

The Bret King Series

by David Baumann

posts on the Galloping Ghost Message Board

5,728 words

February 6, 2004—post 723

The Bret King series (1960-1964) by Dan Scott first came to my attention last fall when I found an advertisement for it on the back 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.

On November 28 I placed a query on this message board about the series. 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." My friend Fred Woodworth reported 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.

The first volume in this series is called *The Mystery of Ghost Canyon*. In this book 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."

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. Jinx becomes suspicious of the professors and checks out their credentials, only to be chagrined when the university that has sponsored the dig verifies the project.

It is evident that the author knows 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 the author is well versed in the matters. "Dan Scott," as James Keeline reported, was Squire Omar Barker, a well-published western writer who died at the age of 90 in 1985. He produced a huge volume of westerns while spending time on working ranches. It was a good combination. One of

his most best-known compositions is the “Cowboy’s Prayer.” Barker was born in New Mexico where the Bret Kings are set. He didn’t begin to write the series until he was about 65.

The internal artwork is high quality, detailed, pen and ink drawings. Characters in *Ghost Canyon* include the Navajo youth, Benny’s Mexican family, and a German butcher, and all are depicted with recognizable features distinctive to their background. 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 first volume in the Bret King series.

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 believable and complex. 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 creditable 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. For those who like these things, it’s a series worth collecting. After this introduction, I plan to post brief reviews of each volume as I read through the series.

February 22, 2004—post 726

The Secret of Hermit’s Peak is the second in the Bret King series. (Anyone interested in my reviews of the books in this series should start with post 723 on February 6, in which I give a brief overview of the series and then make a few statements about the first book in the series, *The Mystery of Ghost Canyon*.) 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 Holts and the Rick Brants, and these guys 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 post about this book (See post 703). 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 12 ½ 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."

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 sixteen-year-old sister Jennifer, affectionately known as "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.

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 ne'er-do-wells, 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 lady 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 chouse 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'm looking forward to the remaining six books in the series.

March 10, 2004—post 728

Today I finished reading the fourth entry in the Bret King series, *The Mystery of Rawhide Gap*. 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've 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-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 Barby in the Rick Brant series.

As usual, the writer has a few memorable lines in the text. 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." One wonders if the writer is poking fun at himself.) Another is, "Right now I couldn't swallow another bite if my best girl held the spoon" (page 57).

It was an enjoyable book. Not the best in the series, but worth reading again sometime.

March 17, 2004—post 729

The author's pattern of including several puzzles in a Bret King book is continued in *The Mystery at Blizzard Mesa*, 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 Dan Scott (Squire Omar 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 trademark exclamation "Gee my wheeze" 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.

I haven't assigned rating numbers to the books of this series I have previously reviewed (see posts 723 and 726), but *The Mystery at Blizzard Mesa* is a sure-as-shootin' 9.5.

March 22, 2004—post 731

When we move on to *The Secret of Fort Pioneer*, the sixth book in the Bret King 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 a well-deserved 5, I can only hope that book seven will bring the reader back to the standard set by the other books in this series.

April 5, 2004—post 744

The Mystery of the Comanche Caves is a welcome entry in the series after the disappointing *Fort Pioneer*. The book begins with topnotch series quality, although it sputters and slows about halfway through. This seventh 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 no more than two major characters: Ken Holt and Sandy Allen, Frank and Joe Hardy, Rick Brant and Scotty, etc. (Well, ahem, now that I think of it, the Starman 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 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.

In my last post on the Bret Kings (March 22, 2004—post 731) I devoted a paragraph to the artist of the series. Thinking later that I’d like to learn more about him, I did a web search for “Joe Beeler” and found that he is still living, and is a noted artist in several media with a specialty in western themes. Here are several websites with information on him and his work.

<http://www.picassomio.com/artist-portfolio/1147/en>

http://www.slowass.net/phaedrux/isedona/arts/sedona_artist_joe_beeler.htm

http://www.ci.paradise-valley.az.us/GWJoe_beeler.htm

I also found his address in Sedona, Arizona where he has lived for about fifty years, and wrote to him, but the letter was returned, marked “no mailing receptacle.” I assume he receives his mail at a post office box rather than at his home, and I haven’t pursued it further.

April 9, 2004—post 749

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!

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 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.

April 12, 2004—post 752

The Mystery of Bandit Gulch ends the Bret King series 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 classic Twilight Zone episode that

was called something like, “Demon 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, winding passages, 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.

Bob Finnan pointed out in a previous post that “five” was generally recognized as the largest number of characters that a juvenile book could handle, but in this mystery author Squire Omar Barker 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. The author appears to have enjoyed throwing a lot of characters into a story.

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. A wry sense of humor that appears once in a while is welcome too. Take this line for example: “Ace can track an ant across a tin roof,” Andy declared. “If he can’t figure out where that pair went, I’ll quit bragging about Texas” (page 128).

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.

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 more than one collector has 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.