

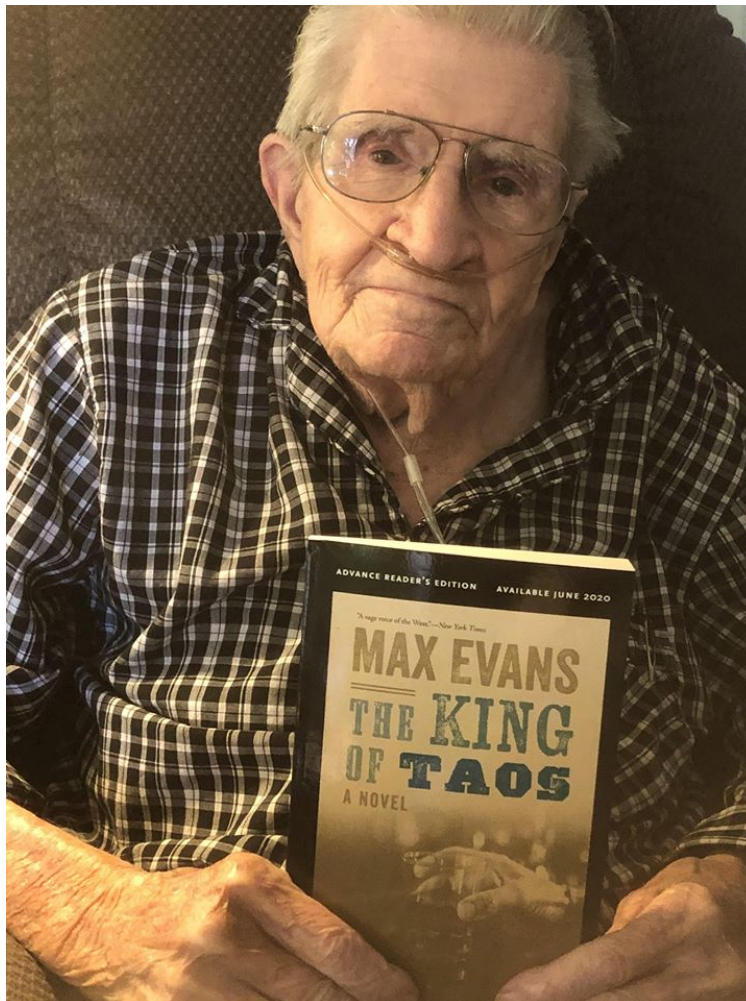
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MAX EVANS, 1924-2020

## Author, soldier, cowboy chronicled changing West

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Max Evans' last book, *The King of Taos*, was published earlier this year.

Courtesy Lorene Mills and Max Evans

Max Evans survived the D-Day invasion, countless barroom brawls, disappointing dust-ups with Hollywood — and, most important, the changing of the American West in the years following World War II.

On Wednesday, the former cowboy, soldier, artist and author died of natural causes in hospice care at the Veterans Affairs hospital in Albuquerque, three days shy of his 96th birthday.

His wife, Pat Evans, said her husband rode off to the “great mystery in the sky,” which is how Max Evans liked to describe God, heavenly guardians, fate, curiosity and just about anything else he couldn’t quite define.

“He’s on a whole new adventure now,” Pat Evans said Thursday morning.

Max Evans was one of the last great American literary figures of the latter part of the 20th century. His works often addressed the challenges faced by men and women coming to grips with the postwar transition of the American West.

He broke into literary fame with his 1960 novel *The Rounders*, about two contemporary cowboys who just want to live, love and avoid trouble, but whose simple dreams are foiled time and again by a rambunctious, impossible-to-tame horse.

The horse, like Evans himself, survives efforts to abandon and kill it and proves to the two hapless cowboys that the spirit of the Old West is pretty hard to extinguish. Director-writer Burt Kennedy made a film version of the novel in the mid-1960s, with actors Glenn Ford and Henry Fonda as the protagonists. The movie was a sleeper hit for MGM.

Evans also is known for his 1962 novel *The Hi Lo Country*, a tale of two New Mexico cowboys returning home from combat service in World War II. They are thrust into another battle to save the West they once knew as progress — in the form of larger corporate outfits and trucks — envelops the land.

