (1961)
7. The Mystery of the Comanche Caves (1962)
8. The Phantom of Wolf Creek (1963)
9. The Mystery of Bandit Gulch (1964)

Before I bought the books, though, in November of that year I placed a query on the Galloping Ghost message board about the series. The advertisement in the Biff Brewster book intrigued me. James Keeline responded, "I have not read them, so I can't speak from first-hand experience. However, most and probably all were written by Squire Omar Barker, an author of western stories so they should have a bit more realism than something like the X-Bar-X Boys series. Interestingly, both were set in the then-current-day West rather than the old West." Seth Smolinske (who a week earlier had read the second book in the series) wrote that that entry was "so-so". Fred Woodworth reported in a letter that the Brets "now and then [got] fairly good, but mostly [were] sort of 'mediocre'." So when I finally turned to volume one, page one, I expected to encounter a series that was maybe a little better than passable. Although

## The Bret King MYSTERY STORIES

By DAN SCOTT

### THE MYSTERY OF GHOST CANYON

Truck rustlers butcher cattle on Rimrock Ranch, confronting Bret with Western outlaws who combine thievery with science to outwit the law.

### THE SECRET OF HERMIT'S PEAK

When a wild mountain lion and a gang of thieves invade Desolation Peak at the same time, Bret unlocks the fascinating secret of the mountain.

### THE RANGE RODEO MYSTERY

From the moment the cow town of Tovar plans a revival of its colorful local rodeo, trouble stampedes Rimrock Ranch, until Bret outsmarts a band of big-time gangsters.

### THE MYSTERY OF RAWHIDE GAP

Bret and his plane become involved in an international mix-up, uncovering a bizarre underground plot aimed at the federal government of the United States.

### THE MYSTERY AT BLIZZARD MESA

The Navajo reservation is snowbound, and Bret King and his friends join the emergency airlift, only to run headfirst into treachery and skulduggery.

### THE SECRET OF FORT PIONEER

Bret King and his friends become interested in a "jinxed" movie company which has been hampered by bad weather, bad tempers, and a series of sinister mishaps.

GROSSET & DUNLAP, *Publishers*  
NEW YORK 10, N. Y.

eventually I mostly agreed with those who had shared their opinions of the series, when I read the stories for myself, overall I was more than pleasantly surprised.

### The Author

It is evident that the author knew ranching, riding, and the southwest. There are dozens of flavorful details that emerge in the descriptions of ranch life, horse care, and riding that show that



he was well versed in the matters. “Dan Scott”, as James Keeline had reported, was Squire Omar Barker (June 16, 1894-April 1, 1985), a well-published writer of western stories and poems for forty years before he began to write the Brets at age 65.

He was born in a log cabin in New Mexico where he lived his entire life as a rancher, teacher and writer. He was the youngest of eleven children. The Bret King books are set in his home state. Barker grew up on the family homestead and was a teacher of Spanish, a high school principal, a forest ranger, a sergeant of the 502nd Engineers in France in World War I, a trombone player in a cowboy band, a state legislator, and a newspaper correspondent. He began writing and selling stories, articles, and poems as early as 1914 and became a full-time writer in 1925. Probably his best known work is his poem, “A Cowboy’s Christmas Prayer”, which has been widely distributed and even recorded.

Barker also appears to have been an honorable man whose commitment to basic decency comes through in his stories. For example, the cultural and national differences between the various characters are pointed out, but merely as facts. Mexicans and Navajos are always presented in respectful terms. Bret himself is fluent in Spanish. Honor, courage, hospitality to friend and stranger alike, trustworthiness, good hard work, taking responsibility for oneself while helping others in need, and getting involved when your help is needed are qualities in the Bret King series.

As is characteristic of the entire series, his writing shows that he has extensive experience and intimate knowledge of ranching and the ways of the mid-twentieth century west. Details of weather, ranching chores, and New Mexico life and terrain, as well as familiarity with cowboy slang, add to the enjoyment of the book. His wry sense of humor that appears once in a while is welcome too. He often signed his books with his initials and trademark brand, “Lazy SOB”.

Barker died at the age of 90 after three years of debilitating and painful illness.



