

Why we write Westerns

By Micki Fuhrman

Disclosure: The gathering of Western writing notables you'll read about here never happened, at least not at one table. I interviewed, over the course of several days, 22 award-winning fiction and nonfiction writers, historians, songwriters, poets laureate, screenwriters and a couple of slightly reluctant editor/publishers who will participate in the following discussion about Western literature: the how-we-got-started of it, the craft of it, the thrills and spills of it.

Their comments and rantings were shared only with me, by phone or e-mail, as I fed them questions. Anything in quotes was actually spoken or written by that person, but I took the liberty of seating everyone at a huge fictional table in an unnamed hotel bar and combining all the bits and pieces into one conversation. I regret there wasn't room at the table, or in this article, to include all 700-plus WWA members.

While it never happened just this way, it *could* have, and *has*, in a sense— from hundreds of hotel barstools and booths at the nearly 70 WWA conventions held beginning in 1954. Each year, word-slingers, balladeers, poem-pushers and screenplay scribes finish up with panels and discussions, then form friendly knots in the bar for mountain man, and woman, reunions. Agents and editors show up too, but haggling over contract terms or book titles isn't on the agenda. Booze flows like the Colorado after a record snowmelt. Legends hold court, telling stories and more stories.

It's a Western sensory overload of laughter and leather smells and bobbing cowboy hats. Bartenders have the best, and worst, nights of their careers. And new "kids" like me might score a seat near an Estleman or a Crutchfield and wish we could record everything that's going on — the wild tales, the writing process manna from heaven.

Oh, and for the purposes of this article, everyone at this imaginary table can hear everything being said. No ear cupping or "what-was-that-agains?"

It's after 9 p.m., and there aren't many seats left. I pass on the ones scattered along the sides of the table, being a lefty and all. Author Debi Estleman, a k a Deborah Morgan,

spots me and waves, drags a chair from another table, wedges me into the corner beside her. She's a southpaw too.

I look down the long double row of highball glasses and longnecks. Someone's wrapping up a Dusty Richards anecdote that happened "back in Albuquerque," and it's punctuated by Cowboy Mike Searles's boomy, Pavarotti-esque laugh. After a beat of silence, Cowboy Mike pulls up a memory. "I'll never forget flying over Albuquerque — my first trip out West in the '70s — looking down from the plane and seeing these bright colors. I thought, 'This cannot be the earth! This must be a lunarscape.'"

"A juxtaposition of harshness and beauty," says poet Larry D. Thomas, a Texan turned New Mexican. Others nod appreciatively.

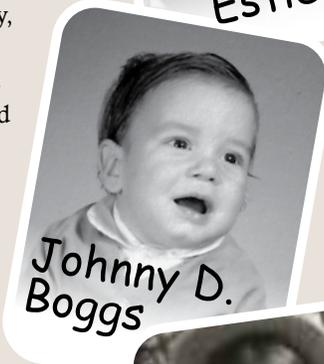
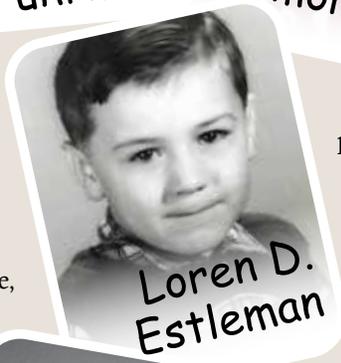
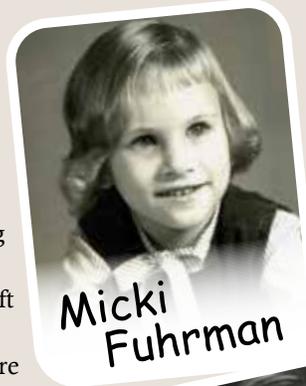
Another poet, karla k. morton, leans forward and goes dreamy-eyed. "The landscape ... the skies, the prairie, the tall grass, the mountains. The mountain becomes a grandmother. Steady and sturdy. It physically has your back."

The server sets down drinks and clears the empties. Loren D. Estleman, married to Deborah, is one of four Wister recipients at the table. Johnny D. Boggs, this year's pick, sits across from him (I'm glad I'm close enough to catch his soft, South Carolina-steeped commentary), and Lucia St. Clair Robson is at the far end, hands waving as she talks about taking drum lessons. I hear Jim Crutchfield's twangy Tennessee tenor rise. He's all wound up about political correctness versus historical accuracy. I told him once that a Western fiction writer could own a complete set of his 50-something books and never have to look elsewhere for research.

