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FORT WORTH

Eules author visits Old West with paperback novels

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By Steve Freeman

EULESS – When cowboys, lumberjacks, saloon girls, gunslingers, railroad crews and merchants moved westward for adventure and profit, Jack Ballas was there in spirit.

The Eules author's fictional accounts of the Old West scroll up his computer screen at the rate of one book every six months, at his publisher's bidding.

That's a lot of tobacco chewing, horse riding, lady loving and gun fighting for a 73-year-old, but he's no worse for the wear.

Ballas has authored four paperback western novels and promised his publisher, Berkley Publishing Group of New York, four more over two years.

He attributes the galloping pace to a chance to fulfill a lifelong dream.

"After retirement, I figured I'm gonna do what I want to do now. It's terrible to live a whole life and not do what you want," says Ballas, a soft-spoken man with a neatly trimmed mustache.

Ballas is a lifelong reader of western novels by such legends as Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour. In between a 22-year stint in the U.S. Navy and a career with defense contractors, he earned a journalism degree.

He writes traditional westerns – tales of heroes who encounter unsavory antagonists along cattle trails and in frontier towns. The formula is simple: "I come up with a real good ending and then I back up and head on out." Ballas says.

In his latest creation, the 200-page *Montana Breed*, Ballas introduces readers to Rafe Gunn, who aims to learn his Sioux heritage.

Tomahawk Canyon tracks Cole Mason, who is bound for New Mexico Territory but gets caught in a range war.

Ballas' second effort – *Durango Gunfight* – tells how Quint Cantrell ends his life as a fugitive from justice. No. 3, *Maverick Guns*, finds Clay Mason on a mission to defend a lady saloonkeeper. The release of the third paperback qualified Ballas for membership in the Western Writers of America club.

Ballas' approach apparently works. According to this publisher, sales of his books are near the six-figure mark.

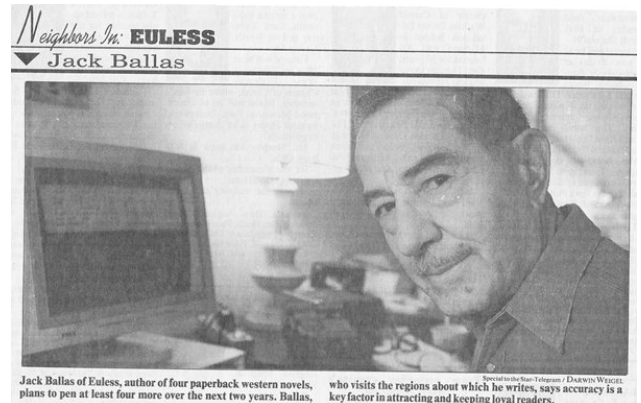
Research for the books has taken him to Arizona, Montana, Colorado, New Mexico and all points southwest.

"I go to the place I write about and touch it, taste it, feel it, see it and smell it," he says. "I can see more in three days of driving than our ancestors did all their lives traveling by wagon."

He spends a month visiting the sites he writes about. "There's a lot of importance to factual accuracy. If you're not gonna do that, you're gonna lose your reader and he'll never read you again," says Ballas, a member and past president of the D/FW Writers Workshop.

Ballas leans on his imagination, but his own adventures help him write from the heart, he says.

Raised in Alabama, Ballas was 13 when he and some Boy Scout pals were lost for three months in the Florida Everglades, surviving by living off the land. They were eventually rescued.



Jack Ballas of Eules, author of four paperback western novels, who visits the regions about which he writes, says accuracy is a key factor in attracting and keeping loyal readers.

He worked as a lumberjack, bar manager and cowpoke before entering the Navy in 1940. He earned 13 battle stars during his military career. After the war, he earned his degree from the University of Oklahoma.

But, to pay the bills, Ballas parlayed his military experience into a job with defense contractor LTV.

Berkley signed Ballas, sensing that he's serious about westerns. "What attracted me to him is he has a lot of respect for his genre," says Gary Goldstein, Berkley's senior editor. "He's trying to preserve the traditional western – he grew up reading them."

If Ballas could pick an age and an era in which to live, he would be 25, living in 1875 west of the Mississippi River, "maybe New Mexico or Arizona."

But Ballas and his wife, Harriette, have lived in Euless for 30 years and plan to stay.

No matter where he hangs his hat, though, Ballas is committed to transporting readers to the Old West. Another time, another place.

"My heart is out yonder somewhere," he says.