### The Illustrator

The internal artwork is high quality, detailed, pen and ink drawings. Although the author used a pseudonym, the author’s real name is used: Joe Beeler. The illustrations are done in pen and ink, and show much higher quality or skill than most internals in the series books with which I am familiar. The artist is very skilled in depicting both natural elements and human beings. Characters in the series include Navajo, Mexicans, and a German butcher, and all are depicted with

recognizable features distinctive to their background. Samples of his artwork for the Bret Kings are included later in this article.

I was so impressed with the quality of the illustrations that I wanted to learn more about him. I did a web search on “Joe Beeler”, and found that he was still living and was a noted artist in several media with a specialty in western themes.

I found three websites with information on him and his work, and liked everything I saw—line drawings, oils, and bronze statuary. I also found his address in Sedona, Arizona where he had lived for about fifty years; I wrote to him, but the letter was returned, marked “no mailing receptacle”. Later I found a post office box address for him and wrote again. Not long afterwards I received a kind letter back, dated September 3, 2004. It read,

Dear Mr. Baumann,

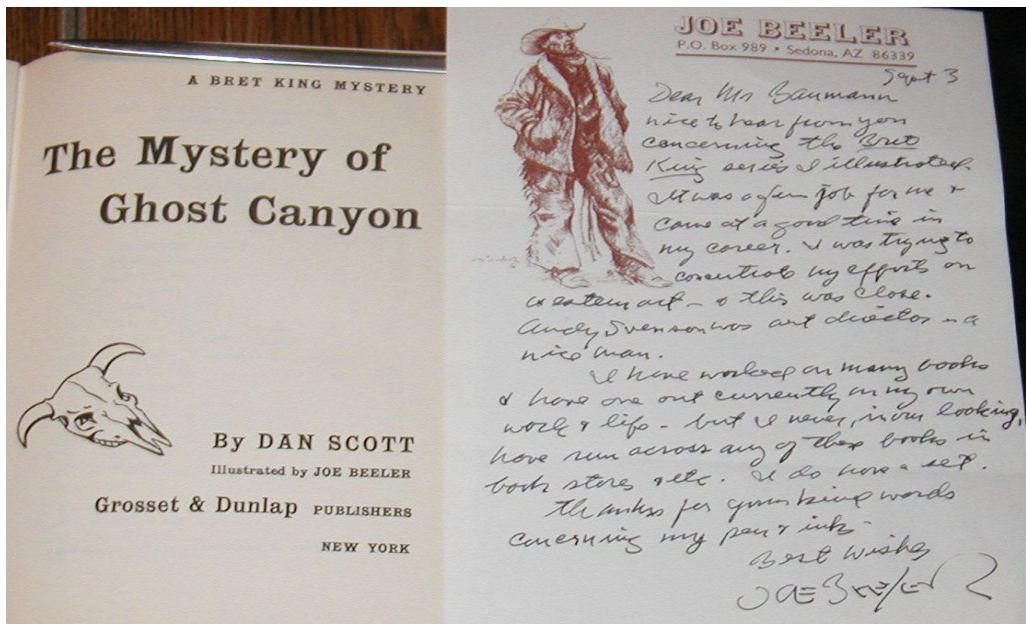
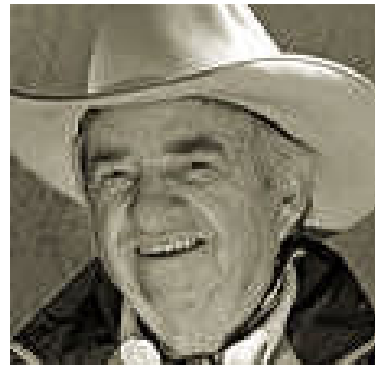
Nice to hear from you concerning the Bret King series I illustrated. It was a fun job for me + came at a good time in my career. I was trying to concentrate my efforts on creating art— + this was close. Andy Svenson was art director—a nice man.

I have worked on many books + have one out currently on my own work + life—but I never, in our looking, have run across any of these books in book stores + etc. I do have a set.

Thanks for your kind words concerning my pen + ink.