"You've got to temper what we know in 2020 with what they *didn't* know in 1818.

True historians know that," Jim explains. "You don't have a right to change what happened and make it look different, because it wasn't different. History is history. Leave it alone and don't try to rewrite it."

Someone suggests that this is why fiction writers have it easier than historians. Johnny, whose collection of Spur Awards and other trophies outweigh him at this point, speaks up. "But when you're writing historical fiction, you can't give the characters too much of a 21st Century mentality."



A spark lights Loren's dark eyes. "When I'm writing about the West, I can create my own town. I can give it my own name and if I want to put the jail next to the saloon, I can damn well do it. It's my universe. But ..." he nods at Jim ... "when I started reading about the actual history of the West, I realized that writers had spent a hundred years building a mythology on top of a far more fascinating reality. So I set out to write the first authentic Western. Well ... it *wasn't* the first authentic Western. That had already been written by Owen Wister."

Novelist Michael Zimmer leans forward, and so do I, just to hear his take. "I grew tired of pop-culture Westerns and wanted to know what the West was really like, warts and all." I happen to know he's holding back cards. Zimmer's a reserved man with a neat beard, but I've read he was a hardcore historical re-enactor. Starting fire with rocks, sleeping under bear hides in the snow, eating berries and bark, that kind of stuff. No wonder he's known for his detail-rich, historically accurate style.

I'm awed by the depth of knowledge and writing prowess of the men and women who've come to this meeting of Western writers – from not just the Western states, but Maryland, Georgia, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Michigan. And that's only at *this* table. It's clear that the same white-hot passion for writing about the American West burns in each of them. I shyly raise my hand, asking for permission to speak. Johnny notices it and uncharacteristically barks, "HEY!" The crowd goes silent. "Y'all listen up. Micki has a question."

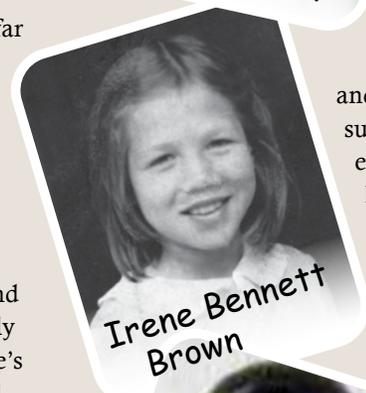
Mortified, I stand, but the friendly smiles of these generous creative souls give me courage. "So ... *why* do you write Westerns?" I ask.

"LUST!" shouts Lucia, then gives a summary of how meeting the love of her life, Brian Daley, led to the writing of her first novel, the Spur-winning *Ride the Wind*. "I happened across Cynthia Ann Parker's story in a Time/Life book and mentioned it to Brian's editor, who started badgering me to write it."

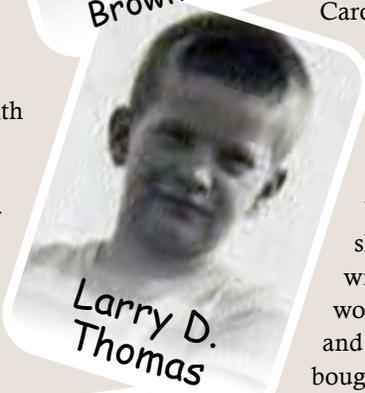
"The easy answer to why I write Westerns is, I just can't help myself," says reticent songwriter Allan Chapman, which draws a collective chuckle. "And I represent six generations of a Texas ranching family that dates back to 1823 when Texas was part of Mexico. That's a lot of history and



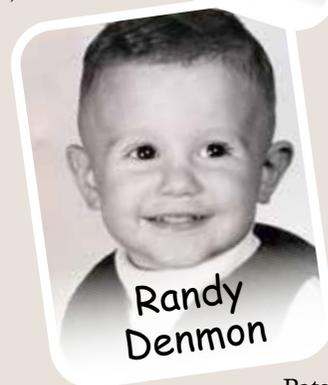
Michael Zimmer



Irene Bennett Brown



Larry D. Thomas



Randy Denmon

tradition to live up to."

Allan says musicians like Bob Wills and Pee Wee King and their bands stopped at the family ranch to sleep in the bunkhouse. "Grandmother would cook for them and they'd play sessions out on the porch."

"Westerns are delicious." That's karla, going dreamy-eyed again. "The Western landscape speaks to me in an elemental way."

