Elmer Kelton was voted "Great Western Writer of All Time" by the Western Writers of America, a daunting title to work under, though he bears it modestly. There is, after all, that modifying adjective: Western.

Kelton, who turned 80 in April, has his academic champions, but he acknowledges that "the Western field is a literary ghetto. Critics don't read a Western unless the book is contemptuous of its subject matter. If you write out of love for your subject matter they'll dismiss you."

Elmer Kelton loves his subject matter. He was born to it, after all. And if the Western is a ghetto, it is a remarkably rich ghetto populated by the likes of Edward Abbey (The Brave Cowboy), Jack Schaefer (Shane), Larry McMurtry (Lonesome Dove), and other novelists whose mortal sin, it seems, is setting their tales in open spaces rather than in the confines of the faculty lounge or city tenement. Elmer Kelton has an utter mastery of his subject; a distinctive, even arresting, point of view; and a narrative talent honed by writing for the Western pulps. His best work, The Time It Never Rained (1973), can be read as character study, regional literature, and philosophical novel: find me a navel-gazing New Yorker writer who has squeezed out a single book as rich, layered, and unsettling.

Following a lunch of--what else?--thick steaks, I spoke with Elmer Kelton in his study in the home he and his wife built half a century ago in the ranching town of San Angelo, Texas. His library overspills with books on Texas, cattle, and the West; his musical tastes run to Bob Wills, Roy Acuff, Willie Nelson, and Bill Monroe. He reels off the original lineup of the "Sons of the Pioneers."

His father, a ranch foreman named Buck Kelton, came from a line of cowboys; his mother, Bea, was a schoolteacher whose male relatives worked as roustabouts in the oil fields. "In an oil-patch town like Crane," where he attended school, recalls Kelton, "a boy who excelled in English and won spelling bees was automatically suspect."

I ask about his youthful cowboying skills. "Pretty inept," Kelton says with a smile. "My three younger brothers were all better cowboys than I was. I got lost a lot--turns out I was nearsighted. We'd go out to gather cattle and if they were 100 yards away I'd miss 'em. Dad told me pretty early I'd better find some other way to make a living."

Being a novelist was not exactly what Dad had in mind. When Elmer, as a senior in high school, told Buck Kelton that he wanted to write, the old cowboy replied, "That's the way it is with you kids nowadays--you all want to make a living without having to work for it."

Buck relented. Eimer went on to the University of Texas and a career as a journalist and novelist. He made his first story sale in 1947 to the pulp magazine Ranch Romances; 49 years later, his corpus has...
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