Best wishes,

Joe Beeler

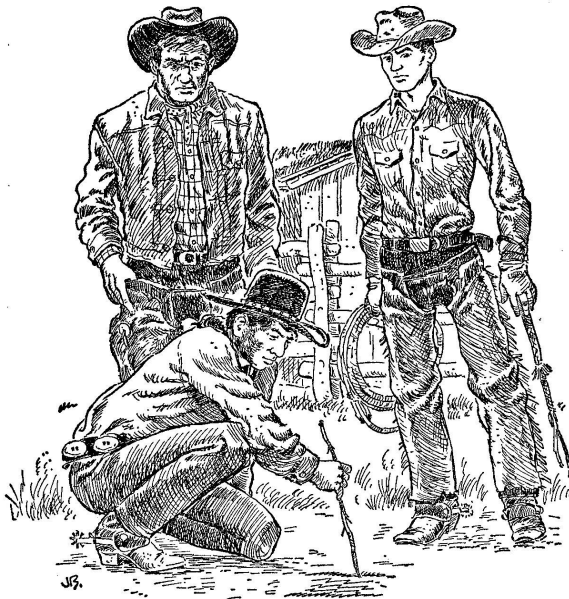


A recent online search showed that Mr. Beeler died on April 26, 2006. He was 74 years old, having been born on Christmas Day in 1931. He was helping neighbors and friends rope and brand calves when he succumbed to a heart attack. The three websites I had found with samples of his work had all been taken down.

## The Nine Books

### *1. The Mystery of Ghost Canyon*

In the first volume in this series we meet eighteen-year-old Bret King, a cowboy whose father Big Jim King owns the Rimrock Ranch in New Mexico. Bret is a more than capable young man as a rider and all around rancher. He has a sixteen-year-old sister known as Jinx, and a kid brother twelve years old named Rusty. His friends are a young Navajo, Ace Tallchief; Benny Ortega of “New Mexican Spanish” heritage; and Vic Martinson, a newcomer to the West but quick to “savvy cowboy”.



*Big Jim studied the tire-tread pattern*

The tale features an organized gang of “truck rustlers.” These criminals “slip in at night, shoot a few steers, then either load them whole in the truck or skin them and bury the hides. They race to a highway with the stolen beef, then sell it—maybe two hundred miles away” (page 9). This is the immediate problem that Bret and his friends and family determine to solve. The story is further complicated by robbers who enter a bank, drop everyone by the use of nerve gas, rifle the safe, and then disappear before the employees and patrons come to. If that’s not enough excitement for one book, a third mystery emerges when a couple of university professors rent Benny Ortega’s family’s adobe for a year with cash up front. Ostensibly they want to excavate the Indian ruins in nearby *La Cueva del Oro Perdido*, or “Cave of the

Lost Gold”—the mysterious site that Benny calls Ghost Canyon. The site is full of legend but has never been carefully explored.

Seth advised me that Benny had an irritating habit of saying, “Well, gee my wheeze.” He does. But I think that’s the lowest point of the book. Overall I found *Ghost Canyon* to be quite good. The writing is generally high quality, with good descriptive phrases that don’t turn into purple prose, a strong story line that is both complex and believable. Although the standard doesn’t rise to that set in the Ken Holts, there is a definite intellectual challenge for the reader as the story unfolds. There’s some well-written, distinctive dialogue, such as when Bret says that Ace can “track a bee in a blizzard” (page 19), or when Benny declares, “When a cowboy doesn’t feel able to ride, that’s because somebody chopped off his head and hid it from him” (page 28).

*The Mystery of Ghost Canyon* includes undercover work, satisfying fistfights, chases on horseback, urgent nighttime rides across the wilderness, and a strong sense that one is really on a ranch. In short, the Bret King series has the detective flair of a good Hardy Boys book, a

credible attempt at providing the intellectual intricacy of a Ken Holt, a sense of adventure worthy of a Biff Brewster, and the flavor of an X Bar X Boys book. It was a good start, and I looked forward to the next volume.

## 2. The Secret of Hermit's Peak

The inside front cover flap of the second volume informs the prospective reader that “a vicious mountain lion” is threatening the Rimrock Ranch which the King family calls home. The predator apparently makes his home on nearby Desolation Peak where a mysterious hermit, known as “Ol’ Whiskers”, has built his cabin. This heavily bewhiskered and decidedly unfriendly old coot threatens people away from the peak he claims to own, since he has found “gold” there. A couple of disreputable bad guys add further complications to the adventure by scouring the mountain for some unknown reason and threatening Bret and his friends more than once. They back up their threats with some determined actions.