Another poet, Oklahoman Francine Roark Robison, smiles broadly. "Wrongs are righted, and the sky is blue, and the heroes ride off into the sunset. What could be better? I write Western poetry because that is what I have grown up with and know about."

Johnny laughs. "A lot of people seem to think I don't write many Westerns – three baseball novels and as many short stories about the sport, Civil War novels, three novels set in 1700s South Carolina, another set primarily on theater stages in the East. But I say the West and Westerns aren't defined by geography, time periods, boundaries, borders, plots, clichés or stereotypes. It's a feeling, an attitude."

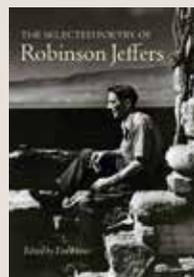
Like many others, his interest was fueled by Western TV shows and movies. "Those showed me a world with hats and horses but without tobacco fields, swamps, thick piney woods, water moccasins, oppressive humidity and okra to pick," he says. "At some point, I bought a history of the American West, which showed me a West that was a lot more complex and not so much good-versus-evil than what I'd seen on TV and at the movies. I kept that book until the covers fell apart and all the pages fell out."

Irene Bennett Brown, a beloved 44-year member of WWA who experienced one-room schools firsthand, weighs in. "I've lived most of my life in Oregon, but ... I inherited an emotional tie to Kansas, where I was born. I listened to my father and my brothers play the guitar and sing cowboy songs. At age 10, a cousin taught me to yodel like

Patsy Cline. I watched my father, an artist, do one Western painting after another."

Wait ... Irene can yodel?

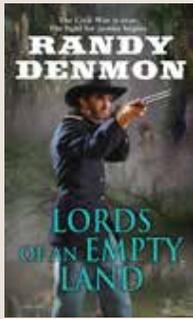
Maybe I'll talk her into joining the after-hours music jam. And will somebody please give this woman an award for first subscribing to *Roundup* magazine in 1956??? For \$4 a year, she says!



Robinson Jeffers.psd

Larry D. Thomas mentions poets who wrote from a sense of place, as he tries to do. "Robert Frost of New England, James Dickey of the South, Ted Hughes of the moors of England, Robinson Jeffers of the American West."

Randy Denmon recalls his north



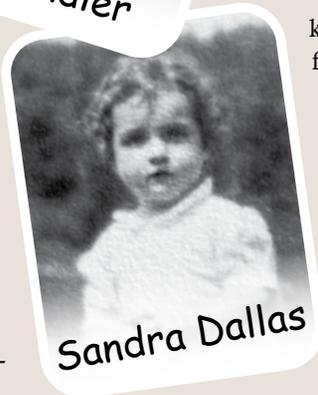
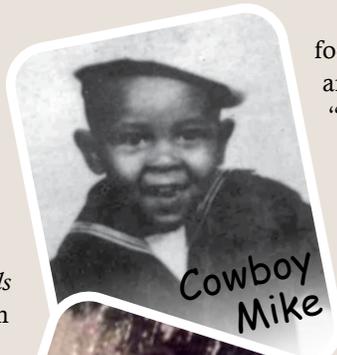
Louisiana childhood, growing up raising cattle. Cowboying in modern times. He says, “Just about any story can be played out in the West.” Ironically, his Spur-winning novel, *Lords of an Empty Land*, is set in north Louisiana.

One member has a more pragmatic view. Greg Hunt says of Westerns, “That’s where I have developed a style and following, and publishers buy my books. After a few years of bleeding out my first two ‘literary’ novels, I was facing the possibility that I just didn’t have the right stuff. Then I came to a simple realization. *Write what you read.* A year or so later, a start-up agent took on my first Western.”

Crutchfield, a lifelong Nashville, Tennessee-area resident, has settled down from his earlier rant. “I don’t remember a time in my life when I wasn’t interested in history. My love of the West grew out of my love of the *original* West, which was the Trans-Appalachian Frontier of Tennessee, Kentucky and Virginia. Western history’s roots are in the Eastern United States. They had to be. My first WWA convention was in 1986 and, after that, I devoted my life and writing to the American West.”

“I could say that it’s to help record history, which I love, but for me history is the springboard for story,” says screenwriter/novelist C. Courtney Joyner, who somehow manages to write both horror and Western fiction convincingly. “I grew up in the ’60s as a monster kid, which meant Aurora model kits, Hammer horror films, creepy magazines. I was a zombie extra in *Dawn of the Dead* in 1978. I’d scan *TV Guide* looking for monster movies and see my favorite actors like John Carradine and Lon Chaney popping up in films that weren’t classic horror. They were *High Noon* and *Stagecoach* and *Jesse James*. I had to see my beloved actors on the dusty streets and soon I was hooked on my other favorite genre, Westerns.”

