



Robert Nott | The New Mexican

LONESOME ROADS



Author Max Evans on
The Hi Lo Country



Max Evans, circa 1995, photo Pat Evans; courtesy Palace of the Governor's (NMHM/DCA), HP.2006.19

Top left to right, Big Boy Hittson's hat on Hittson's grave, stars of the 1998 film adaptation of *The Hi Lo Country*

You either adapt or perish in the beautiful state of New Mexico, according to Albuquerque-based writer and best friend, Big Boy Hittson, adapted quite well to the fact that wasn't enough to stop his brother from being killed by 38 slugs in November 1949. Big Boy's death inspired the novel *The Hi Lo Country*, which was published in 1962. Later, producer Martin Scorsese and director Stephen Frears adapted the novel to the screen. The film, released in 1998, starred Woody Harrelson as Big Boy Matson (his name in the novel was Patricia Arquette as his married lover, Billy Crudup as Pete, and Penélope Cruz — in her first major American role — as neglected girlfriend).

Evans, who is still going strong at age 87, talks with *The New Mexican* director of the Lea County Museum in southeast New Mexico about the screening of the picture at the New Mexico History Museum on May 17. The event is part of the history museum's *Imagined* exhibition.

Evans' novel uses its protagonists to tell the story of the West in the wake of World War II, when the pick-up trucks and the big outfits began buying up ranches and making cowhands. Evans, who was born in Ropes, Texas, relocated to the mid-1930s and was one of the little fellows who got by on a day's work.

"I published *The Rounders* in '60 and *The Hi Lo Country* in '62. I did the first two major literary works. "I just wrote *The Hi Lo*, but the story was on my mind forever. I decided to do that story of Big Boy, because there were so many days in the Hi Lo country with other people: not just cowboys, bartenders and railroaders and women. I wanted to tell the story of lonesome country and the wonderful few people in it who are related to the land and the country and how they got by. I did."

Hollywood called almost immediately after the book. Sam Peckinpah — whose most recent picture at the time was *The Wild Bunch* (1962), was picking up critical and commercial steam in America — got in touch with Evans' agent to adapt *The Hi Lo Country* for film. According to Evans, Peckinpah said, "I want to meet the son of a bitch who wrote it."

"So this son of a bitch went out to Hollywood to meet the son of a bitch who wrote it." Peckinpah optioned the film repeatedly over the years, but the screenplay for 20th Century Fox in 1968. Evans received a check for \$10,000, which is about 140 pages long and includes many chapters that have nothing to do with his novel. But Peckinpah went on to direct *The Wild Bunch*, and his plans for *The Hi Lo Country* were shelved for years, various producers, directors, and actors expressed interest, including Lee Marvin, Steve McQueen, Charlton Heston, and as well as NBC, which considered turning the novel into a television show (obviously Big Boy wouldn't die if he were still alive after week).

But by the mid-1990s, Evans — who saw *The Rounders* screen in a 1965 production directed by Burt Kennedy



You either adapt or perish in the beautiful country of northeast New Mexico, according to Albuquerque-based writer Max Evans. Evans' best friend, Big Boy Hittson, adapted quite well to the elements, but that wasn't enough to stop his brother from filling Big Boy with five .38 slugs in November 1949. Big Boy's death inspired Evans to write the novel *The Hi Lo Country*, which was published in 1961. Some 35 years later, producer Martin Scorsese and director Stephen Frears worked together to bring the novel to the screen. The film, released late in 1998, starred Woody Harrelson as Big Boy Matson (his name in the novel and movie), Patricia Arquette as his married lover, Billy Crudup as Big Boy's best friend, Pete, and Penelope Cruz — in her first major American film role — as Pete's neglected girlfriend.

Evans, who is still going strong at age 87, talks with author Jim Harris, director of the Lea County Museum in southeast New Mexico, before a screening of the picture at the New Mexico History Museum on Friday, May 17. The event is part of the history museum's *Cowboys: Real and Imagined* exhibition.

Evans' novel uses its protagonists to tell the story of the changing West in the wake of World War II, when the pick-up truck replaced the horse and the big outfits began buying up ranches and muscling out independent cowhands. Evans, who was born in Ropes, Texas, relocated to New Mexico in the mid-1930s and was one of the little fellows who eventually got squeezed out by progress.

"I published *The Rounders* in '60 and *The Hi Lo Country* a year later," Evans said of his first two major literary works. "I just worked two to three years on *Hi Lo*, but the story was on my mind forever. I decided that I couldn't tell just that story of Big Boy, because there were so many damn adventures I had in the Hi Lo country with other people: not just cowboys, but miners and trappers and bartenders and railroaders and women. I wanted to tell the story of a huge lonesome country and the wonderful few people in it who held it together and are related to the land and the country and how they survived. And that's what I did."