Overall I liked the story a lot. The bad guys are genuinely evil, to an intensity not often seen in series books, yet not perversely extreme. One finds genuinely evil people in some of the Ken Hols and the Rick Brants, and these ne’er-dowells are in the same category. By and large, the writing is good quality, though there are a few places where dialogue or a particular scene seemed forced or unconvincing.

Benny Ortega’s trademark exclamation, “gee my wheeze”, very quickly becomes irritating, as Seth Smolinske reported in his observations about this book. Having been sufficiently annoyed by the habit in the first book, I counted its use in this volume. In 181 pages, Benny gets it off 12½ times. (In one occasion he only gets to spout, “Well, gee my—” before he gets interrupted.)

I agree with Seth’s review of this book, although I think I enjoyed it more than he did. Seth’s observations of aspects of the story that make it less than magnificent are the same things I wrote down as I was reading. Private flying instructor delivered with the new plane? Teaching Bret to become a pilot in “a few days” (page 18)? I don’t think so. As Seth reported, the good guys are indeed often up well before dawn and get back home after midnight. Bret’s mom, former New Englander Hope Chandler King, usually has a real spread ready for them. She doesn’t complain but does point out once that putting out a full meal in the early hours of the morning is something she’s not planning on making a habit.

Nevertheless, there are some excellent aspects to the story and the writing. The writer once again proves that he knows ranching from long experience. He also knows writing, and some memorable lines are found in the pages of this book. Ace can tell the “difference between two bees just by the buzz” (page 37). The first half hour of the day in the crispness of early morning, “makes a man feel twelve feet tall and able to prove it” (page 68). We learn on page 78 that Bret likes his “java” “black and strong enough to float a horseshoe”.



*Rusty squeezed off two more warning shots*

Seth pointed out that there are a lot of characters to keep track of, and there are. I think it was easier for me to do so since the characters had been introduced in book one and I was familiar with them when I read this second entry in the series. Notably, Bret's sister Jinx is a major player in the story, as is the younger brother Rusty. As in the case of the X Bar X Boys, the entire family has a role to play in the adventures.

Needless to say, the mystery was well resolved and the bad guys caught, though I thought it came together a little too easily at the end. Several days of fruitless labor, exploration, and danger are followed by a single scene in which everything is solved.

### 3. The Range Rodeo Mystery

In the third entry in this series, the Chamber of Commerce in the local town of Tovar has decided to bring back the annual rodeo, which had not been held for twenty-five years. They're looking for a suitable venue to be offered by one of the ranchers. Naturally Big Jim King offers a terrific site, as does a "Mr. Carrington" of the Cross U ranch. Carrington is a rich newcomer who tries to buy and bribe his way to win the right to hold the rodeo on his ranch. He has hired a couple of local scalawags, who are too eager to do his bidding and do not hesitate to stoop to unscrupulous, even potentially murderous, means to do so. Things are complicated by the unfortunate reality of a drought that affects the Kings' Rimrock Ranch and other local ranches, but does not threaten the Cross U (located on the other side of town).

Here yet again a really, truly bad guy is presented in convincing terms. Carrington is a detestable ruffian upon whom no blame can be fastened and where there is at best only circumstantial evidence connecting him and his flunkies to serious malfeasance, yet whose oiliness guarantees that he is assuredly an unwholesome presence.



In this story Jinx is developed as a thoughtful and analytical young woman whose intellectual contributions to puzzling out the mystery are most helpful. The same quality was seen in the first book, and I am glad to see this side of her emerge. The Bret Kings are unusual in including a female as a major supporting character.

Benny Ortega hasn't moved beyond his bad habit yet. He blows off "Gee my wheeze"

fourteen times in this story, including four times in eighteen pages. It has become almost amusing.

As before, there is some fine writing in the tale. One curious and entertaining line is found on page 14. When Jinx praises her romantic interest, Vic Martinson, who has taken a job as a



reporter for the local paper, Rusty (typical kid brother) says, “Shucks, writing’s easy. All you have to do is choose words around and cut out the strays, same as punching cattle.” A lively description from the author, who was both a writer and a genuine cattleman.