“Two loves,” says Cowboy Mike. “The African American past and the Western experience.” He remembers the first time he saw a photograph of black cowboys. “I was teaching and I told my students, ‘Here, look at these images. These were people ... in the West ... people in sod houses. People wearing Western attire who were *black*.’” It became the



focus of his teaching and writing career, he says, and transformed him from Professor Searles into “Cowboy Mike.”

If I had any doubts about Coloradoan Jon Chandler’s Western pedigree, he stomps them flat with one size 13D boot. “I have a long frontier history on both sides of my family tree. My great-grandfather, Morgan Patterson, was a southern Colorado lawman, justice of the peace, miner, moonshiner and acquaintance of Buffalo Bill. I once got to meet Louis L’Amour, who started telling me about my great-grandfather in La Veta, Colorado. ‘Oh, yes,’ he said. ‘I’ve heard of Morgan Patterson. He was a deputy sheriff down there, I believe. La Veta was a tough, tough town.’ So, the seed was planted, and my grandfather Russell Patterson nurtured it. He led me to Zane Grey.”

You know you’re legit when Louis L’Amour knew of your great-grandpap and said he was from a “tough, tough town.”

“In fact, I don’t write Westerns.” We all turn to Sandra Dallas, and wait for further explanation. “I write literary novels set in the West. And I write them because I’m a Westerner,” she says. I would like more time to ponder this, but she’s telling us how she ended up writing fiction at all. She had been a reporter for *Business Week*, covering the Rocky Mountain region.

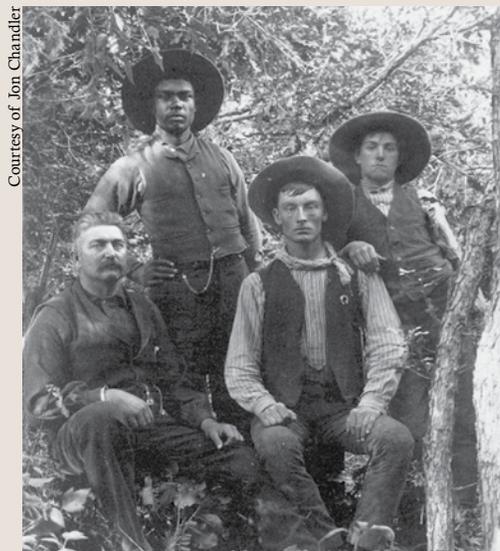
“It was simply a fluke. Two journalist friends and I decided we should write a bodice ripper. It never got past the first chapter. Now, I write about women’s place in history and the obstacles they faced. Their lack of opportunities. As to who influenced me, I’m not sure. As a kid, I loved Laura Ingalls Wilder.”

Editor/New Yorker Gary Goldstein of Kensington Books doesn’t write Westerns, either. But, *if* Gary has a soft spot, it’s for this genre. Many authors seated here do regular business with him. “My admiration for Westerns, as far as I can remember, was when I saw *Shane* for the first time on TV.

Not long after, I found a dog-eared copy of the old Bantam paperback in my high school library and grabbed it. I was amazed that such a short book – 128 pages, if I recall – could be made into a two-hour movie. Then I started reading and found it impossible to stop, which included the flashlight-under-the-blanket routine.

“I shared a room with my brother, and he ratted me out. My folks had mixed emotions. I was staying up way past my bedtime but at least it was for reading purposes. I was officially hooked.”

Seventh-generation Coloradoan Jon Chandler’s great-grandfather, Morgan Patterson, second from right, was a Colorado lawman.



Courtesy of Jon Chandler

Larry Bjornson relates a college story of wandering through the Arizona State University library and discovering a collection of old books inside a chain-link cage. He was told they were rare books about the American West – most, long out of print. “I spent a year in that cage, reading and taking notes. And, lo and behold, the reality bore little resemblance to cinematic inventions.” Those notes, he says, led to the writing of his Spur-winning novel, *Wide Open*.