Hollywood called almost immediately after the book's publication. Director Sam Peckinpah — whose most recent picture at the time, *Ride the High Country* (1962), was picking up critical and commercial steam in Europe after a so-so run in America — got in touch with Evans' agent to talk about optioning *The Hi Lo Country* for film. According to Evans, Peckinpah told Evans' agent, "I want to meet the son of a bitch who wrote it."

"So this son of a bitch went out to Hollywood to meet him."

Peckinpah optioned the film repeatedly over the years and even wrote a screenplay for 20th Century Fox in 1968. Evans recently uncovered that script, which is about 140 pages long and includes many characters and scenes that have nothing to do with his novel. But Peckinpah went off to Mexico to make *The Wild Bunch*, and his plans for *The Hi Lo Country* got shelved. Over the years, various producers, directors, and actors expressed interest in the book, including Lee Marvin, Steve McQueen, Charlton Heston, and Stuart Whitman, as well as NBC, which considered turning the novel into a *Bonanza*-type television show (obviously Big Boy wouldn't die if he had to come back week after week).

But by the mid-1990s, Evans — who saw *The Rounders* move to the big screen in a 1965 production directed by Burt Kennedy and starring Henry

Fonda and Glenn of *The Hi Lo Country*

Evans and his wife ceremony in Oklahoma called them from a message for Max. for Peckinpah, had Scorsese read *The* a letter asking about "He said he understood — because of the country. Though it received "Polygram was Universal while we and just enough money earned Cate Blanchett. That happens all the time in *High Country*."

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Evans said that in married woman, as protective of him as ship was great. The jealousy between us Crudup."

And in real life, Evans he became an alcoholic some years later. Evans

details

- ▼ Author Max Evans about the book &
- ▼ 6 p.m. Friday, May
- ▼ New Mexico History
- ▼ No charge; 476-5



Fonda and Glenn Ford — had given up any dreams of seeing a film version of *The Hi Lo Country*.

Evans and his wife, Pat, were attending the Cowboy Hall of Fame awards ceremony in Oklahoma City in the mid-1990s when one of their daughters called them from Albuquerque to tell them that Scorsese had left a phone message for Max. Actor L.Q. Jones, a friend of Evans' and frequent actor for Peckinpah, had just worked for Scorsese in *Casino* and suggested that Scorsese read *The Hi Lo Country* and adapt it for film. Scorsese wrote Evans a letter asking about the rights and expressing admiration for the book. "He said he understood why Sam [Peckinpah] wanted to make the picture — because of the characters." The movie was shot in New Mexico in 1997. Though it received fairly good reviews, it came and went quickly.

"Polygram was the production company, and it was taken over by Universal while we were filming," Evans recalled. "They had two pictures and just enough money to promote and release one — *Elizabeth*, which earned Cate Blanchett an Oscar. They just threw *The Hi Lo Country* away. That happens all the time in Hollywood; it happened to Sam with *Ride the High Country*."

And while many in the cast received good notices, Arquette got blasted by some critics for her low-key portrayal of an unhappily married woman enjoying a passionate romance with Harrelson's Big Boy character. *The New York Times*, for instance, praised Frears for a "wildly ambitious new film" but said Arquette "fails to convey her character's fiery animal magnetism."

Evans said the fault was all his. During a lunch with the cast that Frears organized, Arquette asked Evans why the script — written by Walon Green — underplayed her feelings for Big Boy. "I said to her, It's the truth. In that country, so slimly populated, everybody looked for a movement," Evans recalled. "Your whole existence out there is movement — you're looking for a cow, a horse, a coyote, so any movement is instantly picked up by anyone who is looking. So a married woman having an affair in that country at that time would be scared to death to have anyone see her make a daring move. She played it perfectly and got slaughtered by the critics because the other women in the film (including Cruz and Katy Jurado) were so vibrant and vital in their parts."

Evans said that in real life he did not vie with Big Boy for the love of a married woman, as Billy Crudup's character does in the movie. "I was very protective of him and that woman. I loved them and thought their relationship was great. That part of the story is fiction. There was no contest or jealousy between us over her. But people think I was the guy played by Billy Crudup."

And in real life, Big Boy's killer got off scot-free. Evans said he heard that he became an alcoholic and died falling off a bar stool in a saloon in Raton some years later. Evans inherited Big Boy's hat and gun. ◀

details

- ▼ Author Max Evans in conversation with Jim Harris about the book & film *The Hi Lo Country*; screening follows
- ▼ 6 p.m. Friday, May 17
- ▼ New Mexico History Museum, 113 Lincoln Ave.