My favorite scene in the book is the one in which Bret and his friend Ace Tallchief reason out that there had to be water in some unexplored caves on the Rimrock Ranch land. In a scene reminiscent of Tom Sawyer in Injun Joe’s cave, the two follow an ancient Navajo trail into the cave on the track of water, which they later pipe out as a temporary solution to the drought. One can feel the coolness of the interior of the cave as the two young men unreel a ball of twine along the path, deep-cut in the stone floor by many thousands of trips over the same ground by the Navajo of hundreds of years earlier. Ace, a Navajo, is deeply impressed by the experience. When they find pieces of broken pottery on the cavern floor, Ace comments: “Bret,” he said, in a voice which sounded oddly old, “who knows but the hands that shaped this pottery belonged to one of my own ancestors? It gives me a strange feeling in my heart” (page 54).

The pacing of the story is very fine and the tension maintained straight through to the end. The climactic scene where all becomes clear and the bad guys rounded up was somewhat contrived, and the logic behind the story’s adventures involved too much of a leap of faith for my taste. The scene where one or two bad guys fall all over each other, eager to confess who did what to whom and why, reminded me of the end of a bad Hardy Boys book. Still, the concluding scene did not diminish my overall enjoyment of the tale. Generally the writing, characterization, and details of storyline are strong enough to carry the reader through whatever weakness in large scale plotting there may be. I was looking forward to the remaining six books in the series.

#### 4. The Mystery of Rawhide Gap

In the fourth entry in the Bret King series, Benny’s standard exclamation, “Gee my wheeze,” is frequent, and as irritating as a burr under a saddle. Aside from that, the story was engaging. There are better series books, but most are a lot worse. Now that I’d read four books in this nine-volume series, it has become evident that the author likes to have several plotlines going on in one story.

As the summary of the story says on the inside bookflap, a “Frenchman, Jacques Dulion, joins Bret and his cowboy friends on a camping expedition to the old ghost town of Rawhide Gap.

(Note: The Frenchman is trying to exonerate his falsely-accused great-great-grand uncle Henri, who lived in Rawhide Gap a hundred years earlier and was shot for a theft of gold that Jacques insists he didn’t commit.) Here they encounter a terrifying ghost from the past and a very-much-alive, gun-totin’ eccentric. The situation is further complicated when Bret’s plane and the Frenchman mysteriously disappear. During the search for clues, the boys become involved in a hunt for a giant bear and in a wild chase to capture two buffaloes that have escaped from a nearby private game preserve. The most unexpected development of all occurs when the FBI suspects Bret of espionage. In a climax that packs the wallop of a



.30-30, the young cowboy and his trailwise companions uncover a sabotage plot aimed at the United States.”

Whew! All of this develops and is resolved in 182 pages. Most of the action takes place in Rawhide Gap, a ghost town a few hours’ drive from Rimrock Ranch where the King family lives. Just about every teenage character in the series has a reason to go there, and when you get to the end of the story, there are about TEN young people involved in the action! The setting provides fine opportunity for describing good atmosphere, but the plot was somewhat contrived, the stage was overcrowded, and the solution a little too easy. Nonetheless, there were several good scenes. There is a secret tunnel reminiscent of the one in a Hardy Boys tale (*Lost Tunnel*), and a precipitous fall into an abandoned well similar to that in Ken Holt’s *Stone Elephant*. *Rawhide Gap* is unusual in finding a place for a few girls in important supportive roles. One thinks of Jan and Barbey in the Rick Brant series.

As usual, the writer has a few memorable lines in the text that give evidence of his sense of humor and ability to poke fun at himself. One is, “I’ve heard that writers are sometimes a little fanatic” (page 53). (Compare this to the line from the previous book, “Shucks, writing’s easy.”) Another is, “Right now I couldn’t swallow another bite if my best girl held the spoon” (page 57).

#### 5. *The Mystery at Blizzard Mesa*

The author’s pattern of including several puzzles in a Bret King book is continued in the fifth book in the series. This is a finely written tale—so far the best in the Bret King series and one that must rank far above average in series bookdom overall. The adventure is mostly convincing and develops tension skillfully, and has numerous descriptions of scenery that are inspiring.