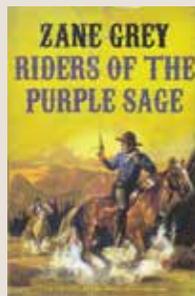
A newcomer to WWA, screenwriter/director Jake Stetler recalls, “As a boy, I played ‘guess the plot’ with my dad while we watched Western movies. I seemed to have a knack for predicting stories. My favorite scene in any film ever is in John Ford’s *Stagecoach* when he introduces Ringo – John Wayne. It’s not even a perfect shot, which makes it even better.” The former paratrooper’s face lights up. “It’s a really quick zoom in to him and it goes *out of focus* for a second. In the background is Monument Valley and Ringo says ‘HYYYYYAAHH’ and twirls his rifle, cocking it. It’s such a powerful image. You knew everything in that one shot.”



Most everyone agrees that Western movies and TV shows were a major influence. Names of favorites fly back and forth, including usual suspects like *Shane*, *The Searchers*, *True Grit*, *Lonesome Dove*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Unforgiven*. Sometimes it’s just a director’s name that’s tossed out. Peckinpah. Ford. Boetticher. Leone. We recall sitting cross-legged as kids, watching *The Rifleman*, *The Virginian*, *Bonanza* and, of course, *Gunslinger* on TV.



“I listened to *The Lone Ranger* on the radio,” Lucia says. “Although I really preferred Tonto. Cowboys were a dime a dozen. Indians were exotic.”



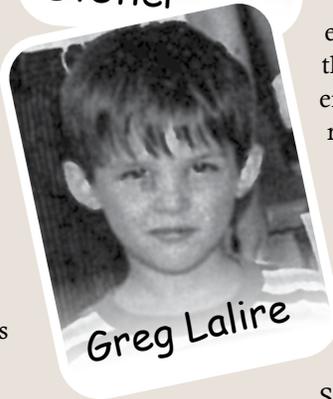
Someone mentions a favorite book and, not surprisingly, that starts another chain reaction of chatter. Irene says, “In my opinion, Elmer Kelton’s *The Time It Never Rained* is one of the best Westerns ever written. I admire his excellent storytelling, and that he incorporated women characters so easily into his books.”

“Elmer Kelton really knew the West,” Loren says quietly.

“I’d read Elmer Kelton’s shopping list,” quips Gary. “I think the most thrilling Western passage ever written,” says Jon, “is at the end of *Riders of the Purple Sage*. Jane Withersteen is saying, ‘Roll the stone, Lassiter! Roll the



Jake Stetler



Greg Lalire

stone!” And your heart’s pumping and finally you’re saying, ‘Roll the damn stone, Lassiter!’ It obviously traps them in this new world where no one can enter. Until the next book.”

Emboldened by the response to my “Why do you write Westerns” question, I ask, “There’s the myth of the West, and there’s the myth of the cowboy. Why can’t we get enough of the American cowboy?”

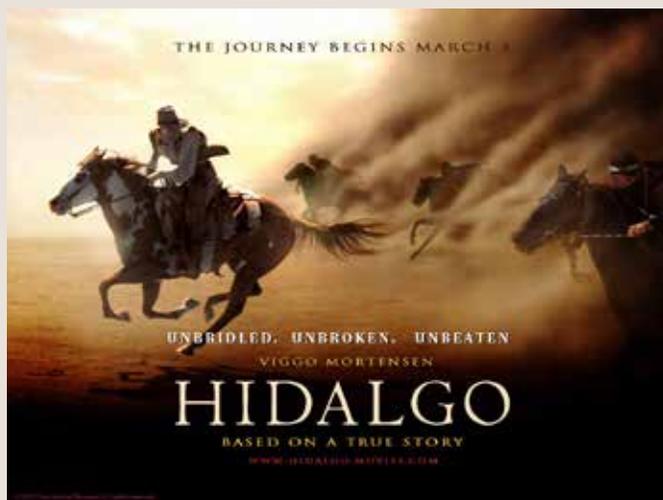
Jake Stetler reflects. “Westerns are the quintessential American myth. The gunslinger, like the samurai in Japan or the knight in England, embodies the archetype of the honorable warrior.”

And Jon again. “I think *Shane*, *The Virginian*, *Lassiter* and *The Man With No Name* all trace their lineages directly to Achilles, a dark hero pulled kicking and screaming into a situation he abhorred ... yet, he still saved the Greeks’ bacon. Kinda like Rooster Cogburn.”

Screenwriter/producer John Fusco has swooshed in. He sits beside Jon, makes apologies for his late arrival. Raking back silver-streaked hair, he immediately picks up the narrative. “I’ve always believed that the Western is America’s *Iliad*. It’s the canvas on which the most authentic American stories are told.” I mentally scroll through some of Fusco’s blockbusters – *Young Guns*, *Hidalgo*, *The Highwaymen*. Maybe I’ll ask him later if those stories had roots in mythology.

