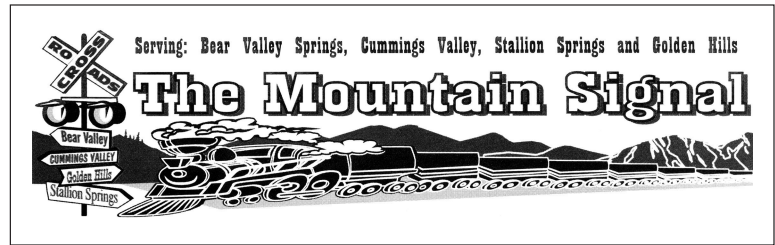




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WRITER DISCOVERS FICTIONS ON BEAR MOUNTAIN

By Bob Diehl

Is it the mountain air, the boulders, the big pines and the oaks? To hear Bear Valley novelist/consultant E.T. Ellison tell it, it's all of those and a lot more. "If it hadn't been for Bear Valley, I would have never discovered the incredible joys of making things up," says Ellison, whose critically acclaimed first novel, *The Luck of Madonna 13*, was published by Wynderry Press (www.wynderry.com) at the beginning of August.

Ellison agreed to meet me at the Great Wall in Tehachapi, where we both got stuffed on their Chinese buffet. In the spaces between bites I sopped up enough tidbits about the author to come up with this article.

"Mostly it was the animals," said Ellison, when asked what got him started writing fiction. "They all seemed to have stories to tell. In 1997, my second year as a Bear Valley resident, my friend Barbara Montgomery and I decided we would write their stories down. We started spying on them, trying to glean their essential natures. That led to giving them names, personalities and families. We wrote about owls, woodpeckers, ground squirrels, bobcats, deer, bluejays, raccoons, chipmunks and even gophers. The result was a little book of very short stories called *Winter at Roseberry Hill*, which we got printed up to give to family members as Christmas gifts. It totally amazed us how big a hit those stories were." (Ellison's publisher, Wynderry Press, is planning to bring out an expanded version of this book sometime in 2003, so a larger audience can meet Just Plain Bob, Maybelle Three Left, Orriwether, Gullifaunt and all the others.)

Ellison says he fell in love with the Tehachapi area in 1979, but couldn't figure how to live here full time until 1996 when he and business partner Jean-Louis Janssen decided there was no good reason not to move their consulting practice from the manic madness of Los Angeles to the solace and simplicity of Bear Mountain.

"I've been looking for the perfect place to be for most of my adult life," says Ellison. "In the early 1990s I was pretty hot on Belize and spent a month there to check it out. I still love that country, and thoroughly understand what might prompt somebody like Francis Ford Coppola to build his own personal resort there [Blancaneaux Lodge]. But it's tough to figure out how to earn a living in Belize. Bear Valley is a lot more practical and equally beautiful and remote in its own way.

"When Jean-Louis and I were traveling around America on behalf of Mobil, we saw a lot of fabulous countryside, but we never found anything that could beat where we are right now." Ellison and Janssen's company (www.janssenellison.com) is one of the nation's top specialists in the franchising field. In addition to working together, Ellison and Janssen manage to find time to ride together on their venerable Honda Gold Wing motorcycles. "That's another great thing about this area," says Ellison: "lots of mostly-empty two lane roads in just about every direction. I love two lane roads. And so does Big Red."

That was a setup, I learned a little later. If you ask Ellison who Big Red is, prepare for a coy introduction to what he calls the art of recipe trading. "I probably oughta just point you to the Recipe Rangers website (www.reciperangers.org)," he says with a twinkle in his eye. Its got a bunch of fun stuff about recipe trading — and Big Red, too — and it has some great pictures of places we visited during Big Red's recipe trading expeditions around the west. There are even some downloadable free samples of stuff from the book, including recipes."

This was the point at which I knew I'd been set up: Ellison's second book for Wynderry Press, a collaboration with Barbara Montgomery called *Recipe Rangers in the West*, is due out early in 2003. "It's mostly nonfiction," he says, "but

continues

still a lot of fun. We visited some pretty unusual places and met some interesting folks who dared to trade us one of their own favorite recipes for the secret of Ultimate Dressing. Would you believe we got a monstrously good custard recipe in the Save Mart parking lot in Tehachapi? Or an incredible shrimp recipe from a female cop in Arcata? Or a killer burger-and-fries stir-fry from a big guy in a whupped yellow Caddy by the Rio Grande Bridge outside of Taos?" Ellison is prepared to go on and on about this project, but I eventually steered him back to fiction.

"Writing fiction may be the next best thing to breathing," he says. Ellison, who has written everything from annual reports to TV commercials, gets an almost maniacal gleam in his eye when he talks about fiction. "You can make up complete and total lies, and your imagination can wander just about anywhere it wants...." The sentence dribbled away and I waited about ten seconds before he unwound this little story.

"When I was twelve or so, I read an article in the L.A. Times about some kid my age who wrote a novel and got it published. I was so knocked out I immediately started my own novel. It was done in about an hour and it was one page long. It took me more than four decades to figure out how to write a story longer than one page. The secret, I think, is to just let the story tell itself. I start by inventing a character and a setting and let them go to work on each other."

Ellison seems to have gotten his technique down pretty well: Publishers Weekly called *The Luck of Madonna* 13 "highly imaginative" and January Magazine touted it as "quite wonderful" and said it was original enough to deserve its own genre.

Back up on Bear Mountain, E.T. Ellison is probably sitting in his writing chair, occasionally looking out across Bear Valley to the Tehachapis, as he lets the second book in his *Last Nevergate Chronicles* tell itself to his laptop. ••