As one might guess from the title, *Blizzard Mesa* falls into the category of a “winter” book. It’s a rough winter in New Mexico, and the Navajo reservation (which includes part of the northwest part of the state) is experiencing the worst snowfall in recorded history. An emergency airlift is organized to drop food for the Indians and hay for their sheep. One or two civilian pilots like Bret join the Air Force in carrying these supplies to those who are snowbound. At the same time and in the same village where the airlift is based, Ace Tallchief’s uncle Notah is framed by a gang of jewel thieves; casting suspicion on him is intended to distract investigators from the real culprits. More than that, Mike Farrell, a friend of Bret’s friend Vic Mortenson has recently moved into the area from Vermont and invested all he had in a ski lodge which inexplicably is being sabotaged. Bret and his friends leap into these mysteries.



This fifth entry in the Bret King series has many scenes that take place in Navajo country. The author is clearly conversant with Navajo customs and makes the most of it. Those who are familiar with the Tony Hillerman novels and his detectives Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn will feel right at home with *Blizzard Mesa*. The contrast with Frank and Joe Hardy’s encounter with the Ramapan Indians in *The Crisscross Shadow* is like comparing an SUV with a golf cart. Author



Barker utilizes his lifetime of familiarity with how Navajo live, think, and work. He knows Navajo courtesies, beliefs, and practices, and presents them with respect. Three different times Bret finds himself a guest in Navajo hogans in a winter wilderness, and each account makes one wish that one could have been present too.

The end of the story brings all the mysteries together in an exciting conclusion. There are only two flaws: the blabbing bad guys at the end whose boasting tritely answers all the mysterious happenings that have occurred throughout the tale; and, like the previous book in this series, there are nine young people to keep track of: Bret, Ace, Benny, Vic, Andy, Penny, Dodie, Jinx, and Rusty. At least this time, except for the last chapter they don't all appear at once. These flaws are almost offset by the added bonus that Benny Ortega only appears from time to time in the story, which means that his annoying trademark exclamation is infrequent.

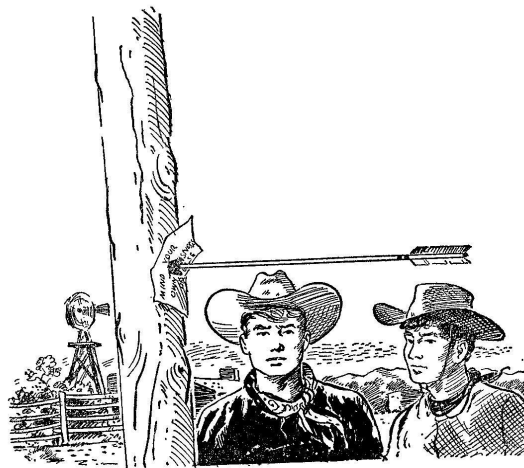
Now is a good time to praise the illustrator again. The title page includes the line, "Illustrated by Joe Beeler." This skilled artist has read the book and done the necessary research. He knows what a hogan looks like and accurately portrays the terrain of New Mexico. He draws people well, capturing the Navajo features beautifully. He's not quite as adept at rendering females, but overall his pen and ink drawings match the text admirably. He's given plenty of room to work in, since this book has twenty illustrations.

#### 6. *The Secret of Fort Pioneer*

When we move on to the sixth book in the series, we descend from a mountaintop to a valley. *Blizzard Mesa* is a top story, but *Fort Pioneer* is, at best, mediocre. It's chock full of confusions and switchbacks (i.e., quick transitions from scene to scene, and action that takes place in only a few sentences before moving on to something else). One puzzle after another take place without apparent purpose. We have to wait until the end to find out what it all means.

The basic story is that a movie company, Westpix, has selected Fort Pioneer, an old historic site near the Rimrock Ranch and the town of Tovar, to make a movie called "The Burning Arrow". A lot of locals are hired to serve as extras, including several young people in Bret King's circle of friends. The production is plagued by so many mishaps that it is clear that someone is sabotaging the project; however, the motive is unclear.