Like the protagonists of that book, Evans came home from World War II to a changed New Mexico ranching landscape. The native of Ropes, Texas, who moved to New Mexico to start punching cows as a young teen, found himself edged out of the ranching business by the end of the 1940s.

Among other professions, Evans worked as a miner, smuggled gold and bat guano, and dealt with enterprises involving people from the wrong side of the tracks — and the law. He often joked that he was a con man, and his life was one of bars, bunkhouses, typewriters and mishaps, often involving fights he continually lost and women perpetually intent on doing him harm.

Living high and fast was part of Evans' creed. In his 2004 autobiography, *Ol' Max Evans — The First Thousand Years*, written with Slim Randles, Evans said he once figured he and a pal spent \$100,000 on alcohol over the course of five years.

But he never let liquor get in the way of his work — and he was a worker, turning to writing full time in the late 1950s after a bid to be a visual artist. Evans was not so much a larger-than-life character than a life-like character who liked to see how far he could push the fun to be had every day.

His send-off catchphrase was always: "Have fun!"

Friend and Western fiction writer Johnny D. Boggs said, "Evans showed publishers and readers that the American West didn't end by 1900. He told often-autobiographical fiction and nonfiction set during the Great Depression, World War II and beyond."

And while he's best known for contemporary cowboy tales, he also populated his West with an assortment of characters: artists and soldiers, mystics and misfits, widow-making broncs, starving coyotes and super bulls, madams and miners, drunks and crooks, a plumber and ballet star. "They all seemed real — probably because he really knew them, like he knew the land and the weather he painted with words," Boggs said.

Producer and screenwriter Kirk Ellis, who wrote a screenplay based on Evans' 2002 nonfiction book *Madam Millie: Bordellos From Silver City to Ketchikan*, said Evans drew inspiration for this work from the "working people of the land of the West."

Evans' characters, he said, were "the ordinary people, the downtrodden, the losers — he celebrates that."

Evans rarely talked about his war experiences, but the personal, physical and emotional trauma he experienced during the Normandy invasion remained with him as he continually suffered from nausea, stomach pain and hearing trouble because of combat injuries.

"All of us who survived — who weren't killed — came back and we were all kind of crazy for a while," Evans said in a 2017 interview with *Pasatiempo*. "People were always respectful and condoned a lot of nonsense from us. They put up with a lot of crap."

Of his own drive to write, he simply said, "A real writer is someone who can't help it."

Evans' forays into Hollywood led to friendships and sometimes feuds with the likes of director Sam Peckinpah, actors Fess Parker and Burt Lancaster, and producers whose names he either forgot or didn't wish to recall. He relished all the experiences and enjoyed telling and retelling them to friends and associates — even if his stories climaxed with him on the losing end of a Hollywood deal.

But he was proud of director Stephen Frears' 1998 film version of *The Hi-Lo Country*, mostly shot in New Mexico, saying he felt it was faithful to his book.

Evans' other literary works include *Bluefeather Fellini*, a collection of animal stories, and his last novel, *The King of Taos*, which the University of New Mexico Press published earlier this year.

Stephen Hull, director of University of New Mexico Press, said Evans told him *The King of Taos* would be his last book.

"I didn't believe him," Hull said. "Max had so much energy and so much spark and so much life."

He called Evans the best "chronicler" of the changes wrought on the American West when trucks replaced horses in the 1940s.

Shortly after the publication of *The King of Taos*, Evans — who moved to Albuquerque in the late 1960s — fell at his home and was hospitalized at the Raymond G. Murphy VA Medical Center, where he died.

Survivors include his wife of 71 years and their twin daughters, Sheryl and Charlotte. Pat Evans said her husband wished to be cremated and she would plan a memorial service at a later date.

Max Evans liked to say he already lived 1,000 years by the time he was 70. Now, his wife said, "He's off on his second thousand years."

Ellis said Evans' passing will leave a void in the writing world.

"Max was connected to the land in a way people today are not — and probably never will be," he said. "His tradition of writing — he takes it with him. There's nobody left like him, really."

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Robert Nott has covered education and youth issues for the Santa Fe New Mexican. He is assigned to The New Mexican's city desk where he covers a general assignment beat.