Wild West magazine’s Greg Lalire has been quiet so far, but this question sparks him. “Cowboys riding the open range, free to roam and drift, independent, self-sufficient, willing to stand up to any dangers, whether rustlers, rattlesnakes or raiding Indians, with fists and guns – that’s the romantic image that has been played up in traditional Western novels and Western movies.

“Farmers didn’t sound nearly as exciting. And like farmers, miners didn’t have the appeal of cowboys. Prospectors and men panning for gold do have a certain fascination, but in many cases these guys were seen as greedy or odd or



both, and not as colorful as cowboys, plus they didn't ride horses."

He pauses, looks up and down the table and poses a question. "How many Westerns have there been about farming or mining compared to cowboys, whether on the range or in wild towns?"

There's a lull as plates of chips and dip, stuffed jalapeños and hot wings are passed around for sharing. Here's my big chance at furthering my Western-writing education.

"What about craft? And style?"

Again, Johnny laughs. "I'm still learning! It's still a challenge – every time. Figure out all the parts and try to make it come together into something that's cohesive and makes sense and you also hope it educates and entertains people. I want to tell a story in such a way that the story captures you, but you really don't pay much attention to the writing. It's just the flow of the narrative. I'm constantly trying to reinvent myself. But I have discovered who I am: I'm the lucky guy who gets to write Westerns."

Loren grins. "Johnny has a real respect for the West, and I think his grasp of it is terrific. His visual detail is terrific too. 'A Piano at Dead Man's Crossing' [Johnny's 2002 Spur winner for short fiction] was exceedingly moving. You felt the hot sun on the back of your neck and you felt what it was like to ford a river up to your hips aboard a horse."

It's hard to tell through the whiskers, but Johnny might be blushing.

"I love the language," Loren continues. "When you read

journals and letters written by pioneers, it's fascinating ... the breadth of their vocabulary and their grasp of the English language. These people had grammar read onto them on the backs of their knuckles. I suppose my style is visual. I studied to be a commercial artist but didn't have the talent necessary. But it taught me to observe and respect a tale. When I write, I try to draw those pictures with words, as if I'm standing in front of an easel."

Johnny interjects, "To paraphrase what Larry Gatlin said about Kris Kristofferson: All those words are in the dictionary. Loren just puts them together in a way no one else ever imagined."

I'm picking up on an Estleman-Boggs mutual admiration society. A WWA bromance?

There's chaos as the harried server passes out 20-something separate checks. She smiles anyway, having figured out that these folks are pretty good tippers. Chairs scoot back noisily, and there's back-slapping and hugging. Cowboy Mike laughs. Lucia walks over to chat, and gets my address so she can send me her booklet, a thesaurus of historical vulgarity with bonus mix-and-match insults. I'm not sure how the conversation took such a turn. That's the delight in talking with her.

I have a lot to digest, far beyond the four stuffed jalapeños I ate. I'm still not sure exactly *why* we're all doing this. Like Allan Chapman, we just can't help ourselves. And it may be enough to simply know *who we are*, as Johnny Boggs said.

The lucky guys and gals who get to write Westerns.

The future of historical fiction?

By Micki Fuhrman

In case you've decided that enthusiasm for American history is dying, as school-age kids seem to know more about *Minecraft* than the Monroe Doctrine, David Johnson is here to red-line and rewrite your beliefs.

2020 was a great year for this Ottawa, Ontario, resident. He flew through sixth grade with no sweat, did some exploring of area historic sites and read up on owls and snakes and such. Oh, and in March, he finished writing his first historical novel.

Nothing too heavy. Just a saga of a European whaler who is shipwrecked in the 1750s in the Arctic, then makes his way across Canadian prairies and woodlands, encountering fur trappers and various indigenous tribes, who teach him wilderness survival skills.

"I got interested in the various boundaries," David says, "where the two worlds, Europeans and natives, met, and in the competing factions of people such as those who lived on the prairies and those in the woodlands."

Inspired by authors Jack London and Farley Mowat, and by adventure stories told to him by his grandfather, David included several wild animal encounters in his book.

David's classmates were "very surprised" at his dedication to faithfully write 500 words a day, and at the size of his finished work. "It's pretty large, for a writer my age."

Yes, publishers, David is open to discussing offers for the book, titled *In the Land of the Free*, says David's father, Stephen, who works at the local library.

David plans to write more. That is, after his daily homework is done.