Plot contrivance, obvious red herrings, amateurish characterization and dialogue, and a bad guy so odious that you love to hate him, makes one wonder how this book and its immediate predecessor could have been written by the same person. Although it doesn't descend anywhere near the astonishingly near-parody poor quality of the original text Hardy Boys book, *The Disappearing Floor*, *Fort Pioneer* is that kind of book.



There are a few good lines. I particularly liked, "This is the most fun I've had since the bear treed my Aunt Carmencita in a cactus!" (page 109) and "How are you at stuffing dummies?" "Why do you ask—are you hungry?" (page 166).

*Fort Pioneer* suffers at the end from yet another scene in which the bad guys shout at each other, revealing who did what to whom, thus resolving all the mysteries in a long list of nefarious doings. Leaving this book with relief, I hoped that book seven would bring the reader back to the standard set by the other books in this series.

### 7. *The Mystery of the Comanche Caves*

I was not disappointed. *The Mystery of the Comanche Caves* is a welcome entry in the series after its disappointing predecessor. The seventh book begins with topnotch series quality, although it sputters and slows about halfway through. This entry in the series launches with news of suspected smuggling going on in the Big Bend area of Texas. Bad guys appear to be trafficking in contraband across the Rio Grande, although there is no proof of anything other than strange border crossings. All of the Rimrockers, as they are called—the six male friends of whom Bret is the acknowledged leader—decide to help the sheriff of that area, who happens to be an uncle of one of Bret's friends, Andy Buxton.

This book mentions a couple of real monuments in New Mexico, namely the grave of Billy the Kid and Carlsbad Caverns, where the Rimrockers stop on their drive southeast across New Mexico to reach their goal. (The only other time Carlsbad Caverns appears in a series book that I know about is in *The Diamond Cave Mystery* by Troy Nesbit [a.k.a. Franklin Folsom]). The six are also chased by a tornado—the first time I've run across that kind of hair-raiser (literally!) in a series book.



Although there is a lot of potential for some good story-telling in *Comanche Caves*, it kinda peters out to average once the guys arrive in the Big Bend area. Too many highly-improbables take place as the plot unrolls, and I had the impression that the author had a hard time keeping all of the characters occupied. I have mentioned before that one flaw in this series is the large number of characters, and here it really tells. In every other series I can think of, there are usually no more than two major characters: Ken Holt and Sandy Allen, Frank and Joe Hardy, Rick Brant and Scotty, etc. The Three Investigators series has three. In the Bret Kings there are actually six,

who carry about equal weight. The early Boy Scout books by Percy Keese Fitzhugh were able to keep the action going with six or more characters, but one or two were usually at the forefront.

Still, the plot of this book is filled with action and the setting has just about all the requisite ingredients for some real adventure: the wide Rio Grande; bluffs, caves, canyons, cacti, and cliffs; a Mexican border town; rain and sun; quicksand, wild boars, and centuries-old Indian artifacts. There's plenty to enjoy in the story.

### 8. *The Phantom of Wolf Creek*

Now this is more like it! This eighth entry in the nine-book Bret King series was excellent. Writing, characterization, and plot all come together beautifully to provide a believable, exciting, tense mystery that keeps the reader guessing, yet whose resolution is satisfying. Not least of the

attractive features of this book is that Benny Ortega plays only a small part in the story—we only get to hear “gee my wheeze” about twice in the entire 178 pages. Hurrah!



*As Carl cried out, the whole shack collapsed*

In this book, Bret and his friends Andy Buxton, later joined by Ace Tallchief, assist new friends Carl and Rick Conrad at their ranch in Colorado. Peter Conrad, Carl and Rick's father, has been engaged in a decades-long feud with his neighbor Mr. Burkhart over water rights. The water comes from Wolf Creek, a dependable stream in the area where both ranches are located. (Although the premise may sound a little like the second Ken Holt story, *Riddle of the Stone Elephant*, there is no other similarity in the two stories.) Both families have been on their ranches for several generations—so long that the deciding factor over who controls the water rights depends on a

declaration by the King of Spain said to grant water rights to the Conrads. The declaration, however, has been lost since the days of the first settlement of the land.

Moreover, in recent weeks the personnel of the two ranches suspect each other of cattle theft, poisoning, and killing, as well as other malicious mischief and general harassment. All the evidence of numerous malevolent events committed against one ranch points to personnel of the other ranch, and vice versa. If that's not enough, a phantom “wolf-man” is frequently seen in the hills adjacent to both ranches. The book has its title from this elusive figure, although he plays only a small part in the tale.

That's what Bret and Andy get into when Carl and Rick invite them, whom they had met at a rodeo, to assist them in solving the mystery and prevent further cattle theft from their ranch. The adventures intensify as soon as Bret and Andy arrive on the scene. They are sniped at more than once by someone with a high-powered rifle, they are confronted and seriously threatened several

times by Burkhart or his men, and a flash flood is let loose on them—and these attacks do not include the ongoing trouble directed against the Conrads.

The hot-headedness of both Peter Conrad and Mr. Burkhart prevent both of them from seeing what, to the reader, gradually becomes obvious, but Bret sees it. It is true-to-life, I think, that Bret is unable to convince the feuders that what he suspects might be true. Several well-placed red herrings, however, keep the reader guessing as to what is really going on, for what reason, and by whom, but the final resolution makes sense. The only flaw in this book is a pat conclusion. The Spanish land grant is found at the moment it is most needed, the feud ends with lovey-dovey amicability, and there is the unwelcome pattern the author has set in previous books: once the bad guys are captured, they blab till the cows come home, telling all hearers who did what to whom throughout the whole book.

These scenes, however, come in the last few pages of the book. I have the impression that the conclusion was kind of rushed through and necessarily simplified to resolve a pretty complicated mystery that could have used an extra chapter or two to do it justice. Alas that in the days this series was produced, the books had to be held to about 180 pages. The too-easy ending was still agreeable, and a worthwhile price for an overall excellent tale.

### *9. The Mystery of Bandit Gulch*

The ninth entry in the series ends the Bret Kings on a high note. There are lots of fine, atmospheric scenes in this well-crafted tale. To quote the summary given in the front of the book, “A treasure cache hidden since Territorial days, a mail pouch stolen in an old-time train robbery, and the ruins of a once-famous hacienda—all play important roles in the mystery confronting

Bret King and his pals when trespassers invade Rimrock Ranch.” Adding to the excitement there is even a hijacked airliner, forced to land in the wilds of New Mexico with a desperado aboard who was being extradited from Arizona.



*The Mystery of Bandit Gulch* was published in 1964, the era when (if I remember right) hijacking airliners to Cuba was in the news. Imagine airports without all the security we’re used to now, when people could even carry guns aboard. (Remember the 1963 classic *Twilight Zone* episode that was called, “Nightmare at 30,000 Feet”? The police officer aboard the flight had his pistol placed loosely in his holster as he slept aboard the aircraft. Those were the days.)

Back to the ninth Bret King. Bandit Gulch is a wild, tortuous area of canyons, abandoned mines, dead end trails, cliffs and rock

shelves, and at least one wild eagle’s nest. Some of the action takes place in this uninviting piece of territory that gives its name to the book, and the action finally concludes there.

In this mystery the author finally manages to use all six Rimrockers without too much confusion over who's who. However, there are several bad guys to try to keep track of as well. Barker obviously enjoyed throwing a lot of characters into a story.

There are a few places where the plot jumps around pretty quickly, but that may be just trying to tell a good story and still keep it under 180 pages. This story and its immediate predecessor make me think that the author was finally getting the hang of writing a really good boys' series book. One bit of evidence for this is that although Benny Ortega appears throughout this story, his irritating exclamation "gee my wheeze" doesn't appear too often.

It is a grief that this is where the series ends. When this book hit the stores, it must have been known that it was the last of the Bret Kings, for it alone does not have a teaser at the end that urges readers to pick up the next book in the series. I don't know, of course, whether that was the author's choice, the publishers', or the Syndicate's.

### **Sure as Shootin'**

My final opinion: Bret King was a short-lived series of better-than-average quality, especially considering that it appeared in the time when the Stratemeyer Syndicate was modernizing its texts—a process that has often been described as “dumbing down”, “gutting”, and the like—as it sought to appeal to a generation of juveniles that was notably different even from a decade earlier. I enjoyed the Bret Kings. Just as the early Tom Swift Jr.'s breathe the 1950s, so this series breathes the first half of the 1960s. I'm glad that I found these books, and will definitely reread them someday.

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